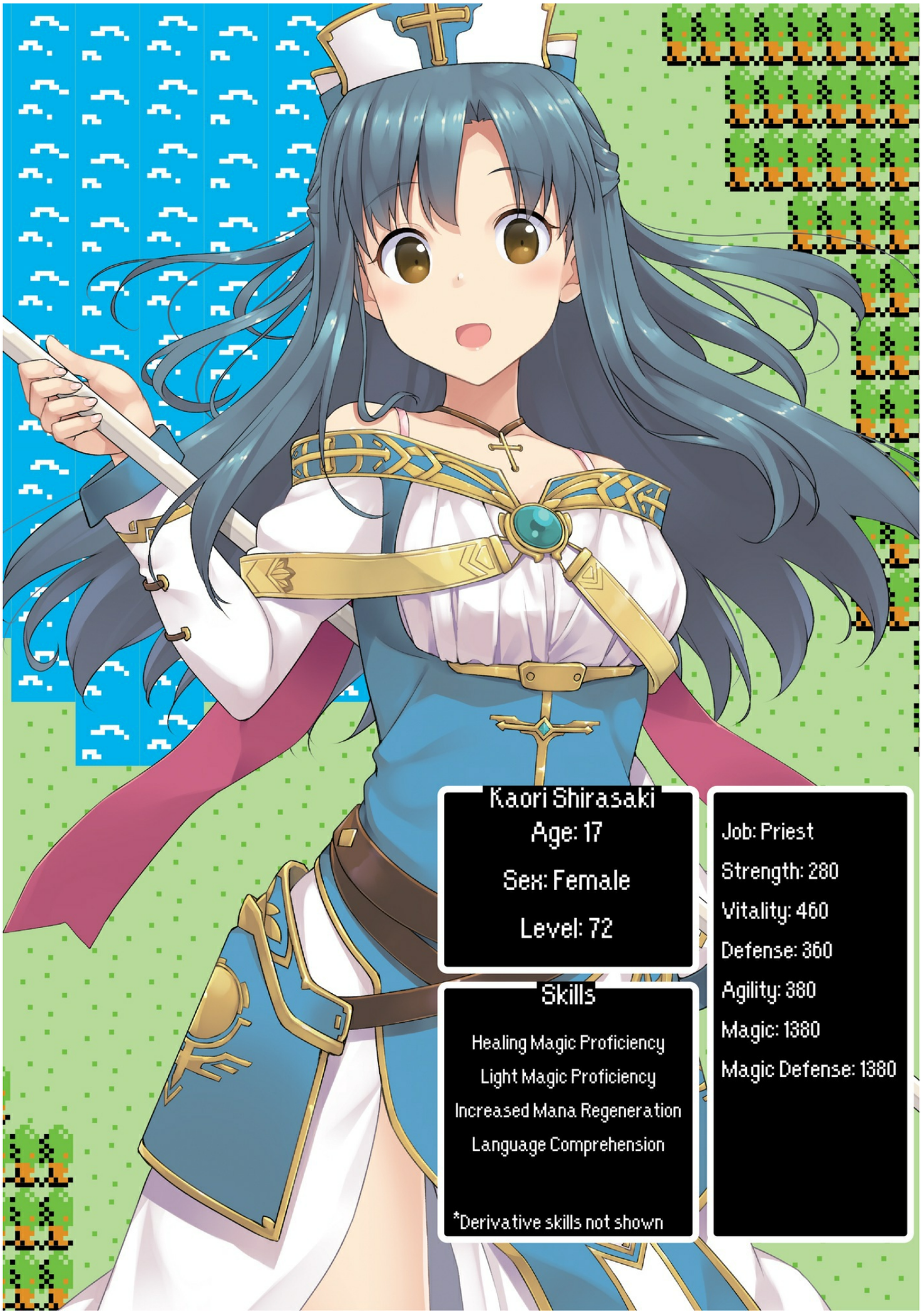

#4
ryo shirakome
takayaki
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST


MYU
"DADDY, WHAT'S WRONG?"
"HAJIME, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?"
YUE
"WELL THE THING IS, I'VE ACTUALLY BEEN HERE BEFORE..."
HAJIME NAGUMO

TIO
SHEA


Kaori Shirasaki
Age: 17
Sex: Female
Level: 72
Skills
Healing Magic Proficiency
Light Magic Proficiency
Increased Mana Regeneration
Language Comprehension
*Derivative skills not shown
Job: Priest
Strength: 280
Vitality: 460
Defense: 360
Agility: 380
Magic: 1380
Magic Defense: 1380

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Chapter I: Hajime Becomes an XXX

The mercantile city-state of Fuhren. A place where people, goods, and ambitions all mixed together to form the largest trading center in the world. Today too, it was bustling with activity. One could hear the clamor of the city a good distance away from the walls, even.

A long line of adventurers, merchants, and tourists snaked out from the main gate. They were all waiting their turn for Fuhren's trademark inspection. Some lounged about lazily, while others tapped their feet impatiently.

At the very end of the line stood a man who was dressed rather ostentatiously. Next to him were two women outfitted in equally flashy garb, presumably his servants. Though he didn't seem too impatient, he was complaining incessantly about the necessity of the inspection.

He was the kind of fool who thought spouting large words made him seem smarter. He went on at length about the incompetency of the Fuhren government. The nearby merchants struggled to hold in their derisive laughter, but the man and his two female attendants seemed not to notice.

In the middle of his tirade, the gaudily-dressed man began to hear a high-pitched noise, one he had never heard before. It sounded like steam hissing out of a pipe.

At first he tried to ignore it and continued droning on to his two servants, but they, along with the other merchants, ignored him. Their eyes were fixated on something behind him. Giving up once the sound grew louder, the man let out a harrumph and turned to see what all the fuss was about.

The man let out a squeal of surprise. An unfamiliar black box-shaped object was heading for the city at an incredible speed, kicking up clouds of dust in its wake.

A commotion broke out among the waiting travelers. Many turned to run, thinking it was a monster, but the black box was far faster than any of them

could have ever predicted. Before they'd gone a single step, it was already upon them.

The gaudily-dressed man stiffened up in fear. Despair colored the travelers' faces.

However, just before the box crashed into the line, it turned to its side and came to an abrupt stop. The force of its deceleration caused it to kick up a massive cloud of dust. As the travelers all stared at Brise in wonderment and confusion, its front door opened.

"Man, this line is always so damn long."

"...Yeah. What can you do, though?" Hajime and Yue stepped out of the car, heedless of the fear and confusion they'd caused. Shea and Tio followed after, with Will Cudeta coming out last. Will's expression seemed somewhat stiff.

A few days back, the head of Fuhren's adventurer's guild, Ilwa Chang, had asked Hajime and his party to go to the northern mountain ranges and search for Will. They had accepted, finding Will alive in the process. After protecting him from the wrath of a mind-controlled Tio, they'd safely brought him back home.

Will bowed uncharacteristically low for a noble and apologized for startling all of the people waiting in line. However, he realized quickly that no one was paying any attention to him.

Everyone's gazes were focused on the three beautiful ladies. The fact that they'd just come out of a speeding black box was of little importance. The men only had eyes for them now. Every time they so much as moved, sighs of appreciation rang out among the crowd.

Hajime sat down on Brise's hood and studied the line.

"Probably gonna take another hour, it looks like," he said as he narrowed his eyes. Sitting in the car for so long had left Hajime a little stiff, so he started stretching along with Yue and the others. There was still a lot of time until they got in, so he might as well relax, he thought.

Brise was operated via the direct application of mana, so he could control it without actually sitting in the driver's seat. Of course, his control wasn't nearly

as precise as when he was behind the wheel, but he could still move it forward slowly as the line progressed.

He cracked his neck from side to side, loosening up. Yue sat down behind him and massaged his shoulders. Smiling, Hajime leaned back into Yue.

Shea's rabbit ears drooped a little. Feeling left out, she clambered up the hood and sat down next to Hajime.

"Allow me to join you as well!" Tio proclaimed. She climbed to Hajime's other side and attempted to press her breasts against his arm. However, a slap from Hajime sent her sprawling. Though, the way she moaned as he slapped her implied she'd enjoyed it. He'd hit her hard enough that she'd spun around a few times, but... for the masochistic Tio, there was no greater reward.

Hajime scowled as she panted excitedly at his feet. Smiling awkwardly, Shea asked him the foremost question on his mind.

"Umm, Hajime-san? Was it really alright to drive all the way here in Brise? I thought you wanted to hide your abilities..."

"It's a bit late for that now. We broadcast them to a whole village already. I guarantee you everywhere but the sticks will have heard of us in a week. Besides, I expected this day would come eventually. Though, I *was* hoping it wouldn't happen so soon."

"Yeah. No need for caution now." Hajime shrugged his shoulders. Until recently, he'd been willing to suffer a little inconvenience if it saved him trouble down the line. However, after the battle at Ur, he had no doubt tales of his wondrous artifacts would spread throughout the kingdom in no time. Since his cover had already been blown, there was no reason for him to hide his abilities or equipment anymore.

"Hmm, I guess you're right. There's no stopping the Holy Church or Heiligh from pressuring us now. I just wonder if Aiko-san and Ilwa-san will be willing to help us..."

"Well, the thing with Sensei and Ilwa was just extra insurance. It'd be nice if it pans out, but there's no big loss if it doesn't. From the start, I was ready to fight the entire world if it came down to it. We'll mow down anything in our way.

That’s all there is to it, Shea. You don’t have to go around pretending to be my slave now, either. You can take the collar off if you want.”

They really had just been extra countermeasures. Hajime wasn’t too concerned with whether or not they’d really end up helping him when it came down to it.

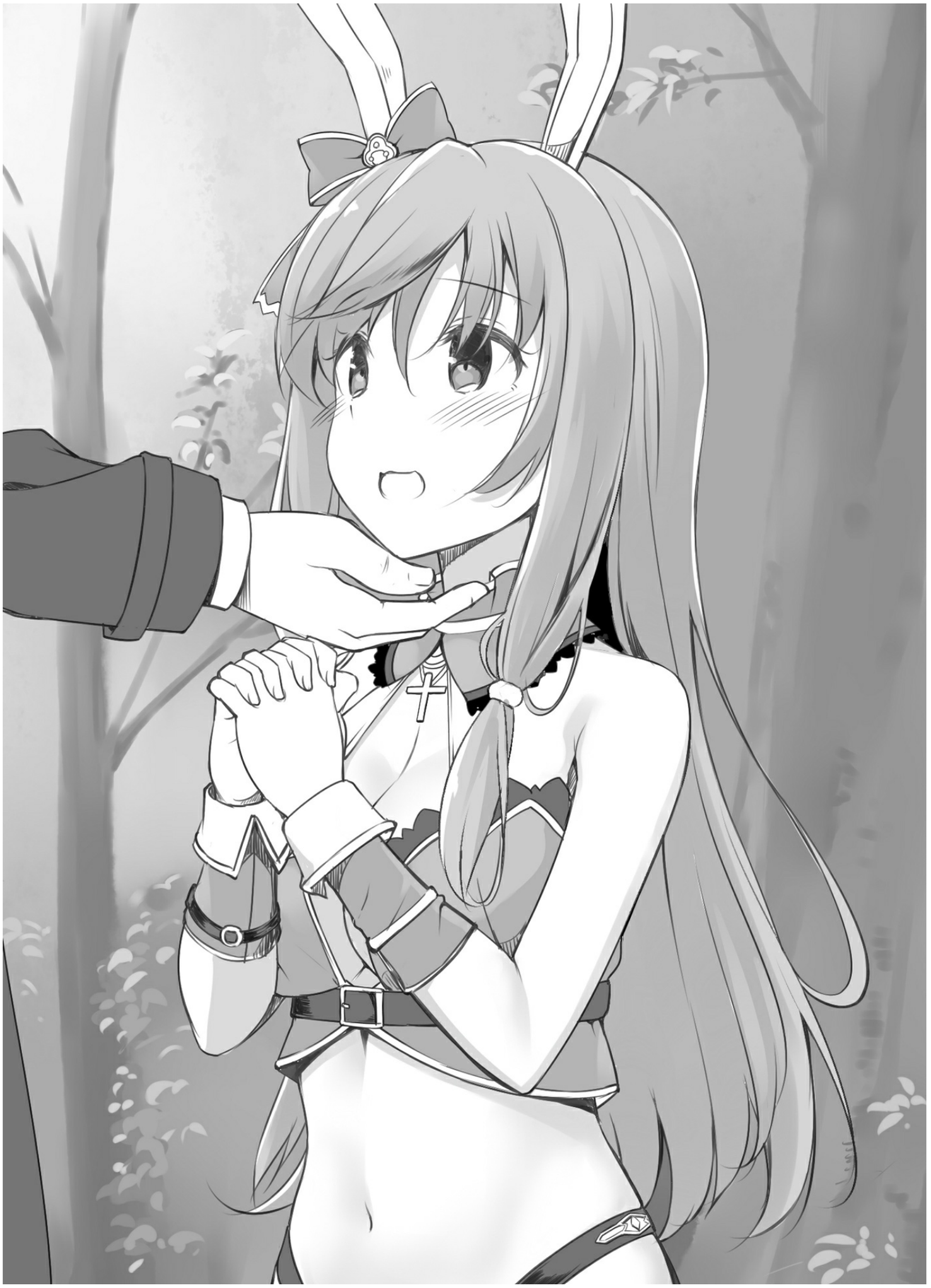
Hajime gently rapped on Shea’s fake slave collar as he spoke. Shea was strong enough to beat down anyone who tried to mess with her, so there was no reason not to let her walk around as their equal anymore. To Hajime’s surprise though, Shea gently touched her collar and shook her head.

“It’s fine, I don’t mind staying like this. It is still technically the first thing you ever gave me, Hajime-san... and it’s proof that I belong to you. Besides, I’ve actually started to like wearing it so... I’ll keep it on.” A faint blush spread up her cheeks. Her bunny ears were twitching in embarrassment too. Even Hajime had to admit the way she looked down shyly was cute. Many of the men standing close enough to hear their conversation had already been overcome with nosebleeds.

“I see. Gotta at least make it look nicer, though.”

“H-Hajime-san?” Hajime gently lifted Shea’s chin up. Her face was completely flushed now. Around them, the men’s nosebleeds had turned the ground into a river of blood.

Hajime pulled a set of dazzling jewels from his Treasure Trove and transmuted them onto Shea’s collar. Furthermore, he rearranged the gems already on there. Shea’s collar had served the purpose of making it look like she was Hajime’s slave, so he hadn’t spent much time on its initial design. Because of that it had come out looking rather plain. It had just been to avoid trouble after all.



However, if Shea was going to keep wearing it because she liked it, Hajime felt it deserved an upgrade in the looks department too. That was why he retailored it to suit her appearance more.

Her new collar had white and blue ornaments adorning the simple black fabric. Furthermore, he had transmuted a fragment of his now spent Divinity Stone into a luminous sky blue cross, and transfixed it to the front of her collar. It now resembled a fashionable choker from his old world. No one would think it was a simple collar meant to identify a slave.

Hajime nodded in satisfaction. Shea had lost herself in the sensation of Hajime's fingers on her neck, but she snapped back to herself when he handed her a mirror. She excitedly looked at her neck. The beautiful choker was a huge improvement from her old collar. It seemed the color of the cross was the same as her eyes.

"Wow~ This is the first time I've ever had something so pretty." Shea beamed happily as she played with the tiny cross. Until recently, Shea had never left her village, much less the sea of trees. She had never owned fancy things like jewelry. Of course, that didn't mean she hadn't liked them. She'd always been jealous of the girls she'd seen in Verbergen. The ones rich enough to afford the scant amount of gems that could be found in the sea of trees.

And now she finally had jewelry like that of her own. She was ecstatic. Doubly so because it had been gifted to her by the boy she loved. Her bunny ears hopped up and down with joy.

"Thank you so much, Hajime-saaan!" She hugged his arm and buried her head in his chest with a smile. Her ears rubbed against him and her tail twitched happily.

Hajime simply shrugged his shoulders while Yue sidled up, smiling faintly, and started patting Shea's head. When Tio tried to do the same, Hajime slapped her away.

The sight of them all flirting brought the onlookers to their senses, and they looked at the party with a mixture of emotions clouding their faces.

The girls all sighed, admiring Yue, Shea, and Tio's stellar looks. They didn't

even have it in them to be jealous. Meanwhile, the guys were split between being entranced by Yue and the others, extremely jealous of Hajime, or fascinated by his artifacts and looking to see how much they could potentially make off them.

None of them had tried approaching him yet, though. The merchants would have walked up to him, but they were too busy keeping each other in check while waiting for the perfect opportunity to give the others the slip and approach Hajime first.

The gaudily-dressed man was comparing his own girls to Yue and Shea, and was clearly displeased. He then attempted something that could only be called rash.

“Hey, you two. Would you be interested in—”

“Get your filthy hands off her, scum.” He’d completely ignored Hajime and walked up to Yue and the others. If all he’d done was talk to them, then Hajime would have just activated his Intimidation and made the guy faint. However, he’d gone one step too far, and tried to cup Shea’s cheek.

Though his outfit was needlessly ostentatious, he was actually a rather handsome man. His confidence in his looks had given him the mistaken belief that any woman would swoon before him as long as he walked up to her and said some pretty words. Shea glared coldly at the man and made to swat his hand away, but before she could, Hajime grabbed the man’s head in a vice grip. If looks could kill, the man would already be dead.

“Hiii!?” The man shrank back, a pathetic whimper escaping his lips. Hajime lifted him up and threw him as far as he could toward the town. He landed on the ground a good thirty meters away. He fell face-first, sliding across the ground for a good ten meters. Then, he did a headstand for a few seconds before flopping to the ground.

He stayed there in a cloud of dust, unmoving. Everyone’s gazes went from the man, who had just flown an unbelievable distance, to Hajime, their jaws hanging open in shock. The man’s two female servants gave Hajime one last fearful look before running away screaming. Hajime gazed at the gathered onlookers with a stare that could freeze hell over.

The merchants who had a second ago been trying to stop each other from being the first were now eagerly pushing their fellow traders forward instead. Hajime's gaze promised the same for anyone else who tried anything.

When he saw no one else came forward, he smiled in satisfaction and returned to ignoring the crowd.

"Hawawa, Hajime-san got mad for my sake. Have his feelings toward me started growing? Just a bit more and we'll finally be real lovers!"

"Shea, good luck."

"Yue-san... thank you. I'll do my best!"

"Hmm, despite what he says, he truly seems to cherish you. Master, when will you start cherishing me so? I would love it if you could throw me like that man."

Shea clapped her hands over her cheeks and squirmed with happiness. In truth, Hajime just hadn't been able to stand how the guy had walked around as if he owned everyone and everything. Though it was also true that he held Shea dear, so he couldn't exactly deny what Tio had said either.

As an aside, when Tio expressed her desire to be thrown as well, Hajime simply slapped her again. She fell to the ground, moaning in ecstasy again. Hajime glared at her, but that only made her more excited. Giving up, he sighed dramatically and decided to ignore her. Will alone sat in the back of the truck, hugging his knees. He was trying his best to pretend like he had nothing to do with the group up front. Just then, a huge commotion broke out at the front of the line.

Hajime looked over, spotting the gate guards heading this way. They'd probably spotted the earlier altercation and had come to see what had happened. Or maybe they'd just seen the man lying on the ground and wanted to find out what had occurred.

Three men in armor had ridden out on horses and were questioning the nearby merchants as they made their way toward Hajime. One of the merchants pointed to Hajime, then to the man lying on the ground. Then, one guard barked out orders and rode over to the collapsed man. The other two headed toward Hajime and the others, who were still flirting on top of Brise's

hood. Their gazes hardened. Not because that was their duty as guards... but because they were jealous.

“Hey, you! What’s all this commotion about!? And what’s that black box thing!? Explain yourself!” Though he was addressing Hajime, his gaze kept shifting over to Yue, so he didn’t really sound as intimidating as he intended. Hajime had expected this, so he answered without hesitation.

“This is my artifact. It’s a vehicle that can move without horses. As for that guy... he tried to lay a hand on my companion, so I sent him flying. He was trying to rape her. Can you believe it? Look at how scared she is now... Honorable guard, surely you don’t mean to take the side of that rapist. Me and my friends would never feel safe coming into Fuhren, knowing that the law protects criminals like him... You understand, right?” Hajime spun his tale without batting an eyelid. Shea was clinging to Hajime, and depending on how one interpreted it, it could have looked like she was terrified.

Will glared at Hajime from the back.

“Silver-tongued devil,” he muttered. However, Hajime ignored him. The nearby merchants all whispered things like “Rape her? He barely even said anything before he got sent flying,” or “She doesn’t look very scared to me. In fact, she looks pretty happy,” but Hajime ignored them too. After all, between a man dressed in tacky clothes and a group of beautiful girls, it was obvious who the guards were going to believe.

“Why, that’s terrible,” one of the guards exclaimed, without even bothering to verify the truth of Hajime’s statement. However, the other guard tilted his neck and examined Hajime. Suddenly, a look of realization passed over him and he started whispering to the other guard.

“Come to think of it, you’re right,” the other guard muttered, as he looked over Hajime.

“Could you three be Hajime, Yue, and Shea?”

“Hm? Yeah, we are, but...”

“I see. Does that mean you’ve returned from the quest the branch chief sent you on?”

“Yeah, that’s right... Do you have some kind of message from him or something?”

The guards nodded. They’d been informed by Ilwa to let Hajime’s party through right away. Thanks to that, Hajime wouldn’t have to wait in line. He started up Brise and followed after the guards. The rest of the travelers watched with curiosity as Hajime rode into Fuhren for the second time.

Once they were inside, the group headed straight for the adventurers guild.

They were let into the same waiting room as last time. There, they greedily devoured the tea and cakes they were offered while they waited. Five minutes later the door slammed open and Ilwa Chang stepped into the room.

“Will, are you alright!? You’re not hurt, are you!?” There was none of the calm composure he’d had last time. Without even greeting anyone, he dashed toward Will, fretting over his safety. *He must have been really worried.*

“Ilwa-san... I’m sorry. Because I insisted on going, I ended up causing you so much trouble...”

“What are you saying? It’s my fault for recommending such a dangerous request to you... I’m so glad you made it back safely. I don’t know how I’d face Greil and Saria if something had happened to you. They were both worried about you too. You should go let them know you’re safe. I’ve already told them you’re alive. They’re here in Fuhren right now.”

“Father and Mom are... I understand. I’ll go there immediately.”

Ilwa told Will where they were staying and urged him to see them at once. Will expressed his thanks to Ilwa for setting up a search party, promised Hajime he’d properly repay him later, and left the room. Hajime would have been fine at leaving things there, but Will insisted that he owed him.

Once Will left, Ilwa focused his attention on Hajime. He smiled and bowed his head low.

“Hajime-kun, thank you so much for finding Will. I honestly did not believe I would see him alive again. I cannot express how grateful I am that you brought him back alive.”

“It was his own luck that let him survive for that long.”

“Hohoho, is that really so? I suppose that did play a part in it, but... I heard you also defended him from an army of monsters. Isn’t that right, Sir Goddess’ Knight?” Ilwa grinned mischievously as he spoke the nickname Hajime had been given in Ur. Hajime’s expression stiffened. It looked like information between guild branches traveled even faster than Brise.

“So you found out already, huh?”

“Most of the guild’s higher-ups have an artifact that allows them to communicate with each other over long distances. Ur’s branch chief isn’t ranked high enough to have one, so I’d actually sent one of my subordinates there to relay information to me. The first time I’d ever heard him cry was when he tearfully reported how he’d lost sight of you a few minutes after you’d left Fuhren.” Ilwa smiled wryly. It seemed whoever he’d sent to Ur had wanted to tail Hajime to learn his secrets.

Whether that had been on Ilwa’s instructions, or his own decision, he must have been quite frustrated that he’d lost sight of Hajime so soon. Then, after riding to Ur as fast as he could, he’d seen four people face off against an army of sixty thousand. Moments after that was over, he’d probably raced out of town to head back as fast as he could. He was probably riding to Fuhren as they spoke... Hajime couldn’t help but sympathize with the guy a little.

Regardless of whether this artifact was a communication device, or some kind of scrying tool, Hajime had no intention of blaming Ilwa for sending someone after him. In fact, he was relieved the man he’d scouted as an ally was this cunning.

Ilwa cleared his throat and put the subject of his spy’s trials and tribulations to the side.

“Regardless, it must have been tough. To think the anomalies in the northern mountains had been the signs of such a disaster... I’m doubly grateful you chose to take this request. I’m truly interested in what power you must possess to be able to eliminate such an enormous army so easily... Would you mind telling me what happened there first?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. But could you get Yue and Shea their status plates first?

As for Tio—”

“I see... You plan to show this man their stats. Very well. If that is your decision, Master, then may I be granted a plate as well?”

“Well, you heard her.”

“I suppose seeing all of your stats will lend some credibility to the story that you annihilated an army of monsters... Very well.” Ilwa could tell there was something special to Hajime and his party, even the newly added Tio. And so, he called over an attendant and had them bring three new status plates.

Yue and the others stats were as follows:

Yue Age: 323 Female Level: 75

Job: Divine Priestess

Strength: 120

Vitality: 300

Defense: 60

Agility: 120

Magic: 6980

Magic Defense: 7120

Skills: Automatic Regeneration [+Pain Dampener] — All Elemental Affinity — Spell Melding — Mana Manipulation [+Mana Emission] [+Mana Compression] [+Remote Manipulation] [+Increased Efficiency] [+Ether Absorption] — Image Composition [+Increased Imagination] [+Multiple Spell Image Composition] [+Delayed Casting] — Blood Conversion [+Body Strengthening] [+Mana Conversion] [+Stamina Conversion] [+Mana Strengthening] [+Blood Oath] — High Speed Mana Recovery — Creation Magic — Gravity Magic

*Image Composition allows the wielder to use imagined magic circles in lieu of real ones. Blood Oath increases the effectiveness of bloodsucking abilities when the blood being sucked belongs to the contracted.

Shea Haulia Age: 16 Female Level: 40

Job: Diviner

Strength: 60 [Max 6100]

Vitality: 80 [Max 6120]

Defense: 60 [Max 6100]

Agility: 85 [Max 6125]

Magic: 3020

Magic Defense: 3180

Skills: Future Sight [+Automatic Activation] [+Branching Paths] — Mana Manipulation [+Body Strengthening] [+Partial Strengthening] [+Conversion Efficiency II] [+Increased Concentration] — Gravity Magic

*Conversion Efficiency II allows one point of mana to increase two points worth of stats.

Tio Klarus Age: 563 Female Level: 89

Job: Guardian

Strength: 770 [+4620 while in dragon form]

Vitality: 1100 [+6600 while in dragon form]

Defense: 1100 [+6600 while in dragon form]

Agility: 580 [+3480 while in dragon form]

Magic: 4590

Magic Defense: 4220

Skills: Draconification [+Dragon Scales] [+Mana Efficiency Up] [+Physical Stats Increase] [+Draconic Roar II] [+Wind Veil] [+Pain Conversion] — Mana Manipulation [+Mana Emission] [+Mana Compression] — Fire Resistance [+Decreased Mana Consumption] [+Increased Efficiency] [+Increased Duration] — Wind Resistance [+Decreased Mana Consumption] [+Increased Efficiency] [+Increased Duration] — Spell Melding

*Draconic Roar II allows the wielder to use their dragonbreath while outside of dragon form. Wind Veil wraps the wielder in an armor of wind while draconified, aiding in their flight speed. Pain Conversion is a truly wonderful skill. It's proof the wielder has opened the door to a new world. Come, partake of this wonderful sensation!

Though they weren't quite as broken as Hajime, each of them were strong enough to take on the rest of Hajime's cheat-level classmates all at once. All of their best stats were so high that even Kouki with Limit Break wouldn't have been able to match up to them. Naturally, most combat jobs wouldn't even come close to their level of strength.

And that was just their stats. Their unique skills and abilities had left Ilwa completely speechless.

It was hardly surprising. Skills such as Blood Conversion and Draconification belonged to races that had supposedly gone extinct centuries ago. Furthermore, they were races that, according to the Holy Church, had betrayed the gods centuries past.

And while Shea didn't belong to a heretical race like Yue and Tio, her stats and abilities were completely abnormal for her species.

"My word... I had expected to see something out of the ordinary, but not this out of the ordinary..." Sweat dripped down his forehead, and his usual smile was conspicuously absent. Unconcerned, Hajime began explaining what had happened at Ur. Normally, Ilwa would have laughed such a story off as impossible, but he had no choice but to believe Hajime after seeing their stats

and skills.

Once Hajime finished talking, Ilwa crumpled into the sofa, looking like he'd aged a decade.

"No wonder you caught Master Catherine's attention. I had assumed you were one of the summoned heroes, Hajime-kun, but... this is far beyond my expectations."

"So, what are you gonna do? Report us to the Holy Church for being heretics?"

Ilwa hurriedly straightened up under Hajime's piercing gaze.

"That's a good joke. I couldn't even if I wanted to. Turning you into my enemy would spell disaster not just for me, but likely for the entire guild. Besides, what kind of monster do you think I am? You lot are my saviors. I'll never forget that, not for the rest of my life."

"I see. Then we're good." Hajime shrugged, as if apologizing for testing Ilwa. He gestured his thanks. Ilwa smiled and nodded in response.

"As promised, I'll do everything in my power to support you. Both as a manager of the guild, and as an individual. Though, after that little display of might, I doubt the higher-ups will be in any hurry to go after you. In order to make this easier for us, we'll make your adventurer rank gold as well. Normally there's a lot of silly ceremonies and formalities that accompany a promotion to gold rank, but... well I'll make sure everyone accepts it. It'll be easier since you have Master Catherine's recommendation, along with my own. That, and your newfound reputation as 'The Goddess' Knight.'" Along with all of that, Ilwa also allowed them to stay at the VIP room in the guild-managed inn for as long as they were staying in Fuhren. Furthermore, he provided them a letter bearing his personal crest. He was serious about maintaining a friendly relationship with Hajime and his party.

"Thanks a lot. The more cards we have to play, the better. Looks like it was worth racing all the way out to Ur after all."

"I'm glad you don't regret it. However, I'm sure you're aware those two girls' identities will be discovered eventually, even if they don't show people their

status plates. Though I have pledged my support, in all honesty, it's like trying to block a fireball with a piece of paper...” Ilwa scratched his cheek and smiled bitterly. Hajime brought his teacup to his mouth and shrugged his shoulders.

“A piece of paper can be a good shield if you use it right. My job's Synergist, you know? My duty is to make sure anything that can be useful is made useful. Don't worry, I'll make good use of your support.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Besides, remember what you said when you asked me to take this request?”

“What?” Ilwa tilted his head in confusion. Hajime grinned wolfishly and repeated the words Ilwa had told him a few days ago.

“I was prepared for a confrontation from the start.”

“I see. I did say something to that effect.” Whether Hajime had Ilwa's help or not was irrelevant. Having it would make things a little easier in the future, but he wouldn't be stopped regardless. His pupils glimmered, his smile promising ruin to anything or anyone that dared stand in his way.

Ilwa couldn't help but smile when he saw Hajime's determination, and the resolve his companions had to follow him down that path. His spirits soared. He suddenly remembered the time he was a young boy, when he had given it his all to work his way up to branch chief.

He had a premonition. These four who dared to stand up against the Holy Church would be the ones to change the world.

It wasn't that he hated the current status quo. He was on the side of the haves, not the have-nots, after all. He was a human living an honest life in this world. If anything, he should have wished for the world to stay as it was.

But the reason he couldn't help but feel excitement, and possibly a little fear, at the prospect was because he, Ilwa Chang, was part of the adventurer's guild.

“I pray your travels turn into the most wonderful adventure and bring the most trouble this world has ever seen.”

“I'm not sure if I'm supposed to say thanks to that or not.” Even Hajime

wasn't sure how to interpret Ilwa's heartfelt words. *But well, it's very much like him,* he thought with a wry smile. Yue, Shea, and Tio all turned to each other with bemused looks on their faces.

Seeing their expressions, Ilwa laughed. He hadn't laughed like this in years. For so long he'd just been busy with the work of managing the guild, but things were finally going to change.

After they parted ways with Ilwa, Hajime and the others went to the guild-managed inn in the center of the city. It was a massive, twenty-story building, and their room was situated at the top floor. They had an unobstructed view of the tourist quarter. The room they'd been given was magnificent as well. There was a wide living room, as well as four separate bedrooms, each furnished with a massive canopy bed. Both the sofas and the rug were soft and fluffy, and they could tell at a glance every piece of furniture was high-class.

Hajime and Yue sank into the couch, while Shea and Tio excitedly explored their new living quarters. A few minutes after their arrival, Will came to visit along with his parents, Count Greil Cudeta and Countess Saria Cudeta. Unlike the nobles Hajime had seen at the palace, Greil and Saria were very agreeable people. He could see how Will had turned out into such a nice person. Greil insisted on thanking Hajime and offered him gold and invitations to his manor, but Hajime wasn't interested.

"Kind sir, I'm truly glad I was able to return your son to you alive. But as for a reward, the guild has already paid me. They requested this mission, and I completed it, so the matter of payment's been settled." He was being surprisingly polite to Will's parents. It was so out of character for him that Shea started yelling for a medic, while Tio hid under her bed screaming, "I do not like this! Master's gone mad!" Needless to say, the Cudeta couple found their behavior rather odd.

"Excuse me a moment," Hajime said to the bewildered Cudetas. He picked up Shea and Tio, then flung them out the window, saying "Go play outside for a bit," in a forcibly cheery voice. In case anyone had forgotten, they were on the top floor of a twenty-story building.

The Cudetas paled as they heard Shea and Tio scream all the way down.

However, Hajime just slammed the window shut, turned to the couple with a smile, and said “Cheery kids, aren’t they?” They nodded vigorously.

Hajime had seen no reason to antagonize people as nice as them, so he’d acted more politely than usual. However, his conduct must have been too much of a shock for Shea and Tio, and they’d broke.

Exasperated, Yue muttered “I’ll go get them,” and leaped out of the window as well. The Cudetas turned to look at their son, their heads creaking like a badly oiled machine.

Will was rubbing the goosebumps on his arm, glaring angrily at Hajime all the while. He’d guessed what Hajime was trying to do, and what he was hoping to get out of it.

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t refuse your feelings, Count.”

“Huh? O-Oh, yes...” Still shocked at the recent chain of events, Greil peeled his eyes away from his son and turned to Hajime. Grinning, Hajime requested the same things he’d requested from Ilwa.

“So basically, if it ever happens that we need to turn to you for aid, I hope you’ll be willing to give it.”

“I-Is that really all? I heard you risked life and limb to rescue my son from a dragon’s breath. Surely, there must be more you want. By the way, didn’t one of your comrades just leap from the window—”

“Well... I’d say I’m asking for a lot, actually. It’s possible you might be put in a very dangerous position for helping us. If anything, I may be asking for too much.”

“Hahaha, I suppose that’s true. In that case, I won’t promise unconditional support, but I will do everything I can if you ever come to me for help. Anyway, if I may be blunt, didn’t you just throw two of your companions out of the window—”

“Thank you very much, Count. Your help is much appreciated.” Hajime continued to ignore Greil’s question. He did it so casually that the Cudetas started doubting whether they’d really seen him throw his friends out the window. Finally, they finished processing everything and realized the truth of

the situation, thinking *Wait a second, didn't we just see a murder occur right before our eyes? His companions must be a splatter on the ground now, right!?* However, before they could do anything more than shudder—

"Uuu, that was mean, Hajime-san. Just because it won't kill me doesn't mean it wasn't scary."

"U-Unbelievable. To be thrown so unceremoniously out of a window... This was the first time I have ever experienced such a thing. I must say, it was rather exciting."

"Shut up, pervert." A white hand latched onto the window, and Tio and Shea's heads popped up below the window sill. Their bangs covered their expressions. Yue was floating behind them, but with how terrifying Shea and Tio looked, no one had eyes for her.

Saria let out a high-pitched scream and fell unconscious to the floor.

"Mom!" Will cried out, clearly worried for his mother's safety. Hajime suddenly remembered Will had a big enough Oedipus complex that he carried a locket with a picture of his mother in it everywhere. Will had been even faster to react than his father.

"By the way, Hajime-san. Why did you start talking all creepy like that... It gave me goosebumps."

"Indeed. Even I was repulsed. Master, if something is worrying you, I would —"

Hajime glared angrily at them. He'd had a very good reason for acting nice, and they had both ruined it with their inability to take a hint. And of all people, Tio had no right to call him repulsive.

Greil opened his mouth to express his amazement at their survival.

"Y-You two, you were all—"

Bang! Bang! Two gunshots resounded through the room.

"Bwah!" "Thank you very much!" With those two words, Shea and Tio fell from the window once more.

"I apologize for my comrades' rudeness."

“Oh, not at all. At any rate, my wife seems to be a little tired, so we shall take our leave.” Sweating profusely, Greil picked up his wife and made to leave. Will looked up at his father and smiled awkwardly, as if he’d expected this outcome, then addressed Hajime.

“Really, thank you for saving me. I hope we meet again.” With those parting words he turned on his heel and left.

Hajime watched Greil scuttle to the door like a rabbit afraid of being pounced on by the lion standing right behind it. As Greil opened the door, Hajime said one last thing.

“Thank you for coming all the way to see me. As for my reward... Well, I hope you won’t disappoint.”

“I-I won’t, I swear it!” Greil squeaked that out through chattering teeth. The dignity of a noble was nowhere to be seen. Will just let out a sad sigh, bowed his head, and closed the door behind him.

Hajime lapsed into thought. He had tried his best to appear pleasant, humble, and leave a good impression on the count. He’d wanted to convince him amicably to pledge his support to Hajime’s cause, and yet it had somehow ended up looking like he’d threatened him into doing it. The poor man had left looking like the victim of some unspeakable crime.

“I don’t get it. Why’d it end up like this...”

“Have you heard the saying, you reap what you sow?” Yue’s words were surprisingly harsh.

After the Cudeta family had left, Hajime had collapsed back into the sofa and sighed heavily. His head was resting in Yue’s lap like usual, Shea was sitting by his feet, and Tio was still exploring their room. She examined each piece of furniture thoroughly, occasionally letting out a gasp of admiration, other times tilting her head in confusion. Hajime guessed she was examining how different it was from things in her home.

“Anyway, let’s rest for today. We’ve gotta restock on supplies tomorrow.” Hajime lazily closed his eyes as Yue stroked his hair. However, Shea objected to Hajime’s plans. She grabbed Hajime’s leg and started shaking him.

“Wait, Hajime-san. You promised...”

“Oh yeah, I did say I’d take you around the tourist quarter.” As a reward for saving Aiko’s life, Hajime had promised to take Shea around the tourists’ quarter for a day.

Shea looked at Hajime expectantly. However, he hesitated. They still had to get a lot of shopping done too. It was then that Yue came to the rescue. She cupped Hajime’s cheeks and looked down at him gently.

“Tio and I will do the shopping. You go with Shea.”

“Are you fine with that?”

“Yeah... but in return...”

“What?” Yue knew how much Shea was looking forward to her date, so she wanted to make sure it happened. Really, she was more like a big sister than a friend to Shea. Hajime looked up at Yue with a complicated expression on his face. Her expression transformed from gentle to predatory, and she licked her lips. She brought her lips close to Hajime’s ear and whispered softly.

“Spend tonight with me.”

“Okay,” Hajime replied, sounding just like Yue. He instantly gave in. He, who had the confidence to beat even labyrinth guardians, didn’t think he would ever be able to win against Yue.

“...And there they go, flirting again. Yue-san’s really good at this.”

“Hmm... I must say, it is quite impressive how you refuse to back down even after seeing that, Shea. I am satisfied as long as Master doles out punishment regularly, but... it must be difficult for you.” Shea watched Yue with admiration. Tio was impressed with how Shea didn’t seem to be jealous of Yue. Their relationship had piqued Tio’s interests. A while later Yue and Hajime came back to reality, and the four of them chatted idly for a few hours until it was time for bed.

Late that night, around the time the moon was nearing its zenith, two figures were stealthily creeping their way across the terrace of the top floor of the

adventurers guild's inn. They were covered from head to toe in black, like assassins, snuffing out their presence and furtively looked into the window of a certain room.

Upon looking inside, they saw...

"Fwah, look at that, Tio-san! They're being so rough... Won't Yue-san break if Hajime-san's that rough?"

"Fwooooh! Master is indeed being rough! B-But look, Shea. That expression of Yue's... it is far too stimulating! Even a woman such as myself feels tempted to..."

"Hawawa, you're right. That look of pure ecstasy really is something! Yue-san looks really happy. I'm so jealous~"

"Nnngh... I had thought being tormented was enough for me, but... that does look nice."

A few minutes later, the two of them were discovered by Hajime and subjected to his usual punishments.

"Hmhmhm... Hmhmhm! The weather's great... It's a perfect day for a date!" Shea was happily skipping down the main street of Fuhren.

She was wearing a white one-piece dress today, instead of her usual adventuring outfit. It was a wonder the thin shoulder straps managed to hold up her massive bust as she walked. She was wearing a small black belt around her waist, which further accentuated her figure, the loosely tied belt emphasized her perfect waistline, and her bare legs drew about as many stares from the surrounding men as her massive knockers did.

However, most charming of all was her radiant smile. Her cheeks were flushed and joy was overflowing from her every pore. The fact that she was a beastman, and that she was wearing a slave collar, albeit a very pretty one, didn't matter at all to the onlookers. They were all utterly entranced by Shea.

Hajime was walking behind her, his demeanor more at ease than it normally was.

Shea kept excitedly bounding ahead a few steps and then turning around to wait for him with a smile. Honestly, even Hajime couldn't help but smile when he saw how happy she was.

"You don't need to run that fast, Shea. What if you trip?"

"Fufufu, as if I would do that~ I've been trained by Yue-san, there's no way I'd —" Her foot caught on something and she tipped backward before she could finish her sentence. Hajime rushed forward and caught her before she fell. He doubted falling would actually hurt her with her strengthened body, but he wanted to be safe since she was wearing a dress. He wasn't going to let any of the onlookers "accidentally" cop a feel as they pretended to fall on top of her.

"Sh-Shorry."

"Hey, I know you're excited, but don't run off ahead." Shea shrank back in embarrassment. She timidly grabbed his sleeve and matched his pace with small, quick steps. Quite a few of the onlookers fainted at the sight of her blushing cutely as she walked with Hajime. Most of the knockouts were caused by their lovers punching their lights out, though.

They made their way to the tourists' district, attracting attention along the way.

The district was filled with entertainment facilities of all kinds. There was a theater, numerous street performances, a circus, an opera house, aquariums, an arena, a gaming hall, numerous sightseeing platforms, multiple botanical gardens, and various plazas and towers to explore.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san! Let's go to the Meerstadt first! I've never seen living sea creatures before!" Her bunny ears twitched impatiently as she gestured to the guidebook in her hand. As she'd lived her entire life in the Haltina Woods, it wasn't too surprising that she'd never seen the sea or the animals that lived within it. That was why the first thing that had caught her eye was Fuhren's most famous aquarium.

There had been lakes and rivers in the forest, so she had seen aquatic life before, but freshwater fish and saltwater fish had a completely different feel to them, even if they looked similar.

Fish are fish, aren't they? It's not like they're any different... But Hajime saw the excitement on Shea's face and kept his thoughts to himself. Today, at least, he would be nice to her.

"Huh, I'm kinda surprised they have marine fish this far inland... They really go all-out to attract customers. It must be tough transporting and feeding them." Hajime's interest in the aquarium was in perhaps the wrong direction, but he saw no reason to refuse, so they decided to go there. Shea happily grabbed Hajime's hand and pulled him along to the aquarium. Her ears and tail were jumping for joy.

Along the way they passed by street players performing extraordinary feats of acrobatics that tested the limits of human flexibility. They watched as they walked, until finally they arrived at the massive Meerstadt Aquarium. The building was painted an ocean-blue and filled with people.

Hajime marveled at how the inside resembled the aquariums back on earth. The only difference was that the tanks were covered in thick glass and a lattice of steel support beams, making it a bit harder to see inside. Unlike Earth, Tortus had yet to develop thin glass sturdy enough to handle the water pressure.

With nothing to compare it to, Shea didn't mind at all. Her eyes glowed as she watched all the creatures swim by. She pointed at them one after another and chattered excitedly to Hajime

Her mannerisms were the same as the little girl next to them who'd come along with her family. For a second, Hajime's eyes met with those of the girl's father. For some reason, the man's warm gaze made Hajime embarrassed and he quickly dragged Shea somewhere else. Though she was surprised by their sudden departure, she was glad Hajime was holding her hand. She squeezed back.

They spent an hour wandering around the aquarium enjoying themselves, but as they were passing by another row of tanks, Shea suddenly did a double take.

One of the tanks was holding... A fish with a human head. In fact, he looked just like the human-faced fish from the game Seaman.

"Wh-Why is he here..." Shea stepped back with a shudder. The weird fish spotted Shea and swam over to the edge of the tank, a bored expression on its

face. Shea felt a sudden surge of unease. Hajime ignored the two of them and went over to the plaque next to the tank.

“Let’s see here... Oh, it can talk?” According to the blurb, the fishmen were an aquatic race of monsters whose unique magic was Telepathy. Thanks to that, they could talk to people. So far they were the only recorded monster race to have made peace with mankind.

However, it seemed that they found talking a pain and rarely used their ability. Even when they did, their replies tended to be lazy and lifeless. The plaque warned that people who did talk to them tended to feel listless themselves and to approach it with caution.

They loved alcohol though, and would become rather talkative if given some. But even then they would simply launch into a long-winded lecture so actually conversing with one was very difficult... Their nickname was “office drone.”

Hajime wiped a bead of sweat from his brow and turned to Shea and the fishman. He couldn’t tell if they were staring at each other or glaring at each other. With a hint of trepidation, he tried talking to it. Since they apparently didn’t respond often to regular conversation, he tried using Telepathy.

“You can use Telepathy, right? Can you really talk? Do you understand what I’m saying?” The seaman blinked once. It tore its gaze away from Shea and slowly turned to face him. Shea smiled triumphantly, as if she’d just won a contest.

“Tch, this is our first meeting, isn’t it, boy? It’s only polite to tell someone your name first. Sheesh, this is why kids these days are...” A fish with an old man’s face had just lectured Hajime on manners. He couldn’t believe it. His mouth twitched at the corners a little and he tried again.

“Sorry about that. I’m Hajime. So, you really can talk, huh? What kind of creature are you guys?”

“My dear boy, what kind of creatures are humans? If I asked you that right now would you be able to answer? You wouldn’t, right? All I can say is I’m me. Nothing more, nothing less. I can’t say I have a name either, so just address me however you wish.”

Hajime floundered for a bit. Not only had the fishman's response made complete sense, he'd started sounding really cool too. He hadn't expected a fish monster to be this intelligent. *Didn't the plaque say their answers are always lazy and lifeless?* Hajime suddenly felt like suing whoever had written that. He quickly averted his gaze, so this time it was the seaman who asked him a question.

"I'd like to ask you something, too. How is it you can use Telepathy? You certainly aren't using any magic humans are capable of... It's almost like you're the same as me, as us monsters." It was a pretty reasonable question. After all, here was a human using the special magic Telepathy. It was only natural for the fishman to wonder how Hajime could do something only monsters were supposed to be able to do. The reason he'd answered Hajime's questions seriously was because he'd been curious himself.

Hajime cleared his throat to give himself a second to think. He explained that he'd eaten a monster that could use Telepathy and absorbed its powers.

"I see. You've faced a great deal of hardship despite your youth. Very well, if there's anything you'd like to ask this old man, go ahead. I'll tell you anything you want." He was being pitied by a fish. It looked like the fishman had misunderstood and thought Hajime had been so poor that he'd been forced to eat monster meat to survive. It wiped a tear with its fin. Judging by the clothes Hajime was wearing now, it was obvious he had worked hard to escape his impoverished situation. Truly, it was a tale touching enough to make an old man cry.

Since he wasn't that far off the mark, Hajime didn't bother to correct him. Hajime certainly had faced a lot of hardship. Though it was still a bit of a shock that his life so far had been so bad that even a fish pitied him.

He shakily pulled himself together and asked whatever came to mind. Whether or not monsters possessed their own wills, how they were born, whether there were any other monsters people could come to an understanding with, and so on.

According to the fishman, most monsters acted purely on instinct and had no wills of their own. Aside from his race, it was unlikely that there could ever be

understanding with monsters and humans. Also, it seemed even he didn't know how monsters were born.

They spent a long time discussing various topics of interest. To a bystander it looked like a boy and a fish with an old man's face were just staring at each other. The surreal sight started attracting attention, so people came to watch.

"Umm, Hajime-san, people are staring at us. Also, you're on a date with me, so how come you're staring at that old fishman? The person you're supposed to be looking at is me." Shea's rabbit ears pressed flat against her head and she shyly tugged at Hajime's sleeve. He reluctantly cut his conversation short and turned to Shea. His obvious reluctance made Shea even more depressed.

Honestly, Hajime had been hoping to talk some more with the fishman, but he had promised to spend today on a date with Shea, and he didn't take his promises lightly.

"Oh my, I didn't realize I was interrupting your date. My apologies for getting in the way of you youngsters." The fishman didn't seem to mind stopping their conversation there either. *What an understanding old man...*

Sometime during their conversation they'd started calling each other by the nicknames Fish-san and Young Haj. Hajime could tell this fishman was a man among men.

Before they parted ways, Hajime asked what he was doing here in this aquarium. The answer he received was rather surprising.

"Well, like I said before, I was traveling the world... when suddenly the underground river I was swimming in got blasted to the surface. Before I knew it, I'd been thrown out of the fountain and into the grass. I won't die on land, but I can't really move either. I used my Telepathy to call for help and... Well, I ended up getting taken here." Cold sweat poured down Hajime's forehead. It was obvious from his description that the fishman was talking about the time Hajime and the others had been forced out of Miledi Reisen's labyrinth.

The poor fish had been caught up in the stream and thrown on land. Technically, that *was* Miledi's fault, but that didn't change the fact that Hajime had something to do with his current plight.

Hajime awkwardly asked the seaman the foremost thing on his mind.

“Uh, Fish-san, do you want to escape from here?”

“Of course I do. Wanderlust is in my blood. And it’s my belief that living things should be born in nature and die in nature. When I die, I want it to be out in the open sea, not this metal cage.” His words were filled with longing. Hajime had taken quite a liking to the fishman, and it was partly his fault he was stuck in this cage, so he decided to save him.

“Fish-san. If you want, I can let you go in a nearby river. I think it might be partly our fault you’re stuck here in the first place. I’ll get you out in a couple of minutes. Are you willing to put your trust in me?”

“Young Haj... Heh, never thought I’d have a youngster worrying about little old me. Dunno what you’ve got planned, but I ain’t so senile that I’d mistrust a strapping young lad like yourself. I believe in you, Young Haj.”

The two of them shared a smile.

“Huh? Could it be I have a rival in love?” Shea muttered that to herself as she watched the two of them stare at each other.

Hajime then turned on his heel and dragged Shea along. Shea had no idea what was going on, but followed Hajime obediently. As they were about to leave, the fishman reached out to Shea via Telepathy.

“Sorry for surprising you back then, Missy. Don’t ever let go of that hand you’re holding, you hear?”

“Huh? What? Umm, I don’t mind at all! Actually, it was thanks to that I was able to share my first kiss with Hajime-san! Also, I’ll never let go!” She responded as best as she could. The fishman smiled in satisfaction. *Meddlesome old fart,* Hajime thought affectionately. Hajime wished the first “male” friend he’d made since coming to this world well and left the aquarium.

A few minutes later, one of his cross bits started rampaging around the aquarium and destroyed the seaman’s tank. As he fell out, he landed neatly in the cage Hajime had attached to the cross bit. The cross bit blasted through the aquarium staff that came after the fishman without hurting them, blew through the aquarium wall, and flew off into the sky.

The incident caused such a stir within the city that eventually Fuhren's leaders got involved as well. No one could tell whether it had been a new monster, or some hidden power of the fishman's... but none of that had anything to do with Hajime.

Around the same time, Yue and Tio were walking around the commercial district doing their shopping. Hajime had stockpiled large quantities of resources in his Treasure Trove already, so they were mostly just topping up on supplies a little bit. Thanks to that, they didn't have to scramble to buy up as much food as possible, and they could take their time window shopping as they walked down the business district.

"Hmm. I have to ask, Yue. Are you truly alright with this?"

"Hm...? You mean Shea?"

"Indeed. It's possible their relationship may have progressed far more than you anticipated on this date." Yue turned back from the clothes she was examining. The curiosity was rather evident in Tio's voice. "Are you sure you should be taking it so easy? She might usurp your position, you know?" was the unsaid implication in her question.

Tio had joined only recently, and the strange relationship between Shea, Yue, and Hajime was something that intrigued her greatly. Seeing as they'd be traveling together from now on, she decided not to beat around the bush and just ask about it.

However, Yue didn't seem shaken at all. She glanced at Tio's expression and shrugged her shoulders. She evidently wasn't worried at all.

"I'd be happy if it has."

"Happy? Do you mean to tell me you would not mind the man you love getting intimate with another girl?"

"She's not just another girl. It's only because it's Shea." Yue went back to window-shopping as she responded.

"At first she was all over Hajime. It was annoying seeing her try to seduce him so brazenly. But after being with her for so long, I understand."

“Understand what?”

“...Hm. That that girl is always serious. She’s always doing her best. Both for the things she holds dear, and for the people she loves. For better or worse, she always charges straight ahead.”

“I see. After watching her, I can certainly understand that. So what, you were moved by her sincerity?” Tio had only been with the group a short time, but even she smiled as she thought back on Shea’s antics. Despite the suffering she’d endured because she was born different, she never stopped smiling. The always cheerful bunny girl naturally put smiles on everyone else’s face.

Due to her youth, she still made a lot of mistakes and had a lot of flaws, but even Tio was charmed by how she always tried her hardest. However, that seemed too flimsy an excuse for Yue to let her one and only lover on a date with another girl. And so, Tio felt the need to confirm whether that was really the only reason Yue had allowed it.

“That’s half of the reason.”

“Half, you say? Then what was the other half?”

Yue’s lips curled up into a smile, something rare for her.

“Shea loves me too. About as much as she loves Hajime. Perhaps in a different way, but still the same amount. Don’t you think that’s cute?”

“I understand now. That girl needs both you and Master. Not many would be willing to deny such a pure request. I suppose that sincerity is one of her virtues. I see... Well, now I understand the depths of your feelings for Shea. But what about Master? Are you not worried she might steal his heart away? Surely you know better than anyone how alluring she can be.” Yue shrugged her shoulders, as if such a thing was impossible. Her smile suddenly turned seductive. She closed her eyes and licked her lips, a light blush spreading across her cheeks.

The aura of mature sexiness that surrounded her was at odds with her small body. Men and women alike turned to stare at her. Thanks to that there were a few collisions as pedestrians ran into each other. Yue’s charm was enough to overshadow even Tio, who had curves in all the right places. Tio suddenly

recalled the sight she had witnessed last night, and shuddered.

Unaware of the carnage she was causing, or perhaps aware and simply ignoring it, Yue replied.

“I want Hajime to have more people who are important to him. But... I’m the only one who will be special to him. If anyone thinks they can take that position, they’re welcome to try. I’ll take on any challenge, from anyone, at any time, in any place.”

“Try it if you dare,” Yue’s smile seemed to say. Because she was usually so inexpressive, the impact was multiplied. Tio took an involuntary step backward. Realizing just how much Yue’s smile had scared her, she smiled bitterly and raised her hands in surrender.

“Do not worry... I have no intention of picking a fight with you. So long as Master continues to debase me, I am content.”

“Pervert.” However, Yue’s disgusted tone only made Tio happier.

Yue understood that Tio’s initial question had stemmed for a desire to get to know them all better, which was why despite her exasperation with Tio’s perverted behavior, Yue knew she would get along just fine with everyone.

The two of them grew a little closer thanks to that exchange, and they continued walking amicably down the street together.

“Guh!”

“Pugyaaa!”

A nearby wall was blown to pieces, and two men came hurtling out of the hole. The two of them screamed as they skid across the ground. They came to a stop a few meters from the wall. Neither of them were even twitching. They looked like corpses... In fact, they *were* corpses now.

The window of the same building shattered, and a few more men came whizzing out of it like pinballs. Sounds of destruction could be heard coming from inside the building. Every few seconds it would shake, and more cracks would appear on the walls.

A couple dozen more men were flung out of the building, their limbs splayed

out at unnatural angles as they landed. Some of them were in too hideous a state to accurately describe. Finally, the building could take no more, and it collapsed with a loud boom.

Screaming, the onlookers fled as fast as their feet would take them. Yue and Tio recognized a familiar presence and looked over at the rubble with a sigh.

“Ah, so it was you two after all...”

“Huh? Yue-san and Tio-san? What are you doing here?”

“That’s my line. This is a bit much for a date.”



“Indeed. So, Master, what kind of trouble did you get yourself wrapped up in this time?” As they had expected, Shea and Hajime emerged from the ruins of what had until recently been a building. The two of them were still dressed the same way they’d been when they’d left for the date, their weapons sitting comfortably in their hands. It was quite a surreal sight, a bunny girl in a cute one piece dress holding a warhammer over her shoulder.

“Ahaha, I didn’t think our date would go like this either, but... Well, one thing led to another and we ended up destroying an underground slavery ring.”

“How did things lead to you fighting a slavery ring?” Yue sighed again. Shea smiled weakly. Tio looked over at Hajime, silently demanding an explanation.

“Well, I’m glad we ran into you guys. We’re short on hands. I’ll explain everything on the way, so mind helping out?” Hajime holstered Donner and started flinging the unconscious men on top of the rubble heap. He didn’t want them blocking the streets. He didn’t even look at them as he threw them, and began explaining what had happened.

They’d gone for lunch after the aquarium. Once they’d finished eating they’d decided to walk through some of the botanical gardens and maybe see some street performers. Shea’s hands were full of the various food she’d bought from different stalls. At the time she’d been devouring a vanilla ice cream bar...

“You sure can eat... Is it really that good?”

“Haumf... Yes! It’s delicious. Fuhren’s amazing. Even the food stalls have food this good.”

“If you eat too much, you’ll get fat.”

“Hajime-san, that’s the one thing you can’t say to a girl.” Shea stopped eating for a second, but then muttered something lightly.

“I’ll exercise later... and cut down a bit tomorrow...” Then, she resumed her quest to eat through every sweet Fuhren had to offer. Hajime smiled as he watched her chow down. However, suddenly, his expression transformed into one of confusion, and he looked down at his feet.

Shea cocked her head quizzically at him.

“What’s wrong, Hajime-san?”

“Hm? Oh, my Sense Perception just went off...”

“Why were you even using that skill?”

“It’s good training, and I usually use it constantly.”

“Okay? But what’s so special about sensing someone? There’s people everywhere right now...” Shea gestured around her.

“That’s not exactly what I mean... I sensed someone below us.”

“Below? Aren’t the sewers below us? Maybe someone’s doing some work on them right now?”

“I wouldn’t have paid any attention if it was just that. But this presence is really small. Plus, it feels weak... I think it’s a kid. A really hurt kid.”

“Wha—!? Th-That’s terrible! What if they accidentally fell in and are being swept away by the water!? Hajime-san, let’s chase after them! Where’d you sense them?” Once Hajime told her the direction, Shea dashed off.

Hajime had been trying to live a life that in Aiko’s terms was “less lonely,” but in the end it was still Shea who acted first. He couldn’t help but smile wryly to himself. Her cheerful and straightforward attitude had started rubbing off on him a little, or so it seemed.

Together with Shea, Hajime tried to pinpoint the location of the rapidly moving child. They realized they were being carried by the current toward the sewer channel that ran beneath the street they were on. They dashed forward ahead of the presence and Hajime pressed his hands to the ground. Red sparks sputtered from his hands and in seconds there was a hole in the street.

Without hesitation, they both leaped into the hole. Hajime grabbed hold of Shea and used Aerodynamic to leap to one of the walkways that snaked alongside each side of the tunnel. He had no intention of falling into the foul-smelling sewer sludge.

“Hajime-san, I can sense it too now. I’ll jump in and rescue whoever it is!”

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to do that.” Shea didn’t hesitate to leap forward, even though it would have gotten her precious date clothes dirty. However, Hajime grabbed her by the collar and held her back. He once again placed his hands on the ground and transmuted it.

A latticework of clay rose up from the bottom of the sewer. Hajime tilted the makeshift net and scooped up the child that was being washed down the sewer. Then, he carefully rolled them closer to where he was standing. Finally, he shot out his left arm, grabbed the child, and reeled them in.

“This girl’s...”

“She’s still breathing. Let’s get out of here first. It smells disgusting.” Shea’s eyes opened wide as she saw the girl Hajime had pulled in. Hajime was pretty surprised as well. Even with his limited knowledge of this world, he was certain someone like her wasn’t supposed to be in a city like this. However, considering where they were, it really wasn’t the time to worry about that. The unhygienic conditions were bad for them both physically and mentally.

Considering who she was, Hajime doubted she’d fallen in here by accident. He wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to bring her up into the open street, so he closed the earlier hole he’d made and transmuted a new one into the wall. Then, he used his knowledge of the nearby layout to map out a new path. After that, he pulled a blanket out of his Treasure Trove and wrapped it around the girl.

Red sparks flared in a small back alley, and suddenly a hole appeared in the ground. Out of it appeared Shea and Hajime. He closed the hole behind him and took a proper look at the girl they had rescued.

She had long, emerald-green hair. Her adorable features shone through the dirt and shit that was caked on her face. From the looks of it, she couldn’t have been more than three or four years old.

However, her most striking feature, the one that had surprised Hajime and Shea, were her ears. Instead of human ears, two fan-shaped fins sprouted from the sides of her head. Furthermore, Hajime could see thin webbing on the tiny red hand that poked out of the blanket.

“This girl’s a dagon. What’s she doing here?”

“Well, whatever the reason is, it’s probably not good.”

Dagons were a unique race among the beastmen. They lived in the coastal city of Erisen, which was to the west of the continent, past even the massive Gruen Desert. Thanks to their racial traits, they were well suited to the water. So much so that they provided seventy percent of the continent’s marine produce. It was thanks to their usefulness that the Heiligh Kingdom guaranteed their safety, despite the fact that they were beastmen. The kingdom’s opportunism knew no bounds. Even as they discriminated against the other races, they protected any that were useful to them.

It seemed impossible that a dagon child would be in one of the largest cities on the continent, and even more impossible that they’d find her in the sewers of all places. The whole affair reeked of shady dealings at work.

As Hajime and Shea looked at each other, unsure of what to do, the little girl’s nose twitched, and she opened her eyes.

She looked around in confusion for a little bit before finally settling her large round pupils on Hajime. She stared silently at him.

Unable to look away, Hajime stared back. Seconds passed. Seconds turned into minutes. And the minutes continued stretching on.

“What the heck are you two doing?” Shea’s exasperated interjection shattered the strange tension that had formed around them, and the girl’s stomach gurgled. Her nose twitched again and this time her eyes locked on to the food Shea still had wrapped up in her hands.

Shea tilted her head and pulled out a meat skewer. She slowly waved it from right to left, and the girl’s gaze followed it like a magnet. She was clearly hungry. Hajime stopped her before she could unwrap the skewer and started transmuting.

“So, what’s your name?” She shrank back as red sparks filled the air and the ground rose up to make a small box. The skewer was no longer the center of her attention. After a moment of hesitation, she quietly whispered her name.

“Myu.”

“I see. I’m Hajime, and that’s Shea. Anyway, Myu, before you can eat that, we

have to clean you up first.” Hajime took some clean water out of the Treasure Trove and poured it into his makeshift bathtub, then heated some flamrock under the tub to warm it, finishing off his impromptu bath. He didn’t think it would be healthy even for a dagon to eat with hands caked in sewer sludge. As she’d probably swallowed some earlier when she was being washed away, he’d probably need to give her some antibiotics as well.

Without even giving her time to reply, Hajime stripped off her dirty clothes and plopped her into the bath. Myu let out a terrified squeal, but after she realized the warm water actually felt pleasant, she slowly relaxed.

Hajime handed Shea a towel, some medicine, and a bar of soap. He left her to bathe Myu while he went out to purchase new clothes for her.

When he returned, he found Myu hugging Shea, a blanket wrapped around her body. It seemed she’d already finished her bath. Shea was in the process of feeding her the meat skewer. Myu’s small mouth worked furiously to chew the large chunks. Her hair had regained its original luster, and she looked like a tiny angel surrounded in a halo of emerald green.



“Ah, Hajime-san. Welcome back. I’m not a doctor, but it looks like Myu-chan’s doing fine.” Shea stroked Myu’s damp hair as she reported to Hajime. Still chewing on the meat, Myu turned back to stare at Hajime again. It looked like she was trying to decide whether Hajime was a good or bad person.

Hajime nodded and pulled out the clothes he’d bought. It was a small white one-piece, similar in design to Shea’s. He’d also gotten her a pair of gladiator sandals and some basic underwear. Even though it had been for a kid, Hajime could feel the clerk’s eyes boring into him when he went to buy them.

Hajime gently pulled the blanket off her and pulled the dress over her head. Of course, he helped her put the underwear on as well. Then, he knelt down and slipped the sandals onto her feet.

Once that was finished he pulled out one of his artifacts that could blow hot air, a hair dryer basically, out of his Treasure Trove and started drying Myu’s hair. At first Myu just silently watched Hajime, but as the hot air hit her back, she let out a cute squeal and smiled a little.

“I didn’t realize you were so good at looking after people, Hajime-san.”

“Where’d that come from?” Hajime furrowed his brows, but it was obvious from the way he was drying Myu’s hair that Shea was right. She grinned pointedly at him. Realizing he couldn’t deny it, Hajime quickly changed the subject.

“Anyway, we need to think about what to do next...”

“You mean about Myu-chan, right...” Realizing they were talking about her, Myu shifted her gaze between the two of them. They decided to first figure out what was going on with her.

Myu haltingly told them everything, after a lot of prodding. It was more or less what Hajime had already guessed. One day, while she’d been swimming, she’d gotten separated from her mother and had ended up being captured by humans.

After a grueling journey through the desert, Myu had been taken to Fuhren and locked up in a dark cell somewhere. Apparently there’d been other human children in the cells next to her. Then, after a few days, a few of the children

were taken away each morning. None of them ever came back. She overheard that one of the older boys had been shown off to a bunch of people before being sold to someone.

It was meant to be her turn today, but the door to the sewers had been left open. Probably because someone had gone in to maintain it and forgotten to close the door. Regardless, the sound of rushing water had called to Myu, and she'd jumped in.

It was a blessing that they hadn't shackled her. They had probably figured a young child like her couldn't have done much anyway. Anyway, thanks to that, Myu was able to swim. She did her best not to gag at the terrible smell and started paddling. Though she was young, she was a dagon. Nobody on foot could have hoped to catch her, especially as she was swimming with the current.

However, the stress of the kidnapping, the terrible journey, and the inadequate food she'd been given finally caught up to her. Swimming through a city's worth of human waste was impossible for her in her weakened condition.

She'd blacked out and when she next awoke, she had been in Hajime's arms.

"Shown off and then sold, huh? Sounds like an auction. And if they're selling dagon and human children too, it's clearly an illegal one."

"Hajime-san, what should we do?" Shea hugged Myu tight. It was obvious from her expression that she wanted to do something for the poor girl. The fear of being captured and sold off as a slave was one beastmen were well accustomed to. Shea had watched many of her family members get captured, so she knew just how much it hurt.

And yet, Hajime simply shook his head.

"It would be better to leave her to the safety department."

"You can't! You're going to just abandon her and all those other kids?" Shea cried out vehemently. She looked at Hajime in shock, as if she'd just been betrayed.

The safety department Hajime was referring to was the fantasy world equivalent of the police. Placing her in the care of a public institution like that

would mean that her fate was completely out of their hands. It wasn't exactly the same as abandoning her, and it was, in fact, the normal procedure for when someone found a lost child, but considering the situation, Shea's feelings were understandable as well.

Hajime knelt down and explained everything to Shea point by point.

"Look, Shea. Normally, when you find a lost child, the proper thing to do is to send them to the safety department. Besides, Myu's a dagon. They'll definitely treat her well. And the fact that there's an underground auction that deals in dagons will cause a huge uproar. There'll definitely be a full-scale investigation, and all the other kids will end up in the department's protection as well." Even if Myu was a beastman, she was one of the races under the kingdom's protection. Fuhren did possess a level of independence, but they couldn't ignore people that were so flagrantly flouting the kingdom's authority. Hajime had no doubt that the officials of the city would have to act, which in turn would surely lead to Myu being returned home.

Hajime continued piling on rational reasons why they should leave Myu in the city's care.

"Do you understand? What we're dealing with here is the underworld that exists in every large city. If they're capable of capturing Myu, then it's obvious they have eyes and ears in places the government can't reach them. This whole affair is Fuhren's problem. It's not something we should poke our noses into. Besides, whatever we decide to do, we still have to report this to someone. I know this probably hits close to home, and I understand your feelings, but..."

"I guess... you're right... But we could at least take her with us, right? We're headed west, anyway..."

"Come on, you know we're going to visit the volcano before we reach the coast. Are you suggesting we take her into a labyrinth with us? Or make her wait outside alone in the desert? Besides, if we just took a girl with us because we wanted to, we'd be no better than kidnappers ourselves. Don't be unreasonable."

"Awww, okay..." Shea had gotten pretty attached to Myu in the short time they'd spent together. Guessing that she was the cause of their argument, Myu

tightly hugged Shea. It seemed Myu was pretty comfortable around Shea now, too. Her hug made Shea even more reluctant to let Myu go.

However, what Hajime was saying was right, so she reluctantly nodded. Hajime squatted down next to Myu and slowly explained what they'd decided.

"Okay, Myu. We're going to take you to some people who can protect you. It might take some time, but they'll definitely get you back home."

"What about you?" Myu's voice was anxious.

"Sorry, but we'll have to say bye to you there."

"No!"

"Hey now, don't be like that..."

"I like being with Onii-chan and Onee-chan! I'm staying with you!" Her adamant refusal threw Hajime off-balance.

She started struggling in Shea's lap. She'd been surprisingly mature up until now, but that might have just been because she was still trying to figure out what kinds of people Hajime and Shea were. Now that she'd decided they were people she could trust, she'd begun acting more spoiled, like a kid her age. It was possible she'd been a lot more cheerful and noisy before all this had happened to her.

Hajime was glad Myu liked him, but he knew he'd have to report this to the authorities. On top of that, he still had a labyrinth to conquer before they would make it to the west coast, so he had no intention of bringing Myu with him.

After seeing how reluctant Myu was, Hajime gave up on trying to explain things to her. Instead, he forcibly put her on his shoulders and headed for the safety department building.

The whole way there, she scratched and pulled at Hajime's hair, eyepatch, and face. She had finally found people she could trust after escaping that hellish prison, so she wasn't going to let them go without a fight.

Had it not been for Shea following behind them placating everyone, it was quite possible Hajime would have been reported as a kidnapper himself. Hajime arrived at the safety department covered in scratches, his eyepatch missing,

and his hair a mess. He explained to the wide-eyed receptionist what he'd discovered.

The receptionist told Hajime that in order to launch an investigation and to make sure the procedures to get Myu sent home they would have to talk to their boss. They promised Myu would be safe in their hands, and urged Hajime to leave her there. As Hajime had guessed, this was a huge deal. They would probably need to call in reinforcements from their headquarters as well. Seeing that his job was done, Hajime turned to leave. However...

"Onii-chan, do you hate me?" Even Hajime couldn't take Myu's teary-eyed puppy-dog look. Most people wouldn't be able to. He let out a garbled groan and tried to explain once again why he couldn't take Myu with him, and that she would be safe with the kind old man standing over there. But even when he told her the man would take her home, Myu's sorrowful expression remained.

The people at the safety department tried to console Myu, and somewhat forcibly attempted to separate her from Hajime. After many tears and pulled hairs, Hajime and Shea finally left the department building behind.

Of course, neither of them were in the mood to continue their date, and Shea kept shooting worried glances back at the safety department building.

Finally, they were out of sight of the building. Shea still looked glum, so Hajime tried to cheer her up.

However, just as he opened his mouth, there was a massive explosion behind them. The two of them whirled around and saw black smoke rising in the distance. The source of the smoke was clearly—

"H-Hajime-san, that's the..."

"Tch, the safety department building!" The black smoke was rising from where Hajime and Shea had just left.

They nodded to each other and ran back as fast as possible, fueled by the fear that the worst-case scenario might have happened. That they'd somehow found word of Myu's location, and in order to keep everyone's mouths shut, blown the whole place up along with her.

They tried to hold back their panic as they arrived to find a blown out building

with glass and masonry lying everywhere. Fortunately, the building itself didn't seem too damaged, and wasn't in any danger of collapsing. They gingerly stepped inside and found the kindly old receptionist lying face-down on the ground.

Both of his arms had been broken, and he was unconscious. The other members had suffered a similar fate. The only saving grace was that no one's injuries looked fatal. As Hajime was looking over the staff, Shea came running back to him. She'd gone on ahead to search a different part of the building.

"Hajime-san, Myu-san isn't here! Also, I found this!" She handed over a slip of paper. There were demands written on it.

"If you value the dagon's life, bring the white-haired kid and the beastman with him to this location."

"Hajime-san, this is..."

"Looks like our opponents got greedy..." Hajime crushed the paper in his fist and smiled fiendishly. Somehow, they'd overheard Hajime's exchange with the safety department people. They'd decided that it would be more valuable to keep Myu as a hostage. That way they could use her as a bargaining chip to get a rare rabbitman as well.

Shea looked at Hajime, determination etched all over her face.

"Hajime-san, I'm going to—"

"You don't need to say it. I know. Besides, they've made themselves my enemy. The time for talk's over. We're gonna tear them a new asshole and get Myu back."

"Roger!"

Hajime had honestly thought it would have been better to leave Myu in the care of professionals, especially considering how dangerous their journey was. And if they were going to leave her eventually, the faster the better. After all, he hadn't wanted a desperate girl like her getting too attached to them.

Still, now that he knew there was the danger of her getting kidnapped again, he couldn't leave her alone. Abandoning her when there was something he

could do about it would certainly lead down the path Aiko had feared. Besides, he knew if he just said it had nothing to do with him, Shea would be devastated too.

And more than anything, they'd tried to kidnap Shea too. Anyone that would dare harm someone Hajime considered important was an enemy. And he showed his enemies not even an iota of mercy. These slave traders had crossed a line they never should have.

Weapons in hand, Hajime and Shea headed to the designated meeting point. Those fools would soon learn what unholy monsters they had called down upon themselves.

"And there you have it. When we got to the place they'd marked, we only found a bunch of thugs. Myu wasn't there. They'd probably planned to kill me and kidnap Shea. We killed most of them and interrogated the few we left alive, but they didn't know where Myu was being held either. We tortured them until they told us where their other hideouts were, and we've been going to each one trying to beat Myu's location out of someone."

"It seems they were planning on kidnapping not just me, but you two as well. So in order to set an example, we decided to utterly crush this organization and anyone associated with them..."

Today was supposed to have been just a simple date, but they'd become entangled in the underworld of one of the largest cities on the continent. Yue and Tio marveled at Hajime and Shea's penchant for attracting trouble.

"So we just need to find out where Myu is, right?"

"Yeah. From the information we've gotten so far, it's a pretty big organization... They've got a lot of buildings and sub-groups. Could you help us?"

"Yeah... leave it to me."

"Of course. I would never dream of refusing a request from my master."

Yue and Tio agreed without hesitation. Hajime told them about the location of the hideouts he'd just discovered from his previous raid, and they split up

into two groups to take them down. Hajime went with Yue, Shea with Tio. The reason Hajime and Shea had split up was because they wanted there to be at least one person Myu knew there when they found her.

They headed to a place near the outskirts of the business district. It was an area that no tourist or honest merchant ever visited. It was a place as far from the prying eyes of the authorities as possible, the perfect location for a criminal base. There was dimness to the alleys despite the fact that it was noon. Even the people walking around seemed somehow gloomier.

Tucked away in a corner was a ten-story building. On the surface, it was a place that managed part-timers. However, in reality, it was the headquarters of Freidhof, an organization that managed Fuhren's slave trade.

Normally, it was a quiet place that did its best to look inconspicuous, but today it was bustling with activity. People were running in and out of the entrance with unusual frequency. Most of the people running around were low-ranking thugs that were ferrying messages back and forth. Their expressions were twisted in confusion, impatience, and fear. No one had any idea what the situation was.

Thanks to the chaos, two figures clad in nondescript robes were easily able to slip into Freidhof's headquarters.

They weaved through the crowd of panicking gang members, and made it to the top floor without anyone challenging them. Before them stood an imposing set of double doors. Angry voices spilled out of the room into the hallway the figures were standing in. The two of them raised the hoods of their robes slightly and tiptoed forward.

"Quit fucking with me! I dare you to say that again, you bastard!"

"H-Hii! B-But it's true, Boss. They've already taken out more than fifty of our safe houses. There's two groups of two taking our whole operation out!"

"You're saying that just four fuckheads are destroying everything Freidhof built up? Is that it, huh!?"

"Th-That's righ— Bugwah!?"

There was a loud thud and the room fell silent. Whoever had been giving the report must have been punched by this “Boss.”

“Listen good, you lowlifes! I want those fuckers brought to me alive. Cut their legs off, break their arms, I don’t care, but I want them alive. At this rate Freidhof’s reputation will be ruined. We’ve gotta torture those fools to make an example out of them, or we’ll be the laughingstock of the city. I’ll give five million Luta to anyone who captures them! Five million per head! Tell everyone else about the bounty!” A flurry of activity could be heard coming from the room. The man hastened to leave the room as fast as he could. The two hooded figures nodded to each other. One of them pulled out a massive warhammer strapped to her back and hefted it into the air. Then, just as the man put his hand on the doorknob, she swung the hammer down.

With a massive bang, the door exploded into a thousand splinters. The right side of the man’s body was crushed flat, and the people sitting behind him were blasted by a wall of shrapnel. They slammed into the wall behind them, covered in blood.

“There’s no need to tell everyone. We’re right here.”

“Hmph, I shall handle those waiting outside. Finish this up quickly, Shea.”

“Thank you, Tio-san.”

The two figures who had casually walked into the room were none other than Tio and Shea.

Freidhof’s boss, Hansen, had watched in shock as his door was blasted open and his subordinates flung across the room like ragdolls. Shea and Tio’s conversation brought him back to his senses though, and he quickly pulled out his weapon.

“So you’re the ones that have been running around busting up my operation. Wait a sec... Tch, you’re the bitches from the wanted posters. Shea and Tio, right? There was that other small brat too, Yue or something. Man, you’re real lookers. Hey, if you throw down your weapons and surrender, I’ll spare your lives. You don’t honestly think you can walk into Freidhof’s headquarters and make it back ali—” A massive bang, loud enough that it could be physically felt, interrupted Hansen’s prattling. Drucken was resting on Shea’s shoulder, smoke

coming from the retracted handle. She'd transformed it into bombardment mode... and blown Hansen away with a shotgun blast.

From such close range, he hadn't stood a chance. The barrage of iron pellets had ripped his right arm clean off. He tumbled into the wall behind him, a spray of blood trailing in his wake. A few seconds passed before he realized what had happened, and then the screaming started.

"Boss!? What was that sound!?"

"Are you alright!?"

The loud sound attracted the thugs on the nearby floors. They started swarming in like flies. However—

"Preying on children is one of the most despicable acts there is... You've roused my anger now. Repent your sins in the afterlife." Tio unleashed a blast of fire magic that eradicated the stairs and anyone standing on it. Those left on the floor below stopped in their tracks, their only way up now a pile of ash.

Still, the dragon wasn't about to let anyone escape. She turned her fangs to the men below and unleashed her dragonbreath. True, her breath wasn't as powerful in human form, but it was still the same breath that had tested the limits of Hajime's defenses. A wooden building had no hope of surviving that.

Everything but the room Hansen was in was bathed in pitch black flames. The building somehow didn't collapse, despite the fact that an entire wall was now missing. From a distance, the burning building looked just like an ant farm, with people scurrying about, trying to escape.

Those who were still alive scrambled out of the building as fast as they could and simply stared dumbfounded at what was happening on the top floor. It was only natural. Their base had been destroyed in the span of a few seconds. Their brains couldn't keep up with the situation at hand.

However, the enraged dragon had no intention of showing them any mercy. Fireballs and wind blades rained down on the survivors with the speed of Hajime's gatling guns. Men fled in every direction, but... only a few made it out of the onslaught alive.

As Tio kept busy raining death onto the people outside, Shea walked up to

Hansen. She stopped in front of him, tapping Drucken menacingly against her shoulder. Without a word, she slammed the hammer into the cowering gang leader's stomach. He simply grunted in pain and desperately tried to push the hammer off him, but moving the super heavy hammer with a single hand was all but impossible. The only option left to him was to beg for his life.

"I-I'm begging you. Don't kill me! I'll give you as much money as you want! I won't ever go after you guys again! Please— Gwaah!?"

"Quit talking. All I want to hear from you are the answers to my questions. Understood? Every time you don't answer, I'll make this hammer heavier... I recommend you start talking before your organs turn to mush."

"Shea... You really are one of Master's comrades... You sound just like him." Tio turned around to poke fun at Shea, but she completely ignored her and grilled Hansen for Myu's location.

Hansen seemed confused at first, but when Shea mentioned that Myu was the dagon girl he quickly started talking. The steadily increasing weight of Drucken probably had something to do with it, too. It seemed there was going to be an illegal auction held this evening, and that she'd been imprisoned in a cell beneath the auction hall.

Hansen hadn't been aware of the relationship between Shea and Myu, which was why he didn't understand the reason Shea was so hung up on her.

From the sound of it, whoever had spotted Shea and Myu at the safety department had decided to capture Shea on a whim. Shea's name had actually been a priority target on Freidhof's list already, so the thug who tried to kidnap her had likely just been looking for a promotion.

Shea touched the gem on her choker and used Telepathy to contact Hajime.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san. Can you hear me? It's Shea."

"Shea? Yeah, I can hear you loud and clear. What's up?"

"I found out where Myu-chan is. You're in the tourist quarter right now, right? It's close to where you are, so head there before us."

"Gotcha."

Shea told him Myu's location and cut the telepathic link. Hansen could no longer breathe under Drucken's weight, and his face was turning blue. He silently begged Shea to let him live.

She canceled the gravity magic and hoisted the hammer back onto her shoulder. Though he was no longer being crushed, his consciousness was starting to grow dim due to the blood loss. He weakly reached out in supplication.

"P-Please... call a doctor..."

"Do you really think you deserve to live after what you did to those poor children? Besides, you're our enemy now. If I let one of our enemies go, I'll get scolded by Hajime-san and Yue-san. And so, goodbye!"

"N-No, wai—" Shea crushed Hansen flat. There was a wet squelching noise as blood spurted from underneath Drucken. She shook the blood off and slung her hammer across her back, then turned to face Tio without so much as a backward glance at the pile of flesh that had once been Hansen.

"Tio-san. Let's finish off the survivors and meet up with Hajime as soon as possible!"

"V-Very well. Your utter lack of mercy is... rather alluring..."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"I-It was nothing." Though she hadn't been able to pick up what Tio had muttered, shivers still ran down Shea's spine. She tilted her head in confusion for a moment, but then put it out of her mind as the two of them began systematically destroying Freidhof's headquarters.

By the time they were done, there was nothing but corpses and a pile of rubble left.

In a single afternoon Freidhof, Fuhren's largest criminal organization, had been utterly demolished.

Meanwhile, as Shea and Tio were wreaking havoc, Hajime and Yue rushed toward the Myu's location. Since she was meant to be auctioned off, Hajime assumed her life wasn't in any danger, but that didn't mean she wasn't

suffering. The faster they rescued her, the better.

“This is the place... Ah, yeah, I can sense people below us.”

“Okay.”

There were two hulking figures clothed in all black guarding the entrance. Hajime didn’t want to cause a commotion and risk them moving Myu somewhere else, so he went around to a back alley and transmuted his way in.

They both hid their presence and started searching the building. If only they’d had a cardboard box to hide under... They wouldn’t even have needed Hide Presence if they’d had that...

Finally, they arrived at a vast underground prison. The lone guard guarding the entrance was dozing at his post. They slipped past him and found a group of ten human children huddled together inside a cell. These were most likely the children up for auction that night.

Almost all humans were faithful believers of the Holy Church, and it was illegal to take any believers as slaves. It was, however, still acceptable to buy and sell criminals and heretics. Anyone who betrayed god was no longer protected by the laws of the Holy Church. Hajime highly doubted any of the children shivering on the cold stone floor were either criminals or heretics. It was obvious this was not a legal auction.

However, Hajime didn’t see Myu anywhere in the cell. The children shrank back as he walked up to their cell, but he squatted down in front of them quietly asked a question.

“Did any of you see a dagon girl come here?” They’d all been terrified it was their turn to go up, so his question took them by surprise. They all looked at each other.

Sensing their reluctance to say anything, Yue squatted down next to Hajime and muttered something.

“It’s okay, we won’t hurt you,” was what she said. A young boy of maybe eight fidgeted nervously for a few seconds before answering.

“Umm, they took her a little while ago. Who are you?” Hajime clicked his

tongue in frustration before answering the boy.

“We’ve come here to save you.”

“Wha—!? You’re here to save us!?” The boy shouted excitedly. His voice echoed across the stone walls. Realizing his mistake, the boy hurriedly clapped his hands over his mouth. But it was too late.

“Quit making a racket!” The guard yelled that out as he came stomping toward their cell. He stiffened for a moment when he spotted Hajime and Yue, but recovered quickly.

“Who the hell are you guys!” he screamed as he drew his short sword and charged. The children let out terrified shrieks, thinking their saviors were about to be killed.

However, that didn’t happen. Hajime casually grabbed the sword’s blade with his artificial hand and crushed it. Shards of metal fell from his hand as he opened his fist.

The guard stared dumbly at Hajime for a few seconds before looking down at the sword in his hands. All that was left was the hilt. Comprehension dawned on him and he took a faltering step backward.

Hajime took a step forward, crushed the guard’s throat with a quick jab, and tripped him as he pitched backward. At the same time, he grabbed the guard’s skull and slammed it into the ground.

There was a wet crunching noise as he hit the stone floor. He died instantly.

“If you’re a guard, then the first thing you should have done was raise the alarm.” Hajime looked down at the corpse in disgust. The children’s eyes were as round as dinner plates as they looked at him.

He ignored their shocked stares and transmuted the iron bars around their cell. The children’s surprise grew even greater as the bars keeping them trapped crumbled to dust. They just sat there, their mouths hanging open.

“Yue. Sorry, but can you look after them for me? It looks like I’m gonna have to go on another rampage.”

“Okay... Leave it to me.”

“My guess is the safety department people will get here soon. When they do, you can hand the children off to them. I’ve got Ilwa working behind the scenes, so... we can dump all of the little things on him.”

Yue looked off in the distance sympathetically. Her gaze was directed toward the adventurer’s guild building.

Some time before they’d started destroying Freidhof, Hajime had grabbed a random adventurer and had him deliver a telepathy stone to Ilwa. Since then, he’d been keeping Ilwa up to date on events.

Being a gold adventurer came in handy during times like these. The moment Hajime had shown that random adventurer his Status Plate, they’d been ready to do anything he asked. It was just like if a Hollywood star had spoken to a stranger back on earth. The adventurer had even saluted Hajime before running off.

The stone Hajime had given Ilwa couldn’t be activated from his side, so Ilwa had been forced to one-sidedly listen to reports about how Hajime had picked a fight with a massive criminal organization, and how he was leaving the cleanup to them. The people back at the guild had probably been furious.

He was already making good use of Ilwa’s promise to support him. When Ilwa had started hearing the reports, he’d smiled ruefully.

Hajime transmuted a passage heading to the ground floor and stepped into it, leaving the children in Yue’s care. Just before he dashed out of sight, the young boy who had answered Hajime’s question called out to him.

“Mister, thank you for saving us! Save that other girl too, okay! She looked really scared! I couldn’t do anything to help when they took her...”

The fact that Myu was a beastman apparently hadn’t mattered at all this boy. He had guts, considering he’d been trapped in the same situation as her. Hajime turned back and ruffled the young boy’s hair.

“Hey, wh-what are you doing?”

“It’s frustrating, right? In that case, you just have to get stronger. That’s the only way to make sure you never feel like that again. I mean, I was around to save you this time, but if you get stronger, next time you can save everyone.”

With those parting remarks, Hajime turned on his heel and vanished through the tunnel he'd made. The boy covered his hair with both of his hands. He sat there for a few seconds before curling his tiny fingers into a fist. There was a new sparkle in his eyes.

Yue smiled gently down at him and started herding the children out of the building.

A heavy silence filled the auction hall. There were around a hundred buyers seated in the stands. Each and every one of them was wearing a mask, and none of them were saying a word. Whenever something a customer wanted to buy appeared, they'd just silently raise their number tag. They didn't want to give any hints away about their identities.

Still, even they couldn't suppress their cries of surprise when the next item was brought to the stage. A two meter long water tank holding a young dagon girl... Myu.

She'd been stripped naked and was currently hugging her knees in a corner of the tank. The reason she'd been put in the tank was to prove that she was a real dagon, as they were the only race that could breathe underwater. And because she'd managed to escape once before, they'd shackled her this time. The metal shackles had been fastened so tight that her skin was chafed underneath them.

The auctioneers examined the trembling girl for a few seconds, then the bidding began. Prices soared, yet the bidding war showed no sign of stopping. Even though her existence had now been made aware to the public, most of the auctioneers seemed confident they could transport her discreetly. Or perhaps they simply weren't aware of the commotion that had happened that afternoon.

The auction hall grew noisy for the first time, and Myu shrank as far back as the tank would allow her to. Her fingers were curled tightly around a black piece of cloth. Hajime's eyepatch. He'd been so preoccupied with trying to calm Myu down that he'd forgotten to take it back. The one he was wearing right now was a spare.

Right now, that eyepatch was the last thing Myu had left to cling to. She'd

been taken from her mother, forced to travel a long way, been thrown in a dark cell, and swam through literal filth to escape. Finally, when she'd thought all hope was lost, she'd found herself wrapped in something warm.

When she'd opened her eyes, she'd found herself face to face with a young silver-haired boy wearing an eyepatch. She'd stared at him in surprise, and he'd stared back. Both of them had been too stubborn to be the first to break eye contact, but then Myu'd been distracted by the smell of something delicious.

He'd asked for her name, and she'd told him. Then, there'd been a pretty red flash, and he'd plopped her into a bath. After that a pretty girl with light blue hair had started washing her. The bath had been pleasantly warm, and the girl had been really gentle. Soon enough, Myu had let her guard down enough that she was calling the pretty girl, Shea, "onee-chan."

Myu didn't think she'd forget the taste of the skewers Shea had fed her for the rest of her life. And, while she'd been busy eating, the boy named Hajime had come back.

She'd been a little scared of him, but then he helped her put on these really cute clothes and dried and combed her hair, so she started feeling better around him, too.

When they'd said she couldn't stay with them and that they'd give her to these people called the safety department, she'd been devastated. She'd been so lonely ever since she'd been separated from her mom. She didn't think she could take being lonely like that again after having found such kind people.

And so, Myu did everything she could to stay.

She pulled at Hajime's hair, slapped his cheeks, and even took his eyepatch. If he wanted it back, he'd have to let her stay with them.

However, in the end, the kind people she'd finally found left her in a strange and unfamiliar place.

As she huddled in her tank, she thought back on what happened.

Did they leave me because I did something bad? Is it because I took the black thingy? Do Onii-chan and Onee-chan hate me? Tears welled up in her eyes. If she ever saw them again she'd apologize. She'd even give Hajime his eyepatch

back. She'd do anything they asked. She just wanted to go with them.

Onii-chan... Onee-chan... Suddenly, there was a loud thud and her tank shook. She squealed in terror and hurriedly opened her eyes. There was a masked man wearing a tuxedo standing next to her tank. He was yelling something and kicking the glass repeatedly.

The auction manager had wanted to Myu to swim around a little in order to make the guests bid higher, but she'd just stayed curled up in a ball. Tired of waiting, he'd finally snapped and started kicking her tank.

That only served to frighten Myu further, however, as she curled into a ball and attempted to look as small as possible. All she could do was try to drown out the yelling and the kicking.

The Freidhof member managing the auction grew even angrier. He was worried people would think she was sick, and not bid as high. If she sold low, he was the one who'd be punished for it. Seeing this wasn't working, he resorted to drastic measures. Feeling pressured by the crowd, he started insulting Myu in the hopes of eliciting a reaction.

"Move, you sniveling little brat. Stop causing us humans so much trouble, you stupid fish-freak!" He climbed up the ladder next to the tank as he berated her, intending to poke her with the cane he was carrying. Myu shut her eyes and braced herself.

Oddly, the impact she was waiting for never came. Instead, she heard a familiar voice.

"What was that, you fucking bastard?" Hajime leaped from the ceiling, grinding both the auction manager and the ladder into the ground. A fountain of blood spurted from underneath his foot. The manager had been killed instantly.

Hajime didn't even look at the man he'd just killed. Instead, he turned around and smashed the water tank with his artificial arm. The glass pane shattered into a thousand pieces, and a torrent of water came flooding out.

"Hyaaah!" The current carried Myu out with it. But before she got very far, a warm hand caught her, and she timidly opened her eyes.

When she'd first heard his voice, she'd desperately hoped she hadn't been imagining it. And now she knew she hadn't. The person holding her right now was Hajime. Myu blinked a few times before staring at him, much like she had when they first met.

"Yo, Myu. How come you're always soaked whenever I see you?" Still staring at him, she quietly whispered a single word.

"Onii-chan?"

"I wouldn't say I'm your brother, but I am the same guy you scratched, kicked, and stole an eyepatch from." Hajime smiled at Myu, and the tears started dripping from her eyes. After a second of silence—

"Onii-chan!" She wrapped her arms around Hajime and started sobbing. Hajime awkwardly patted her back in an attempt to comfort her. Then, he wrapped her in another blanket.

Black-robed men burst into the main hall and surrounded the two, cutting their reunion short. The auctioneers were certain the men could handle Hajime, so none of them made any move to flee.

"Hey, brat. Do you know what happens to morons who try and mess with Freidhof? If you hand over the girl, then we'll at least grant you a painless death." Myu lifted her face from Hajime's neck and looked at him worriedly. Twenty burly men stood between them and safety.

"Onii-chan..."

"Don't worry. I'm here with you. It'll get a little noisy though, so you should close your eyes and cover your ears." Hajime peeled Myu's fingers off his neck and placed them over her ears. His confident tone assuaged Myu's worries. Still a little confused, she nodded, closed her eyes, and buried her face in Hajime's chest.

"Think you can just ignore us, huh!?"

"Kill the brat! But don't lay a hand on the merchandise!" The leader angrily ordered his men to charge.

A second later there was a loud bang and the leader was suddenly missing his

head. The remnants of his brain splattered the faces of his comrades.

Unable to grasp what had just happened, everyone silently watched as the leader's corpse crumpled to the ground.

And while they stood there, still confused, Hajime fired again. And again. And again. Gunshots echoed throughout the chamber, each one marking another death. Eleven people fell before the rest finally realized what was going on.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! He's a monster!"

"H-He's a demon! We're all gonna be killed!" The men in black started backing away from him, while the auctioneers screamed and swarmed for the exits.

A monster huh? That's rich, coming from people who buy and sell slaves. He wanted to teach those fleeing slavers a thing or two, but he kept his attention firmly focused on the threat in front of him.

"Wh-Who the hell are you!? What, why... How did you do that!?" The man trembled in fear as he shouted in what he hoped was an intimidating voice. Another dozen men in black ran into the hall, but they faltered when they saw the bodies littering the floor.

Hajime scoffed at the man who'd spoken.

"Why? Isn't it obvious? I came to take back what's mine. Oh... and to make an example out of you guys. This is what happens if you touch my friends. Now then, you'll join me for the grand finale, right?" Hajime used Aerodynamic to jump up to the ceiling. Then, he transmuted a hole into the ceiling and leaped through it.

"Yue, I've got Myu. How are things on your end?"

"Good. Everyone evacuated. The guests are running out of the hall."

"I see. Well, let's end this with a bang, then."

"Okay!"

As Hajime zipped through the air, he looked down at Myu. Up until now she had done as he'd asked, covering her ears and closing her eyes. He gently removed one of her hands and talked to her.

“It’s alright now, Myu.” Her eyes snapped open and she looked around. As she took in the scenery, she let out a gasp of surprise. The view was spectacular. From their vantage point, they could see the entire city of Fuhren. The sun was a blazing ball of red, slowly sinking below the horizon. Underneath the crimson sky, they could see lights dotting the city; people had started lighting the streetlamps.

Myu’s eyes sparkled as she took all of it in. She excitedly grabbed Hajime’s collar and started pointing things out.

“It’s amazing, Onii-chan! We’re flying through the sky!”

“We’re more jumping through it than flying but... Well, whatever. Anyway, Myu, look over there. There’s going to be some huge fireworks soon.”

“Fireworks?”

“Fireworks are... giant explosions.”

“Ex-plo-sions?”

Hajime couldn’t figure out a good way to explain it, but it didn’t matter since she’d see for herself in a few seconds. He cradled Myu in one arm as he pulled a ring out of his Treasure Trove with the other. The ring was actually a remote detonator he’d made with spirit stone. While he’d been searching for Myu, he’d left some bombs here and there.

“Alright, here we go. Bombs away~”

“Bombs away?”

Their voices faded away into the evening breeze. A second later, there was a boom so loud that it could be heard throughout the entire city.

The art museum that doubled as an illegal auction hall was blasted to kingdom come. Not a trace remained of the probably beautiful and historic art that had adorned its halls. The surrounding buildings that had all belonged to Freidhof were toppled by the shockwave following the explosion.

He’d shaped the charges upward so the fire wouldn’t spread to the rest of the city. Pillars of flame rose up to the heavens, dying the sky a deep crimson, though a different shade than that of the sunset. It looked as if a volcano had

erupted in the heart of the city.

“Whaaaaaaaaat!?”

“Well, Myu? Surprised? Those are fireworks.”

“Fireworks are scary.” Trembling, Myu clung to Hajime as she watched the spectacle. However, Hajime wasn’t done yet. The party was just getting started, after all.

“O-O-Onii-chan! There’s something over there!”

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“Huh!?” Dark clouds had gathered where Myu was pointing. Four dragons composed of pure lightning burst from the clouds with a thunderous roar, further scaring an already terrified Myu.

Each one was about half the size of Yue’s single dragon, but their ferocity hadn’t changed at all. The faint of heart passed out at the mere sight of them as they circled above the city.

The four dragons split off from each other, heading to different districts.

Chances were, everyone in Fuhren saw them.

They flew majestically through the burning sky, heading for the remaining four major Freidhof bases. Upon reaching their destination, they plummeted to the ground, swallowing the buildings whole.

The ground shook as they struck. There were four blinding flashes of light and with another roar, the four bases were wiped out of existence.

Plumes of smoke rose from the rubble, the debris and ash choking out the light of the setting sun. From up above, the city of Fuhren looked like it had been hit by a disaster.

That being said, Hajime and Yue had taken great precautions to make sure no innocents were harmed. Hajime had sent his Ornises to scout out all of Freidhof’s bases and made doubly sure no one unaffiliated with the group had been present. So despite the destruction, the only casualties had been Freidhof’s members.

It was possible some of the members had been forced to join the gang, or maybe could have been reformed, but... Hajime didn't feel the need to investigate the individuals of an organization that had made themselves his enemy.

"Hajime-san! Is Myu-chan safe!?"

"W-Wait for me, Shea. God, you're fast. Were your physical abilities always this high!?"

Hajime received a telepathic message from Shea as he was surveying the damage. Since he hadn't mentioned the fireworks to her, she had been rather surprised when half the city exploded.

"Yeah. Safe and sound. And it looks like we got most of their bases too... Oh, right, let's all meet up at the adventurer's guild. Ilwa's probably tearing his hair out over how much paperwork this is going to mean for him."

"Oh, thank goodness~ You said we're meeting at the guild? Roger. I'll be right there. I want to hurry up and see Myu-chan."

"Yeah. Don't worry, you'll get to see her real soon. Alright, meet you there."

"You got it." Myu looked up at Hajime as he suddenly fell silent and gazed off into the distance. When he finished his conversation with Shea, he told Myu she'd get to see her soon. Myu exclaimed "Onee-chan!" and her face broke out into a smile.

As he descended to the ground, Yue came up to meet him. She'd already seen the kids to the safety department. She stared intently at the little girl in Hajime's arms. Myu uncomfortably glanced around before looking up at Hajime again. He could guess what the unspoken question in her eyes was.

"Myu, this is Yue. She's my lover."

"Huh? Lover...? What about Onee-chan?"

"She's my comrade."

"She's not your lover?"

"Nope, she's not."

“But...”

“I don’t know what else to tell you. Yue’s my lover.”

“Mrrrr~” Myu looked petulantly over at Yue. Yue hadn’t taken her eyes off Myu during that whole exchange. This time Myu met Yue’s gaze. She stared at Yue intently, trying to figure out what kind of person she was.

They continued staring at each other for a few minutes. Yue was the first to break contact. She suddenly started walking forward.

Myu watched her cautiously. Yue stopped in front of Hajime, took Myu from his hands, and hugged her tight. Myu yelped and struggled to break free of Yue’s grasp, but Yue wouldn’t let go. After a few seconds, Yue spoke.

“This is cheating. You’re too cute.” It looked like Yue had taken a liking to Myu. Myu finally managed to wriggle her head out Yue’s chest and gasped for air. The two stared at each other once more.

“Hi there, Myu. I’m Yue. You did great, enduring all that. Good job.” Yue’s eyes softened and she patted Myu’s head.

Her gentle warmth melted away Myu’s wariness, and she started bawling in Yue’s arms. When Hajime had first rescued her, she’d still been too nervous to cry properly. It was only now that she could vent all of her frustration and sadness without worry of what might happen to her.

Hajime smiled awkwardly as he watched the two of them. Once Myu had calmed down, the three of them headed to the adventurer’s guild.

“Fifteen buildings were destroyed, thirty suffered serious damage, and nine of them were completely leveled. On top of that, thirty-eight of Freidhof’s members are confirmed dead, forty-four are mortally injured, twenty-eight are seriously injured, and one hundred and nineteen are unaccounted for... Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“They pissed me off, so I crushed them. I don’t regret it, either.”

“Haaaaaaaaaaah...” They were sitting in the guild’s waiting room. Ilwa held a stack of reports in one hand as he glared at Hajime. For his part, Hajime was

sharing the snacks they'd been served with Myu, who was sitting on his lap. Seeing how Hajime had no intention of reflecting on his actions, Ilwa let out a tired sigh.

"Please tell me the fishman escaping from the Meerstadt Aquarium by flying out of a hole in the wall had nothing to do with you at least... It didn't, right?"

"Myu, these are pretty good too? Here, try some."

"Damn it... Haaah..." Hajime feigned ignorance and casually continued feeding Myu, but Shea shifted guiltily in her seat, something that didn't go unnoticed by Ilwa. Ilwa heaved another sigh, deeper this time. He grimaced and rubbed his stomach. Dott, his secretary, gave him a sympathetic look and passed him some stomach medicine.

"Well, while you may have gone too far, you did destroy a massive criminal organization for us. Honestly speaking, we had no way of dealing with them. They never left any trace of their illegal dealings, and on the off chance we managed to catch a few of their underlings in the act, the main organization would just cut them off. We didn't think it was even possible to put a stop to them. Though this also means the balance of Fuhren's underworld has been completely toppled... Haaah, we're going to be rather busy in the coming weeks. Especially since we offered our support to the safety department."

"Well, normally it's the government's job to handle stuff like this anyway. This time was a special case. They tried to hurt one of my comrades, so I gave them a little payback."

"That 'little payback' being destroying Fuhren's largest criminal organization in just half a day? You guys are crazy." Ilwa smiled bitterly. He looked like he'd aged twenty years in a day. Combining the ten years he'd aged when he first saw everyone's Status Plates, he may as well have turned into an old man by now. Even Hajime felt a little bad for putting him through so much, so he offered a suggestion.

"Part of the reason we were so flashy about it was because we wanted to make an example out of them. You know, to make sure no one else would try the same thing. So why not use our names to your benefit? If you say the gold ranked adventurer that did this is part of your branch... wouldn't that work as a

good deterrent?”

“Oh my, is that really alright? That would save us a great deal of trouble but... weren’t you the kind of person that hated their name being used by others?” Ilwa looked at Hajime in surprise. He sounded hesitant, but his gaze made it clear he was dying to use Hajime’s name. Hajime smiled wryly and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, you scratch my back, I scratch yours, right? You’ve been a great help already, so I don’t mind if it’s just using my name. If you’re smart enough to make it all the way to branch chief, I can trust you’ll use it wisely. Plus, I do feel a little bad about getting innocent people involved in our personal vendetta.”

“I see... Is it just me, or have you changed, Hajime-kun? When I first met you, you struck me as the kind of person that didn’t care at all about others. Did something happen at Ur?”

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

Ilwa wasn’t a branch chief for nothing. He could see through people better than most. That was why he’d been able to pick up on the slight shift in Hajime’s mentality. Hajime becoming a kinder person was better for Ilwa too, and he gladly accepted Hajime’s offer to use his name.

As Ilwa had expected, days after Freidhof’s destruction new criminal groups would spring up, hoping to take advantage of the power vacuum that had been created. However, Ilwa would manage to keep them quiet by skillfully spreading rumors of Hajime’s ferocity.

Some time later, people would begin referring to him by nicknames like “Fuhren’s Ultimate Weapon,” “White-haired Flame Master,” “Lady Killer,” and so on. However, that was of little concern to Hajime. Or rather, no concern at all.

Thanks to Ilwa’s frantic efforts, the safety department ruled that Hajime had acted in self-defense, thereby making him innocent of any crime. Normally it wouldn’t have gone over so smoothly, but they were pretty mad about Freidhof’s bombing of one of their buildings.

In fact, the director of the safety department had given Hajime a not-so-

subtle thumbs-up for destroying Freidhof. The organization had flaunted the safety department's authority at every turn, expanding their illegal activities into every industry they could get their hands on. The chief, who'd just celebrated his 60th birthday, had been more than happy to acquit Hajime of all charges.

"Also, about Myu-kun..." Ilwa looked down at the tiny girl who was happily gnawing on a cookie.

Myu gave a little start. She looked worriedly between Hajime, Yue, and Shea. She didn't want to be separated from them again. The reason she didn't look over at Tio was because, well, everyone was trying to keep her away from Tio's harmful influence.

"Either we can take care of her and send her back to Erisen through the formal routes, or we can make this an official guild request and ask you to take her back... Those are your two options. Well, which do you prefer?" Hajime tilted his head in confusion. He had assumed the safety department would have requested he return her to their custody. According to Ilwa's explanation, however, they were willing to let him handle the case if he so desired. Because of his guild ranking, and the fact that he'd destroyed an entire organization to save her, they believed he was trustworthy enough.

Ultimately though, this too was Ilwa's handiwork. It almost seemed as if he was eager to prove how helpful of an ally he could.

"Hajime-san... I promise I'll protect her. So please... let her come with us." Shea bowed to Hajime. She wanted to be there for Myu during her journey home. Yue and Tio remained silent, deciding to leave the decision up to Hajime.

"Onii-chan... please?" She hit Hajime with her irresistible puppy-dog eyes. Though she hadn't needed to. From the moment he had sworn to get Myu back, Hajime had decided he'd be willing to let her come with them if that was still what she wanted.

"I was planning on taking her with me regardless, so I'm glad you're on board already. Even I couldn't abandon her after all we've been through."

"Hajime-san!"

“Onii-chan!”

Shea and Myu beamed at him. There was still the little problem of how they were going to clear the Grand Gruen Volcano, which came before Erisen, with Myu in tow, but Hajime figured it would work out somehow. He’d decided to take Myu, and that was that.

“But there’s just one thing, Myu. Could you stop calling me onii-chan? Just Hajime is fine. It’s kind of embarrassing to be called that...” Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly as Myu hugged him. He was still an otaku after all. Being called onii-chan... Well, it just didn’t sit right with him.

Myu stared at him. After a while, she came to some sort of understanding and nodded. However, her response was something no one present had expected.

“Then I’ll call you daddy.”

“Wh-What? Sorry, Myu. I didn’t quite catch that. Could you say that again?”

“Daddy.”

“U-Umm, is this like a dagon word for onii-chan or Hajime or something?”

“Nope. Daddy means daddy.”

“Okay, hold on a second.” Hajime started massaging his temples, while Shea hesitantly asked Myu why she’d chosen to call him daddy of all things. Apparently—

“I don’t have a daddy. He went to heaven before I was born. All of my friends have one, but I don’t... That’s why you’re my daddy now, Onii-chan.”

“I kind of get it, but at the same time, I kind of don’t. Anyway, Myu. I’m begging you, anything but daddy. I’m still only seventeen, you know?”

“No, I like daddy!”

“Okay, fine. Even onii-chan is okay! I’m not asking for much, so please, just not daddy!”

“Nooo! You’re my daddy now!”

Hajime tried everything he could to get her to stop calling him daddy, but he struck out. She seemed to like it even more than onii-chan, so the name stuck.

Finally, Hajime gave up. His only choice now was to ask Myu's mother to get her to stop when they finally reached Erisen. Myu had managed to inflict more damage on him than anything else since he'd left the abyss.

They finished talking to Ilwa and headed back to the inn. Once there, a heated debate began over who would become Myu's "mama." In the meantime, Hajime tied Tio up and hid her somewhere so she couldn't be a bad influence on Myu. Naturally, Tio saw her punishment as a reward. In the end, it seemed Myu only wanted to call her real mother mama, so Yue, Shea, and Tio all became onee-chans.

That night, depressed that Myu wouldn't call her mama, Yue said something shocking.

"Hajime, I want a baby." Judging by his reaction, the day where Yue would get to be called mama wasn't too far off.

Shea tried the same trick, but Hajime ignored her. And, of course, the perverted dragon lady couldn't resist adding her two cents after that.

"Master, I am prepared to bear your children as well. We can begin at—"

"Your existence is already enough of a joke, I don't need you spouting them as well."

"Why am I the only one to receive such a harsh rejection!?" Despite her indignant reply, Tio writhed happily on the ground when Hajime shot her down.

The next morning, Hajime said his goodbyes to everyone who'd come to see him off. Ilwa, the people at the safety department, and the Cudeta family. He looked just like a real father, carrying Myu on his shoulders. She was happily hugging his head as he grabbed her legs to make sure she didn't fall off.

Today was the day the monster of the abyss became a father.

And so, his adventures continued, now with a daughter in tow!

Chapter II: A Looming Shadow

Sounds of battle filled the dimly lit underground room. Explosions and the steel of swords were illuminated by the faint green light. The fighting was so fierce that it shook the walls around them. At times, the reverberations could even be felt by those far out of sight of the combatants.

Silver blades of light, fireballs, flaming spears, wind blades, and water jets flew in every which direction, a never-ending barrage of projectiles. Frantic yelling, the sounds of bodies slamming against bodies, and battle cries all mingled together into a chaotic cacophony. The once quiet room had been transformed into a raging battlefield.

“Light that tears through all creation, Wind that erodes time itself, rage like a thousand flower petals and coalesce into a blinding storm— Heavenrend!” In the middle of all the fighting stood Kouki Amanogawa, the hero. With a flick of his wrist, countless blades of light shot out of his holy sword. A dozen of the bat-like creatures flying at him were shredded to pieces. They were reduced to chunks of flesh in a flash, without even a chance to defend themselves.

“Vanguard, ten more seconds!”

“Roger!” The party was facing off a veritable army of huge ant-monsters, giant bats, and massive sea anemone-like things with wriggling tentacles. All in a circular room only thirty meters in diameter. Eight tunnels led into the room. It was from there that the monsters continued pouring in.

The hero’s party was currently exploring the 89th floor of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. The party’s vanguard was composed of the Hero Kouki, his childhood friends, the Monk Ryutarou Sakagami and the Swordmaster Shizuku Yaegashi, the Heavy Knight Jugo Nagayama, the Fighter Daisuke Hiyama, and the Spearmaster Reichi Kondou. Lastly, though he wasn’t technically part of the vanguard, the Assassin Kousuke Endou flitted around the battlefield, picking off targets.

The highly trained vanguard expertly repelled the wave of monsters, keeping

the more vulnerable rearguard safe. Meanwhile, the rearguard called out a count for how much longer it would take for their next magical barrage to be ready.

A few of the bats managed to fly past the vanguard, but the ever-reliable Barrier Master kept them at bay with a magical wall.

“O momentary squall, form an impassable, invisible wall! Rebuff all who approach— Storm Bulwark!” Suzu Taniguchi summoned an offensive barrier to shield the back line. But as the wall of raging wind was invisible, the bats didn’t notice it. Heedless of Suzu’s magic, they charged at the rearguard, thinking only of how they would tear these puny humans to shreds.

Just before they reached the group, they ran into the wind wall. As they did so, the wall began to bulge outward. Dozens of them rammed into the wall, none of them able to pass through the swirling gusts.

Once all of the bats were trapped the bulge reached a breaking point and exploded outward. The resulting blast of wind sent the bats flying back.

The impact was powerful enough to obliterate a few of the bats on the spot. Those that survived the blast died a few seconds later when they slammed into the walls with bone-shattering force.

“Heh! You’re not getting past me that easy!” Suzu’s shout was loud enough to be heard over the din of the fighting. Just then, the members of the vanguard unleashed some of their strongest attacks. Their goal wasn’t to defeat the enemies in front of them, but to immobilize them long enough that they could get out of the way.

“Get back!” At Kouki’s command, the vanguard retreated a few steps.

A second later, the rearguard’s magic hit the crowd of monsters. Their timing was perfect. A massive fireball slammed into the monsters, throwing them in disarray. At the same time, a tornado sprouted from the ground, tearing through their ranks. Stone spires jutted out from the floor, impaling those unlucky enough to still be on the ground. Icicles with points as sharp as knives rained down on the battlefield, skewering everything.

Nature’s ferocity tore through the army of monsters, leaving no survivors in

its wake. The whole attack lasted only a few seconds. But in those scant few seconds, over 90% of the monsters had been killed or mortally wounded.

“Perfect! Let’s mop up the rest of them!” The vanguard surged forward once more, thoroughly eliminating the few survivors. It didn’t even take five minutes to finish off the weakened enemies. Even after the last monster was dealt with, they didn’t let their guard down. The party remained vigilant for enemy attacks while congratulating each other on a battle well fought.

“Phew, the 90th floor’s up next... We’ve gotten strong enough to kill the monsters here without too much trouble... Looks like our training mission’s almost over.”

“But that doesn’t mean we can take it easy. There’s no telling what kinds of monsters and traps are waiting for us on the next floor.”

“You worry too much, Shizuku. We’ve easily cleared floors no one else has ever made it to. We’ll wipe the floor with anything that comes at us, even if it’s demons.” Ryutarou smiled confidently as he brushed Shizuku’s worries aside. He gave Kouki a fistbump, who returned it and smiled back at him.

Shizuku sighed, frowning. She massaged the wrinkles that had formed on her forehead. Sadly, she’d gotten used to cleaning up the overconfident duo’s messes. Every time she looked in a mirror she worried her frown wrinkles had become permanent. But even so, she didn’t stop looking out for the rest of the group. Despite her attitude, Shizuku was kind at heart.

“Hiyama-kun, Kondou-kun, I’ve finished healing you two... How do you feel?” Kaori started doing her job while the rest of the party was talking to each other. Namely, healing all of the injured members. She was the group’s Priest after all.

Among their 15-person labyrinth conquest party there was one other healer in the group. She split the work with Kaori, and they set about healing everyone.

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt at all. Thanks, Shirasaki.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine now. Thanks.” Hiyama replied absentmindedly as he stared at Kaori’s face. It was obvious he was smitten with her. Kondou was blushing to the tips of his ears too. As they were vanguard fighters the two of them often

found themselves on the receiving end of Kaori's healing. Despite that, they still hadn't gotten used to talking to her.

Kondou's attitude could be explained away by puberty, and his awkwardness was almost endearing. However, the kinds of gazes Hiyama gave Kaori were far from normal. There was a darkness in his eyes that clouded over his pupils from time to time. And recently, that darkness had been growing stronger. But even those who were close to him, such as Shinji Nakano and Yoshiki Saitou, hadn't noticed this subtle change in Hiyama.

Kaori accepted the two boys' thanks with a smile and walked off to heal the rest of the party.

A short distance away, the party's other healer, Ayako Tsuji, was finishing up healing Nagayama. She was wearing her trademark hair clip, which exposed her somewhat large forehead. Once she was finished she sighed and wiped a bead of sweat off her brow. As Nagayama was the party's Heavy Knight, he often took the brunt of the enemies' attacks. Thanks to that, healing him was harder than healing the others.

The rearguard members of Nagayama's party, the Geomancer Kentarou Nomura and the Invoker Mao Yoshino hadn't been injured. That accounted for all of Nagayama's party... Tsuji suddenly felt someone tug on her sleeve. She turned to see Endou showing off the gash in his arm, tears in his eyes. It didn't look too deep, but it probably hurt a lot. He'd been patiently waiting his turn the whole time, but as always no one had taken notice of his presence and he'd been left forgotten.

"Crap," Tsuji blurted out, but it wasn't as if she'd forgotten about her friend.

Kaori smiled at the pair and went over to heal Tsuji. After making sure no one else needed healing, she heaved a small sigh. Then, she turned to look at the dim passageway heading forward, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"....." Shizuku knew what the cause of her best friend's melancholy was with a single glance. Kaori was worried. In another ten floors they would reach the end of the labyrinth, at least as far as they knew. And so far, they hadn't found a single trace of Hajime.

She was still hopeful, but the despair was beginning to creep up on her. Kaori

had sworn to herself she'd only believe Hajime was dead when she saw it with her own eyes. But every time they went down a floor without finding anything, her outlook grew bleaker. Moreover, it had been four months since Hajime had tumbled into the abyss. No matter how strong her will was, even she couldn't keep her negative emotions at bay for that long.

She gripped her white staff tight, as if clinging to it for support. Unable to bear seeing her like that, Shizuku opened her mouth to say something. But before she could, the class' most energetic girl, Suzu, ran up to Kaori and hugged her from behind. It was as if she hadn't even noticed Kaori's dispirited expression.

"Kaorin! Forget about those fools, heal me~ Come on, heal me~"

"Hwah! Suzu-chan, what are you doing!? And besides, you're not even injured!"

"Am too! My poor glass heart's been broken! So spoil me! Let me have some of those soft boobs of yours!"

"Wh-Wha... No! Hey, stop that! Yaaah! Shizuku-chan, help meee!"

"Haaah, haaah, how about this? Does it feel good? You're pretty sensitive down— Bwah!?"



“Haaah, cut it out, Suzu. That’s too much stimulation for all the poor boys.” Shizuku delivered a sharp chop to the back of Suzu’s head, and she fell to the ground. She often acted more like a perverted old man than the teenage girl she was. However, Shizuku was too late to save the dignity of the boys in the room, who’d all gotten erections.

Eri Nakamura, Suzu’s friend, smiled awkwardly as she watched Suzu roll around in pain.

“Uuu~ Thanks, Shizuku-chan. That was embarrassing...”

“There there, everything’s fine now. I’ll be here to get rid of any perverts that try and attack you.” Kaori clung to Shizuku, who gently patted her head. This had become a pretty common scene recently.

As she ran her fingers through Kaori’s hair, Shizuku examined her expression. Kaori was busy watching Eri nurse Suzu now though, and her earlier somber expression was nowhere to be seen. At least for now, she’d been distracted. Shizuku mentally thanked Suzu for her timely intervention.

“There’s still ten more floors. Hang in there, Kaori.” Shizuku squeezed Kaori’s shoulder and looked her in the eyes. “Don’t break on me now,” her gaze seemed to say. Realizing how pathetic she must have looked, Kaori slapped her cheeks and looked back at Shizuku. Her gaze didn’t waver.

“You’re right. Thanks, Shizuku-chan.” Once again, Kaori realized just how much she relied on Shizuku’s support. As she expressed her thanks, her gaze softened. Shizuku too, dropped the intensity from her glare and nodded.

To everyone else they looked like passionate lovers staring into each other’s eyes, but neither Shizuku nor Kaori noticed. They didn’t notice Kouki looking around awkwardly, either. After all, they only had eyes for each other.

“Do you think... I could protect him now?”

“Definitely. I know you can. You’re stronger than you were back then. I mean, look, your level’s even higher than Captain Meld’s. Hehe, but you know, he might have gotten even stronger than you. He was the one who saved us back then too.”

“Fufu, jeez, Shizuku-chan...” Shizuku had just meant it as a joke, but in truth, Hajime had grown far stronger than either of them could have imagined. Though they wouldn’t come to learn that until later.

As Kouki and his party’s stats had long since eclipsed that of Captain Meld, he and his knights were waiting on standby in the 30th floor. They remained guarding the magic circle they’d discovered that connected to the 70th floor. As of now, they ranked among Tortus’ strongest humans. Their stats were:

Kouki Amanogawa Age: 17 Male Level: 72

Job: Hero

Strength: 880

Vitality: 880

Defense: 880

Agility: 880

Magic: 880

Magic Defense: 880

Skills: All Elemental Aptitude [+Light Element Proficiency] [+Speed Casting] — All Elemental Resistance [+Increased Light Resistance] — Physical Resistance [+Improved Healing] [+Impact Mitigation] — Composite Casting — Sword Mastery — Herculean Strength — Supersonic Step — Foresight — High Speed Mana Recovery — Sense Presence — Sense Magic — Limit Break — Language Comprehension

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Ryutarou Sakagami Age: 17 Male Level: 72

Job: Monk

Strength: 820

Vitality: 820

Defense: 680

Agility: 550

Magic: 280

Magic Defense: 280

Skills: Close Quarters Combat Proficiency [+Body Strengthening] [+Partial Strengthening] [+Focused Strengthening] [+Penetrating Strikes] — Supersonic Step — Physical Resistance [+Diamond Skin] — All Elemental Resistance — Language Comprehension

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Shizuku Yaegashi Age: 17 Female Level:72

Job: Swordmaster

Strength: 450

Vitality: 560

Defense: 320

Agility: 1110

Magic: 380

Magic Defense: 380

Skills: Sword Proficiency [+Improved Slashing Speed] [+Improved Drawing Speed] — Supersonic Step [+Continual Steps] [+Steel Legs] [+No Tempo] — Foresight — Sense Presence — Invisibility [+Illusionary Attacks] — Language Comprehension

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Kaori Shirasaki Age: 17 Female Level: 72

Job: Priest

Strength: 280

Vitality: 460

Defense: 360

Agility: 380

Magic: 1380

Magic Defense: 1380

Skills: Recovery Magic Affinity [+Improved Proficiency] [+Increased Casting Speed] [+Image Supplementation] [+Piercing Spells] [+AoE Proficiency] [+Remote Healing] [+Improved Status Effect Recovery] [+Reduced Mana Consumption] [+Improved Mana Efficiency] [+Chain Casting] [+Multicasting] [+Spell Retention] [+Effect Multiplication] — Light Magic Affinity [+Speed Casting] [+Improved Proficiency] [+Increased Spell Duration] [+Chain Casting] [+Multicasting] [+Spell Retention] — High Speed Mana Recovery [+Meditation] — Language Comprehension

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Kaori's recovery magic and light magic skills had been honed to the limit. Especially her recovery magic. Among the four, Kaori had started with the least amount of skills, but with the addition of her derivative skills, she now had more than even Kouki.

She'd trained harder than anyone to make sure that this time she wouldn't fail to keep her promise. This time, she'd protect Hajime. Her strength was the result of ceaseless training. She'd even lost sleep to practice her magic.

"I'd like to keep going... Are you guys good?" Kouki awkwardly tried to get Kaori and Shizuku's attention. Ever since he'd seen the two of them hugging in Kaori's room, Kouki's behavior had become odd at times. Kaori hadn't really paid it any mind, but Shizuku had easily read what was going through his mind. She glared at Kouki, her eyes clearly spelling out "Don't jump to any weird conclusions, you moron."

Kouki pretended to ignore her glare and started gathering the rest of the party up. They'd already explored most of the 89th floor. The passage they

were heading down now was the only place they hadn't mapped.

After ten minutes of walking, the party discovered the stairs leading to the 90th floor. The group descended down the dim spiral staircase, warily examining their surroundings for traps. Ten meters worth of steps later, they found themselves on the 90th floor.

Every ten floors usually marked a turning point, so the party remained extremely vigilant as they stepped into the passageway. However, as far as everyone could tell, the 90th floor was no different from the 89th. They quickly started mapping out the area. Even if the overall structure of the labyrinth hadn't changed, they were bound to meet stronger monsters. They couldn't let their guard down.

At first the party's search progressed smoothly. Despite that, one by one, the party members began to grow suspicious.

"What the heck is going on?" The party arrived in a large empty room, and Kouki finally voiced the suspicions that had been growing in the back of his mind. Everyone else stopped and nodded. Confused expressions flitted over everyone's faces.

"How have we not seen a single monster even after exploring so much of the floor?" Excluding a few side paths, the party must have covered half of the floor already.

So far, they'd always run into monsters strong enough to at least slow them down on each floor. Normally it took them around two days to map out half of a floor.

This floor they'd managed to get through half of in just three hours.

At first Kouki had assumed they were lying low and observing the party from afar, but no matter how many times he tried to use Sense Presence and Sense Magic, he didn't find anything. Something strange was afoot.

"This is really starting to creep me out. Does this floor just not have monsters?" The others started muttering to each other, but no one could come up with a plausible explanation. Their confusion only grew.

"Kouki. Maybe we should head back for now. I have a bad feeling about this.

And it’s possible Captain Meld might know something that’ll help.” Shizuku was clearly worried.

Kouki hesitated for a few seconds. He too had misgivings about continuing on like this. If they were intent on proceeding cautiously, the best course of action would indeed be to go back.

However, at the same time he didn’t want to head back just on some baseless premonitions. Besides, whatever obstacles they faced from here on out, they’d probably be able to overcome them with their strength. After all, they’d been able to clear out the 89th floor with ease.

As Kouki was waffling, Endou started scouting out the room. Spotting something, he stooped down and called out to the group in a nervous voice.

“Guys... this is... blood, right?” He ran his finger across the ground and held it up for everyone to see. Kouki started scrutinizing the walls and floor. As he did so, he noticed something.

“It’s kind of dark so it’s hard to tell, but... there’s definitely blood splattered all over this room.”

“Man, this is... a lot of blood...”

Nomura and Nagayama stared grimly at the blood plastered over the walls. Both of them were now on high alert.

Everyone’s faces paled.

“Amanogawa, I think Yaegashi-san has a point. We should leave. This is monster blood. And it’s fresh.” Endou’s voice was uncharacteristically assertive. However, Kouki still wasn’t convinced.

“Judging by the amount of blood here, whatever monster it was that did this killed every other monster on the floor... But even if there’s something that strong here, we have to defeat it to move forward, right?” Nagayama shook his head. His size rivaled Ryutarou’s, but he was a far more cautious person than him. On top of that, he was good friends with Endou. Nagayama was inclined to trust in his judgment. He had all of his senses heightened to the max in case of a surprise attack. However, he was hoping to retreat without a fight.

“Amanogawa, listen to me. There’s no way monsters only lived in this room. We should have found traces of them on our way here too. But we didn’t. In other words...”

“Whoever attacked these monsters was trying to hide their tracks?” Shimizu finished his sentence, and Nagayama nodded. Realizing what that meant, Kouki stretched out his Sense Presence as far as it would go, cautiously searching for enemies.

“It’s possible there’s monsters that intelligent down here, but... it seems more likely this was the work of a person. And the fact that the bloodstains here haven’t been wiped away means they didn’t manage to cover their tracks in time, or that—”

“This is the place we wanted to lure you to.” An unfamiliar woman’s voice echoed throughout the room. It was a husky, hoarse voice. Everyone drew their weapons and turned to face the voice at once.

Footsteps rang out on the stone floor as a young woman with fiery red hair walked into the room from the other side. Her skin was swarthy, and her ears tapered to fine points.

The students’ eyes opened wide in surprise. They recognized those particular characteristics, if not the person. They’d never seen one in person before, but they knew from Ishtar’s lectures what race she belonged to. According to the Holy Church, she was mankind’s greatest enemy. In other words...

“A demon...” One of the students muttered quietly. A cold smile formed on the demon lady’s face.

She looked over the shocked party of students. Her eyes were the same fiery crimson as her hair. She was dressed in something that resembled the biking suits that motorcyclists wore. The black suit hugged her body, emphasizing her ample curves, even in the dim light.

Kondou, Nakano, and Saitou all blushed, though they knew that now was neither the time nor the place for such thoughts.

“I take it you’re the hero? The one dressed up in that ridiculously sparkly armor?”

“I-It’s not ridiculous! Besides, a demon like you has no right to criticize me! What’re you even doing in this place!?” His somewhat overblown reaction could probably be chalked up to how shocked he’d been to see a demon here, but he managed to recompose himself and ask what everyone was wondering.

The demon lady ignored his question and shook her head in exasperation.

“Well, you certainly are straightforward. Really though, this is the ‘great hero’ they want me to win over to our side? Unbelievable. Well, I guess orders are orders.” With an annoyed sigh, she addressed Kouki once more.

“You, the one in the stupid shining armor. How about joining our side?”

“Wh-What? What do you mean... join your side!?”

“Slow on the uptake I see. Literally what I said. I’m inviting you to join us, the demons. I promise we’ll treat you better than the humans have.” The students were so stunned by the offer that it took them a second to comprehend it. Everyone turned to Kouki, waiting for his answer. He wiped the befuddled look off his face and glared angrily at the demon.

“I refuse! Do you honestly believe I would betray my comrades, and my fellow humans!? I see now that you demons are as evil as the stories say! You may have come here to persuade me, but it was foolish to come alone. You’re outnumbered here. Surrender quietly and come with us!” Kouki’s yells reverberated throughout the chamber, but the demon didn’t even flinch. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and carefully observed Kouki. She didn’t seem too perturbed by his refusal. In fact, she tried offering even more favorable conditions.

“What if I said you could bring your comrades with you? Do you still refuse?”

“My answer won’t change. No matter what you offer me, I won’t betray the humans!” There wasn’t even an ounce of hesitation in his reply. Offended that the demon had even offered, he raised his sword and started pouring mana into it. The holy sword began to glow with white light. His stance made it clear there would be no more talking. *If she won’t surrender, then I’ll take her by force!*

The demon didn’t react to Kouki’s response, but Shizuku and Nagayama did. They both clicked their tongues and carefully watched the demon and the area

around her. Nagayama quietly mouthed instructions to Endou. A second later his presence vanished.

Both Nagayama and Shizuku had hoped Kouki would play along. Even if he'd had to lie, their priority had been to escape. But before they could tell him as much, he'd already antagonized the demon. Now they had no choice but to prepare for the worst.

No matter how reputed demons' magic skills were, neither Nagayama nor Shizuku were naive enough to think she'd actually come alone. Especially as they didn't think a single demon was capable of wiping out all of the monsters on a floor this deep, and then hiding all traces of it afterward too. If she was, then humanity would have long since been annihilated.

And to top it all off, she wasn't in the least worried about facing a group of humans capable of reaching the 90th floor. If they'd gone to the pains of covering their tracks, it made sense that they'd laid an ambush for them. In which case, fighting here was not to the students' advantage.

This was no longer the Great Orcus Labyrinth. It was enemy territory! A second later, Shizuku's worst fears were proven true.

"I see. Well then, I have no need of you. I'll have you know, my orders weren't to bring you over no matter what. They were simply to convert you if it seemed possible. If the situation calls for it, we're allowed to eliminate you. Don't think we're soft enough to leave our opponents alive. Lutos, Habel, Enki. It's time to hunt!" There was a loud bang, and Shizuku and Nagayama were suddenly blown backward. They grunted in pain as they slid across the ground.

"Ah!?"

"Gah!?"

They had no idea what had just hit them. At the woman's command, the space to the left and right of Kouki began to bend and warp. *Something* tumbled out of that rift in space and headed to the dumbfounded rearguard at high speed.

Only Shizuku and Nagayama, who'd been on guard the whole time, managed to see the surprise attack coming.

Shizuku quickly held her sword and sheath in a cross formation in front of her to guard, while leaping backward to soften the impact of the blow. However, the strength of the attack was far beyond her expectations. Whatever it was that hit her broke through her guard, sliced open her stomach, and slammed her to the ground hard enough to knock the air out of her lungs.

Meanwhile, Nagayama used his Body Strengthening and Diamond Skin skills to raise his base defensive stats. The two skills combined made his body a far more reliable shield than any metal barrier. Most things would have found it difficult to break through that human fortress.

Still, that something managed to blow through his defenses and ravage his arms. Blood splattered the ground as he was blown backward. He only remained standing because Saitou, who'd been standing behind him, was able to catch him.

There was a sound of shattering glass as the makeshift barrier Suzu had put up the instant before the attack was obliterated.

The rearguard had been targeted too. Suzu hadn't sensed the attack coming like Shizuku and Nagayama had, but she'd instinctively realized that she needed to erect a barrier the moment Shizuku and Nagayama had taken their stances. Or perhaps it had been the wealth of experience that had told her that, and not her instincts.

Either way, she'd clearly made the right decision. Without that barrier, Tsuji and Yoshino would have been ripped to shreds.

As it was, the shockwave from the barrier breaking flung Suzu further back into the rearguard.

Luckily for her, Eri was there to catch her. That helped Suzu avoid taking any direct damage, but her body was still temporarily paralyzed from the blow.

The three somethings instantly launched a follow-up attack. Shizuku, Nagayama, and Suzu were all down for the count, and the remaining party members were unable to mount any kind of defense in time. Just as it seemed all hope was lost—

"Holy light protect us! Holy Blessing, Divine Veil, Sacred Shields!" Kaori fired

off three light spells at once with barely any incantation.

The first spell was an intermediate rank healing spell that she'd cast on Shizuku and Nagayama, Holy Blessing. It was one of the few healing spells that could target multiple people from a distance.

Pale violet light rained down on the two figures groaning on the ground, healing their wounds at unnatural speeds.

Her next spell was targeted at the three invisible creatures. Like with Shimizu and Nagayama, pale violet light began to eclipse them. Thanks to the light, their outlines were visible to everyone for the first time.

This was her second spell, the intermediate rank healing spell Divine Veil. The amount of healing it provided was minimal, but so long as the spell was active it continued to passively regenerate the target's health while enveloping them in the caster's mana. She'd used the second of those effects to indirectly expose the three creatures' true forms.

The monsters outlined in pale light had the heads of lions, the legs and claws of dragons, the tails of snakes, and the wings of eagles. In other words, they were Chimeras. Chances were the camouflage they used was their special magic. It not only hid them from sight, but it also erased any trace of their presence. It was quite the dangerous skill, but it seemed they couldn't completely hide themselves while in motion. That was why the space around them looked warped when they had attacked.

However, even with that it was obvious to Kaori that her classmates couldn't compete with those monsters. Shizuku and Nagayama, two of the party's best fighters, had been incapacitated in a single blow. Their strength was on a completely different level from the monsters they'd been fighting on the last floor.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The three Chimeras roared angrily and struck once more with their lethal claws. It seemed being revealed hadn't bothered them in the slightest.

The Chimeras' claws closed in on Shimizu, Nagayama, and Suzu like death's scythe itself. However, just before reaching their targets, they found their attacks redirected. Shining shields of light had diverted the trajectory of their

swipes.

This was Kaori's third spell, Sacred Shields. It was the advanced version of the basic light spell, Holy Shield. Sacred Shields allowed the caster to deploy multiple Holy Shields at once.

Barrier Masters like Suzu used this spell to supplement their usual barriers. As each individual shield was weak, they generally stacked them on top of each other to create layered defenses.

Kaori, despite her proficiency in light magic, was no Barrier Master, and so couldn't use the spell in the same way. Instead, she'd positioned the shields at the perfect angles to deflect the Chimeras attacks, rather than block them outright. The way she'd masterfully used the enemies' strength against them felt more like an advanced martial arts move than a magic spell.

This was the result of all the training she'd done. She'd sworn never to lose anyone precious to her again, and she wasn't about to break that promise now. Thanks to Kaori's herculean efforts, she managed to keep all of her party safe.

Enraged at having their attacks deflected, the Chimeras made to strike again. Kaori had only managed to buy her teammates a second. In the end, her efforts were still nothing more than the futile struggling of a weakling.

But that one second she'd gained made all the difference. Kouki had no intention of letting her efforts be in vain.

"Get off of Shizuku!" With the one second she'd bought, Kouki used his Supersonic Step to interpose himself between Shizuku and the Chimera. He'd moved fast enough that he'd left afterimages in his wake. His holy sword shimmered in the air as he swung at the Chimera's neck, aiming to decapitate it.

At the same time, the other students made their move.

"Like I'll let you!" Ryutarou thrust his hand toward the Chimera targeting Nagayama. Figuring he didn't have time to rush all the way over, he'd instead opted to use his gauntlet artifacts' special ability, and fire off a shockwave. He gathered his mana into his gauntlets. Still, Ryutarou wasn't the only one to strike.

"Swallow them whole, O crimson mother— Flame Tide!" Eri stuck out a hand

and cast her spell with barely an incantation. This was the first time she'd cast a spell this powerful, and the first time she'd redacted an incantation. As the name suggested, Flame Tide was an intermediate rank fire spell that summoned a wave of fire the caster could freely control. Even agile enemies had a hard time dodging this spell.

Kouki's sword swung down at the Chimera faster than human eyes could follow, all the force of gravity behind the swing. Ryutarou's shockwave shot out of his hand with the force of a cannonball, aftershocks trailing in its wake. Eri's crimson wave of death surged forward, reducing everything it touched to ash.

However—

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" There'd been more enemies waiting in the wings. Just before their attacks landed home, two new shadows suddenly appeared and charged at Kouki and Ryutarou.

"Ah!?"

"What the!?" Chills ran down their spines.

The two shadows reached their targets and swung down their heavy metal maces.

Kouki nimbly twisted his body out of the way, using the centrifugal force of his swing to accelerate his dodge. Meanwhile, Ryutarou brought up his left fist and blocked the mace outright.

Kouki lost his balance and tumbled to the ground, while Ryutarou was blown away by the shadow's follow-up punch. The monsters that had caught Kouki and Ryutarou by surprise were two two-meter tall giants that looked like Bulltaurs. But Bulltaurs, like Orcs and Ogres, tended to have pig-like, disgusting faces. These two giants that had attacked Ryutarou and Kouki had much more intelligent features. They looked like what one might get if they took a Bulltaur and refined its face into something more pleasant. And both their strength and their speed was far greater than that of any Bulltaur's.

"What the hell are these things!?"

"Damn it, where do they keep popping up from!?"

Kouki and Ryutarou were confused and overwhelmed by the powerful monsters that had appeared out of seemingly nowhere. Just then—

“Gah!?” Endou cried out in pain as he slammed into the ground between the two of them.

“Endou!?”

“Ngh, be careful everyone! There’s more we can’t see! They’re everywhere!” Endou held a hand over his stomach as he shouted out his warning. He’d been hurt pretty bad.

At Nagayama’s command, Endou had gone invisible using his Assassin skills and tried to launch a sneak attack on the demon. However, the situation had progressed faster than he’d expected. He’d been so surprised by the monsters’ attacks that his concentration had slipped and his invisibility had been dispelled for a moment. Because of that one of the monsters had managed to spot him and ram into him from the side. When he’d been hit, he’d noticed that the monster who’d struck him was the same kind of Chimera as the ones that had attacked Kouki seconds before. Furthermore, he’d realized there were Chimeras next to the Super Bulltaurs, and that they could go invisible too by touching the Chimeras’ manes.

In other words, all of the monsters could, and had, borrowed the Chimeras’ power of invisibility. There was no telling how many enemies were hidden from them. That was how the demon had been able to wipe out all the monsters on the 90th floor.

As if to prove Endou’s statement, monsters suddenly appeared next to Eri as well.

There was a massive whoosh of air, and her Flame Tide suddenly collapsed in on itself before being completely snuffed out. It was as if someone had made a hole in the atmosphere itself, and it was sucking everything inside it.

“No way...” The shock of having a massive spell like that wiped out in the blink of an eye was too much for Eri. She stared blankly at the spot her flames had been in.

The monster who’d destroyed her flames appeared in that same spot,

seemingly as if from thin air. It resembled a massive, six-legged turtle. The shell on its back was glowing bright red, as if it had absorbed all of Eri's flames.

The turtle then opened its mouth, and its shell glowed even brighter. Shimmering red light started gathering in its mouth. It looked like a laser ready to fire.

"N-Not good." Eri's face paled. She'd just cast a spell, so she didn't have time to cast another. However, her best friend had recovered enough to help out once more.

"I'm not done yet! Undying holy light, be my shield forevermore— Sacred Shields!" Twenty barriers of light instantly sprung up in front of the pair of them just as the turtle released its red-hot laser beam. The shields were all angled at 45 degrees, so as the beam punched through each one, more and more of its volume was directed upward.

However, this attack was even more powerful than the Chimera's swipes had been, so Suzu's barriers were all pulverized.

Biting her lip, Suzu continued chanting. For every shield that was destroyed, she raised a new one. Living up to her name of Barrier Master, Suzu just barely managed to keep the turtle's ray of death at bay.

The entire floor shook as the turtle's beam slammed into the ceiling, sending chunks of molten rock raining down below.

"Dammit! What the hell are these things!?"

"They're so freaking strong!"

"Fuck! It's do or die, guys!"

Hiyama and his party had recovered their wits as well, and they too leaped into the fray.

"Nagayama-kun! I'll cut them down, you protect the rearguard!"

"Just leave it to me! Take them down, Yaegashi!"

Both of them had been fully healed now, and they were ready to launch a counterattack.

Shizuku charged at the Chimera closest to her. She moved so fast that even her afterimages left afterimages. There was a loud whoosh, and in less than a second Shizuku was behind her quarry. She drew her katana with superhuman speed, slashing at the Chimera's rear.

Her No Tempo skill made it impossible to read her movements. It wasn't just her speed that made her hard to follow, but also the lack of any sort of pattern to her actions. On top of that, her sword-related skills had made her slashing and drawing speeds even faster. Most creatures would be cut down by a slash like that without even knowing what hit them.

This was one of the Yaegashi-style's signature moves, Vacuum Slash. A technique where the wielder held the sword in its scabbard until the last moment, building up as much force as possible. Then, they released that force all at once.

True to its name, Shizuku's sword moved so fast that it felt as if it was cutting through air itself. There was a single silver flash, and the Chimera's tail was severed at the base.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The Chimera roared in pain and turned to slash at Shizuku. However, its paws passed through thin air. Shizuku had already circled around to the other side. This time she sliced through both of the Chimera's wings.

"Ngh!" She was whittling down its strength with shallow, speedy attacks. However, Shizuku didn't seem happy about that at all, probably because her attacks weren't connecting as well as she'd wanted. In truth, she'd been hoping to cut through the Chimera's torso with her first slash, but the tail had gotten in her way, so she'd been forced to change targets. Her second attack was also supposed to have been fatal, but the Chimera had managed to twist out of the way in time, resulting in only its wings being chopped off.

The Chimera wasn't able to keep up with Shizuku's speed, but it still managed to react fast enough to avoid lethal blows, so not only was it able to erase its presence, it also possessed an agility that was close to Shizuku's. This was the hardest foe they'd faced yet. Shizuku had planned on finishing this Chimera off quickly and going back to help her comrades, but it seemed that wasn't going to

be happening.

Her next series of attacks all failed to kill the Chimera as well, instead only inflicting shallow wounds. Worse, the Chimera was starting to get used to Shizuku's speed. Shizuku could feel panic welling up within her. Plus, that wasn't even the worst part.

"Kraaaaaaw!" The Chimera in front of Shizuku was enveloped in dark red light. The murky mana swirled around its wounds, healing them instantly.

Kaori had long since dropped her Divine Veil, as it wasn't helping too much. And even if she hadn't, it wasn't strong enough to heal wounds like this instantly. Still wary of the Chimera, Shizuku turned to the direction of the screech she'd heard.

There was a white, two-headed raven perched on the demon's shoulder. One of the raven's heads was looking right at the Chimera in front of Shizuku.

"She's got monsters who can heal, too!?" It had taken everything Shizuku had to even injure the Chimera, and now all that hard work was undone in an instant. Her chances of victory had been slim to begin with, but with the raven's healing there was no hope at all. Shizuku screamed at the unfairness of it all.

A quick look around the battlefield told her that the rest of her comrades were in similarly dire straits.

Kouki had managed to land a fatal blow on the Super Bulltaur that he'd been fighting, but the raven's second head had instantly turned to heal it before the Super Bulltaur died. Its healing powers were fearsome enough that it could bring allies back even from the brink of death.

Ryutarou and Nagayama were struggling as well. Ryutarou had managed to beat the other Super Bulltaur to a pulp by smashing its stomach and breaking its limbs, but before he could land a finishing blow the raven had turned to heal it as well. Nagayama had dealt quite a bit of damage to the one menacing the rearguard, but that was also healed back to perfect condition. The situation was looking rather dire for the hero's party...

"Looks like you're having a hard time. How about it? Feel like joining our side yet? If you give up now, I might still be willing to let you." The demon folded her

arms and watched as Kouki and the other struggled to keep the monsters at bay. Her cold stare made it clear that she already knew what his answer was going to be, though. And, of course, Kouki didn't defy expectations.

"Like hell we will! Your petty threats won't work on us! Just you watch, we'll beat you and your monster army! Take this— Limit Break!" He angrily swatted back the Super Bulltaur's mace and activated his most powerful skill.

Limit Break continually drained his mana, but in exchange it tripled all of his stats. However, the skill literally pushed his body past its limits, so he couldn't maintain it for long. Furthermore, it left him drained and exhausted once the skill was over. He'd be lucky to have even half his original strength left once the skill wore off. Though this skill was his trump card, it came with dire consequences that needed to be taken into consideration.

Kouki had activated it here because he knew he needed to kill these monsters fast, or his party's morale would drop. The strength of the monsters, as well as the raven's healing had left him with few other options.

Blinding white light wreathed his body. The Super Bulltaur charged again, completely unperturbed.

"Light of judgment, smite mine enemies— Holy Blade!" Kouki ducked under the Super Bulltaur's attack and swung his light-infused sword up from below.

He'd done a similar attack a few minutes before, but it had only managed to wound the Super Bulltaur back then, not kill it. However, his stats were tripled now. And so, he cut through the Super Bulltaur like it was butter.

A second later the two halves of the Super Bulltaur's body thudded to the ground. Kouki used the momentum of his swing to rush forward, directly at the demon woman.

There was nothing left protecting her from him. Skilled at magic though they may be, Kouki doubted this demon could do anything to stop him now. He'd cut down the two-headed raven and that would end the battle. At least, that's what everyone thought would happen. Just then—

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Wha—!?" The space around Kouki warped in five different spots. Five

invisible Chimeras let out a ferocious howl and charged at him. Kouki wheeled about in surprise as they closed in on him from all sides.

He ducked under the attack coming at him from the front while cutting down the Chimera to his right. He trusted his holy armor to protect him from the Chimeras to his left and rear.

It succeeded, but just barely. The one on the left cuffed him on the shoulder, sending him careening into yet another Chimera. The right one raised its paws and slammed them down on his shoulders, forcing Kouki to his knees.

“Ngh!” Gritting his teeth, Kouki grunted in pain. The Chimera’s fangs bore down on him, and he just barely managed to keep them at bay with his sword.

The claws digging into his shoulders limited Kouki’s movements, and despite being in Limit Break, he couldn’t squeeze out enough strength to break free.

“Sanctified flowers, pave the path to victory— Plenary Blessing! Radiant Prison!” Kaori cast her spells the moment she saw Kouki get hit.

Plenary Blessing was a single-target intermediate rank recovery spell. It was a more potent form of an earlier spell she’d cast, Holy Blessing. Just healing Kouki would have been pointless though, as the Chimera had him pinned and would just hit him again.

That was why she’d also cast the intermediate rank light spell, Radiant Prison. As its name suggested, Radiant Prison sealed its target in a cage of light. Her target was Kouki. Bars of light rose up around him, pushing the Chimera away.

With the Chimera removed, Plenary Blessing was able to heal Kouki without interruption.

At the same time, Suzu and a few other members of the rearguard fired off a barrage of spells at the remaining Chimeras near Kouki. They’d managed to gain enough of a respite against their own opponents to unleash a single volley. However, as Kaori’s Divine Veil wasn’t covering them anymore, they had had a hard time aiming their spells. Due to that, and the distance between them, their volley wasn’t as effective as they’d hoped.

Still, it bought the front line enough time to regroup. Fully recovered, Kouki raised his sword high and cast one of his strongest spells.

“Astral Unleash!” Four shockwaves of light exploded out from Kouki’s blade. This was his favorite technique. The Chimeras sensed danger and quickly tried to leap out of the way. However, Kaori wasn’t going to let that happen.

“Divine Shackles!” Now it was her turn to show off her most prized spell. Chains of light rose up around the Chimeras’ feet, wrapping around their legs, necks, and torsos. With their strength, the Chimeras could easily break free, but Kaori had still succeeded in stopping them for a few seconds.

Those few seconds were all it took for Kouki’s shockwaves to reach the Chimeras and make mincemeat out of them. Kouki turned around and pointed his sword at the demon.

“Sorry, but if this is the best you’ve got, it’s nowhere near good enough. There’s nothing left protecting you now!” The demon stared at Kouki with an incredulous expression on her face. “If you have me on the defensive, why waste your time stating the obvious? You should’ve just gone straight for the attack,” it seemed to say.

Kouki found it infuriating that even after being pressed so far, the demon still seemed so composed.

He’d taken out all of her Chimeras and Super Bulltaurs. Part of why he was so annoyed was because everything she’d hit them with until now had been surprise attacks.

That coward! All she ever does is use petty tricks and sneak attacks, while she watches safely from behind her monsters!

“I don’t recall ever saying this was my best.”

“Your bluffs won’t work on me!”

“You’ll see for yourselves whether it’s a bluff or not. Now that I’ve seen how strong you heretical apostles are, I have no use for you anymore.”

“What do you—”

“Kyaaaaaa!”

The demon irritably flicked a strand of hair out of her eyes. At the same time, Kouki heard a scream behind him.

The sight that greeted him as he turned around was the stuff of nightmares. Five more Super Bulltaurs and Chimeras had suddenly sprouted up from nowhere. Worse, new monsters had popped up too. Black four-eyed wolves and black cats with tentacles sprouting from their backs menaced the rest of the party. One of the cats slammed its tentacles into Nomura's flank as he watched.

"Kentarou! Dammit, you'll pay for that!"

"Ayako, pull yourself together! Heal him!"

Endou quickly launched an attack on the cat's tentacles the moment he saw Nomura go down. He angrily slashed down with his daggers.

Meanwhile, Yoshino started yelling at the dumbfounded Tsuji to start healing her comrade. Yoshino's rebuke brought Tsuji back to her senses, and she began casting healing spells on both Endou and the collapsed Nomura.

"What!? There were still that many monsters left!?" Kouki's jaw dropped open in surprise.

"The Chimera's special ability is Camouflage. It can hide itself and anything it touches. That kid over there even tried to warn you about it. Though, even he wasn't able to figure out just how many monsters I had hidden here. Now then, I suppose it's time for the final curtain call!"

"Ah!?"

The students were being pushed back by the sudden onslaught of monsters. Kouki dashed back to try and help his comrades. Now that the secret was out, the demon had no reason to hide her forces. More and more monsters started dispelling their Camouflage, and joined the fray. Dozens of wolves and cats appeared from the space behind the demon and charged.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Before he could make it back to his allies, Kouki found himself surrounded by a wall of tentacles.

He swung his sword in a giant circle, cutting down the tentacles. One of the cats jumped at his face, and he swung down at it. Since it was mid-leap, he was sure it wouldn't be able to dodge out of the way.

“I’ll start with you!” Kouki roared. However, the cat jumped aside in mid-air, and Kouki’s sword swung harmlessly through the air. This went far beyond Kouki’s expectations. It then leaped forward again, its wickedly sharp claws headed straight for Kouki’s neck.

He barely managed to duck his head out of the way in time, but in doing so he ruined his stance, and was unable to defend against the four-eyed wolf that came at him from behind. Thanks to his armor and Limit Break skill, the wolf’s tackle didn’t do any real damage to him. Instead, it sent him flying backward to his comrades. Which, fortunately, he’d been trying to do in the first place.

The horde of insanely powerful monsters surrounded Kouki and his comrades.

It was only thanks to Kaori and Tsuji’s nonstop healing that all of the students were still alive. The front line was still barely holding, but as it was, they had no way out of this predicament.

Kouki tried to cut down their numbers while his Limit Break was still active, but the monsters came at him in formations of five and employed hit and run tactics. They weren’t letting him get a decisive blow in.

Even Shizuku’s speed had been sealed. The agile cats worked together with the wolves, who possessed the special magic Foresight, to keep up with her even when she was using No Tempo. Though she managed to get a few cuts in anyway, none of them were fatal.

“Crap... This is really bad!”

“Fuck! What are we supposed to do!?”

Despair started to color the students’ faces as they continued fighting. The final nail in the coffin was when the demon herself joined the battle.

“O great golden-eyed drake, slumbering deep beneath the earth, lord of all creation, your curse pierces through even the blackest darkness. Bring forth an everlasting seal of darkness, from which nothing escapes. Fear, despair, anguish, swallow it all and leave emptiness in your wake. All will fall before your stern visage. Destroy your enemies and return them to the earth— Dark Gaol!” As she finished chanting, a swirling gray ball of mana gathered into her hand and flew across the room to where Kouki and the others were.

It didn’t travel all that fast. Every one of the students was a high enough level that they could have dodged it. However, when Nomura saw it his face paled. He was barely conscious thanks to that earlier attack, but he knew he had to warn his friends. Coughing up blood, he shouted a warning to his comrades.

“Oh no! Taniguchiii! Put up one of your barriers! We have to stop that sphere!”

“Huh!? O-Okay! Reject all malice and let this be a holy ground that denies thine enemies passage— Hallowed Ground!” Suzu shortened her chant and hurriedly cast a high level light barrier spell. A shimmering dome covered the party. As Hallowed Ground separated a particular area from other areas and not people from people, the monsters within the dome remained.

Moreover, Hallowed Ground consumed a massive amount of mana. Normally, Suzu reserved this skill for the most dire of circumstances. And Nomura’s desperation had made it clear that demon’s ball was one of those circumstances. That was why she’d picked the strongest spell she knew.

The swirling gray sphere slammed into the barrier. It possessed a force far greater than its appearance would imply. Suzu gritted her teeth and burned through her mana at a prodigious rate as she struggled to keep the sphere from breaking through.

At the same time, the monsters’ movements suddenly changed. A group of them broke off and headed for Suzu, almost as if the demon was commanding them.

“Suzu!”

“Everyone, protect Taniguchi!” Eri started casting like mad, trying to keep the encroaching Super Bulltaurs at bay. Across from her, Saitou, Yoshiki, Kondou, and Reichi all heard Nomura’s shout and rushed over to cover Suzu.

So long as Hallowed Ground was active, Suzu couldn’t move. The black cats took advantage of that weakness and nimbly slipped through the gaps in the party’s defenses. Nomura laid his hand against the ground and summoned spikes from the earth, hoping to impale the cats, but they zigzagged through the air, avoiding the spikes, and lashed out at Suzu with their tentacles.

“Taniguchi!”

“Aaah!?”

Nomura called out a warning, but it was too late. The tentacles pierced through Suzu’s stomach, thigh, and right arm. Before she could even scream, the cats swung their tentacles sideways, throwing Suzu to the side.

She hit the ground so hard the breath was knocked out of her throat. Blood littered the ground where she lay. As she sucked in a ragged gasp, a searing pain ran through her body.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Suzu-chan!”

“Suzu!”

Eri and Kaori called out to Suzu, clearly panicked. Kaori quickly began casting a healing spell, but Suzu’s barrier faded before she could finish.

“Everyone, get away from that sphere!” Nomura desperately called out to everyone, but this was the same spell that had managed to compete evenly with Suzu’s Hallowed Ground. Nomura’s warning was too little, too late.

The gray sphere hit the ground without a sound. It broke apart where it landed, smoke expanding from the point of impact.

Saitou, Kondou, and Nomura all tried to run over to Suzu. The gray smoke enveloped all four of them. The monsters nearby had all leaped out of the way ahead of time, so they weren’t affected.

The gray smoke expanded out even further, swallowing the rest of the students.

“Heed my call, O wind— Wind Blast!” Kouki instantly unleashed a gust of wind to blow the smoke out of the room. Magically created smoke like that wouldn’t normally be so easy to dislodge. Still, Kouki *was* under the effects of his Limit Break, making his magic stronger. He was able to push the smoke out into the hallway, albeit with some difficulty. However, when the smoke cleared, the sight that greeted them was completely unexpected.

“No way! Suzu!”

“Nomura-kun!”

“Saitou! Kondou!”

The four of them had been turned to stone. Saitou and Kondou had been completely petrified, while Nomura, who had thrown himself above Suzu had only his left half petrified. For her part, Suzu had only had her legs petrified.

Saitou and Kondou hadn’t even had time to react before the smoke had hit them. Their faces were still frozen in dumbfounded shock. Suzu had fainted from the excruciating pain that had accompanied having her legs petrified.

Nomura managed to remain conscious, but just barely. He gritted his teeth and groaned as the petrified part of his body seared in pain.

The reason Nomura had resisted the petrification better than the others was because he was a Geomancer and possessed the highest resistance to earth magic out of all of them. He’d been aware of how dangerous the spell was in the first place because it was an earth spell he’d recognized.

More specifically, the high rank earth spell, Dark Gaol. It spread a cloud of smoke that petrified anything it touched. Worse, as long as any part of someone was hit by the petrification, it would slowly spread until they were completely frozen. The only way to stop it was to put up a barrier strong enough to repel it, or blow the smoke away before it touched anyone. However, only a high rank barrier would be able to hold it off. Furthermore, it required an extremely powerful wind spell to be dislodged.

“You bastard! How dare you!” Seething fury dripped from his words. The light surrounding him shone brighter than before. He was more than ready to charge straight at the demon.

However, Shizuku’s words stopped him.

“Kouki, wait! We have to retreat! You need to secure our escape route!”

“No way! You want me to retreat after she did that to our comrades!?” He glared angrily at Shizuku, but she wasn’t fazed by his attitude and calmly glared back at him.

“Listen to me! Kaori can still heal them, but it’ll take her time. And if we wait

too long, it might be too late. We need to retreat and regroup! And now that we've lost half our party, if you jump out to attack now, the rest of us won't be able to hold out! We'll all die!"

"Ngh, but..."

"Besides, your Limit Break's going to run out soon, isn't it? How long do you think you can last without it!? You can't lose your cool here! Everyone's angry about what happened, but we're done for if we let that get the better of us!"

Kouki ground his teeth in frustration. It was then that he noticed the blood dripping from the corners of Shizuku's mouth. She was just as angry as him, if not more.

Still, even though she was so frustrated that she'd bit her lips until they'd bled, she hadn't lost sight of what needed to be done. If she could, she'd pound that demon into a pulp, but she knew that wouldn't save her comrades.

"Fine! Everyone, we're retreating! Shizuku, Ryutarou, cover me for a bit!"

"You can count on me!"

"You got it!"

Kouki raised his sword up high and started chanting. He hadn't used this spell earlier because it had such a long incantation. On top of that, it wouldn't have been enough to defeat the enemy. However, it was the perfect spell for opening up an escape path.

Chanting left him defenseless, so he'd asked Shizuku and Ryutarou to guard him. Of course, that meant they had to fight the monsters he'd been holding off until now on top of their own foes. They fought valiantly, but every second they suffered more injuries. They wouldn't be able to hold out for long.

"Hmph, do you honestly believe I'll just let you flee?" The demon commanded her monsters to circle behind the party's rear. At the same time, she started chanting another spell. This time, her hand was pointed directly at Kouki.

And it was then that something unexpected occurred.

"Graaaaaah!"

"What!? How!?"

Five of the Chimeras, which were supposed to be her allies, suddenly turned on her. She instantly shortened her incantation and changed her target to the monsters bearing down on her. A dust storm whipped up around her. Grains of sand coalesced into blades and sliced through two of the Chimeras. The remaining three let the wind push them back, saving them from the whirlwind of sand blades.

She stared at them in surprise. *Why are they attacking me!?* Then, she realized that all of the Chimeras were gravely injured.

“That damn brat...” The monsters that had turned on her were all ones that had been cut down by Kouki. They should have all been dead, and indeed the demon didn’t sense any life coming from them. Suddenly, she remembered a certain branch of magic that allowed people to manipulate the dead.

“I won’t let you touch Kouki-kun!” Eri waved her hand like a baton, and the dead Chimeras moved to surround the demon.

“Tch! A Necromancer! No one told me they had one of those!” The demon had actually done a rather thorough investigation of Kouki and his party before laying this trap. None of her reports had mentioned anything about there being a Necromancer in his party.

Eri’s usual aversion to necromancy had actually ended up saving them in this critical juncture. Though she was a Necromancer, she’d been too scared to actually use her necromancy skills.

However, now that their backs were to the wall, she’d had to conquer that fear. She glared at the demon, skillfully manipulating the three Chimera corpses. It was hard to believe this was her first time using necromancy. She kept the Chimeras circling just out of the demon’s attack range, but close enough that they still posed a threat. Her goal wasn’t to defeat the demon, but rather to buy time.

“Suzu-chan, hang on! I’ll heal you!” Kaori cast both Plenary Blessing and Consecration on Suzu.

She was the one closest to death out of all the party members, which was why Kaori had focused on her first. Consecration was an intermediate rank light spell that removed status effects from the target.

Petrification in particular was a very potent status effect, and it was taking even Kaori some time to heal it. Plenary Blessing instantly closed up the holes in Suzu's arm and stomach, but she'd already lost a lot of blood. She needed a proper rest or her life would be in danger. And once her legs were unpetrified, Kaori needed to close up the wound there as well.

While Kaori was tending to Suzu, Tsuji began unpetrifying Nomura. Thanks to Nomura's naturally high earth resistance, his healing went quickly. Tsuji had already succeeded in restoring his left leg.

As she was healing Nomura, Tsuji glanced over at Kaori and bit her lip. Though she was an accomplished Priest as well, it was obvious that Kaori's skills were far greater than her own.

Not only was she healing Suzu, who'd been hurt far more than Nomura, she was able to cast recovery spells on Shizuku and Ryutarou at the same time. On top of that, she was even providing support with her Binding Blades of Light and Divine Shackles. Tsuji doubted she could manage even half of that.

Shirasaki-san is amazing... Compared to her, I'm just... No, now's not the time for self-pity! Though she hated herself for not being more useful to her companions, she couldn't afford to let herself be distracted right now.

Nomura wanted to offer some words of encouragement, but he also knew there was no time for sentimental chit-chat. Still groaning in pain, he spat out an incantation.

With their battle power reduced, and Kouki no longer fighting, the students were hard pressed. Hiyama, Nakano, Nagayama, and Endou were all covered from head to toe in blood, and their movements were growing dull. Eri had her hands full protecting Kouki and the two healers. At this rate, the party would collapse in a few more minutes.

Had it not been for the hope Kouki's gleaming blade gave everyone, they would likely have given up already.

Finally, the moment they'd all been waiting for arrived.

"Take this— Divine Deluge!" A single beam of light shot up into the sky. As it hit the ceiling, it burst apart, sending shards of light hurtling toward the ground

like a meteor shower.

Divine Deluge was a light spell that targeted multiple monsters from above. It wasn't a terribly powerful spell, and was usually just used to clean up hordes of weak enemies, but with the help of Kouki's Limit Break, the spell's might increased to the point where it could kill even monsters found on the 50th floor.

Unfortunately, the monsters the demon had brought with her were far more powerful than that. The most it was able to do was slow them down.

Still, that was all Kouki needed. As long as it kept them pinned down for a few seconds, they'd be able to escape.

The demon was still busy dealing with Eri's three Chimeras.

After making sure the demon was still occupied, Kouki then activated the second effect of this ridiculously long spell.

"Gather!"

The rain of light that had been keeping the monsters at bay stopped, and began returning to Kouki's sword. It was a truly awe-inspiring sight, watching a veritable meteor storm of light fly into the holy sword.

Once all the light was back with him, Kouki pointed his sword at the monsters blocking their escape and shouted the name of the spell's second form.

"Holy Shooting Stars!" The countless points of light shot out at once, bombarding the monsters. This spell didn't have the same destructive might as his trump card, Divine Wrath, so it was unable to completely destroy the monsters in front of him.

He would have preferred to use Divine Wrath, but the incantation was too long. He knew Shizuku and Ryutarou wouldn't have been able to hold out for that long.

Though, there was something Holy Shooting Stars had that Divine Wrath didn't.

As the shards of light slammed into the monsters, they burst in a thousand shimmering explosions. It was as if Kouki had fired a cluster bomb into the

horde of monsters. The monsters were unable to defend against the continual bombardment, so they were blown away.

“Graaaaaaaaah!” They screamed in pain, their eyes closed against the blinding light.

The harsh light crippled their vision. Holy Shooting Stars secondary ability was that it blinded its targets. Unable to see properly, the monsters flailed about.

They weren’t in position to guard an escape route anymore. Kouki and the others were saved.

“Everyone, run for your lives!”

At Kouki’s command, the party began to flee. Nagayama carried the petrified Kondou and Saitou, while Endou carried the unconscious Suzu. Nomura’s left arm was still petrified, but he endured the pain and ran.

“Tch! Don’t let them escape! All of you, attack!” The demon ordered her remaining monsters to attack while she continued fending off the Chimera corpses. The monsters quickly dashed off in pursuit. The Chimeras, four-eyed wolves, and black cats were all agile creatures, and they closed the gap in an instant.

Nomura grinned through his pain and turned around, his right hand pointed at the army of monsters bearing down on them.

“You’re not the only one who can use earth magic here! Have a taste of your own medicine— Dark Gaol!” Nomura fired off the same gray sphere the demon had a few minutes prior.

It exploded in front of the charging monsters. When the demon had cast the spell, her monsters had all instinctively leaped out of the way. He’d guessed that the demon had taught them all to be wary of that specific spell, which was precisely why he’d chosen it. He figured it would buy them the most time.

His guess proved to be correct. The moment Nomura had thrown out the gray sphere, the monsters had all come to a halt and swiftly leaped back. The petrifying smoke also doubled as a smokescreen, hiding Kouki and the others from view.

Endou called upon the last dredges of his mana to use a skill that hid their tracks and erased their scent. It was one of his derivative skills, “Stealth.”

The monsters angry howls faded into the distance as the party ran. Humbled and defeated, Kouki and the others trudged up the stairs leading to the 89th floor. Their faces were a mixture of frustration at how badly they’d suffered defeat, and happiness at escaping alive at all.

Chapter III: A Generic NPC's Valiant Struggle

Somewhere deep within the 89th floor, there was an octagonal room with exits on four sides. There was also a concealed room that existed on one side, in between two of the exits. It wasn't terribly large, but it made for a great hiding spot. The entrance was camouflaged, so it was hard to spot from the outside.

Kouki and the others were currently cooped up inside, taking a short break. Everyone's expressions were dark. Their minds were all preoccupied with the battle they'd just escaped from. Many of them still hadn't had their wounds healed, and were grimacing in pain.

Normally this would be where Kouki roused his companions with one of his characteristically charismatic speeches. However, using Limit Break for that long had taken a serious toll on him. He silently sat against the wall, his lips utterly sealed.

Worse, the ever-cheerful class mascot Suzu was still unconscious. Her face was pale from blood loss, and she rested fitfully, her breathing ragged. Seeing her so weak was part of what had the class down.

Suzu's legs were still petrified from the knees down, and Kaori was still working on healing her.

Fortunately, she'd already closed the wound on her thigh. All that was left to do was unpetrify the rest of her legs. Unfortunately, she'd already lost way too much blood. From the looks of it, the cat's tentacles must have hit a major artery. It was only thanks to Kaori's prodigious skill that Suzu was alive at all.

However, even Kaori couldn't replace all of Suzu's lost blood. At least not immediately, anyway. There was no magic that created blood, so the most she could do was feed Suzu blood replenishing potions. For all intents and purposes, Suzu was out of commission for the near future. The party needed somewhere safe to rest.

Because Kaori was so focused on keeping Suzu alive, she hadn't had time to

really heal the others. Naturally, that meant Saitou and Kondou were still petrified too.

Once Suzu's condition was stable, Kaori would have to heal them next. And so, the party knew that they wouldn't get to be healed for a while, and aside from a small minority, most of them were okay with that. Or maybe they just didn't have the energy to complain.

Shizuku furrowed her brows and massaged her temples. She knew that she had to do something about everyone's low morale, but she didn't know how.

She was a fundamentally quiet person, unlike Suzu. Words didn't come easy to her.

But Kouki was too exhausted to even stand, and Suzu was unconscious. She was the only one left in a position to act, and she'd always been afflicted with the never-ending need to help people. In many ways, Shizuku was more like a wise old lady than a high school girl.

On top of that, she possessed a will of iron. She was just as exhausted as the rest of them, but she didn't rest. Tired of thinking about it, Shizuku decided to at least break the oppressive silence with a joke about how badly they'd been beaten. However, before she could, Tsuji and Nomura walked through the room's entrance.

"Phew. I think we managed to camouflage it better than before. I've never done such precise spellcasting, so it was pretty difficult. I don't think I can cast anymore."

"Altering the entrance to look just like the rest of the wall is outside your area of expertise, after all. We had to draw that whole magic circle from scratch too. You did good."

"You too. Thanks for fixing up my arm. It must have been rough." Nomura hadn't just camouflaged this room's entrance. He was the one who'd made this room in the first place.

Geomancers' affinity with earth magic generally extended to directly controlling the earth, not shaping and molding it like Synergists did. Because of that, precise work such as this was difficult for them. They could open giant

cracks in the earth, send boulders flying, make spears out of the ground, and if they were strong enough, even petrify foes and create golems, but separating out specific minerals from alloys, fusing them together, and creating new objects with things that fell under the “earth” category was the sole domain of Synergists.

So while it was easy for a Geomancer to make a huge hole in the wall, doing something precise like then covering that hole up with earth that looked just like the wall around it was almost impossible. Nomura had needed to draw an entire magic circle from scratch to make it happen.

The reason Tsuji had gone with him was so she could finish unpetrifying his arm.

“Good work, Nomura-kun. You’ve bought us some time.”

“I just hope it works. All we can do now is pray she doesn’t find us before we finish healing. As for Kousuke... all we can do for him is pray too.”

“Don’t worry about Kousuke. No one’s as unnoticeable as him.”

“Hey Jugo, I know you’re trying to cheer us up, but that’s just depressing to hear...”

The despondent atmosphere cleared up a little when the students heard that they were safely hidden. Shizuku thanked Nomura for lightening the mood.

Nomura smiled bitterly and prayed for his best friend’s safety. Endou was the only one not inside the safety of their hidden room. He’d headed out alone to inform Captain Meld of what they’d encountered on the 90th floor. Even for an overpowered summoned hero like him, running through ten floors this deep down was paramount to suicide. The only reason Kouki and the others had had a somewhat easy time of it was because they’d worked together as a team of 15.

However, he had one rather cheap trick up his sleeve that would allow him to traverse the whole distance safely.

His ability to go unnoticed. Despite the fact that he was neither overly gloomy, nor a terribly quiet person, his friends often lost sight of him. And when they looked around in a panic, they’d be surprised to see him still standing

there right next to them. His naturally weak presence, coupled with his Assassin skills would easily allow him to run all the way to the 70th floor where Captain Meld was without being noticed by a single monster. He'd already been a master of hiding back on earth, but he'd polished his skills to new heights since being summoned here. Even those with the Sense Presence skill couldn't easily find him.

It was for that reason everyone had entrusted Endou with delivering this information.

When he'd left, Endou had been in tears. Nothing was more frustrating than leaving your comrades behind and running away alone. Though those tears may have been due to the way his friends had tried to convince him he was the best suited for this mission. Saying things like "no one is as unnoticeable as you," or "I can't even tell when you're around sometimes, so there's no way the monsters will," or "you know, you're so forgettable I actually forgot your name for a few seconds," probably didn't do much for his confidence.

In all honesty, Kouki and the others had wanted to retreat to a higher floor, but they hadn't had any strength left to fight. With everyone covered in wounds, three of their party out of commission, and Kouki severely weakened, they wouldn't have survived a battle with the monsters on this floor.

Of course, they didn't think Captain Meld would be able to come down to rescue them.

Including him, only six knights even had the strength to survive the 70th floor. Even if they gathered all of the best knights and all the highest-ranked adventurers, Kouki knew they would at best be able to make it to the latter half of the 70s. Any more than that was impossible for the humans of this world. And even if Endou managed to convince everyone to follow him on such a dangerous trek, that would still require the rest of the students to climb at least 10 floors back to the 70s too.

The reason they'd sent Endou off was not to ask for reinforcements, but to inform Meld and the others of the demon they'd encountered, and the monster army she led.

Ishtar and the others already knew that demons were able to control

monsters. And that they didn't use simple brainwashing, but a method that allowed the monsters to maintain some semblance of their will. However, they had grossly miscalculated the strength of those monsters. The humans were worried about the numbers demons could bring to bear against people, not the strength of those individual monsters.

Yet the monsters the students had faced were strong enough to not only wipe out everything on the 90th floor with ease, they had even been able to beat back a party of cheat-endowed heroes. If the demons had always possessed such power, humanity would have been annihilated long ago.

In other words, Ishtar's information hadn't been mistaken at the time, but the demons had since leveled up their monster taming abilities.

Not only had they gained the advantage of numbers, but they also eclipsed humans in individual strength. Kouki and the others knew that information had to be passed along to the Holy Church as soon as possible.

"Shirasaki-san, I'll leave unpetrifying Kondou-kun and Saitou-kun to you. It would take me too long to do it. I'll start healing the other members instead."

"Yeah, that's fine. Don't overdo it, Tsuji-san."

"I'll be fine. If anything, I should be saying that to you... Sorry. If I was stronger, you wouldn't have to carry such a huge burden..." Tsuji had been downing mana potions one after the other while Nomura was talking. She'd recovered enough to start healing the others now.

Tsuji always pretended that she wasn't bothered by the fact that her skills were far inferior to Kaori's, but in truth her lack of skill constantly ate at her. She hated her own weakness and the burden it caused Kaori.

Kaori shook her head, but Tsuji just smiled bitterly and went to go heal her comrades. Seeing the pain vanish from their faces helped ease her own.

One again Nomura was dying to say something, but he didn't want to interrupt Tsuji's concentration while she was healing.

"We're not even sure how much longer we can hold out. If there's something you wanna say man, just say it."

“Shove off.”

Nagayama watched Nomura with an amused expression, but Nomura sulkily turned away from him.

A few hours later. The students took naps in shifts, gradually recovering some of their strength.

Meanwhile, Endou made his way up the floors, avoiding contact with all monsters. Slowly but surely, he was approaching the 70th floor where Captain Meld was.

The monsters on 80th floor and below were all powerful enough that he could only take them on one at a time. If multiple came at him at once, he’d be overwhelmed. He moved as fast as he could without attracting attention, knowing every minute he spent on the lower floors was a risk. Fortunately, he was so well hidden that he could watch monsters go by right in front of him and not be worried.

Once the current group of monsters was out of sight, he dropped from the ceiling, silent as a spider. His artifacts all aided in his stealth, and he was wearing all black. He looked every bit the Assassin he was.

Had he wished to, Endou could easily have launched a surprise attack on the monsters that had passed him by, doing quite a bit of damage. *Am I really that hard to notice?* A tear glimmered in the corner of his eyes. It dripped to the ground, as silent as the rest of him.

“Anyway, I need to hurry...” Endou understood the importance of the task he’d been entrusted with. He also knew that they hadn’t sent him away just to inform the kingdom. His comrades had wanted him to survive, that was why they’d made him go. He was the only one who could escape. Nagayama and Nomura hadn’t said anything, but he could tell from their faces when they’d sent him off that they didn’t want him to come back.

Despite their wishes, he had every intention of returning to his friends once he’d completed his mission. He couldn’t bring himself to escape by himself when he knew his friends were struggling.

Though it disappointed him how invisible he was, he also knew that right now it was his greatest weapon. He sped up the escape route he knew by heart now, and safely made it back to the 70th floor.

Reining in his impatience, he cautiously made his way to the teleportation circle Captain Meld had made his base. Finally, he was close enough that he could sense six humans. No one else could make it this far down, so he was sure it was Captain Meld. He deactivated his Stealth, and got close enough that they should be able to sense him.

He rounded the last corner and walked into the room Captain Meld and the others were waiting in. Still, even though he was in plain sight, nobody seemed to take any notice of him.

He looked up at the captain with dead eyes and raised his voice to catch his attention. Not only was he annoyed that people still hadn't noticed him, he was in a hurry to get back to his comrades.

"Captain! It's me! Hello! We're in big trouble!"

"Whoa!? What the!? Are we under attack!?" Captain Meld hurriedly drew his sword and leaped back. He looked around him warily. The other knights followed suit a heartbeat later.

"No, it's me! Seriously, give me a break!"

"Huh? Oh, it's just Kousuke. Don't scare me like that. Wait, where's everyone else? And how come you look all beat up?"

"Like I said, we're in trouble! Big trouble!" Captain Meld had gotten used to Endou popping up out of nowhere, so he instantly relaxed when he realized it wasn't an enemy.

A moment later, the fact that he'd returned earlier than scheduled, alone, and covered in wounds set alarm bells ringing in his head. He realized something catastrophic must have occurred and his expression grew serious.

He was a little hurt that even the country's most elite knights couldn't sense him unless he said something, but he also knew now wasn't the time to worry about that. He quickly explained what had happened.

At first Captain Meld had just been confused, but as Endou's story progressed, his expression grew steadily more grim.

Tears started streaming down Endou's face as he finished his tale and explained why he'd escaped alone. Captain Meld gently patted his head and reassured him.

"Don't cry, Kousuke. You did what you needed to do. Could anyone else make it up 20 floors this fast? Someone had to warn us, and you were the best person for the job. You did good, kid."

"Captain... I-I'm going to go back. They said they'd make it back on their own somehow... and that they wouldn't lose next time, but... Amanogawa used his Limit Break, so he's exhausted. We barely managed to run away. Everyone's tired from all the fighting... Even if they get healed up, next time the demon comes... next time those damn monsters show up, there's no telling what'll happen. We don't even know if that was all of them... so please head back to the surface on your own." Endou wiped away his tears and spoke to Captain Meld in a voice full of resolve.

The captain bit his lip in frustration and handed Endou his bag full of high-rank healing supplies. One by one, the other knights gave him all of their items and tools.

"I'm sorry, Kousuke. I'd like nothing more than to head there with you, but... I know I'd just slow you down."

"Oh, don't worry about it. We were running out of healing items, so these alone are a great help."

Endou smiled and held up the pack Captain Meld had given him. He'd been trying to reassure the captain, but instead his expression only grew darker. It wasn't just frustration at his inability to help, but also bitterness at what he knew he had to say.

"Kousuke. I'm going to ask you for something despicable. I don't care if you hate me for it. In fact, maybe you should, but please promise me all the same."

"Huh? What are you..."

"If things look bad, make sure you at least bring Kouki back with you."

“Huh?” Endou stared at Captain Meld, a puzzled look on his face.

“Kousuke. If you’ve encountered monsters strong enough to beat you guys back, we’re in deep trouble... Without Kouki, humanity’s as good as lost. Of course, I believe the lot of you can all make it out of this alive, and I’d like nothing more than to see that happen, but as Heiligh’s knight commander, I need to think about what’s best for our kingdom too. If the worst should happen, I want you to promise you’ll focus on keeping Kouki alive above all else.”

“.....” Endou’s expression transformed into one of shock. Captain Meld wanted him to abandon his friends for the sake of someone more important to humanity. Leaders sometimes had to make cruel choices. The kinds of things Captain Meld had to worry about were things that hadn’t even occurred to Endou. And that was precisely why Endou’s expression darkened.

“Are the rest of us just Amanogawa’s sidekicks to you?”

“That’s not what I meant. I wasn’t lying when I said I want you all to make it out of this alive. No, nothing I say will be able to convince you... Kousuke, if nothing else, can you at least promise to pass on these words to Shizuku and Ryutarou?”

“.....” Captain Meld’s words had shaken Endou. All of the students had spent a great deal of time with the grizzly commander. He was the one who’d taught them the ways of this world. They all looked up to him as a reliable older brother, especially those in the vanguard. Among all the people they’d met in Tortus, he was the one they trusted the most, which was precisely why Endou felt so betrayed by him in that moment.

Yet, in a tiny corner of his mind, he realized there was logic in what Captain Meld had said. Though he wanted nothing more than to yell at the captain, he knew it would be wrong. He nodded sullenly and turned on his heels. But just as he did so...

“Kousuke!”

“Wha—!?”

Captain Meld threw Endou to the side and swung his sword forward. Metal

screeched against metal. The moment he realized his attack didn't connect, he spun in a circle and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the enemy in front of him.

There was a loud thud, and the shimmering outline was pushed back. Deep claw marks gouged the ground in front of Captain Meld. It had used its claws to keep itself from being blown away. Endou's face paled as he realized what the captain was fighting.

"N-No way. They already caught up to us..." Monsters started appearing in waves, surrounding Endou and the knights.

Endou was so shaken that he didn't even get up. He hadn't thought it possible for them to catch up so quickly, or to track him so easily. On his way here, he'd used every stealth skill he'd had to hide not only his presence, but every trace of his mana too. Moreover, he'd ran straight here. He'd expected the demon would have spent time searching for Kouki as well while sweeping her way up the floors.

Then, the woman he feared more than anything showed up.

"Tch... Just one of them, huh...? I figured if you were gonna run you'd head straight for the room with the teleport circle, but it looks like the rest of you are hiding somewhere else." She flicked back her bangs and stared at Endou from atop her four-eyed wolf mount. Captain Meld and the knights readied for battle.

From the sound of it, she'd expected Kouki and the others to head straight here, so she'd done the same. Since they weren't here, she'd have to search for them, which irritated her.

However, that also meant all of Endou's friends were still safe. Captain Meld and Endou inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. The demon noticed the subtle shift in their expressions and snorted.

"Well, I still have my original mission to get back to... I guess I should finish you off and flush out the rest of you quickly." The monsters charged the group.

The Chimeras wavered and blurred as they sped forward and the cats leaped around the battlefield with the speed of a typhoon. Meanwhile, the Super

Bulltaurs raised their heavy maces high, and the four-eyed wolves quietly watched and waited for an opening.

“Everyone, get in a circle formation! Protect the teleportation circle with your lives! Kousuke! Don’t just sit there, get up and run! You have to get back to the surface!”

“Huh!?” The knights reacted with inhuman swiftness. Truly, they lived up to their name as the kingdom’s best. They even managed to hold the monsters at bay... for now. They knew from Endou’s account that they didn’t have the strength to actually beat these monsters, and so focused completely on defense.

Endou didn’t understand why Captain Meld wanted him to run to the surface. He had thought his mission was to return to the others and tell Shizuku and Ryutarou what he wanted from them. Plus, he didn’t understand why they couldn’t all try to escape together.

“Stop spacing out! You have to tell everyone about the demon threat!”

“B-But what about you guys...”

“We’ll... most likely die. Kousuke, once you’ve teleported, destroy the circle on your side! You need to buy as much time as possible!”

“B-But...”

Captain Meld had the right idea. Even if Endou managed to escape, he needed to slow the monsters down, or they’d catch up to him soon enough. Without a way to delay his pursuers, Endou would almost certainly be killed soon after Captain Meld.

In their current situation, the best course of action was for him to run, while leaving the others behind to buy what time they could. In that time, he needed to destroy the magic circle on his end to keep the demon from following. Since it was carved directly into the ground, it could easily be repaired later by anyone with the Transmute skill. Once he’d safely escaped, and come back with an army of soldiers, they could repair it again for Kouki and the others to use.

Anyone would have sufficed for the job, but Captain Meld had chosen Endou.

However, it was exactly that choice that confused Endou, and caused him to hesitate. Minutes before, Captain Meld had urged him to sacrifice himself and everyone else to keep Kouki alive if necessary. Yet now, Captain Meld was doing the exact same thing for Endou. As the battle grew in ferocity, Captain Meld desperately shouted out his final wish to Endou.

“I’m sorry I was so useless! I’m sorry I couldn’t save your friends! I’m sorry all I could do was tell you to sacrifice yourself! But Kousuke, pathetic though I may be, please listen to this final wish of mine!” Surprised, Endou looked up at the man he’d come to respect more than anyone.

“Don’t die!” Finally, Endou understood.

Captain Meld honestly wanted all of the students to survive from the bottom of his heart. If he had to sacrifice someone, he’d rather sacrifice himself to save all of them. Endou realized just how much it must have hurt Captain Meld to ask him to prioritize Kouki above everyone.

Endou bit his lip and ran for the magic circle as fast as he could. If he didn’t at least fulfill Captain Meld’s dying wish, then what kind of man was he?

“You’re not getting away!” The demon ordered her cats to chase after Endou while firing a spell at him. The cats launched their tentacles at the same time spears of stone shot out from her hands.

Endou managed to parry some of the tentacles with his daggers, while dodging the rest. However, he was completely defenseless against the spears that followed. They were aimed exactly at the spot he needed to be in to dodge all of the tentacles.

He gritted his teeth and covered his vitals. He didn’t mind taking a hit or two as long as he could still make it to the teleportation circle.

However, the impact he was expecting never came. One of the knights had broken formation and covered Endou with his body.

“A-Alan-san!”

“Gah... don’t mind me, go!” Even with a spear lodged in his stomach, the knight didn’t stop swinging his sword at the oncoming monsters. Despite his injuries, he managed to smile reassuringly at Endou. Endou bit his lip so hard he

drew blood, then dashed straight for the teleportation circle.

“Tch! Persistent little pests! Everyone, target the boy!” The demon commanded her forces to attack Endou, but it was already too late.

“Hah, you lose! Don’t underestimate Heiligh’s knights!” Captain Meld smiled triumphantly as he watched Endou vanish into the magic circle.

The demon ignored him and charged her monsters toward the circle. Since they could manipulate mana directly, they didn’t need to chant an incantation to use it. This was her last chance to bring them over in time. However, Captain Meld wasn’t about to let that happen.

“I just told you not to underestimate us!” Though they were inferior to the students in terms of raw power, they possessed a level of coordination, skill, and experience that Kouki and the others lacked. Outnumbered they may have been, but they clung on with a persistence that could only be called exceptional.

But no matter how hard they struggled, the strength and numbers of the monsters they faced was too much. They weren’t going to last long. The first to fall was Alan, the knight who’d taken a spear to the stomach. In dodging a monster’s attack, he lost his balance and fell to one knee. A Chimera took advantage of the opening and leaped over him toward the magic circle.

Just as the Chimera vanished through it, the circle’s light began to fade.

“Ngh, we let one through... Kousuke... Don’t die.” Captain Meld’s words were drowned out by the monsters’ roars. Furious with the knights, the demon set her monsters on them.

“Heh... Since we’re destined to die here anyway, let’s go out with a bang, men. Show her the pride of Heiligh’s knights!”

“Yes, sir!” The knights all yelled in unison. Their resolve was so strong that for a second, the monsters around them faltered.

Ten minutes later. The room with the teleportation circle lay silent.

“Uwaaaaaaaaah!” Endou screamed in rage and frustration as he arrived on

the 30th floor. Without a moment's delay, he stabbed his dagger into the magic circle at his feet.

"Wh-What's going on!? Hey, you, what are you doing!?"

"Stop that!"

"Someone, hold him down!"

The knights guarding the teleportation circle on the 30th were surprised when a black-robed boy suddenly appeared from its center. Though they were taken aback, they quickly recovered and tried to prevent Endou from destroying the circle.

These were the knights Captain Meld had left behind to guard the magic circle on this side. The ones he'd left behind were all too weak to accompany him past the 30th floor.

Endou struck a second time, then a third. Just before he'd destroyed the circle completely, the knights managed to pile on top of him. It was possibly the worst mistake of their lives.

"L-Let me go! I need to destroy this! If I don't, they'll follow me! Let me go!"

"Wait, you're one of the heroes friends, aren't you!? Why are you..."

The knights shouted in surprise as they realized the person who'd teleported in was a member of Kouki's party. For just a second, their grips loosened. Endou took advantage of that to raise his dagger up again, but he was a second too late.

The magic circle began to glow. A second later, a blurry outline attacked Endou and the knights.

"Shit! Everyone, get back!"

"What's happening!? Gwaaaaaaaaah!"

Endou leaped out of the way, barely dodging the Chimera's attack. Unfortunately, one of the knights wasn't able to react in time, and the Chimera's claws tore right through his armor, mortally wounding him.

He slumped to the ground, blood spurting everywhere. The other knights

stared in shock. Endou frantically called out to the rest of them.

“Enemy attack! Watch out for the places where the air looks warped! We have to destroy the magic circle or more of them will keep coming!” His shrill screams brought the rest of the knights back to their senses. But in that short time, another knight was torn to shreds.

There were seven knights guarding the 30th floor teleportation circle. Of those, two had already died.

Endou activated one of his Assassin skills, Shadow Dance, and leaped up toward the ceiling. He was planning on jumping behind the Chimera and destroying the circle with one final attack, but the Chimera realized his intentions and jumped up to stop him.

“Dammit, what the hell is this thing!?” The knights still hadn’t fully grasped the situation, but they knew they had to stop the Chimera. The five of them leaped at it all at once.

All they could see of the Chimera, was a blurry outline in the air, so they had no way of knowing what kind of weapons the monsters possessed, or what they should be wary of. Because of that, they were totally unprepared when the Chimera’s tail started biting at their necks, or when its wings started buffeting them away.

However, their concentrated attack did succeed in throwing the Chimera off-balance a little, allowing Endou to just barely dodge its fangs. They still grazed his shoulder, but Endou lopped off its tail in return as he fell past it.

The Chimera flapped its wings to regain its balance and landed a few feet away. At the same time, Endou landed on the ground and swung his dagger at the teleportation circle.

The Chimera used the recoil of its landing to launch itself at Endou with frightening speed, but it was too late. Endou’s dagger had already reached its target. There was a loud crack as the circle shattered. Its glow began to fade. The residual mana from the previous teleports scattered.

“Now we’re... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Just as he breathed a sigh of relief, the Chimera clamped its jaws down on Endou’s right arm. Then, it yanked its jaws

back, trying to tear Endou's arm off.

"We won't let you!"

"Get off of him!"

Luckily, the knights rushed at it, distracting the beast. The Chimera's grip loosened as a short spear embedded itself in its flank.

Due to the blood that had sprayed out when he'd been bitten, most of the Chimera's face was now visible. Endou used that opportunity to throw a dagger at its eye with his left arm while he freed his right.

The knights closed in to deal the finishing blow, and two of them were killed as the Chimera thrashed about in pain. Endou threw more daggers at it, but even with one eye gone, it used its supernatural senses to dodge out of the way.

Another one of the knights screamed. Endou cast a quick glance in his direction. It seemed even after being cut off, the Chimera's tail could still move. It had leaped up and latched on to the knight's neck. The skin around where he'd been bitten turned purple, and after a few more seconds of screaming, he died.

"Damn it all!" The last knight tried to crush the snake-tail for good, but that was a grave mistake on his part. The Chimera instantly pounced on him the moment he turned his back on it. Covered in wounds, Endou desperately squeezed out the last ounce of his strength. He aimed his strongest skill at the Chimera's neck, hoping to kill it before it reached the knight.

"Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" He'd abandoned his comrades. He'd abandoned Captain Meld. He'd even let these knights be killed. He channeled all of that hatred and frustration into this one last attack. His blade struck true. He sliced through the back of the Chimera's neck, slaying it instantly.

The force of his leap took him past the Chimera, so he hit the ground with considerable force, rolling a few meters forward.

Enduring the pain in his shoulder, right arm, and stomach, he propped himself up with his left arm and looked back to make sure the beast was really dead.

Its Camouflage had been dispelled, and there was a huge gash in its neck. As far as he could tell, it was done for. Still, rather than looking triumphant, Endou just cursed bitterly.

The last knight was a short distance away from the Chimera's body. He was quite obviously dead. His right hand was still holding his sword, while his face was a swollen mass of purple. Next to him was the Chimera's tail, cut in half. It seemed the knight had managed to cut down the tail right before the Chimera had reached him. However, just before the tail had died, it had shot its poison at the knight's face.

In the end, all of the knights guarding the magic circle on the 30th floor had died. Endou wept, cursing himself for not managing to save even a single one of them.

Once his tears were all spent, he took out the strongest healing medicine he could find from Captain Meld's bag and drank it. If he didn't fix himself up quickly, he'd die of blood loss.

After he finished treating himself, he gathered all of the knights' corpses and lined them up next to the broken teleportation circle. Then, he gazed at them for a few minutes before turning around and heading for the surface. His face was pale and his eyes empty.

Once again, he'd been the only one to survive.

That knowledge coiled about him like cold chains, weighing down his footsteps. The only thing keeping him going was the mission he'd been entrusted with by those who'd died. He ran mechanically, not thinking about anything else.

Chapter IV: Questioned Worth

“Woohoo! Hell yeah!” Steiff and Brise thundered westward, the Reisen Gorge falling off steeply to their left, while the vast green plains rolled by to their right. Though Brise was driving steadily down the highway, Steiff’s driver was clearly enjoying herself as she veered wildly from the rocky cliffside to the grassy plains.

“Shea’s sure in a good mood. She sounds like one of those bikers you see in movies.”

“Hmm... I kind of want to try driving it too.”

Hajime watched Shea drive with an amused expression on his face. He was driving Brise with one hand, his other arm hanging out the window. Shea was the only person not sitting inside Brise with him. At her insistence, he’d let her drive Steiff instead.

She’d been more taken with the motorcycle, as it allowed her to feel the wind on her face as she drove, but with how much their party had grown, Hajime had ended up using Brise for transport more often than not.

She could have stuck her head out of Brise’s window as they’d drove, but it wouldn’t really have been the same. And because Yue always took the seat next to him, she couldn’t stick to Hajime like before either. After much insistence, Hajime had finally caved and agreed to teach Shea how to drive Steiff.

Since it was operated via mana manipulation, it wasn’t actually that hard to master. Shea didn’t even have to move the handlebars manually if she didn’t want to, as it could all be done magically. Since Shea could control her mana directly too, learning how to drive had been a piece of cake. And once she’d mastered driving, she’d fallen in love with the motorbike.

Even now she was driving all over the place, drifting, popping wheelies, jackknifing, and generally doing crazy stunts that would have put a pro stuntman to shame.

Since both acceleration and braking were controlled magically, it was a lot easier to pull stunts with Steiff than a normal motorcycle. That being said, Shea's driving skill had far surpassed Hajime's at this point.

He didn't particularly mind that she'd become a better driver than him. What he did mind was that now that her skills had improved she took every opportunity to show off and rub it in his face. It seemed Shea was one of those people whose personalities did a complete 180 when they started driving.

Yue also watched Shea drive around, a hint of longing in her expression. Hajime didn't think his heart could take it if Yue turned into a 90s gangster too, so he swore in his heart that he'd never let Yue drive.

Heedless of the inner turmoil within Hajime's heart, Myu clambered up onto Yue's knees and stared at him, eyes glittering with excitement. She pointed at Shea, who was currently doing a handstand on the handlebars.

"Daddy, Daddy! I wanna do that too!"

"Not happening."

"But I wanna!" Myu started thrashing about in Yue's lap.

Yue got a firm grip on Myu so she wouldn't fall down and scolded her gently. Myu started pouting, and Hajime finally relented.

"Myu. I'll let you ride it with me later, so be good okay?"

"You will?"

"Yeah. There's no way in hell I'm letting you get on with Shea, but if it's with me, then I guess it's alright."

"I can't go with Shea-oneechan?"

"Absolutely not. Just look at her. She's posing on top of the handlebars. It's kind of scary how good she is... But there's no way I'm letting you ride with someone who drives like that."

Shea was standing atop Steiff's handlebars, covering her face with her right hand while raising up her left shoulder. It looked just like Jojo's trademark pose.

Hajime stared as she laughed maniacally, vowing to himself that he'd never

let Myu ride with Shea as long as he lived. He then glared at Myu, impressing on her that she better not ask Shea to drive her around in secret either.

“Two-wheelers are pretty dangerous though, so I don’t really want to let you ride in one as it is... Maybe I should make a children’s seat for Steiff? I could probably use... Hmm...”

“Yue-oneechan. Daddy’s talking to himself again. He’s weird.”

“He’s just worried about you... I didn’t think he’d be so overprotective.”

“Fufu, Master’s a surprisingly doting father. I must say, the discrepancy between how he normally is and how he’s acting now is quite... Haaah... Haaah...”

“Yue-oneechan. Tio-oneechan’s making weird noises again.”

“That’s just how she is, don’t worry about it.” Yue absentmindedly patted Myu’s head as she talked with her.

It had only been a short time since Myu’d started traveling with them, but Hajime had already given up on being called anything other than daddy. At first, he’d tried everything he could think of to get Myu to change her mind, but he’d be defeated at every turn by her teary-eyed face. He’d grown strong enough to kill the monsters that inhabited the abyss, but he didn’t think he’d ever match up to this little girl. And so, daddy had stuck.

As time had passed, Hajime had begun doting on Myu more and more. At this point he was just like those idiotic fathers he’d seen on TV. Shea was hopeless, and Tio was a pervert, so it fell to Hajime to raise Myu into an upstanding young woman. Or so he thought, anyway. At present it fell to Yue, the level-headed member of the party, to rein Hajime in when he was clearly being too overprotective.

Yue was a little disappointed that Myu was cutting into her alone time with Hajime, but at the same time she was enjoying acting out the motherly role.

She covered Myu’s ears so she wouldn’t be corrupted by Tio’s perversion, then shut the dragon up with her magic.

Hajime absentmindedly watched Shea, who wasn’t even riding Steiff at this

point, but rather clinging to its rear as she sent it careening up and down the cliffside, while he considered what materials would make for the best car seat.

The party continued driving down the highway like that. After a few hours, they arrived at Horaud.

Originally, Hajime had planned on passing the town by, but Ilwa had asked him to deliver something, so he'd taken a small detour. It was more or less on their way to the Grand Gruen Volcano, so he wasn't going that far out of his way anyway.

Hajime looked around nostalgically as he walked down the main street of Horaud. Myu noticed the slight shift in Hajime's attitude and lightly patted his forehead from her perch atop his shoulders.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

"Hm? Oh, it's just I've been to this place before... It was only four months ago that I was here, but it feels like years have passed..."

"Are you really okay, Hajime?" Yue laid her hand on Hajime's arm and looked up at him worriedly. He simply shrugged his shoulders. A second later, he was back to his normal self.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just got lost in thought for a little bit. It's not like me to get sentimental, but this is where it all began, isn't it...? I spent a night here nervous and afraid, then the next day we went into the labyrinth... And then I fell."

"....."

As Hajime reminisced about that fateful day, Yue, Shea, and Tio looked up at him, their expressions unreadable. Yue seemed content to stay silent, but Tio couldn't restrain her curiosity.

"Hmm... Do you never wish you could do things over, Master? I have only heard some of what transpired back then, but... you do not hate all of your previous comrades, correct? Are there not some you were particularly close to? Do you never wish you could still be with them?" Since Tio hadn't known Hajime for as long as the others, she wasn't as familiar with his past. And because she was straightforward by nature, she had no compunctions about asking whatever came to her mind.

Perhaps the way she went about it was a bit insensitive, it was just her way of showing she cared about her comrades. Her constant perverted antics always gave Hajime headaches, but he actually liked this blunt side of her.

He wasn't offended by her question at all, and organized his thoughts as he considered the best way to answer her question. As he sifted through his memories, he suddenly remembered the conversation he'd had the night before his fall. Kaori had to come to his room, wearing nothing but a white negligee. They'd talked under the moonlight, drinking his sorry excuse for tea. She'd sworn she would protect him no matter what. And even when he'd fallen, he remembered her tortured expression as she tried to jump down after him. It was only her comrades holding her back that had stopped her.

Yue squeezed his arm, snapping him out of his reverie. When he looked down, he saw her staring intently at him. He returned her gaze, and his expression softened.

"You're right, I was pretty close with some of my old classmates. Still, even if I could turn back time and return to that day, I'd do everything the same way."

"Oh, and why is that?"

The reason why was obvious from Hajime's expression, but Tio still asked anyway. He covered Yue's hand with his own, and replied without ever taking his eyes off her. A faint smile formed on the edge of her lips. Her cheeks were slightly flushed too.

"Obviously... so I could meet Yue again."

"Hajime..."

For an outpost town, Horaud was surprisingly lively. Mercenaries, soldiers, and adventurers alike flocked to the Great Orcus Labyrinth both to gain experience and raise their levels, and hopefully to make a fortune harvesting mana crystals. Merchants followed in their wake, hoping to relieve said adventurers of some of that fortune. Because the strength of monsters was strictly regulated by floor, it was one of the most popular, safest training spots in the kingdom. As such, it stood to reason that the town's main street would be the busiest section.

Yue and Hajime were standing in the middle of that bustling street, staring at each other.

They were so lost in each other that they took no notice of the hundreds of people walking around them. They received a lot of curious looks and jealous stares, but as always, the two ignored them. They only had eyes for each other now.

“Did you hear that, Tio-san? He didn’t say ‘us.’ Just Yue-san. And now they’re flirting in the middle of the street again. They don’t even care where they are anymore, do they? And what about us, are we just supposed to sit there and watch? When are we going to have those kinds of special moments with Hajime-san? I’ve been ready for him to come on to me for ages now, but I keep getting treated like some kind of comic relief character... I mean, I get it. I know Yue-san’s special to him. One of the reasons I joined them was because I wanted that kind of relationship the two of them have. So it’s fine if Yue-san gets special treatment. In fact, if Hajime-san started ignoring Yue-san, I don’t think I’d even like him anymore. If he ever did anything to make her sad, I’d be the first one lining up to kill him. But... But you know? I thought I was making progress with him too. I thought I was finally getting somewhere, but nothing’s happened. Even if Yue-san’s special to him, he could at least look at me every once in a while, right? I’m offering myself up on a silver platter here, but he still won’t take me. What kind of guy ignores a girl when she’s trying so hard to seduce him!? Someone needs to teach him a lesson. I wanna flirt with Hajime-san too! I wanna do all those things with him in bed too! I wanna do all those things he did with Yue-san too! What’s so wrong about that!? You’re the pervert here, Tio-san, so tell me what the problem is!”

“Sh-Shea. I understand your resentment very well, but you need to calm down. You cannot go around shouting things like that in public. Look, you’re attracting more attention than they are now. And wait, did you just insult me there at the end? I cannot believe you would call me a pervert in the middle of the street... Haaah... Haaah... I can feel people staring coldly at me... Haaah... Haaah... Mmm...”

Now the flirting couple had been joined by a bunny girl who’d screamed how she wanted to fuck a guy at the top of her lungs, and a beautiful older woman

who was panting heavily after being called a pervert. A lot of the people who'd stopped out of mere curiosity hurriedly left.

"Daddy, Shea-oneechan and Tio-oneechan are..."

"Myu, don't look at them. Pretend you don't know them."

"Shea... Maybe I should tie Hajime up and leave him with you for a night..."

Shea's shouting had brought Hajime and Yue back to the real world, and they quickly began pretending Shea and Tio had nothing to do with them. At the same time, Hajime decided to pointedly ignore Yue's last statement. He didn't want to have to suspect she was luring him into a trap every time they were alone. Though, he didn't want to actually get caught in said trap, either. Well, Yue wouldn't really do something like that... right? She'd tried something similar before, but surely it would be fine to trust her now. At least, that was what Hajime kept telling himself.

The party had caused such a scene in the middle of the street that the guards had come out to see what all the commotion was about. Sighing, Hajime grabbed Shea and Tio by the collar and dragged them somewhere less crowded.

Hajime was used to receiving jealous glares every time he walked into a populated area, but for the first time he felt like people were looking at him in pity more than anything else.

After extricating themselves from the crowd, Hajime and the others finally arrived at Horaud's adventurer's guild.

Hajime pushed open the guild's doors with Myu still sitting on his shoulders. Unlike the other guild branches that he'd visited, this one's front doors were made of metal. There was a massive groaning noise as the double doors creaked open.

Last time Hajime had been in Horaud he'd had no need to visit the guild, so this would be his first time inside. The inside of Horaud's guild was exactly how he'd imagined a guild hall should look like.

The walls were peeling and holes in the floor had been hastily covered up with wooden planks. Dust and grime gathered unchecked in the less-used corners of the room. The building's layout itself was no different from the other

guild branches he'd visited. There was a huge counter dead ahead, and a restaurant to the left. However, it seemed this one also served alcohol. A few grizzled old men were already well into their cups, despite the fact that it was barely past noon.

Some of the adventurers sitting on the second floor walked over to the railing to see who the newcomers were. As far as Hajime could tell, all of the adventurers on the second floor were pretty strong, relatively speaking. It seemed there might have been some kind of unspoken rule that only the higher-ranked adventurers used the upper floor.

The adventurers all had a different air around them compared to the ones Hajime had seen in other cities as well. There was an edge to them that had been missing from the laid-back adventurers Hajime had met in Brooke.

I guess they're all so tough-looking because they're used to fighting monsters in the labyrinth. You'd have to be decently strong to want to come here.

Though, even if one took all that into account, the atmosphere in the guild room was strangely strained. Something serious enough to put these hardened adventurers on edge must have happened.

Everyone's eyes focused on Hajime and his group.

Myu let out a terrified squeal and tried to hide behind Hajime's head.

Jealous glares settled on Hajime, as was usual whenever he walked into a crowded area accompanied by Yue, Shea, and Tio.

He took Myu off his shoulders and cradled her in his arms. She buried her face into his chest and shut out everyone's stares.

A few of the adventurers got up from their seat and headed over to the group. It was obvious from their expressions that they wanted to teach this cheeky little kid who'd just barged in here a lesson. They had no real reason to be so hostile toward him, they were just jealous. That, and the strained atmosphere in the guild had gotten them itching for a fight.

They hadn't even considered the possibility that he might be in trouble and had come to the guild to request help... not that something like that would ever happen. The only thing on their mind right now was beating Hajime up to vent

their own frustrations.

Normally he wouldn't have paid them any mind, but since he'd become an overprotective father, he was going to make them pay for scaring his daughter. He gently patted Myu's head and shot the adventurers advancing upon him a withering glare.

Then, without warning... he unleashed a wave of Intimidation so powerful that it blew the adventurers back. The pressure was so strong that they could physically feel it.

They cowered before Hajime, their earlier confidence nowhere to be seen. The less experienced adventurers fainted on the spot, while most of the others returned meekly to their seats.

They shivered in fear, cold sweat pouring down their backs. It took everything they had to keep from fainting like the other adventurers had.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the oppressive presence vanished. The adventurers gasped for air, only just realizing they'd been holding their breath the entire time. More than a few of them had wet themselves, and some looked like they were about to hurl. Hajime flashed them all a feral grin.

"Hey, all of you bastards that glared at us."

"Ah!" They all jumped when they heard his voice. Everyone was staring at Hajime like he was some kind of monster, which in a sense, he was. He ignored their fear and laid down a request... No, a command.

"Smile."

"Huh?"

He was met with confused stares.

"Didn't you hear me? I said smile. Like this. You've gotta show that you're not scary. Wave your hands and stuff too. It's because you all look so intimidating that you scared her. What're you gonna do if you traumatize her for life, huh?"

Then don't bring a little girl with you to an adventurer's guild in the first place! The adventurers all thought unanimously, but none of them had the courage to actually say it. Cowed by his Intimidation, the adventurers all forced themselves

to smile. A few feebly waved their hands at him too.

It was a truly surreal sight, all these hard-faced adventurers smiling stiffly, trying to pretend they were friendly. Hajime nodded in satisfaction, then whispered something into Myu's ear.

She timidly looked up at him with tears in her eyes. Then, at Hajime's urging, she slowly turned around. She was greeted by the sight of hardened adventurers trying their best to look friendly.

"Hiii!" As expected, their forced smiles did little to assuage her fears, and she buried her face into Hajime's chest once more. And so, Hajime narrowed his eyebrows angrily.

"You call that a smile!?" Hajime roared, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Don't be ridiculous! The poor adventurers turned to Yue for salvation, tears forming in the corners of their eyes.

Yue breathed a deep sigh, walked up to Myu, and whispered something into her ear as well. Once again, Myu hesitantly turned to face the crowd of adventurers. They once again tried their best to look friendly.

She stared at them for quite a bit longer this time. Finally, her face broke out in a smile and she waved back at them. The adventurers forced smiles suddenly turned into natural ones when they saw how cute she was. Hajime nodded in satisfaction and put Myu back on his shoulders. His business with the adventurers concluded, he walked up to the counter.

Silverware clattered to the floor as he walked past, but he paid no heed to the people around him.

For once, the person manning the reception counter was a cute girl. She was about the same age as Hajime. This was the first time the adventurer's guild stereotype actually fit. Unfortunately, the effect was ruined because she was frozen stiff. Having Hajime that close to her made her unbelievably nervous.

"Is the branch chief here? I'm here to deliver a letter from the Fuhren branch's chief... I was requested to give it to him in person." He handed over his status plate to the receptionist. She accepted it with trembling fingers. Though she was nervous, she still did her job admirably.

“Y-Yes. Let me just confirm your identity. U-Umm, does this mean you’re here... on a direct request from Fuhren’s branch chief?” The reason she was so surprised was because it was rare for a mere adventurer to undertake requests from someone as high-ranking as a branch chief. However, when she saw the ranking on Hajime’s status plate, she understood why he’d been chosen.

“Y-You’re gold ranked!?” At most, maybe 10% of all adventurers were gold. And the names of all gold-ranked adventurers were kept on a roster that every guild worker had memorized, including this receptionist, and yet she’d never heard of Hajime before.

When they heard her exclamation, all of the other adventurers stared at Hajime in shock as well. After a few seconds of silence, the entire room burst into conversation.

The receptionist paled as she realized she’d accidentally blurted out Hajime’s personal information for everyone to hear. She bowed as low as she could.

“M-My deepest apologies, sir! I didn’t mean to say it so loudly!”

“Ah, I don’t really mind. Could you just call the branch chief over for me?”

“O-Of course! Right away!”

Hajime smiled to himself. *If I hadn’t said anything, I bet she’d spend another hour apologizing.* After all the commotion he’d caused in Ur and Fuhren, it was pointless to try and pretend he was just a normal adventurer anymore.

He attracted enough stares as it was by bringing along a kid and a harem of beautiful girls with him everywhere. Adding gold-ranked adventurer to the list of oddities didn’t really change much at that point.

However, Myu still wasn’t used to getting so much attention. She squirmed uncomfortably as she looked at everyone. The way she moved was reminiscent of how Tio writhed in pleasure whenever Hajime insulted her. Hajime slapped her for teaching Myu such unwholesome things, which caused even more of a stir with the crowd.

Finally, after a few minutes, Hajime heard someone thundering down the corridor.

A black-clad figure burst out from the hallway situated on the side of the counter. He looked around wildly, his eyes passing through the crowd. He was obviously in a great hurry.

Hajime's eyes went wide in shock. This was someone he recognized, and the last person he'd expected to see here.

"Endou?" The black-clad figure was none other than Hajime's classmate, Kousuke Endou.

Endou wheeled around in surprise. He cast another panicked glance around the room, but didn't spot the person he was searching for. Growing impatient, he loudly shouted,

"Nagumo!? Is that really you!? It is, right!? Where are you!? Nagumo! You're alive, aren't you!? Get out here, Hajime Nagumo!" Many of the adventurers clapped their hands over their ears. His voice was really loud. Endou's extreme impatience implied that he wasn't just in a hurry to see an old classmate he'd thought dead. There was something urgent he needed from Hajime.

Yue and the others stared expectantly at Hajime. He awkwardly scratched his cheek. If he was being perfectly honest, he'd rather not have talked to Endou right now. Nevertheless, he dutifully stepped forward and called out to him.

"Uh, Endou? I can hear you, so can you stop yelling so loudly?"

"Nagumo!? Where are you!?" Endou turned toward Hajime, reacting to his voice. The depth of the desperation in his voice shocked Hajime.

His eyes met Hajime's for an instant, but then he looked away again and started looking around the room once more.

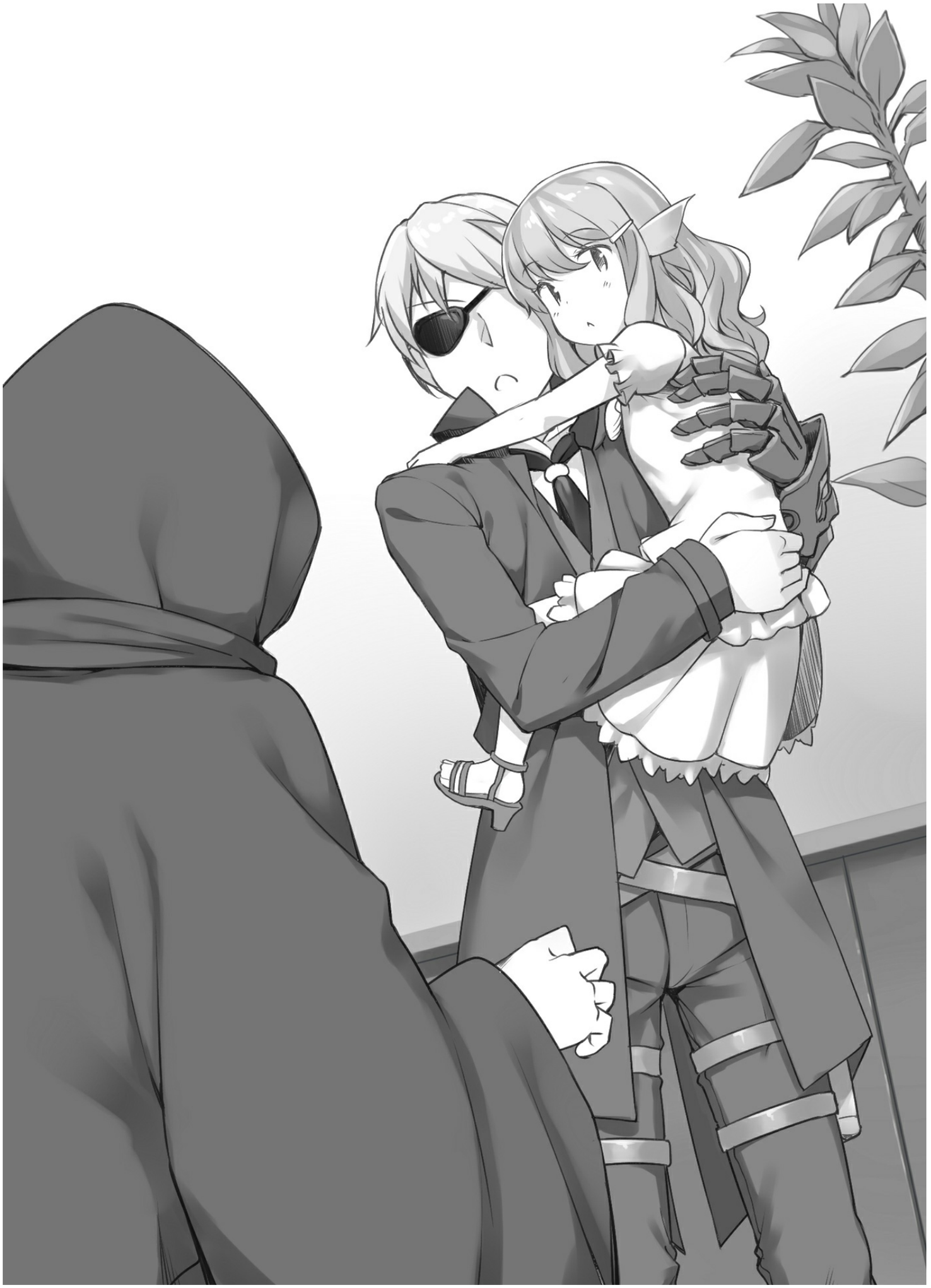
"Dammit! I can hear you, but I can't see you! Are you a ghost!? Did you really die after all!? Is that why I can't see you!?"

"I'm right in front of you, moron. Just calm down, man. Weren't you supposed to be the world's most unnoticeable person?"

"There it is again! That's your voice! And just who are you calling the king of invisibility!? I'll have you know that the automatic doors at stores open for me one-third of the time!"

“Wait, so even they don’t notice you two-thirds of the time...? You’re really something.” After that exchange Endou finally realized the white-haired boy with the eyepatch was indeed Hajime. He scrutinized Hajime’s face. Hajime turned away awkwardly. He wasn’t used to guys staring so intently at him.

“A-Are you... Are you really Nagumo?”



“Yep. In the flesh. I know I look pretty different now, but it’s me, Hajime Nagumo.”

He looked so different from the boy Endou remembered that he still couldn’t completely believe it. He looked Hajime up and down again. Eventually, he was forced to accept it really was Hajime. He had the same general facial structure, and only Hajime would know about how invisible Endou was.

“You’re... really alive.”

“Obviously. I’m standing in front of you, aren’t I?”

“Everything about you has, changed though... like your appearance, and the way you talk...”

“I had to crawl my way out of hell. There’s no way I’d stay the same after that.”

“R-Really? Well, I guess that makes sense... Still, I can’t believe you’re really alive... Thank god.” He may have turned into a drastically different person, but Endou was still relieved that his classmate yet lived.

Though he’d been jealous of the attention Kaori gave Hajime, much like the other guys, and had turned a blind eye to Hiyama’s bullying, he’d never once seriously wanted Hajime dead. Endou had been as shaken as the rest when he’d witnessed Hajime fall. It was only natural that he’d be happy to know his classmate hadn’t actually died.

“Wait, so... you’re really an adventurer too? Gold-ranked at that...”

“Pretty much.”

Endou’s expression did a complete 180. From one of relief, to one of panic.

It was then that Hajime noticed Endou was surprisingly ragged. *What on earth happened to him?*

“So not only were you able to make it back from the depths of the labyrinth alive, you’ve become strong enough to reach the highest rank in the adventurer’s guild? No way...”

“More or less, yeah.” Upon hearing that, Endou broke down and clung

desperately to Hajime's shoulders. His face was a mixture of desperation and regret.

"Then I'm begging you, come back to the labyrinth with me! If we don't hurry, everyone'll die! We need all the help we can get! Kentarou and Jugo could die any minute now! I'm begging you Nagumo, you've gotta help us!"

"W-Wait a second. What the heck are you talking about!? What's going on? What do you mean they could die any minute now? You guys have Amanogawa, don't you? Shouldn't you be fine no matter what happens? Captain Meld and the others are there too, right? Even if you face a Behemoth now, you guys should be fine..." Hajime had never seen the normally composed Endou so distraught. Endou's face fell and he sunk to his knees at the mention of Captain Meld. He managed to squeeze out a few words through his despair.

"...died."

"Huh? I can't hear you. What'd you say?"

"I said he died! Captain Meld, Alan-san, and all the other knights! They're all dead! They died so I could escape! It's my fault! It's all my fault! And now they're all gone!"

"I see." Hajime replied solemnly.

As Hajime hadn't possessed a combat class, he hadn't been that close to Captain Meld. That being said, he'd always thought of the captain as a nice man. And the day he'd fallen, Meld had been the only one who'd believed in him despite the fact that he was labeled incompetent by everyone.

Had he been the callous person he'd turned into right after escaping the abyss, he might not have cared at all about Captain Meld's death, but at present he felt a twinge of sadness. Enough that he prayed Captain Meld would find happiness in the afterlife.

"So what exactly happened?"

"Well..." Endou numbly began recounting the events that had led to his escape. However, before he could start in earnest, a voice stopped him.

"Shall we continue this conversation inside one of our private rooms? It

seems that boy over there has something for me as well.” A grizzled old man well into his sixties stepped out of the hallway. There was a large scar running down his left eye.

Judging from the fact that the receptionist was with him, Hajime guessed that he must be this guild’s branch chief. He recalled the strained atmosphere that had filled the room when he’d first entered and looked back down at Endou. He was practically sobbing now. *Yeah, maybe it’s best we don’t talk about this here.*

Endou had probably broken down once here already, and spilled that something bad had happened to the hero party and their escorts. That was probably why everyone was on edge.

The branch chief took Endou by the arm, pulled him to his feet, and marched him back inside the hallway. All the strength had drained out of Endou after that outburst, and he meekly let himself be dragged along.

Hajime reluctantly followed along. Whatever story he was about to be told, he had the feeling he really didn’t want to hear it.

“Demons, huh...?” Hajime’s voice echoed through the quiet room.

Across from him sat Horaud’s branch chief, Loa Bawavis and Endou. Yue, Shea, and Tio all sat next to him. Myu was resting on his lap.

Endou had just finished recounting the story of what had happened in the labyrinth. Both Loa and Endou had dark expressions on their faces, and the air was heavy. No one had imagined the hero party would get done in so easily.

Myu was seemingly unaffected by the gloomy atmosphere, as she was happily stuffing her face with the snacks Loa had laid out for them. She’d actually looked a little worried at first, which was why Hajime had started feeding her snacks to pacify her. Though their conversation was too difficult for Myu to follow, she had at least been able to tell that it was nothing good.

“Anyway, what the heck is with that girl!? Why’s she just sitting there eating snacks!? Don’t you guys get how serious this is!? Everyone might die!”

“Hiii!? Daddy!”

Unable to stand it any longer, Endou angrily pointed a finger at Myu. She let out a terrified squeal and clung to Hajime.

Naturally, Hajime wasn't going to let that slide. He wouldn't forgive anyone that hurt his daughter.

"You bastard... how dare you take it out on Myu? You wanna die, huh!?"

"Hiii!?" Endou shrank back and shrieked in a high-pitched voice not unlike Myu's.

Next to him, the girls all sighed.

"He's totally become a father now."

"He called Myu 'his daughter' earlier too~"

"I wonder if Master will be able to give her up when we reach Erisen."

Hajime ignored their comments. The only thing in his mind right now was how to calm Myu down.

Loa sighed as he watched Hajime soothe Myu down and decided to move the conversation forward.

"At any rate, Nagumo. Thanks to Ilwa's letter, I understand the gist of your situation. I see you've been busy."

"Yeah, though most of it just sort of happened." Hajime spoke of his unbelievable feats as if they were no different than going on a walk for him. He shrugged his shoulders, and Loa smiled in amusement.

"According to this letter, Ilwa wants me to endorse your promotion to gold rank, and to assist you in any way I can. I more or less understand what's going on, so that shouldn't be a problem. I've heard that you not only single-handedly annihilated an army of sixty thousand monsters, but that you completely destroyed Fuhren's underground crime ring in half a day. Frankly, I find it hard to believe you're actually capable of all of these things, but I can't imagine someone like Ilwa lying. If he told me you were the demon lord himself, I'd still believe him."

Endou's eyes flew open in surprise. He'd assumed Hajime must have gotten a little stronger since he'd managed to escape the Great Orcus Labyrinth on his

own, but he'd thought Hajime was still nowhere near his level.

After all, Hajime's job was Synergist, and he'd been labeled incompetent by the rest of his class. Sure, he might have become a gold adventurer, but the people of this world were all fundamentally weaker than the summoned heroes. He'd expected the most Hajime could do was repair the broken teleportation circle and maybe support them from the rear.

The reason Endou had come to the adventurer's guild in the first place was to recruit high-ranked adventurers to go rescue Kouki with him. Obviously they wouldn't have lasted a second on the lower floors, but they could at least have guarded the circle on the 70th floor.

There were a few of Meld's knights that had been stationed outside the labyrinth, but he'd tasked them with relaying everything to the capital. At best, they'd maybe been able to protect the circle on the 30th floor. Only adventurers silver rank or above would be strong enough to survive on the 70th floor.

He'd gone up to the second floor to try and convince adventurers to join in his cause, but all of them had turned him down. Not only did he want them to guard the 70th floor, a place no one had ever been to, he wanted them to fight against creatures that had decimated the hero party, the hope of all humanity. On top of that, all of the kingdom's elite knights had been slaughtered. As it was, the adventurers were all fearing for the future of the human race.

When he'd heard the commotion, Loa had grabbed Endou and dragged him to the back to get the full story. It was then that the receptionist had shown up with Hajime's status plate.

It finally dawned on Endou that he might have been severely underestimating Hajime's strength. It was possible he was actually way stronger than him, and maybe even Kouki.

While Endou was still frozen in shock, Loa and Hajime continued their conversation.

"Don't be ridiculous. The demon lord wouldn't even be a threat to me."

"Not even a threat, is it? You certainly have some confidence in yourself. In

that case, I'd like you to prove your claims by taking on a certain request on behalf of the Horaud adventurer's guild."

"You want me to go rescue the hero party?"

Endou suddenly snapped back to reality when he heard the word "rescue." He leaned forward and started begging Hajime once more.

"Th-That's right! Nagumo, we need to go save them! If you're really that strong, then you can do it, right!?"

"....."

Endou's eyes lit up with hope, but Hajime's reaction was not what he was expecting. Hajime stared off into the distance, weighing his options. Endou had thought Hajime would jump at the chance to rescue his comrades, so he was confused when Hajime didn't reply instantly.

"What's wrong!? They could be dying while we waste time here! What's there to think about!? They're your comrades!"

"My comrades?" Hajime turned his gaze back to Endou, his eyes cold as ice. Endou faltered in the face of his intense glare. Fear warred with his stubborn desire to save his friends. Eventually, stubbornness won out, and he held his ground against Hajime.

"Y-Yeah. They're your comrades, so we've gotta go save—"

"Don't just go make them my comrades for your own convenience. I'll say this now, but all I've ever thought of you guys as is classmates. That's all. Not really all that different from strangers, really."

"What!? But... how can you..."

Hajime ignored Endou's stuttering and went back to considering the merits and demerits of going to save Kouki's party. As he'd said before, he considered the rest of his classmates mere acquaintances at best. He wasn't terribly interested in getting revenge on the person who'd dropped him into the abyss, but neither did he think too fondly of his former classmates.

However, he also wasn't going to just abandon them outright. Even now, Aiko's words had a profound effect on his way of thinking. If he let them die for

no good reason, it would be betraying everything he'd promised his teacher back in Ur.

Plus, there was at least one person who was more than just an acquaintance. There was a girl who'd promised she'd protect him, despite the fact that everyone else had called him incompetent. Just as she'd feared, her dream had turned into reality and Hajime had been cast into the abyss. He'd asked her to protect him that night to try and assuage her fears, but in the end she hadn't been able to fulfill her promise.

Ever since he'd returned to this town, he'd been thinking about her more and more. Her tortured expression as she'd watched him fall into the darkness was still fresh in his memory.

"Shirasaki... Is she still alive?" Hajime muttered quietly. Endou looked up in surprise. He quickly realized he needed say something or Hajime would likely refuse to help him.

"Y-Yeah. Shirasaki-san's alive. In fact, if it wasn't for her, the rest of us would probably be dead right now. I honestly thought Jugo and Yaegashi-san were done for during that first attack... Shirasaki-san's amazing. Her healing magic is something else... Ever since that day you fell, it felt like she changed, you know? Like, she started training so hard we were worried about her... And she kind of became more mature? Or well, that's what it feels like, anyway. It's like she's always got something on her mind now. She's not as scatterbrained as she used to be..."

"I see."

Endou talked about everything that came to mind, even though all Hajime had asked was if she was alive. There was a brief moment of silence.

Hajime sighed loudly, scratched his head, and looked down at Yue.

"I'll follow you no matter what your decision is. Do what you want."

"Yue..." She took his hand in hers, and he gently squeezed back. He was eternally grateful to Yue for being so understanding.

"M-Me too! I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, Hajime-san!"

“Heh. Naturally, I too will always be by your side, Master.”

“Umm, umm, Myu will too!”

The others quickly spoke up before Hajime and Yue could start flirting again. Myu didn’t fully grasp what was going on, but she didn’t want to be left out of the fun.

“What’s with this harem development...” Endou muttered in disbelief. Hajime ignored him, then turned to face his reliable comrades.

“Thanks, guys. To be honest, I really don’t want to deal with god’s chosen hero... but there’s someone I owe a debt to, so I’m gonna go save her. Though knowing them, they might have fought their way out already.”

In all honesty, Hajime couldn’t have cared less about Kouki and most of the other students. In fact, he would’ve preferred not to get close to them, since they were effectively being manipulated by this world’s corrupt gods.

Still, he’d always felt bad about not letting Kaori know that he was still alive. He had no doubt the reason she’d pushed herself so far was because of him. She was one person he’d rush to save if she was ever in trouble. She’d been the only one who’d tried to protect him. And though he didn’t know it, even now she was soldiering on because she believed he was alive.

Besides, the danger to him would likely be negligible. From Endou’s description, he guessed the four-eyed wolves they’d encountered were the same ones Hajime had fought in Ur. And the chimeras and cats seemed no stronger than the monsters he’d fought in the first couple of floors of the labyrinth. He wouldn’t even break a sweat.

“U-Umm, does that mean you’re going to help?”

“Yeah. Chief Loa. If possible, I’d like you to still make this a formal request from the guild.”

“You don’t want the guild’s managers thinking they can ask you to do things for free?”

“Pretty much. Oh yeah, one more thing. Do you have a room I can leave Myu in?”

“Of course, that won’t be any problem at all.”

Endou breathed a huge sigh of relief when he heard Hajime was coming, but Hajime ignored him and continued talking to Loa.

He was hoping to leave Myu in the guild’s care while he went to rescue everyone. Strong as he was, he didn’t want to risk taking her somewhere that dangerous. Like before, Myu was not at all happy about being left behind. However, this time everyone managed to convince her together, and they left Tio to be her babysitter. Finally, they prepared to depart, with Endou leading the way.

“Hey, hurry up and lead us there, Endou.”

“Hey, don’t kick me! And how come your personality’s so different from what it was before!”

“Quit asking dumb questions. Hurry up, I want to reach them in a day... No, half a day. I’m not happy about having to leave Myu behind, so we’re gonna get this done as fast as possible. I’m worried about leaving her alone in the hands of that pervert.”

“Man, you’ve like, really become a dad, haven’t you? And you’ve got a harem of beautiful girls with you.... What the heck happened for that meek Nagumo to end up like this...” Endou grumbled to himself as they ran through the labyrinth floors. He’d regained some of his former composure now that he’d recruited Hajime’s help.

Endou had been pretty confident in his agility, but that pride had been ripped to shreds as Hajime and his friends easily outstripped his speed. He pushed on as fast as he could, praying that his friends were still safe...

“Ngh...”

“Suzu-chan!”

“Suzu!”

Suzu groaned and opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was her two best friends, Kaori and Eri, looking happily down at her. It took her a few seconds to

fully regain consciousness, but eventually her mind cleared up enough that she could speak.

“T-This is an unfamiliar ceiling.”

“Suzu, we know you’re a comedian at heart, but maybe you should lay off the jokes until you’re feeling better.”

Her voice came out as a hoarse croak. Shizuku had rushed over the moment she’d heard Suzu awaken. She was both impressed, and somewhat exasperated that Suzu would try to crack jokes even in this situation. She pulled off her leather canteen and brought it up to Suzu’s lips.

Suzu greedily gulped down the water.

“I feel like I’ve just come back to life, literally,” she exclaimed as she finished drinking. After that, she unsteadily rose into a sitting position. Kaori and Eri hurriedly supported her.

It was so very like Suzu to act cheerful even after she’d just recovered from near-fatal wounds. Her bright demeanor lifted the spirits of her classmates.

However, despite her forced cheerfulness, Suzu’s face was still pale. She’d burned through much of her mana with that last barrier, and she’d lost a lot of blood. There were dark circles in her eyes, and her smile was strained. It was a testament to the strength of her will that she managed a smile at all. Both Shizuku and Kaori really respected Suzu for this very reason.

“Suzu-chan. You should rest for a bit longer. Your wounds have closed up, but you lost a lot of blood...”

“Ah, so that’s why I’m feeling so dizzy~ I can’t believe that horrible demon could do such a horrible thing to my fair skin... She pierced right through me. Hey, don’t you think that’d make for a great line in porn?”

“Suzu! You’re a girl, don’t say such vulgar things!” Eri blushed as she reprimanded Suzu. Nomura and Nakano, who were nearby, snorted with laughter, but Shizuku’s stern glare shut them up.

“Suzu, I’m glad you’re finally awake. We were really worried about you.”

“Hey, you alright? You’re white as a sheet.”

Kouki and Ryutarou came over to check up on Suzu as well. Both of them were smiling tiredly.

Kouki especially had expended himself a great deal in the earlier battle. Fortunately, the after-effects of using Limit Break had finally begun to fade, and he was feeling a little better.

“Morning, Kouki-kun, Ryutarou-kun! So everyone managed to run away safely, then? Let’s see, everyone looks fine... Wait, is it just me, or are we missing someone?”

“Oh, you mean Endou. We told him to escape ahead of us. Since he’s the stealthiest out of all of us, we thought he might be able to slip through the floors unnoticed...”

Suzu glanced around the room, making sure all of her classmates were accounted for. Kouki explained everything that had happened since Suzu fell unconscious. Kondou and Saitou had been unpetrified some time before Suzu had woken up, so they’d already heard his explanation.

“I see. A lot happened while I was unconscious, huh... Oh yeah, thank you so much, Kaorin! It’s thanks to you that I’m still alive!”

“Healing’s my job, Suzu-chan. I only did what anyone would do. You don’t have to make such a big deal about it.”

“Man, you’re even cooler when you act all stoic like that! Will you marry me?”

“Suzu... you’ll just scare her if you propose while you’re still paler than a ghost. I really think you should rest for a bit longer.”

Suzu clung to Kaori, while Eri scolded her. Shizuku was waiting on standby to stop her by force if she went too far. In a way, it was business as usual for the four girls. Everyone else was worrying about the possibility that they might never see the light of day again, but these four girls were acting the same as always. Seeing them act so composed helped calm the other students down.

Unfortunately, someone had to go and ruin the atmosphere just as everyone was starting to look up.

“What are you guys smiling about? Nothing’s changed! We could still die at

any minute! If you've got time to be cracking jokes, how about you think of a way out of this mess!" Kondou yelled at Suzu. Next to him, Saitou glared angrily at everyone.

"Come on, Kondou. You don't have to put it like that. Suzu was just trying to cheer everyone up..."

"Shut up! You don't have any right to talk to me like that! You... You lost! Thanks to that, I nearly died! Goddammit! Hero my ass!"

Kouki tried to calm Kondou down, but his words just added fuel to the fire. Kondou snapped, lashing out at Kouki this time.

"Bastard... Do you know why you're still alive right now? It's 'cause Kouki risked his life to make an escape route!" Ryutarou started yelling back, but Kondou wasn't willing to back down.

"If you'd done your job and won, we wouldn't have had to run away in the first place! Besides, anyone could tell that we were at a disadvantage! You should have just pretended to take the demon up on her offer and then killed her later! But no, you just had to act all noble and start fighting! This is all your fault!"

Kondou rose to his feet and stared Ryutarou down. Saitou and Nakano stood up as well, backing him up.

"Ryutarou, it's fine. You're right, Kondou. And I'll take responsibility for my failure. Next time, I won't lose! We know what those monsters are capable of, so we won't get caught by surprise again. Next time that demon comes, we'll win!" Kouki sounded confident, but Saitou wasn't convinced. He turned to Kouki and muttered something darkly.

"But last time, you couldn't win even with Limit Break."

"T-True, but... I-I'll win this time!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because this time, I'll use Divine Wrath. As long as you guys can protect me while I'm casting..."

"But if you start casting such a long spell, the demon'll know something big's

coming, won't she? She's sure to do something to stop it. Besides, we don't even know if that was her entire army or if there's more monsters."

No matter how Kouki tried to reassure them, Kondou and his friends had lost faith in his strength. They began complaining one after another.

Living with the constant fear of death had eroded their composure. It was inevitable that they'd try to push the blame onto Kouki and start demanding he provide proof that he could win against those ridiculously strong monsters.

Ryutarou's aggressive response only served to fan the flames of their resentment. Tsuji and Yoshino tried to break up their argument, but they only succeeded in worsening the situation.

Finally, it got to the point where Ryutarou and Kondou raised their weapons at each other. Nervous tension filled the atmosphere. Kouki put a hand on Ryutarou's shoulder, trying to hold him back, but the blood had rushed to Ryutarou's head now, so he simply glared angrily at Kondou, fists raised. Kondou glared back, his spear at the ready.

"Everyone, calm down! Whether you like it or not, Kouki's our only hope of making it out of this alive! We need his Limit Break to have any chance of taking down that demon. There's no way she's going to let us go, and he's the only way we can kill her. Why can't you get that through those thick skulls of yours?" Shizuku tried to reason logically with Kondou and the others, but they weren't in any mood to listen. Suzu even staggered to her feet and apologized to Kondou, but that didn't help either. Just as Kaori was thinking the only way to get everyone to cool their heads was to bind the lot of them, she heard a low growl from outside the room.

"Grrrr..."

"Huh!?" Everyone present recognized that voice. They all froze, their frustration transformed into fear in an instant. Everyone knew what those monsters were capable of. They held their breath, afraid even the slightest noise would alert the monsters to their presence. Their eyes were glued to the hidden entrance to their room.

Claws scratched against the wall. Someone gulped. Endou had erased all traces of their scent from the area as well, so monsters, even high ranking ones,

wouldn’t be able to find them that easily. That didn’t stop everyone from breaking out in a nervous sweat, though.

The party wasn’t anywhere near fully healed. Suzu especially was in no condition to fight. Kaori and Tsuji had taxed themselves to the limit to heal everyone, and had almost no mana left. The vanguard fighters had more or less made a complete recovery, but only half of the rearguard had enough mana to keep fighting. They were all out of mana potions too, so it’d be a few hours at least before they could be of any help.

The loss of Kaori, Suzu, and Tsuji would be especially hard to make up for. Everyone was hoping against hope that the wolves wouldn’t find them. All that separated them from death was a single door.

After a few minutes of pawing the walls, the monsters finally turned around. Silence filled the room. No one relaxed until they were sure the monsters had left. Once they could no longer sense the monsters’ presence, the students collectively breathed a huge sigh. Some of them fell to their knees in relief. Most of them were sweating buckets.

“If you’d kept arguing like that, they would have found us. For the love of god, just stay quiet until we’re all healed at least.”

“G-Got it...”

“W-We will...”

Shizuku wiped the sweat off her face. Kondou apologetically lowered his spear. Their close shave had given everyone a harsh wake up call.

Then, just as everyone started thinking they were safe...

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” The door to their hideout was blasted to pieces.

“Uwaaah!?”

“Kyaaaaaah!”

It was blown apart with such force that the rubble struck Kondou and Yoshino hard enough to send them sprawling to the ground.

Shimmering outlines informed the party that they’d been found by a pack of Chimeras, the one enemy they’d hoped to avoid facing.

“Everyone, get in formation!”

“Goddammit! How’d they find us!?” Kouki quickly gave out orders as he unsheathed his sword. Without hesitation, he charged forward. Kouki couldn’t afford to let the monsters regroup. Chimeras were impossible to spot when they weren’t moving. Ryutarou stopped at the entrance, determined to prevent even a single monster from getting into the room. However...

“Uwooooooooo!”

“Ngh!”

A Super Bulltaur slammed into Ryutarou with the force of a tank. Ryutarou grappled with it for a moment before being overpowered and pushed to the ground.

Dozens of cats with tentacles took that opportunity to dart into the room. They lashed out with their numerous tentacles, taking the rearguard by surprise. A barrage of tentacles headed toward Kondou, who was still standing dumbfounded at the same spot he’d been when their argument had ended. He desperately tried to fend the tentacles off with his spear, but there were too many of them. However, just as he was about to be turned into a living pincushion...

“Sacred Shields!”

“Sacred Shields!”

Thirty or so glimmering shields appeared in front of Kondou. They appeared at an angle, deflecting the storm of tentacles. Kaori and Suzu’s instantaneous reactions, plus the fact that they were able to cast the spell with barely an incantation, were truly impressive. Together, they’d managed to put out thirty shields in the span of less than a second.

Still, because Suzu barely had enough strength to stand, and because Kaori was practically out of mana, their shields were more brittle than usual.

One after another, the shields of light shattered. Even though they’d been summoned at an angle to deflect the tentacles and not take them head on, they still didn’t have enough strength to endure the tentacles’ onslaught. The ones directly in front of Kondou were repelled, but a few of the others made it

through, heading straight for Nakano and Saitou.

They tried to dive out of the way, but as mages their physical stats weren't very good. Though they managed to avoid any fatal wounds, they still took a considerable chunk of damage. One of the tentacles grazed Nakano's shoulder, while another slammed through Saitou's thigh, pinning him to the ground.

"Shinji! Yoshiki! Fuck! Daisuke, back them up!"

"O-Okay."

Ever since they'd escaped, Hiyama had seemed lost in thought. Kondou hadn't said anything to him because he'd wanted to give him some space, but the time for contemplating had long since passed.

Kondou dragged Nakano and Saitou to Suzu's side. Though Suzu's physical condition was terrible, she'd recovered a considerable amount of her mana. He figured they'd be safest next to her. And because Kaori was next to her, she could heal them easier too.

"Kouki! Use your Limit Break and fight the monsters outside! We'll handle the ones in here!"

"But Suzu can barely move..."

"At this rate we'll just be overwhelmed! Please, you've gotta cut open a path for us!"

"Leave things here to me! No one's dying on my watch!"

"Got it! I'll be counting on you, then! Limit Break!" Kouki hesitated for a moment, but Shizuku and Ryutarou managed to convince him. He realized if he didn't do something soon, they'd all be dead.

This was his first time activating Limit Break twice in a day. As expected, it put a great deal of strain on his body. Normally, he could maintain Limit Break for around 8 minutes, but he suspected it wouldn't last that long the second time around. That meant he needed to focus on defeating the demon as fast as possible. He dashed out of the room at top speed.

When he emerged into the octagonal room, he was met with a disheartening sight. The demon was staring coldly at him, protected by a veritable army of

monsters. A white two-headed raven sat on her shoulders.

He could feel his anger boiling up. She was the one who'd hurt his comrades. She was the one who'd had them hiding like cornered rats. And she was the one he needed to defeat if he wanted his friends to survive.

"Hmph, you certainly wasted a lot of my time. I'll have you know I have missions far more important than dealing with you..."

"Shut up! I'm gonna rip that arrogant tongue out of your mouth! Prepare yourself!" Kouki began chanting a short spell. Without the full incantation, he doubted his Divine Wrath could harm the demon, but he was confident it would at least be powerful enough to cut open a path. His sword began to glow.

The demon sneered at him. At her command, two of the Super Bulltaurs pulled something out from behind her.

Kouki went slack-jawed when he realized what that "something" was. He was so shocked he even lowered his sword. Wide-eyed, he spoke in a trembling voice.

"M-Meld-san?" Indeed, what the Super Bulltaurs had dragged forth was Captain Meld. He was drenched in blood, and obviously on the verge of death. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that he was groaning occasionally, Kouki would have thought him already dead.

"Y-You bitch! Let Meld-san—!?" Kouki's anger overrode his common sense and he charged forward. Having predicted that would happen, the demon was already prepared for his attack. Just before he reached her, he found his way barred by a looming shadow. He looked up with a start and saw a massive fist bearing down on him with inhuman speed.

He instinctively held up his left arm to shield himself. The giant fist blasted through his puny arm with ease, then connected with Kouki's torso. Kouki felt like he'd just been hit by a truck. The blow sent him flying so far he slammed into the wall behind him. The force of the impact was large enough to leave a Kouki-shaped hole in the wall.

"Gaaah!" The air burst from his lungs and he slid to the ground in a pathetic heap. He slowly raised himself up with his remaining good arm, blood dripped

from the corners of his mouth. That attack had been powerful enough to damage his organs.

From the looks of things, it had given him a concussion, too. His vision blurred as he looked up at what had hit him. A huge, three-meter-tall monster stood before him, its fist still outstretched.

The monster had the head of a horse with tusks, the torso of a man with four arms, and the lower half of a gorilla. It glared at Kouki with bloodshot eyes, steam billowing from its snout. This monster was on a completely different level from the ones they'd been fighting so far.

The horse-head monster retracted its fist and mercilessly charged Kouki. He stopped mere inches from Kouki's face and brought its hands down in a crushing blow.

Kouki, who was still on all fours, trusted in his instincts and rolled to the side at the last second.

The monster's fists slammed into the ground a second later, reddish-black shockwaves spreading outward from the point of impact. The ground literally exploded, a huge crater forming where the monster's fists had struck.

This was this monster's special magic, Mana Burst. It was as simple as it sounded. It just created shockwaves of mana at the point of impact. However, just because it was simple didn't mean it wasn't powerful.

No longer reeling from his concussion, Kouki finally rose to his feet. Still, before he could do more than raise his sword, the horse-head monster was in front of him, swinging its fist down.

Kouki tried to block the blow with his sword, but his left arm was broken, and his right arm alone couldn't bear the impact. He was blown away once again, barely avoiding a fatal blow. He continued desperately defending against the monster's four arms, and the shockwaves that came from each Mana Burst. His movements grew duller, and he couldn't find a single opening to launch a counterattack.

"Ngh! How strong is this thing!? I'm even using Limit Break!"

"Graaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Even with Limit Break active, Kouki was being easily overwhelmed. If he kept defending, eventually he'd just be beaten down. And so, he steeled himself to take a few hits, then went on the offensive.

However...

"Ah!?" Before he could launch an attack, his legs gave out. His Limit Break's time limit was up. The recoil from using it twice in a short span of time was so great that he couldn't even stand anymore.

The monster mercilessly pressed its advantage. As Kouki sunk to his knees, it slammed its fist cleanly into Kouki's stomach. There was a massive boom as its fist connected.

"Gaha!" A spray of blood spewed from Kouki's mouth as he flew back into the wall. The strain from using Limit Break, plus the damage from that last attack was more than his body could handle. He fell to the ground, unconscious. The only reason he wasn't dead was because the monster had held back on its final attack.

It walked up to Kouki and gruffly lifted him by his collar. It presented the unconscious boy to its master, the demon. She nodded in satisfaction and recalled the monsters she'd sent into the students' hideout.

A few minutes later, Shizuku and the others cautiously stepped outside. They despaired when they saw a massive monster more powerful than anything they'd faced before staring them down, a defeated Kouki in one of its arms.

"No way... Kouki... lost?"

"Th-This can't be happening..." Shizuku cried out in disbelief.

Kaori and Suzu were too shocked to even say anything. They just stood there in stunned silence. Seeing that they'd all lost the will to fight, the demon coldly addressed the students.

"Hmph, I never thought it would be this easy. Looks like... you really were nothing more than overconfident brats after all. And here I was worrying I may have underestimated you." Pale-faced, Shizuku nonetheless bravely asked the demon a question.

“How did you do it?”

“Hm? With this. See, look.” She nodded to Captain Meld, who was still held by the two Super Bulltaurs. When Shizuku spotted the half-dead knight, she realized instantly what must have happened. The demon had used Meld to distract Kouki and hit him with a sneak attack. Anytime Kouki saw someone he knew hurt, he was liable to lose his cool.

The demon must have realized that as well from their last battle. And so, she’d hidden her strongest monster with the Chimera’s magic, and then baited him into range.

“So what do you want with us, then? There has to be a reason you didn’t just kill us all when you had the chance.”

“Yep. Looks like I was right, you really are the brains of this outfit. Don’t worry, it’s not some crazy request or anything. I just thought maybe I’d try inviting you guys over to our side one more time. Last time your little hero started waving his sword around before we could really talk. Unlike him, some of you actually seem pretty skilled, so I thought I’d ask again. Well, what do you say?”

A few of the students hesitated. Shizuku watched them out of the corner of her eye and asked her second question.

“What are you going to do with Kouki?”

“Fufu, you’re a sharp one. Sorry, but I can’t let your hero friend here live. I doubt he’ll change his mind about switching sides, and you guys probably can’t convince him to either, right? He’s one of those guys who thinks he’s better than everyone else, after all. He’ll have to die here.”

“I take it the same holds true for us if we refuse, correct?”

“Naturally. There’s no way we can just let a future threat go, right?”

“Aren’t you worried we’ll go along for now and then just betray you later?”

“Of course. So, if you do agree, we’ll be putting you on a leash. Don’t worry. We’ll just make it so you can’t turn against us, but otherwise you’re all free to do as you wish.”

“So semi-free slaves, basically. We can do whatever we want as long as it’s not attacking you guys.”

“Bingo. Thank god at least one of you has a brain. Now, I recommend you use that brain of yours to make the logical choice, unlike your poor hero friend.”

The other students listened to Shizuku and the demon’s conversation, a mixture of unease and fear in their eyes. If they refused, they’d be attacked by the same monster that had easily defeated Kouki. They would almost certainly die. However, if they agreed, they’d be muzzled like dogs, unable to ever fight against the demons again.

In other words, they would no longer be “Ehit’s chosen warriors.” Even if they returned to Heiligh, they doubted the Holy Church would be willing to shelter a bunch of kids who were no longer useful for the war effort, which also meant they’d likely never get to return home. Either way, their future looked bleak. Finally...

“I-I think we should take her up on her offer!” Eri was the first to speak. Trembling, she voiced her opinion. Surprised, Shizuku turned to look at her friend. On the other hand, Ryutarou went red with rage, then rounded on Eri.

“Eri, you backstabbing bitch! You’re just gonna abandon Kouki, huh!?”

“Hiii!?”

“Ryutarou, calm down! Eri, why do you think we should say yes?” Eri shrank back in the face of Ryutarou’s wrath. Shizuku only just managed to restrain him in time. Eri took a deep breath and clasped her hands to her chest.

“I-I just... I just don’t want everyone to die... I don’t want Kouki-kun... to die either, but... Hic...” Tears began spilling from her eyes. Everyone else’s hearts began to waver as well. Another one of the students backed Eri up.

“I’m with Nakamura. There’s no way we can win. Our options are annihilation or survival. The choice should be obvious, right?”

“Hiyama... So you don’t give a shit about what happens to Kouki, huh!?”

“What do you want us to do, Sakagami? Die together with Amanogawa? That’s the only other option.”

“No! That’s not what I meant!”

“Then unless you’ve got a better plan, shut the hell up! Right now our priority is making sure as many of us get out alive as possible.” Hiyama’s words convinced even more of the students. Like he’d said, the only way to survive was to agree to the demon’s conditions.

The only reason they hadn’t agreed right away was because they’d felt guilty about abandoning Kouki just to save their own skins. They couldn’t bring themselves to sacrifice him like that.

The demon saw that they were beginning to waver, and offered a compromise.

“Hmm... If leaving your hero friend to die is the only thing you’re worried about... I don’t mind letting him live. Granted, I’ll have to put him on a much tighter leash than the rest of you. But if you want him to live, you all have to agree to defect.” Shizuku quietly clicked her tongue. She’d predicted the demon might try and make an offer like that. If she’d really planned on killing Kouki, she could have just killed him after defeating him. There was no reason to put on this whole show.

That meant the reason she’d kept him alive was so she could use him as a bargaining chip. Their first fight with the demon must have impressed her enough that she still wanted them for her army. The reason negotiations had broken down last time was because of Kouki’s self-righteous selfishness. Still, it was entirely possible the others weren’t so stubborn, which was why she’d devised this plan to win over everyone else.

First, she’d kept Kouki alive so the students wouldn’t hate her for killing one of their own. Second, she’d cornered the students into a choice between servitude and death. Third, she’d guided them into thinking submitting wouldn’t be such a terrible idea, as long as Kouki somehow got out alive. Finally, she’d promised to spare him as well, removing the final obstacle. This way, the students wouldn’t feel any guilt about choosing to surrender, making it seem like the only logical option.

This was despite the fact that there was no proof that she’d keep her end of the bargain. And it’d be too late for regrets if she killed Kouki after she’d

collared all of them. That being said, it was still better than all of them dying here.

Even Shizuku, who had seen through the whole plot, was thinking agreeing would be for the best. As long as they could make it out of this situation alive, there was still some hope of saving Kouki.

It would be to the demon's benefit for all of them to switch sides here too, so it was possible she'd try and treat them well. After all, losing Ehit's chosen warriors would be a huge blow to the humans. Their best fighters would have defected. Their betrayal would undoubtedly leave the humans in despair. The demons could deal no greater blow to the humans.

Secondly, the students would be a huge boon to the demons' fighting force. This particular demon's primary mission was to clear the Great Orcus Labyrinth and obtain the godlike power said to be sleeping at its depths. So far, she'd easily been able to slaughter all the monsters she'd encountered, but there was no guarantee the lower floors would be as easy. She'd actually lost a good chunk of her fighting force to Kouki's party, so she wanted to replenish her ranks. Recruiting Shizuku and the others was the most efficient way to do that.

And from her point of view, that was achievable with minimum effort. Her plan had gone without a hitch so far, and at this rate they would capitulate soon. Her lips twitched into a faint smile.

But then, at the last second, her carefully laid plans crumbled.

"G-Guys... don't do it... Don't listen to her..."

"Kouki!"

"Kouki-kun!"

"Amanogawa!"

Kouki had finally woken up. Everyone's eyes were on him.

"She's lying to you... She killed... Alan-san and the others... Don't... trust her... She'll just make you into slaves... She'll make you fight against the humans... Run... Don't mind... me... Just... run..." Kouki would rather die than let his friends agree to a deal that was so obviously a trap. Even if there wasn't a sure

chance of success, he hoped they would run instead. However, Hiyama shook his head.

“How many of us do you think will even get away? Wake up, Amanogawa! We’ve lost! It sucks that the knights died, but... well, they knew what they were getting into! Nothing we can do about it! Right now, we need to save as many of us as we can!” His voice echoed throughout the chamber. Hiyama couldn’t believe Kouki refused to bend, even when it was obvious all hope was lost. All he was thinking about was how to make it out alive. In his mind, it didn’t matter if everyone else died as long as he and Kaori survived. However, if they made a break for it now, it was likely they’d all die.

On the other hand, if he they defected to the demons, there was a chance he could show off his value and get appointed to a high-ranking post. If that happened, it was all but guaranteed that he could make Kaori his own. Especially if these “leashes” the demon was talking about could make someone do anything. As long as Kaori was his, he didn’t care if she still had any free will of her own or not. He saw her as little more than an object.

Once again, the students wavered. Hiyama’s words had swayed them, but they also respected Kouki.

Then, an unexpected voice chimed in with their opinion. It was a hoarse, barely audible voice, but everyone heard it clearly. It came from the person everyone respected the most in this world. The one they trusted to make accurate judgments no matter the situation. The one everyone saw as their role model. To many of them, his words were law. And this is what he said:

“Ngh... You kids... think only about how you’re going to survive! Do whatever it takes to stay alive! I’m sorry... for dragging you all into our war... The more time I spent with you all... the more I came to regret relying on you to solve our problems... so please, live to make it home... Don’t worry about us... From the start... this was our fight to fight!” Those weren’t the words of Heiligh’s knight commander anymore. They were the words of a single man, Meld Loggins. This was what he personally wished for, not what his job required of him. The reason he’d finally dropped his responsibilities was because he knew this was where he would die.

As the students all stared at him in shock, he squeezed out the last ounce of his strength and shook the Super Bulltaurs holding him off. His body began to glow with light and he threw himself at the demon.

“Demon... I’m taking you with me!”

“Wait, that’s... Heh, planning on blowing yourself up? How very gallant of you. I must say, I’m actually rather impressed.”

“Die!” The light grew to a blinding intensity. Meld looked just like Kouki did when he was using Limit Break, but upon closer inspection it became evident that the light was coming not from Meld’s body, but from the pendant hanging about his neck.

The demon recognized the pendant, and praised Meld for his resolve.

The jewel inside the pendant was known as “Loyalty’s Promise.” It was a magical item that created a powerful explosion in return for the caster’s life. All of the high-ranked members of the Heiligh Kingdom and Holy Church were aware of what it did. As the dark magic demons employed included spells that could read a portion of their target’s memories, all powerful people within the kingdom carried one around with them. If they were ever to be captured, they could use it to kill themselves, and hopefully their enemy, and keep the demons from learning any valuable information.

The students called out to Meld when they realized what he was trying to do. The demon, however, who was the target of the attack, seemed wholly unconcerned.

Meld’s jewel grew brighter and brighter. Just before it burst, the demon acted.

“Devour it whole, Absod.” And just like that, the light coming from Meld’s Loyalty’s Promise vanished.

“Wha—!? How on earth!?” Strictly speaking, it hadn’t vanished. It was being sucked away. He turned to the direction the light was going and saw a six-legged turtle with its maw open wide. That was what was sucking away Meld’s final attack.

It seemed that monster’s name was Absod. Its special magic was “Mana

Absorption.” It could absorb the mana of other people’s spells and store it in its shell. However, it couldn’t absorb multiple spells at once, nor could it transform the mana into anything else. All it could do was suck in a spell and fire it back out. Still, it was capable of sucking up even high level magic. It was the natural enemy of mages.

Soon enough, all the light from Meld’s Loyalty’s Promise had been sucked up, leaving it no more than a simple jewel. As he watched, dumbfounded, something suddenly slammed into Meld’s torso. The impact wasn’t all that strong. He looked down to see what had hit him.

There was a dull brown knife sticking out of his stomach. More specifically, a blade made out of sand had been thrust so deep into him that the tip was poking out of his back. Drops of blood dripped from its tip, staining the rock below.

“Meld-san!” Kouki coughed up blood as he called out to his mentor. Meld looked from his wound up to Kouki. “Sorry,” he mouthed with a bitter smile.

The sand blade swung to the side, sending Meld flying. He hit the ground like a ragdoll, and lay unmoving where he landed. A pool of blood spread out from under his stomach. Everyone could tell the wound was fatal. It was a wonder he’d managed to move at all with the wounds he’d already had, but this time he really was done for.

Though she knew it wouldn’t make it in time, Kaori still desperately tried to cast long-range healing magic. She succeeded in staunching the blood loss for a short while, but Kaori was out of mana too, and she didn’t have the strength left to close the wound.

“Nooo! Please! Don’t die!” Kaori was so drained of mana that she couldn’t even stand, but she still continued casting without pause.

“I honestly didn’t think he had enough strength left to stand, let alone pin me down. So this is what the kingdom’s strongest knight is like. You’ve earned my respect. Unfortunately, you’ll have to die here... This time, I’ll be sure to finish you off. How about the rest of you? Is this as far as you all go as well?” The demon flung the blood off her sand-blade and stared at Kouki and the students. Most of the students were trembling in fear. This was the second time they’d

seen someone close to them die. They knew in the back of their minds that unless they submitted, they'd be next.

Hiyama opened his mouth to accept, but someone cut him off before he could.

"...us." Kouki muttered something so quietly that it was barely audible. Even though he was in no state to do anything, there was a heavy pressure emanating from him. Hiyama swallowed the words he was about to say.

"Huh? What was that, you half-dead hero?" The demon scoffed at Kouki, certain the most he could do was whine like always. He lifted up his face and glared daggers at the demon.

She fell silent when she saw the look in his eyes. Possibly because his pupils had turned silver and were now glowing. The immense pressure he was radiating forced her to stagger backward. Her instincts screamed that whatever he was doing was dangerous. Now was not the time to worry about appeasing the other kids. She needed to kill the hero right away.

"Ahatod! Finish him!"

"Rwaaaaaaaaah!" The horse-headed monster, Ahatod, roared obediently. It activated its Magic Shockwaves and pounded on Kouki with two of its fists.

However, just as they reached him, Kouki's entire body was enveloped in a violent whirlpool of white light. It rose up to the ceiling, turning into a solid glowing pillar. He slammed his fist into the arm that was holding him, pulverizing it instantly.

"Raaaaaaaaaah!" Ahatod screamed in pain and dropped Kouki. With movements that seemed impossible given his current wounded state, Kouki followed up with a swift roundhouse kick.

There was a loud boom as his foot connected, and this time it was Ahatod that was sent flying into the wall. Ahatod tried to rise back to its feet, but it no longer had the strength to move. It lay there in the wall, struggling fruitlessly.

Kouki hopped from foot to foot and stretched his hand out. His sword responded to his call and flew back to him. He glared coldly at the demon. The giant pillar of light subsided, and Kouki's body began to glow even brighter than

when he'd used Limit Break.

The dire situation had unlocked his full potential, and he'd learned Limit Break's only derivative skill, Overload.

While Limit Break only tripled someone's base stats, Overload multiplied them by five. Though, it also put even more of a strain on the body than Limit Break, forcibly drawing out every ounce of strength its caster possessed. At best, Kouki could maintain this state for 30 seconds. And the exhaustion that followed would be twice as debilitating.

Still, he was too angry to worry about any of that right at the moment. He let his wrath take over and charged the demon. His only thought was to get revenge for Meld. That was what was giving him the strength to remain standing.

The demon seemed flustered for the first time, and she hurriedly ordered her monsters to defend her. The Chimeras, cats, and Super Bulltaurs all rushed him as one. Claws, tentacles, and maces all descended upon him. However, Kouki didn't even bat an eyelid. He swept them all aside with a single stroke of his blade and continued charging the demon.

"You monster! How dare you kill Meld-san!"

"Tch!"

Kouki swung his sword down without a moment's hesitation. The demon clicked her tongue and transformed her sand sword into a sand shield, but Kouki's sword sliced through it like it was butter, and bit deep into the demon's shoulder.

The only reason she hadn't been sliced in half was because she'd had the foresight to leap back before Kouki's blow struck. Still, her wound was deep, and the shockwave from his attack had sent her flying backward.

She slammed into the wall and slumped to the ground. Kouki swung his sword from side to side as he advanced upon the demon.

"Unbelievable... I didn't think it was possible for you to make a comeback from that... If this is some kind of joke, I don't much like the punchline." This was as cliched as it got. The hero getting a sudden burst of strength just when

everything was beginning to look hopeless. The demon's mouth curled up into a sardonic grin. She seemed resigned to her fate.

The white raven perched on her shoulder had started casting healing magic, but it was too late. She wouldn't recover in time to defend against Kouki's next attack. Realizing this was checkmate, the demon pulled out a small locket from her pocket.

Thinking she was planning on blowing herself up like Meld had been, Kouki hurriedly closed the distance between them. He didn't care if the demon died, but he didn't want his comrades caught up in the explosion. He needed to finish her off before she set off the bomb. However, the locket didn't have a Loyalty's Promise in it.

"I'm sorry, Mikhail... it looks like I'll be going on ahead of you... I love you..." Surprised by her words, Kouki hesitated for a second. He hadn't expected the demon to have a lover. Confused, the demon looked back up. She should have been dead by now, but Kouki's sword had stopped a few millimeters in front of her face.

Kouki stared at her dumbly. The two locked gazes for a few seconds. There was something in her eyes that made shivers run down Kouki's spine.

Seeing his hesitation, and guessing what had caused it, the demon sneered at him again. Her scorn shook Kouki even further

"Pathetic. Did you only just realize that you're about to kill someone?"

"Ah!?" Up until that point, Kouki had been taught by Ishtar that demons were heartless and cruel, no better than monsters, really. In fact, he'd thought they were basically like an advanced form of monsters. The fact that they were using monsters to fight had only further cemented that idea in his mind. He had never considered that they might be just like people, that they had friends, lovers, parents, things they were willing to fight and die for. Rather, he hadn't wanted to consider that possibility, but when he'd seen the demon staring at her locket, Kouki had been forced to confront reality. The reality that who he was about to kill wasn't some heartless "demon," but a person with feelings just like him. Killing her, whether it was justified or not, would make him a murderer.

"To think you didn't even consider us people until now... Rather arrogant of

you, don’t you think?”

“N-No, I... I just didn’t know...”

“Hmph... More like you didn’t care to find out.”

“I-I...”

“Well, what are you waiting for? I’m just another monster to be hunted down, right? Another soulless creature to be eliminated. Get it over with already. You’ve done this hundreds of times already.”

“I-If we just talked things out... I-I’m sure we could...” Kouki lowered his sword. The demon looked at him with eyes full of contempt. By way of a reply, she gave out orders to her monsters.

“Ahatod, get the swordswoman! The rest of you, attack the others!” Ahatod had finally recovered enough to move. It dutifully got up and lumbered toward Shizuku. While Shizuku didn’t possess the overwhelming charisma Kouki did, she was the one who always calmly analyzed every situation and came up with the optimal solution. In a way, she was the most dangerous member of the party.

That was why the demon had sent Ahatod after her, while the rest of the monsters kept the others at bay. She’d made up her mind. It would be better to kill them all here than try to bring them over to their side. Kouki’s sudden power spike had proven too dangerous. He couldn’t be allowed to live.

“What!? Why!?”

“You still don’t get it, do you? We’re at *war,* kid! An immature brat like you having so much power is a threat! That’s why I have to kill you all. You better go save your friends or they’ll all die!” The demon had no interest in negotiating anymore.

Kouki turned around just in time to see Shizuku get sent flying by Ahatod. Ahatod was far stronger than even the other monsters the demon had brought with her. Surprise attack or no, it had managed to overpower Kouki even while he was using Limit Break. There was no way Shizuku stood a chance.

Pale-faced, Kouki rushed over to Shizuku. With his body strengthened with

Overload, he was able to block Ahatod's fists. Then, in one fluid motion, he cut off one of Ahatod's arms.

But before he could deal the finishing blow, he felt himself go weak at the knees once more. He pitched forward, unable to maintain his balance.

Overload's time limit was up. Taxed far beyond its limits, Kouki's body froze up. After using Limit Break twice in one day and then Overload right after, he didn't even have the strength to move.

"DDammit, why now of all times!?"

"Kouki!" Shizuku rushed forward, covering for Kouki. She aimed her slash at the wound Kouki had just created. Even a powerful monster like Ahatod couldn't endure having its wounds gouged out, so it backed away screaming. Shizuku took that opportunity to grab Kouki and retreat to the safety of their comrades.

Kouki was out of commission, and everyone had their hands full keeping the other monsters at bay. *I'm the only one who can do it!* Shizuku thought to herself. She glared coldly at the demon. Unlike Kouki, she was prepared to kill.

"Oh my, I see you're prepared to kill. You're more fit to be the hero than that spoiled brat over there." The white raven had finished healing the demon, and she slowly got to her feet.

"It doesn't matter who the hero is. It's our fault that we didn't realize he wasn't prepared to kill, but I'll rectify that mistake here and now!" Shizuku had known just how straightforward and naive Kouki was, and she'd known he'd never fought another person before. She blamed herself for leaving that problem alone until it was too late.

It wasn't as if Shizuku had any experience killing others either. Honestly, she didn't particularly want to experience it, either. However, she'd known that if they were fighting in a war, the day where she had to would come eventually. Ever since she'd first picked up a sword, she'd been taught about the weight of a life, and what it meant to hurt another person.

It finally seemed like the moment had come, but she could feel her resolve wavering. The reality of what she was about to do weighed heavily on her, and

she felt like just curling up into a ball and crying. Still, she stamped down her feelings and resolutely stared down the demon.

She settled into her stance, then prepared to launch her fastest attack.

However, a second before she could, she felt shivers run down her spine. Trusting her instincts, she leaped to the side. Not even a second later, one of the cats' tentacles shot through the spot she'd been standing.

"I never said Ahatod was the only monster after you. Your resolve is admirable, but do you really believe you can kill me while evading your other foes?"

"Ngh!"

"And it's not like I'm going to just stand here doing nothing, either." As she said that, the demon began chanting a spell.

Thanks to her No Tempo, Shizuku's attacks couldn't be predicted. She continued fending off the waves of monsters that came after her, but she was unable to find an opening to close in on the demon.

The worst part was that Ahatod could match Shizuku's inhuman speed. Despite its massive frame, it was able to keep up with her. Every time Shizuku thought she was getting close, Ahatod would show up and blow her away with its fists.

Shizuku mainly relied on her agility in a fight, so her defense was paper-thin. Instead, she used only her speed to dodge and parry blows, but because Ahatod's Magical Shockwaves still hit her even if she dodged its fists, she kept on taking more damage. At this rate, it was a matter of time before she was beaten down.

Worse, every bit of damage she took dulled her movements ever so slightly. And in a battle as close as this one, that would be fatal.

"Gaaah!"

Finally, one of Ahatod's blows connected. Shizuku tried to parry with her sword and sheath, but its powerful fist smashed right through her weapons and into her shoulder.

She skid across the ground, coming to a stop a few meters away. Drained of all her strength, she lay there, unmoving. Her right arm was bent at an unnatural angle. It was clearly broken. The blow had done a number on her internal organs as well, and she was coughing up blood.

“Shizuku-chan!” Kaori cried out, but her friend simply lay there, her hands still tightly gripping her broken blade and sheath.

At that moment, thoughts about their current plight and the fact that she was completely out of mana vanished from her mind. Kaori knew she couldn’t do anything even if she went to Shizuku’s side, but all she could think about was how her best friend was in danger.

She ran toward Shizuku. Because she was completely drained of mana, her footsteps were unsteady, and she nearly tripped. Her comrades tried to stop her, but she didn’t listen. Nothing was more important than Shizuku right now. Naturally, monsters swarmed toward the now defenseless Kaori.

However, walls of shining light rose up to block their path. The glowing barriers created an unbroken road toward Shizuku.

“Ehehe. No one wants to be alone at the end.” Suzu had done the impossible. Though she was on the verge of fainting, she’d managed to create a wall of barriers stretching from her to Shizuku. There was a faint smile on her lips.

Suzu knew they were all going to die here.

And so, the least she could do was use the last of her magic to make sure her best friends didn’t die alone. This, of course, meant her barriers protecting the rest of the party weakened. Suzu mentally apologized to the rest of her friends, but even if she’d done her best to fight, they were doomed.

A few attacks managed to get through and graze Kaori, but she was able to reach Shizuku more or less intact. She lifted Shizuku’s limp body and held her close.

“K-Kaori... what are you doing... Hurry up and go back to the others. It’s too dangerous for you to be out here.”

“No. It’s dangerous no matter where I go. If this is where it ends, I at least want to be by your side, Shizuku-chan.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t beat her.”

“I’m sorry I can’t do more either. I don’t have any mana left.”

Kaori smiled at Shizuku and cast a small spell to dull Shizuku’s pain. It was such a basic spell that it cost practically no mana. Shizuku gripped Kaori’s hand with her remaining good hand and smiled back.

A huge shadow covered the two of them. Ahatod had arrived. It stared down at the two girls with bloodshot eyes. With a ferocious roar, it raised all four of its fists.

Suzu’s barrier was still protecting the two of them, but it may as well have been tissue paper in the face of Ahatod’s immense strength. One blow would have been all that it would take to smash Suzu’s walls to pieces, and the shockwaves would be enough to kill Kaori and Shizuku.

As she stared death in the face, memories of her life flashed through Kaori’s mind.

So this is what they mean when they said your life flashes before your eyes when you’re about to die. For some reason, Kaori felt extremely calm. The last thing to pass through her mind was that moonlit night she’d vowed to protect Hajime. She remembered every word they’d exchanged. The terrible taste of the tea he’d made. The way he’d smiled awkwardly when he’d suggested she protect him. It was only after he’d fell that she realized she loved him. She’d come this far because she’d believed he was still alive, but all of that was coming to an end.

“In the end, I couldn’t keep this promise either.” Tears spilled from Kaori’s eyes. She’d hoped if they ever met again that they could start calling each other by their first names.

If this was going to be the end, she at least wanted the memory of having said his name at least once.

“Hajime-kun...”

And so, she resigned herself to her fate, but...

There was a thunderous crash, and the ceiling above Ahatod’s head crumbled.

A giant jet-black spike punched through the hole, red sparks running down its length. The spike smashed into Ahatod's head with considerable force. Ahatod never stood a chance. The spike tore through Ahatod like he was butter, destroying the monster that had caused Kouki and the others so much trouble with ease.

The spike drilled into the floor, Ahatod's ravaged body pinned to the ground by its 120 centimeter long length. The fearsome monster was barely recognizable.

Everyone present was stunned into silence. Kaori, Shizuku, Kouki, and even the demon stared blankly at the spike.

A silence unbefitting of a battlefield fell across the room. A single figure dropped from the hole in the ceiling, breaking the fragile silence.

He landed softly, his back facing Kaori and Shizuku. Carefully, he examined his surroundings as he kicked away bits of Ahatod's flesh. Then, he turned to face the two girls huddling behind him.

The moment Kaori locked eyes with him, she felt a shiver of electricity run down her spine. Ever since that fateful day, it had felt like her heart had been encased in a block of ice, but in an instant it had thawed, and now she could hear it pounding loudly in her ears.

"I see you two are as inseparable as always." Kaori could feel her heart bursting with joy.

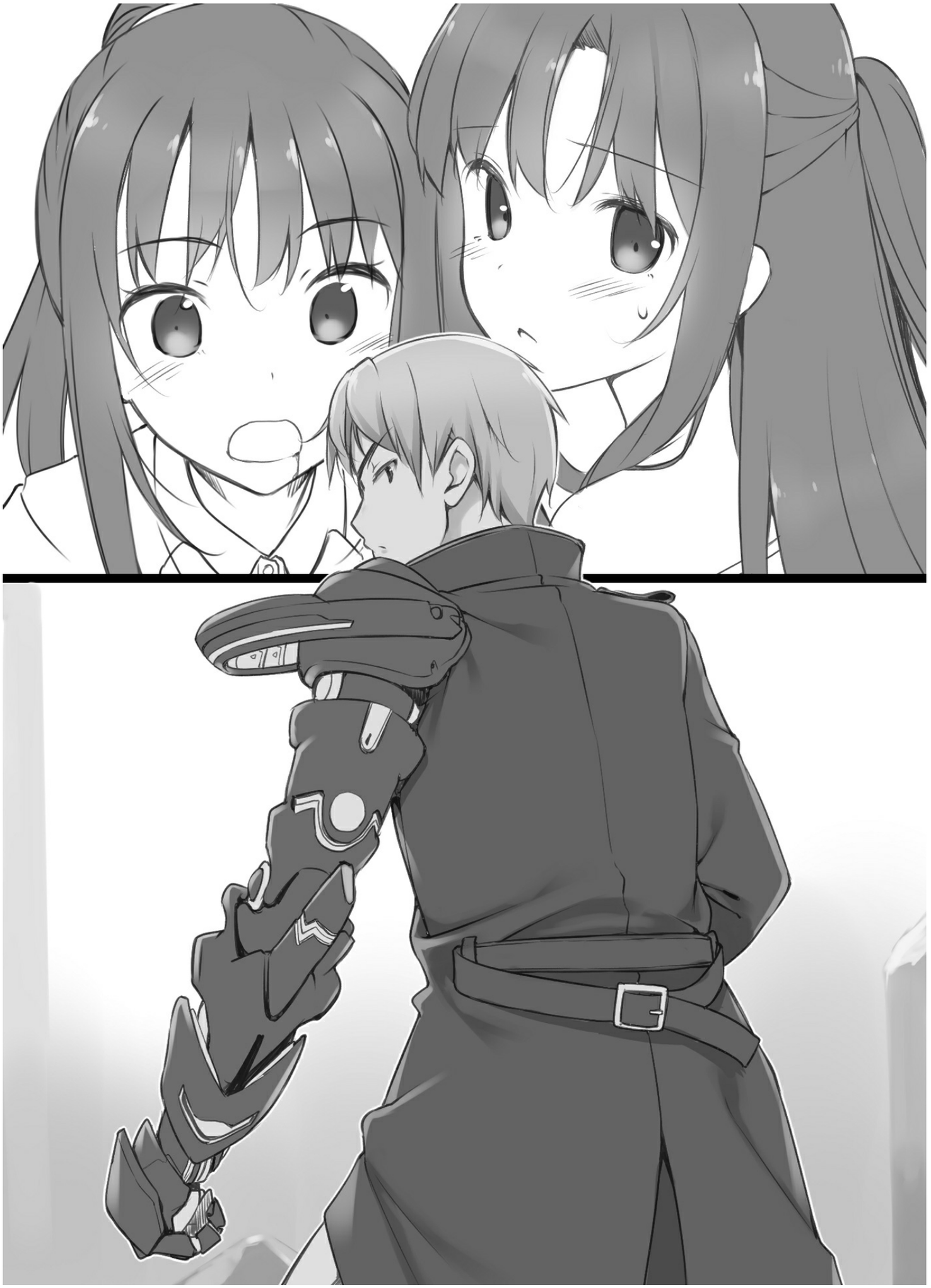
His hair color was different. He looked like a different person. The way he talked was different. Even the look in his eyes was different.

But Kaori knew. She could tell instantly.

It was him. The person she'd been searching all this time for.

It was Hajime.

"Hajime-kun!"



Chapter V: The Best at being the Worst

“Huh? Hajime-kun? Wait, you mean that’s Nagumo-kun? What!? No way!? How!?” Confused, Shizuku glanced back and forth between Hajime and Kaori. Kaori may have been able to instantly tell the white-haired boy with the eyepatch was Hajime, but Shizuku had no such supernatural powers of recognition.

However, his wry smile was certainly the same one she’d remembered seeing many times before. Moreover, his facial features still resembled the Hajime from Shizuku’s memories.

“Wait? Seriously!? Is it really you? Is it really you, Nagumo-kun? How? How on earth are you here!?”

“Slow down, Yaegashi. You’re supposed to be the calm and composed one, aren’t you?”

Even Shizuku couldn’t remain calm after such an unbelievable chain of events. Seconds ago she’d been prepared for death, and now she was faced with a classmate who was supposed to be dead.

While Shizuku was still stammering incoherently, Hajime looked up at the hole he’d come through. He caught Yue as she fell and gently lowered her to the ground. Then, he caught Shea right after, putting her down as well. Last came Endou.

“N-Nagumooo! You bastard, that nearly gave me a heart attack! What the hell was that!? You just plowed right through the ground with it! What the hell were you thinking!?” He looked around as he complained, spotting his best friends, along with the rest of his comrades, surrounded by a horde of monsters. His friends were both overjoyed at seeing him again, and angry that he’d returned.

“Kousuke!”

“Jugo! Kentarou! I’ve brought reinforcements!”

At the word “reinforcements,” both Kouki and the demon turned to look at

Hajime and the girls he'd brought with him. However, Hajime ignored the stares and started barking orders to Yue and Shea.

"Yue, sorry, but can you guard those idiots over there for me? Shea, look after that collapsed knight over there. The one wearing all that armor."

"Okay... leave it to me."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Yue casually walked over to the other students, completely ignoring the monsters surrounding them. Meanwhile, Shea leaped over to Meld with surprising agility.

"H-Hajime-kun..." Kaori once again called out to Hajime, her voice trembling. She was feeling so many different emotions that she couldn't process them all. Naturally, there was the joy of knowing he was still alive, and the happiness she felt at seeing him again. However, there was also a mounting feeling of dread along with a sudden fear creeping its way into her mind. After all, Hajime was here in this dangerous place. She had no idea how he'd found his way down here, but all she wanted was for him to flee to safety.

Hajime noticed her unease and tried to reassure her.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine. Just sit back and watch."

He activated Riftwalk, honing his senses to the limit. Then, pulled three Cross Bits out of his Treasure Trove and set them to guard Kaori and Shizuku. The two girls' eyes darted about as they watched these floating crosses that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Hajime then turned to the demon and arrogantly stared her down. He offered her a single chance at mercy. As of yet, she wasn't his enemy.

"You, the red-haired girl over there. If you flee now, I won't chase you. I recommend you run, if you want to live."

"What was that?" It was ludicrous to think that this puny human could harm her, especially with so many monsters surrounding him. She was so surprised by his words that she didn't comprehend them at first. Hajime sighed and repeated himself.

“You’re not very quick on the uptake, are you? I said if you run now, I’ll let you live. Is that so hard to understand?”

So I didn’t mishear him. Her expression turned cold. All she said in response was a simple, short statement.

“Kill him.” She pointed at Hajime, ordering her monsters to attack.

And so, the demon made a most fatal mistake. She should have paid more attention to the fact that Ahatod, her strongest monster, had been obliterated by a single attack.

Hajime’s arrogant attitude, and the fact that Ahatod was a precious monster that had been gifted to her by her boss, must have caused her to lose her cool. She failed to accurately assess the situation, and let her anger get the better of her. She hadn’t even realized what Hajime drilling through the labyrinth floor meant. Everyone, including the demons, had thought the floor made of material that was literally unbreakable.

Had she not been so quick to anger, she might have made a wiser decision. Still, it was too late. The die had been cast.

“I see. I guess that means you’re my enemy.” Hajime muttered softly under his breath. At the same time, one of the invisible Chimeras attacked.

“Hajime-kun!” “Nagumo-kun!” Kaori and Shizuku both cried out a warning. Hajime nonchalantly grabbed the Chimera with his artificial arm and lifted it into the air as if it were no heavier than a kitten.

The Chimera started thrashing wildly, trying to break free from his grip. Hajime watched the air warp and bend as it struggled, sighing in disbelief.

“Oh come on, are you serious? This half-assed magic is the best you’ve got? Are you even trying?”

What’s the point of having invisibility magic if the air shimmers every time you move?

He’d fought monsters in the abyss that had been able to conceal themselves. Each and every one of them had proven a troublesome foe. Compared to them, the Chimera he was facing was nothing. A concealment skill that still left traces

was no concealment skill at all.

Everyone watched in dumbfounded amazement as Hajime fought. He'd just lifted up a monster weighing a couple hundred kilograms with a single hand as if it was no sweat.

As always, he ignored the stares and put more strength into his grip. There was a loud crunching noise, and eventually the air stopped shimmering. The Chimera fizzled into view, its head mercilessly crushed. The intimidating creature that had given Kouki and the others so much trouble now hung limply from Hajime's hand.

"No way..." Someone muttered in the ensuing silence.

Hajime tossed the dead Chimera to the side, then casually pulled Donner out of its holster. His movements were so smooth that they felt almost unnatural. He took aim at what seemed like nothing, and fired. *Bang! Bang!*

As always, Hajime didn't miss. Two crimson streaks cut through the air, piercing through their intended targets. The air shimmered again, and another Chimera fizzled into view, its head blown apart, along with a Super Bulltaur, its heart shot clean through. Both monsters slumped to the ground, dead.

"H-How did he know..." The demon could no longer hide her surprise.

Hajime just scoffed. Even if they were completely invisible, they shifted the air around them, which caused slight vibrations along the ground. On top of that, Hajime could easily pick up on their gazes, and their auras, along with the flow of their mana and even their body temperature. To him, the monsters were no more than sitting ducks.

Hajime didn't even spare the dead monsters a glance, and began the battle... no, the slaughter, in earnest.

The fight was too one-sided to be called a battle. The monster of the abyss had descended, and he wasn't leaving until his enemies were annihilated.

The demon couldn't believe how easily her monsters were being killed, while Nagayama and the others couldn't understand how Hajime possessed weapons that clearly didn't belong in this world.

Heedless of anything but their orders, the monsters continued attacking in waves. Had they not been mind-controlled, they likely would have fled.

A few black cats got behind Hajime, and tried to launch their tentacles from his blind spot. However, with a single flick of his wrist, Hajime spun Donner around and fired at the enemies behind him. Bullets traveling faster than the speed of sound tore through the cats' skulls.

Next, a pack of four-eyed wolves surrounded Hajime from two sides. And yet, Hajime simply pulled Schlag out as well and mowed down the wolves leaping at him. The bullets fired from practically point-blank range destroyed not only the wolves' skulls, but their bodies as well.

Another black cat leaped on top of a Chimera, and used the Chimera's camouflage to launch a barrage of invisible tentacles. Still, none of them reached their mark. Hajime fired off a non-Lightning Field enhanced bullet and ricocheted it off the wall to hit the cat. The force of the bullet flung it into the air. Then, he enhanced his legs with Steel Legs, and dropped the chimera with an axe kick.

He finished both the cat and the Chimera off with shots from Donner.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

"Uwooooooooo!"

Two Super Bulltaurs moved to flank him. Their maces tore through the air with unbelievable force. Hajime simply ducked out of the way, and tripped the Super Bulltaur to the right while he was at it. Arms pinwheeling, the Super Bulltaur crashed into its comrade.

"Grah!?" Both of them let out a surprised shout. While the two of them were hugging each other, Hajime had fired off another volley of bullets. The Super Bulltaurs died in each other's arms.

Another eight cats leaped into the air, trying to hit Hajime with a synchronized attack. This time they relied on their claws rather than their tentacles.

Hajime's two arms moved independently of each other. With his right, he mowed down the enemies in front of him, while with his left, he shot down

everything behind him. With Donner, he took out everything to his right, with Schlag, everything to his left. When he had to take enemies to his right out with Donner, he fired in front of him with Schlag. When he had to take enemies to his left out with Schlag, he fired behind him with Donner.

Each and every streak of red found its mark without fail. This was the result of Hajime's extensive training.

His movements lacked the polish of Meld or Shizuku's, both of who had trained in styles that had been refined for generations. They were definitely rough around the edges. However, they were effective. Extremely effective.

He fluidly moved to a corner of the room that was easy to defend, then took out his enemies with lethal precision. Every single one of his moves linked perfectly to the next. They were backed by a level of experience that no amount of martial arts practice could ever reach.

A smile played about Hajime's lips. It wasn't that he was deriving pleasure from trampling his enemies. It was just the happiness that came with knowing he could finally challenge this unreasonable, unfair world. His way of saying "Try and kill me if you dare." Packed into that smile was his resolve to stay alive and annihilate anything that dared stand in his way.

Just as both Donner and Schlag ran out of ammo, another wave of Chimeras and four-eyed wolves charged.

Hajime leaped a few meters into the air, did a somersault, and reloaded his guns while upside-down. He moved so fast that the Chimeras and four-eyed wolves lost sight of him for a second. While they were still looking around in confusion, Hajime dealt them all finishing blows.

Blood and flesh flew everywhere. Two Super Bulltaurs charged, hoping to take advantage of the moment Hajime landed.

But he never did. By using Aerodynamic, he launched himself further into the air. He spun around like a top, firing Donner and Schlag in every direction.

The rain of bullets decimated not only the two Super Bulltaurs, but many of the Chimeras and wolves waiting behind them as well. One after another, the charging monsters fell dead, their inertia carrying them into a massive pile of

corpses growing directly below Hajime.

Hajime landed soundlessly atop the devastation he had wrought. He once again paused momentarily to reload. And just as he finished, one of the monsters let out a strange screech.

Hajime turned to see Absod staring at him, its mouth opened wide. A blinding sphere of white light was growing inside its mouth.

It still had all the mana it had absorbed from Meld's Loyalty's Promise. Though the spell's range was limited, it had more than enough force to kill a single person.

Once it had finished charging, Absod fired. The light cut through the ground as it traveled toward Hajime, carving out a huge groove in the rock. He calmly pulled out his massive, coffin-shaped shield, and attached it to his left arm. At the same time, he activated Diamond Skin. He planted himself firmly into the ground, like a tree taking root, and nonchalantly waited for the light to strike.

There was an earth-shattering boom as the light struck his shield. The very air trembled in the wake of Absod's attack. And, to the shock off all the spectators, Hajime didn't even budge an inch. Still smiling, he tilted his shield ever so slightly to deflect the beam of light. Its new trajectory set the beam right in the demon's path.

"Ah!? Curses!" She leaped out of the way. The moment Hajime had started decimating her army, she'd realized she was in big trouble. In order to somehow turn things around she'd began chanting a long, powerful spell. Hajime had, of course, been aware of that, which was precisely why he'd deflected Absod's attack toward her.

As she ran, Hajime began adjusting the angle of his shield so that the beam continued chasing after her. The walls behind her were vaporized, and the demon picked up the pace. Her calm arrogance from before was nowhere to be seen.

Just as she thought she was about to be killed by her own attack, Absod finally ran out of stored mana.

"Tch..." Hajime sighed. Meanwhile, the demon didn't even have time to catch

her breath. Her expression froze and cold sweat poured down her back.

There was a huge explosion, and a wave of heat washed over the right side of her face. White feathers rained down around her.

The raven that had been resting on her shoulder until now had been killed. Since his plan to kill the demon with her own attack had failed, he'd used Donner to kill Absod and Schlag to destroy the raven.

Absod hadn't even had time to scream before Hajime's supersonic bullet had consigned it to the void.

The raven had also been decimated in an instant, without ever realizing what had hit it.

The shockwave from Hajime's bullet had been strong enough to throw the demon off-balance. She tumbled to the ground and absentmindedly touched her cheek. It was splattered with the raven's blood, and stung to the touch. The friction and heat had been enough to burn her cheek.

If her head had been just a few inches closer to the raven, she would have died then and there.

Still, even though she'd survived one attack, it was already over for her. Her supposedly invincible monster army was being steamrolled with unbelievable ease. She knew that boy could kill her whenever he chose to. Her life was utterly and completely in the palm of his hand. Until now she'd had great pride in her unbreakable warrior's spirit. Faced with Hajime's overwhelming strength, however, that spirit began to crumble. Nothing she did would be able to even scratch that monster.

What the hell is he? How does someone like him even exist? And how am I supposed to survive against him!? Questions whirled around inside the demon's head, but no answers presented themselves.

Many of those same questions were going through Kouki and the others' minds too. Most of them hadn't recognized the silver-haired boy with the eyepatch as Hajime, so they were curious about the identity of this kid who was able to trample these monsters they'd barely been able to fend off.

"What the... What the heck is he!?" Kouki watched in disbelief, still too

exhausted to move. Though they didn't say it out loud, everyone was thinking the same thing. The one who provided them all with answers was Endou, the one they'd sent off to escape alone.

"Haha, you probably won't believe me, but... that's Nagumo."

"What!?"

Everyone stared at Endou. He could tell they all thought he was crazy. Granted, it was understandable. He hadn't believed it at first either, but it was the truth, so all he could do was shrug his shoulders.

"Like I said, that's Nagumo. Hajime Nagumo. The same Nagumo that fell off the bridge that day. He somehow survived, and crawled his way back out of the labyrinth. He tore through all the monsters on our way here too. It was crazy! I can't believe it's really the same guy, but... it is."

"Wait, so Nagumo was alive this whole time!?" Kouki shouted in surprise. Everyone turned to look at the boy who was annihilating the demon's army once more. They all thought "That couldn't possibly be Nagumo. There's just no way." Endou could guess what they were thinking from their expressions, so he decided to provide further proof.

"I'm serious. He's totally different now, but I saw his Status Plate." He smiled drily as he watched the reinforcements he brought tear through the monsters' ranks. No one could believe that the weak boy they'd all ridiculed had become so strong. One person was particularly unhappy about this development.

"Y-You're lying. Nagumo died. I mean, we all saw him! There's no way he's still alive! Don't give me this crap!"

"Uwaaah, what's wrong with you!? I saw his Status Plate and everything, it's him for sure!"

"I don't believe it! It has to be some kind of trick! That has to be an imposter!"

"Dude, what the heck are you on about? Why would anyone want to impersonate Nagumo?"

Hiyama grabbed Endou by the collar and started grilling him. His face was pale, and he denied Hajime's survival with an abnormal ferocity. Even his friend

Kondou was shocked by how vehement Hiyama was.

In order to calm him down, someone quite literally doused him with cold water. A mini-waterfall appeared above Hiyama's head, drenching him from head to toe. This happened just as he tried to suck in a breath, so he choked a little. Coughing and spluttering, Hiyama looked to see who'd done that. Standing in front of him was Yue. She spoke to him in a voice colder than the water she'd just poured on him.

"Quiet. You're getting in my way." Hiyama wanted to retort back, but he swallowed his words when he saw the look in Yue's eyes. He was nothing more than a bug to her, and if he argued back he had no doubt she would squash him like one.

Though her stare chilled him to the bone, Hiyama couldn't help but admire Yue's perfect figure. He wasn't alone, either. The other students, Kouki included, had all been entranced by her doll-like features. Suzu even let out a very unladylike whistle. Despite how young Yue looked, there was an air of maturity about her that inadvertently drew people in.

Just then, at the demon's urging, a few of the monsters split off to attack Kouki's group. She was trying to take them as hostages. Since there was no way she could beat Hajime in a head-on battle, she'd resorted to this.

Suzu hurriedly tried to put up a barrier, but her exhausted body cried out in protest. She'd been casting almost nonstop since waking up. Still, she bit her lip to keep herself from blacking out and continued chanting. Eventually, Yue gently put a hand on her head to stop her. Surprised, Suzu stopped chanting.

"Don't worry." Though there was no reason for that to suddenly make things okay, a wave of relief washed over Suzu. Suzu herself didn't know why Yue's words felt so comforting, but she seemed to know she could trust Yue.

Yue stared down the monsters bearing down on them. With their claws, tentacles, and maces inches from her face, she calmly mouthed two words.

"Sapphire Serpent." A pale-blue sphere, about one meter in diameter, appeared directly above her head. The fire mages in the party instantly recognized it as one of the strongest fire spells: Azure Blaze, a spell so powerful it incinerated everything in its vicinity.

It was unthinkable that anyone could cast it instantly without even an incantation. The mages of the party all stared dumbly at the massive fireball floating above them.

However, this was just the beginning. Next, the sphere uncoiled itself, transforming into a snake. The flaming serpent swallowed a Super Bulltaur whole, leaving not even ash in its wake.

The serpent then sprouted wings, completing its transformation.

A flaming sapphire dragon stood where the sphere had been.

The thirty meter long dragon coiled itself around Kouki and the others, forming a protective barrier. The burning blue blaze was so hot that the monsters couldn't even get close to it. The dragon then opened its maw wide, surging forward.

Graaaaaaaaaaaaah! Its roar shook the room. The monsters were all lifted into the air and flung into the dragon's waiting jaws. They struggled desperately, but it was futile. One after another, they were thrown into the furnace of hell and incinerated beyond recognition.

"What is this..." one of the students muttered. None of them had ever heard of magic that could control the bodies of others in a manner like that.

That made sense. After all, Sapphire Serpent was a spell Yue had created herself by combining Azure Blaze with gravity magic.

The reason she'd picked Sapphire Serpent over her usual Draconic Thunder was because she wanted to get more practice with her control. Summoning a massive fire dragon in an enclosed space meant she had to regulate how much oxygen she let it consume, or everyone would suffocate. It required far more precision than Draconic Thunder.

However, Kouki and the others didn't know that. They all turned back to Yue, intent on demanding an explanation.

But when they saw her regal figure, calmly guiding the dragon like it was nothing, they swallowed their words. A few of the students, Suzu included, fell for her then and there.

The demon despaired when she saw the dragon. She'd thought it was only one crazy monster she'd had on her hands, but it seemed this mysterious boy's companion was just as dangerous. Quickly running out of options, the demon looked at what was left. The only other people she could feasibly target were the bunny girl next to the half-dead knight, and the two girls hugging each other a good distance away from the group.

Still, the demon would soon find they weren't easy prey either. One swing from Drucken took a charging Super Bulltaur's head clean off. Shea used the momentum of her swing to turn in a complete circle, crushing the four-eyed wolf that had tried to pounce on her from behind.

Meanwhile, Chimeras and cats surged toward Kaori and Shizuku. Shizuku gritted her teeth and valiantly held up her shattered blade, but before her enemies could reach her, Hajime's Cross Bits took action.

Shizuku watched in amazement as the floating crosses took aim at the Chimeras and let out a bang.

What on earth is that thing!? Something whizzed past her cheek and fell to the ground with a metallic clang. On the other side, the same thing happened next to Kaori.

Still confused, the two turned toward the monsters bearing down on them, only to find they'd all had their heads blown off. They looked back at the Cross Bits, understanding finally dawning on them.

"Was that... gunpowder?"

"Wait, so this is... a gun?"

The two girls exchanged a look. Then they turned toward Hajime. The guns in his hand confirmed their suspicions. The weird floating crosses protecting them were also weapons of his.

"A-Amazing... When did Hajime turn into a human gundam?"

"I'd say he's more like a Newtype than an actual gundam..."

Now that the immediate threat had been dealt with, and it was obvious Hajime was in no real danger, the two girls had managed to calm down some.

Hajime's Cross Bits also had a recording function built into them, so he'd heard what they'd said. He was pretty surprised the two of them knew so much about Gundam. He wanted to make a comment about it, but decided to refrain.

"Unbelievable... What is he?" The demon muttered to herself. All of her schemes had been destroyed by simple brute force. Despair got the better of her, so she resigned herself to her fate. She didn't have many monsters left, and the outcome of this match was clear.

As one last-ditch attempt, she flung the strongest spell she could muster at Hajime and made a break for one of the exits. The spell she'd used was the same one that had caused the other students so much trouble, Dark Gaol.

Hajime spared the gray sphere a brief glance, and then judged it not to be a threat. He ignored the spell entirely and continued slaughtering monsters. The sphere exploded next to Hajime, enveloping him in petrifying smoke. Kouki and the others gasped, while Kaori screamed.

The demon watched them out of the corner of her eye as she ran.

However, just as she made it to the exit—

"Haha... Looks like you were one step ahead of me the whole time."

"That's right."

One of Hajime's Cross Bits was waiting for her at the exit, its muzzle pointed directly at her. She realized now, she'd been doomed from the moment she'd decided to attack him. For some reason, the thought struck her as funny, so she started laughing. Hajime slowly walked up to her. She'd come to hate that overly calm demeanor of his.

She turned around, giving up for good. Hajime hadn't been affected one bit by her petrification spell. And to add insult to injury, he was radiating mana in waves toward another exit to blow the smoke away. He could have avoided it if he wanted to, but he'd just taken the hit to make a point.

"You damned monster. Are you really human? No measly human can do those things."

"To be honest, I'm not really sure anymore. But I don't really mind being a

monster, so let's go with that."

He stopped a few feet away from the demon. She looked around the room and saw all of her monsters lying on the ground, dead. She smiled bitterly and mentally berated herself for picking a fight with him.

Hajime slowly took aim with Donner. The demon's expression was oddly relaxed. There was nothing else she could do. All that was left for her was death, and she'd come to terms with that.

"Normally, I'd ask if you have any last words, but... sadly, I have no interest in what you have to say. Though, I guess there is something I want you to tell me... What's a demon like you doing down here? And where'd you get those monsters?"

"What makes you think I'll tell you? Why would I give information to our enemy? Just kill me and be done with it." The demon sneered at Hajime. He glared coldly at her, and without warning shot her in the leg.

"Agaaaaah!" The demon screamed and tumbled to the ground. Her screams echoed throughout the room. Kouki and the others watched silently, shocked at Hajime's callous cruelty. Hajime ignored them all and continued talking to the demon.

"I have no interest in your stupid war, or this world. I'm not asking you as a member of the human army. I'm just curious. Now answer me."

"....." The demon gritted her teeth and stared Hajime down. Realizing she wouldn't break, Hajime decided there was no point in interrogating her any further.

"Well, I can more or less guess. The reason you're here is because you want to conquer the true labyrinth that lies beneath this one, right?"

The demon's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Noting her reaction, Hajime continued.

"And those monsters were controlled using magic from the age of the gods... Bullseye, huh? So the demons managed to conquer one of the Seven Great Labyrinths, and are using the magic they found there to tip the scales... That means the reason you're here isn't just to extend an invitation to the hero

party, but also to clear the other labyrinths?”

“Impossible... How...” The demon grimaced. Somehow, Hajime had guessed all of their plans. Suddenly, a possibility occurred to her. Maybe Hajime had also cleared one of the labyrinths. She looked up at him for confirmation, and he nodded silently.

“I see. So you’re just like that person... That explains your strength... Are we done here? If so, get it over with already. I hope you’re not thinking of taking me prisoner. You’ll never take me alive.”

“That person, huh? So they’re the one who gave you this army of monsters.”

It was clear from her gaze that the demon would kill herself before she allowed herself to be taken captive. But if possible, she wanted to die a warrior, at the hands of her enemies. For his part, Hajime had gotten all the information he’d wanted out of the demon. He no longer had any use for her.

The demon cursed Hajime with her final words, in one last act of spite.

“Someday my lover will come to kill you.” Hajime smiled fearlessly.

“I’ll kill anyone that makes themselves my enemy, even the gods themselves. I can’t imagine someone stuck as their pawn is much of a threat.”

Done with their final exchange, the two of them fell silent. Hajime pointed Donner at the demon’s head. But before he could pull the trigger, someone called out to him.

“Wait! Wait, Nagumo! She can’t fight anymore! There’s no need to kill her!”

“.....” Hajime looked over his shoulder at Kouki, a dumbfounded expression on his face. *Is this guy serious?* Kouki stumbled to his feet, swaying unsteadily. Hajime still had his finger on the trigger.

“Let’s... Let’s just make her our prisoner. There’s no way we can kill someone who can’t even resist. Heroes aren’t supposed to do things like that. You’re one of my comrades too, so shouldn’t you be obeying my commands?”

Hajime could scarcely believe the things coming out of Kouki’s mouth. He ignored Kouki entirely and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp crack as the bullet robbed the demon of her life.

Silence fell. Kouki's jaw was hanging open. He understood what had just happened, but his mind still couldn't accept that his classmate had mercilessly killed someone without any hesitation. The person who'd been most shocked by Hajime's actions was Kaori.

Not because he'd killed someone. She'd been prepared for that too. She understood that was what it meant to help the humans of this world with their war. This entire labyrinth excursion was simply training for when they'd actually have to kill people.

She knew one day she might have to kill someone. Sure, it would be Shizuku and Kouki and the other frontliners doing the actual killing, but she had to be prepared to help them in that endeavor. To bear the same guilt as them.

What had shocked Kaori was how easily Hajime had done it. She couldn't believe that he had no aversion to killing whatsoever. He'd done it as naturally as breathing. The Hajime she'd known was a kind, powerless boy. Even though he had no strength of his own, he'd always done everything he could to help others. That was what had made him strong. Even though he could barely fight, no matter the situation, he was always sacrificing himself for others. Which was why she was so surprised that he hadn't hesitated to kill someone. Someone who couldn't fight back, even.

Shizuku could easily tell what was going through Kaori's mind. They'd been friends for long enough that she understood Kaori's thought process. After all she'd heard about Hajime from Kaori, Shizuku knew just how big of a shock that had to be.

When she saw Hajime's cold expression, she too thought to herself that he'd changed far too much. Still, she also knew that she had no right to say anything about it when she didn't even know what Hajime had experienced thus far. All she could do was hug Kaori and try to comfort her somehow.

However, Kouki had no such inhibitions. His strong sense of justice compelled him to protest. And protest he did.

"Why... Why did you kill her? There was no need to." Hajime looked at Kouki out of the corner of his eye. He wondered for a few seconds how he should respond, and then realized there was no need to respond at all. Pretending he

hadn’t heard anything, he walked over to Shea and Meld.

Yue broke off from the students and trotted up to Hajime. Suzu watched her forlornly as she left.

“Shea, how’s Meld doing?”

“It was pretty close. Any later and he’d probably be dead. I gave him some Ambrosia like you asked, but... are you sure it was okay to use some on him?”

“Yeah. He deserves that much at least for all the times he helped me. Besides, if he died, the hole left behind would be too big to fill. Things would just get more troublesome in the future if someone less noble took over the job of guiding the hero party. Well, I guess he wasn’t strong enough to stop this mess from happening, but... at least he’s a man of honor. I wouldn’t want to see him die.”

Hajime didn’t want someone shady like Ishtar taking over the job of training Kouki and the others. Meanwhile, Kouki, supported by Ryutarou, made his way over to Hajime and the others. The other students followed close behind. He wasn’t going to let this issue be ignored.

“Hajime.”

“Thanks, Yue. For protecting them, I mean.”

“Mhmm.” Yue arrived just as Hajime finished explaining his reasons to Shea. He gently cupped Yue’s cheek and thanked her for her help. She looked up at him happily, saying it was no sweat with her gaze. Before long, the two of them started flirting again.

“There’s a time and place for this, you two... Come on, give it a rest already! There’s other people here!” Shea started clapping her hands loudly to get their attention. She was getting used to their chronic flirting in inappropriate places.

Hajime’s other classmates started glaring at him for a completely different reason than Kouki. One stare in particular was fierce enough to send shivers down Hajime’s spine.

“Hey, Nagumo. Why did—”

“Hajime-kun... there’s a lot I want to ask you, but first, is Meld-san alright? His

wounds seem to have closed up, and his breathing is steady, but he should have been mortally wounded...” Kaori interrupted Kouki and knelt next to Meld. She checked his vitals and examined the wound as she talked to Hajime.

For a second, it had felt like Kaori had given him a glare terrifying enough to make his blood run cold, but he didn’t feel that pressure anymore, so he chalked it up to his imagination playing tricks on him. He was wondering why she was suddenly calling him “Hajime-kun” now too, but he decided to save that question for later.

“Yeah, he should be... Shea gave him a rather special medicine. It’s potent enough to heal even fatal wounds.”

“I’ve never heard of any items like that.”

“Well, it’s not exactly common... You wouldn’t be able to find it normally. Sorry Yaegashi, but you’ll have to get someone to heal you. I have mana potions at least, if you need those.”

“A-Ah... Th-Thank you.” Shizuku stammered a little as she took the mana potions from Hajime. She still wasn’t used to how different he’d become. Hajime seemed unconcerned by her reaction and threw a mana potion to Kaori as well. She deftly caught the vial, said a word of thanks, and downed it in one gulp. The lingering aftertaste of cough syrup filled her mouth, and Kaori could feel her mana returning. Once Kaori recovered, she could easily heal the other students.

She heaved a sigh of relief after making sure Meld’s life wasn’t in any danger.

Kouki attempted to grill Hajime once more.

“Hey Nagumo, I’m grateful you saved Meld-san, but why—”

“Hajime-kun. Thank you for saving Meld-san’s life. And... thank you for saving ours, too.”

However, he was interrupted again by Kaori. He glanced at her in annoyance, but she ignored him, her attention focused entirely on Hajime. Though Hajime’s transformation had shocked Kaori greatly, there was still something she needed to tell him. She stood up and brought her face inches from Hajime’s.

She gripped the hem of her skirt, trying to hold back the wave of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. But she couldn't do it, and tears started to drip from the corners of her eyes.

Changed or not, Hajime was still standing in front of her, very much alive. She couldn't stop herself from breaking down. Hajime looked into her eyes, and saw a thousand glimmering stars of emotion.

Lips trembling, Kaori finally choked out the words she'd always wanted to say.

"Hajime-kun... Shank you... hic... for staying alive. And I'm... sho sorry I couldn't protect you... Hic..."

The girls, who'd all guessed how much Kaori cared for Hajime, and some of the guys, who'd figured it out as well, all felt a warm fuzziness spread through them as they watched. Only Kondou and Hiyama looked like they'd swallowed a bug. Kouki and Ryutarou, who were the most clueless of the bunch, still hadn't caught on and seemed confused. Kouki was basically a real-life dense anime protagonist, while Ryutarou had more muscles than brains. One could rightly understand why Shizuku always had so much trouble keeping those two in line.

On the other hand, Shea was fretting over the appearance of another potential rival, while Yue was staring at Kaori with a more deadpan expression than usual.

Hajime watched on silently. He'd heard from Endou that his supposed death had weighed heavily on Kaori's mind, but he'd never realized it had affected her *this* deeply. He struggled to find the right words to say.

When he'd told Yue about what had happened to him, he'd of course mentioned Kaori, but since then he hadn't even thought of her once until he'd reunited with Aiko in Ur. He felt a little guilty for forgetting about her when she'd spent this entire time worrying about him.

After a lot of internal debate, Hajime finally smiled awkwardly and settled on a response.

"Looks like I really made you worry. I'm sorry I didn't contact you right away. Still, as you can see, I'm alive, so you don't need to apologize... Please, uhh, don't cry." His eyes held the same kindness they'd had back when Kaori had

first come to his room and he'd asked her to protect him.

Kaori recalled that night as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. It seemed not all of him had changed. Overcome by emotion, she clung to Hajime's shirt and sobbed uncontrollably.

Unsure of how to respond, Hajime just stood there, his arms raised up in the air. Had any of his other classmates done something like this he would have flung them off without hesitation, possibly even give them a good kick for their trouble, but he couldn't bring himself to do that to Kaori. She was the only one who'd cared so much for him this whole time, and the time they'd spent together before he'd been cast into the abyss was slowly coming back to him.

At the same time, though, he didn't want to hug another girl in front of Yue. And so, he just stood there, his hands in the air, not exactly embracing Kaori, but not pushing her away either. Such an indecisive attitude was completely unlike him.

Shizuku glared at Hajime, her gaze seemingly saying "That's my best friend crying in your arms right now! The least you could do is hug her, you wimp!" But at the same time, he could feel Yue's cold stare boring into his back.

He eventually compromised and gently patted Kaori's head a little. He was being a lot more meek than usual.

"You really are kind, Kaori. Still, Nagumo mercilessly killed someone who couldn't resist. We can't just ignore what he did. Please get away from him."

Nagayama and his friends glared at Kouki. *Read the mood, you moron!* It was baffling to them that he still hadn't noticed Kaori's feelings for Hajime. Kouki glared angrily at Hajime as he attempted to pull Kaori off him.

Hajime wasn't sure if Kouki didn't like Kaori touching another man, or if he was worried about leaving her in close proximity of a killer. It might have been a bit of both, honestly.

"Hold on, Kouki. Nagumo-kun's the one who saved us. You don't have to sound so mad."

"But Shizuku, she couldn't resist anymore. She'd lost the will to fight. There was no reason to kill her. That's not something I can forgive."

“Come on, Kouki, can’t you just give it a rest?” Shizuku narrowed her eyes and glared at Kouki. Nagayama and the others glanced around uncomfortably, unsure of which side to take. However, Hiyama and his cronies had always disliked Hajime, so they instantly took Kouki’s side. They riled the others up, and soon most of the students were against him. Kaori had since left Hajime’s side and dried her tears. She was deep in thought, contemplating how different Hajime was from what she remembered.

Yue silenced all of them with a few harsh words. Her voice was as cold as ice.

“What a worthless bunch. Can we leave, Hajime?”

“Ah, yeah. May as well.”

Yue dismissed the lot of them as just a “worthless bunch.” Her voice was barely louder than a whisper, but it somehow carried clearly through the room. Its frigidity silenced the students, and they all turned to look at her.

Hajime had initially only agreed to help because he owed Kaori. Now that he’d repaid that debt, his work was done. He had no reason to stay, so he let Yue herd him out of the room. Shea ignored the students and hurried after Hajime as well.

But of course, Kouki wasn’t going to let them leave just like that.

“Wait. I’m not done here. Unless I understand your reasons, I won’t feel comfortable keeping you around as a comrade. And who are you, anyway? I’m grateful that you saved us, but don’t you think it’s rude to call someone you just met ‘worthless’? Besides, what do you even mean by that?”

“.....”

As always, Kouki was utterly misguided. Taken out of context, everything he said was perfectly rational. But considering the circumstances, it was obvious he was in the wrong. It was as if he was obsessed with that demon’s death.

Yue had already decided Kouki wasn’t even worth wasting her breath on, so she didn’t bother meeting his gaze. Kouki frowned, but a minute later his irritation vanished and he gave Yue the same killer smile he flashed all of the girls in school.

However, all he succeeded in doing was making Yue more annoyed. Realizing that at this rate they'd get nowhere, Hajime sighed and decided to answer Kouki.

"Amanogawa. You're basically a walking joke, and I have no obligation to answer any of your mundane questions. Still, because I know you won't quit no matter what, I'll at least give you a bit of advice."

"Advice? Are you saying I'm the one who's wrong? I'd like to think what I'm saying is common sense."

And this is why you're such a pain to deal with!

"Quit deluding yourself."

"What do you..."

"You're not mad because I killed that demon. You just didn't want to see anyone die in front of you. Even you know you can't say it's wrong to kill someone who tried to kill all of you, and nearly killed the knight commander. That's why you're focusing on the fact that she was defenseless when I killed her. You saw something you couldn't stomach, and you're mad that I did what you couldn't. And now, you're trying to take it out on me. All while pretending you're in the right. Of course, you're not doing it maliciously. You probably don't even realize it. You never change. You always interpret things however you want without ever considering the opinions of others."

"Th-That's not true! Don't talk like you know me! Besides, that doesn't change the fact that you killed a defenseless opponent!"

"What's wrong with killing your enemies?"

"Wha—!? What do you mean, what's wrong!? It's murder! Of course it's bad!"

"I really don't feel like arguing with you. Let's just end it here. It's my policy to kill anyone who becomes my enemy. Unless I have a good reason not to, I'll make sure to kill them. It doesn't matter whether they're good or evil, or whether they can resist or not. The moment you show mercy is the moment you die. I learned that the hard way at the bottom of the abyss. Those are just my values though, and I have no intention of pushing them on anyone else. Still,

if you plan on standing against me just because you don't like that, then..." Hajime closed the gap between them in an instant and pressed Donner against Kouki's forehead. Then, he activated his Intimidation and hit his classmates with the full brunt of it.

They all gulped uneasily. Kouki could at least follow Shizuku, who was the fastest of their group, with his eyes still, but he hadn't even sensed Hajime moving.

"Even if you are my former classmates, I won't show you any mercy."

"Y-You..."

"Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't come here to rejoin your little group. You guys aren't my comrades. I only came back because I owed Shirasaki a debt. Once we get out of here, we'll be parting ways. I have my own goals in mind."

Hajime stared at Kouki for a few seconds longer before holstering Donner and turning away. He canceled his Intimidation as well, and everyone breathed a massive sigh of relief. However, Kouki still wasn't willing to accept this. He opened his mouth to argue further, but this time Yue shut him down. She was tired of his prattling.

"Hajime's the one who fought. All you did was cower in fear and run away. The loser has no right to say anything."

"Wha— I didn't run..."

It wasn't a coincidence that Hajime and the others had fallen into the exact room Kouki and the others had been fighting in. When they were on the floor above, Hajime had sensed a massive explosion of mana. Guessing that was where they must be fighting, Hajime had used his perception skills to track down their location. He'd then used a combination of transmutation and his pile bunker to dig through the floor.

What Hajime had sensed was Kouki's activation of Overload. Hajime had figured with Kouki's current strength, he would easily be able to overpower the demon. From the situation that followed, he'd correctly surmised that Kouki hadn't been able to kill her, which was why they'd fallen into such dire straits.

Just as Kouki was about to argue, Meld joined the discussion.

“Leave it, Kouki.”

“Meld-san!”

Meld had regained consciousness a while back, and had been listening in on their conversation. He still felt a little dizzy, but his consciousness was clear. He eased himself to his feet. He put his hand over where his wounds should have been, but found his stomach surprisingly whole.

Kaori had told Meld a summary of what had happened while he’d been unconscious. When he’d learned Hajime was still alive, and that it was his medicine that had saved Meld’s life, Meld had been overjoyed.

Meld prostrated himself before Hajime, thanking him for saving his life, and apologizing for being unable to save Hajime’s own. Hajime awkwardly accepted Meld’s thanks, stunned by his sincerity.

Frankly, he’d completely forgotten Meld’s promise to save him when he’d offered to hold the Behemoth off, but it seemed it had weighed on Meld heavily.

Once he finished apologizing to Hajime, Meld turned to Kouki and apologized to him as well.

“M-Meld-san? Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’m your instructor. And yet, I forgot to teach you the most important thing. That you need to be prepared to kill. I’d planned to set some bandits on you guys at some point so you’d experience what it’s like to kill someone... After all, you’d have to do a lot more killing in the war... but the more time I spent with you guys, the more I felt it would be wrong to make you kill someone... so I wavered. As the knight commander of Heiligh, I should have taught you this right away, but... I kept putting it off until finally, it led to this. My indecisiveness nearly cost you all your lives. I’m ashamed to call myself your instructor. Truly... I’m so sorry.” Meld once again bowed his head to Kouki and the others. They all crowded around him and tried to reassure him. It seemed Meld had been dealing with his fair share of worries as well. He was torn between his duty as a knight, and his personal feelings for the children.

Meld was a central figure to the kingdom, but he was also a devout follower

of Ehit. His religion told him that teaching these “Warriors of Ehit” to fight in the war was the noblest thing he could do. However, he still felt reservations. His kind-hearted nature had played a part in his misgivings, but more than anything he was as Hajime had said, a man of impeccable virtue.

Kouki suddenly fell silent. It was finally dawning on him that in the near future he’d have to kill people too. He recalled the fear he’d felt at the prospect of taking someone’s life. It had been quite a shock that Meld would have even contemplated setting humans on them for the students to kill. Bandits or not, people were people. The students would have no trouble dealing with bandits, but to kill them was a completely different story.

Kaori had fallen silent as well. Not because of what Meld had said, but because of Hajime’s earlier words.

About how the abyss had taught him to kill his enemies without hesitation, no matter who they were. That was something the old Hajime would never have said. Still, the murderous malice he’d exhibited earlier proved that it was no bluff. The Hajime that had once been willing to sacrifice himself to save them was now saying he wouldn’t hesitate to kill them if they crossed him. Kaori felt lost. The Hajime she knew and the Hajime standing before her were just too different. She was beginning to think she might just have imagined the remnants of his old self that she’d seen earlier.

At some point, Kaori realized someone was staring at her. She looked up to see a golden-haired, red-eyed beauty standing in front of her. It felt to Kaori as if her gaze was devoid of all emotion.

Kaori stared back, curious about this girl who seemed to be so close to the new Hajime. The two gazed at each other for a few minutes.

“Hmph.”

“Ah...”

The first one to look away was Yue. She sneered at Kaori and turned away.

Kaori involuntarily gulped. Even without words, she understood what Yue meant. “If your feelings for Hajime are that superficial, then you may as well forget about him entirely.”

Yue had easily been able to tell that Kaori had feelings for Hajime. She'd expected to have another rival on her hands, and had been prepared to fight for Hajime's affection. However, when Kaori had seen how much Hajime had changed, she'd faltered. It was perhaps a natural reaction, but from Yue's point of view, all it meant was that Kaori wasn't even worth considering as a rival.

If this is all it takes to scare you off, you don't stand a chance. You won't be able to take Hajime away from me. Kaori flushed. Whether from embarrassment or anger, she didn't know. Yue had all but declared that she was the most important person to Hajime, but Kaori couldn't say anything back. She'd lost that right the moment she'd thought of Hajime as something other than human. The first clash between Kaori and Yue ended with Yue's victory.

Hajime collected all of his spent pile bunkers, rounded up Yue and Shea, and went to leave through one of the passages.

Kouki and the others hurriedly followed behind. As the party was exhausted, Endou suggested they all follow Hajime to the surface so they wouldn't have to fight monsters on the way back. When Meld asked if they could, Hajime said he didn't mind.

On the way back, they watched Hajime easily dispatch monsters that had given the entire party trouble. Once again, they were reminded of how overwhelming his strength was. They could hardly believe he was the same guy they'd all laughed at for being "worthless."

Hiyama and Kondou glared jealously at Hajime the whole way up. Nagayama and the others were impressed by Hajime's newfound strength, but they weren't sure what to make of the fact that Hajime didn't see them as comrades.

Hajime's newfound strength intimidated Hiyama and Kondou. They hadn't forgotten how they used to bully him, and they were sure he hadn't either. Nagayama and the others felt guilty for turning a blind eye to the bullying too. The more they thought about it, the more they realized it made sense for Hajime not to think of them as comrades, but Hajime just ignored all the various glances the other students shot his way.

Suzu was the only one brave enough to try and talk to them. She attempted to engage Yue in conversation, and asked Hajime all sorts of questions about

what he'd been doing. When she realized the two of them weren't giving her the time of day, she turned her attention to Shea. Shizuku had to stop her from trying to grope Shea's boobs on multiple occasions. Emboldened by her straightforward attitude, Kondou and Hiyama attempted to get closer to Yue and Shea as well, but the two girls ignored them completely, and when Hiyama got annoyed and tried to grab Shea's ears, he was hit by a rubber bullet from Hajime. Finally, the group made it back to the surface.

Kaori was still lost deep in thought. Shizuku was hovering around her like a worried mother hen. When they stepped out of the labyrinth entrance though, Kaori was forcibly brought back to reality. After all, an event occurred that she absolutely couldn't ignore.

For someone who loved Hajime, it was perhaps the most shocking event possible.

"Ah! Daddy! You're back!"

"Oh, Myu!"

A little girl calling Hajime her father appeared.

Myu's voice carried over the din of the bustling market street. A few onlookers smiled as they watched the little girl totter up to Hajime.

She made a beeline for Hajime and leaped up into his arms. He caught her in midair and lifted her high into the air.

Normally, this would have been the scene where she barreled into Hajime and knocked him over, but he was hardly so weak that he couldn't catch a little girl. If anything, Myu would have been the one to get hurt had she headbutted into his chest.

"Did you come here to see me? Where's Tio?"

"Yep. Tio-oneechan said that daddy would be coming back around now, so I should go see him. Right now, Tio-oneechan's..."

"Right here." Tio made her way through the crowd, her beauty attracting the attention of the nearby merchants and adventurers. Hajime couldn't believe Tio would let Myu out of her sight in such a crowded place.

“Hey, Tio. You can’t leave Myu alone in a place like this.”

“She was never out of my sight. I had to deal with a few thugs though, and I thought it prudent to do it somewhere Myu couldn’t see.”

It seemed some foolish kidnappers had tried to abduct Myu. Hajime had told her to wear a hood whenever she went out in public, so she wouldn’t attract attention. He assumed that was why her would-be kidnappers hadn’t noticed she was a Dagon, a member of a species under the Holy Church’s protection. Myu was an incredibly cute girl, so she made for an appealing kidnapping target. Though Hajime had no way of knowing whether they’d just been after money, or if they were just pedophiles.

“I see. I guess I can’t blame you then... So, where are those thugs?”

“Fear not, Master. I have already dealt with them.”

“Tch, they got off easy.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to part with her when the time comes?”

Hajime had clearly intended to kill the unfortunate kidnappers, so Tio quickly cut him off before he turned the thing into a huge incident. Though he’d hated being called daddy at first, he’d gradually taken to the role of a father more and more. It had gotten to the point where his companions were worried he wouldn’t be able to part with her once they got to Erisen.

Hajime’s classmates had thought nothing could surprise them anymore after witnessing his sudden transformation, but they were wrong. Never in their wildest dreams did any of them imagine he’d become a father. The guys all looked from Yue, to Shea, to the newly arrived Tio, wondering whose kid it was, as well as just how much more experienced Hajime had become in these past few months. It was possible this was an even bigger shock than Hajime’s unbelievable strength.

Logically, it was impossible for Hajime to have a four-year daughter, since they’d only been apart for a little over four months, but the students were all too shocked and exhausted to be thinking straight.

Kaori stepped forward, swaying slightly. There was a smile on her face, but her expression was anything but happy. She stumbled up to Hajime and

grabbed him by the collar.

“Hajime-kun, explain yourself! Is she really your daughter!? Who did you get pregnant!? Yue-san!? Shea-san!? Or that beautiful lady over there!? Wait, are there even more girls I don’t know about!? How many of them have you gotten pregnant!? Answer me, Hajime-kun!” It seemed Kaori had finally snapped. Hajime tried to explain that it was all a misunderstanding, but Kaori wouldn’t let him go. He couldn’t understand where she was getting such strength from.

“Calm down, Kaori! There’s no way that girl could actually be his kid!” Shizuku tried to pull Kaori off Hajime, but to no avail.

The people in the streets started whispering to each other.

“What’s that? A lover’s quarrel?”

“It looks like he went and got another girl pregnant even though he already has a lover?”

“More than just one girl, too.”

“Did he get all five of them pregnant?”

“I’ve heard that he has a whole harem of girls, and got ten of them pregnant.”

“I guess he was hiding it all from his wife.”

“Yeah... And it looks like she just found out.”

“A harem huh...? I’m jealous.”



“What a guy... Lucky bastards like him should all go die.”

The rumors were exaggerated at breakneck speed, and in the span of a few minutes Hajime had become a married man with a harem of ten pregnant girls on the side. Still being rattled back and forth by Kaori, Hajime looked up to the sky and sighed. Myu looked up at him in confusion, and he gently patted her head.

Face bright red, Kaori buried herself in Shizuku’s arms. She just wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Once she’d finally calmed down enough to think things through rationally, Kaori had realized just how embarrassing the things she’d said were. Shizuku looked more like Kaori’s mom than anything as she comforted her.

Hajime and the others had moved from the labyrinth entrance to a square near the town’s edge. Rumors had already begun to fly about how Hajime was a man amongst men, but also a scumbag cheater. Hajime had already finished reporting his success to branch chief Loa, and was in a hurry to get out of this town. He’d only stopped here to deliver Ilwa’s letter, and there were no supplies he needed to replenish at the moment, so there was no problem with leaving right away.

The reason Kouki and the other students had followed Hajime to the edge of town was because Kaori had chased after him. She was still embarrassed at her earlier outburst, but she also knew she had to make a decision soon. Whether to travel with Hajime, or let him go for good. Traveling with him was what she wanted. After all, she’d finally managed to reunite with him, so she definitely didn’t want to let him go again.

Still, she hesitated. She’d feel guilty for leaving Kouki’s party. And more than anything, she was still shaken by how different Hajime was. Worse, Yue had seen through just how shaken she was.

Kaori could tell Yue cared a great deal for Hajime as well.

What stung the most, though, was that Hajime loved Yue as well. They seemed so perfectly in sync. And when Yue had sneered at her, Kaori had begun doubting the depths of her own affection.

Maybe she really did care less for Hajime than Yue did. Maybe if she confessed to him now he'd only see it as a bother. Was she even willing to accept Hajime as he was now? Was she actually just pining for the old Hajime?

In short, Kaori had been overwhelmed by Yue's overbearing presence. The fact that Yue possessed strength that rivaled Hajime's own only added to her intimidation.

Kaori had lost her confidence that she could beat Yue, both as a mage, and even in the depth of her feelings for Hajime. That was why she'd been unable to make a decision. And now, Hajime was about to leave. However, before he could step out of the gates, he was stopped. Kaori looked up to see around ten men blocking their path.

"Hey brat, where do you think you're going? You really think we'll let you go after you beat up one of our buddies!?" The scruffy-looking men were all glaring at Tio. They were friends of the kidnapper Tio had dealt with, coming to avenge their comrade. Though judging from their ogling stares, they were motivated more by lust.

Hajime was getting tired of all these petty thugs picking a fight with him. The thugs interpreted his silence as fear, and they grew even bolder.

Their gazes slid over to Yue and Shea. Disgusted by the men's gazes, Yue and Shea slunk back behind Hajime. Once again, the men misinterpreted their actions and thought they must've be scared, so they began threatening Hajime.

"Brat, you better not be thinking of doing anything stupid. If you don't wanna die, leave the women and scram. Don't worry, we'll give them back after they've apologized properly."

"Though they'll probably be broken by then."

The men all laughed. Unfortunately for them, the moment they'd turned their fangs on Hajime, their fate had been decided.

As always, his Intimidation exerted a pressure so strong it could be felt physically. Enraged, Kouki had stepped forward to punish the men, but he found himself assailed by the same pressure as the thugs. His vision went blurry, and he fell to his knees.

Hajime stepped forward, and the thugs realized too late that they'd picked a fight with the wrong guy. They hurriedly tried to apologize, but the pressure on them was so strong that they couldn't even open their mouths. They fell to the ground, struggling futilely to move.

Hajime didn't feel like listening to their bleating any longer. Anyone who scared Myu deserved a fate worse than death.

Hajime eased the pressure enough that they could struggle to their knees. Then, he went to each one and shot them in the balls.

Kouki and the others were so shocked by his ruthlessness that they backpedaled away from him. The guys all covered their crotches in sympathy.

Once he was done, Yue and the others walked up to him.

"No mercy as always. I was right to make you my master. I may not be a man, but even I winced watching that."

"You looked even madder than usual this time. You're really too overprotective of Myu, you know that?"

"Mmm. That wasn't the only reason... He was mad for our sake too."

"Eh!? Does that include me too? Ehehe, Oh Hajime-san... But thanks~"

"You always see right through me, Yue."

"Yeah. Because I'm always watching you."

"Yue..."

In the end, the usual pattern of the two of them flirting, Shea breaking it up, Myu trying to get Hajime's attention, and Tio getting herself beat up for something stupid happened again. Whenever Hajime was around, the dynamic between the five of them always ended up like that.

Kaori watched the spectacle from the sidelines.

That scene earlier had firmly impressed onto her that Hajime didn't hesitate to resort to violence. At a glance, it seemed as if his old kindness had all but vanished.

But when Kaori thought about the reason behind his actions, she saw things

from a different perspective. He'd done it to protect the smiling girls around him.

Was it possible for a truly unkind person to be surrounded by such smiles? Even that little girl adored Hajime like a father. Besides, wasn't the reason Hajime had come back in the first place so that he could let Kaori know he was alive? She'd been too shocked by his transformation to notice at the time, but he'd come back thinking of her. Plus, even if he'd come mainly for her, he still hadn't abandoned the other students. He'd saved Meld's life too, using his valuable medicine.

And so, after watching them for a while, Kaori finally realized the truth. The reason Hajime didn't hesitate to use violence was because he knew he needed it to protect the things important to him. Naturally, his own life was included in that, but it wasn't the only thing that mattered. The girls smiling next to him were proof of that.

For the first time, Kaori tried to think about what he must have gone through. His hair had turned white. He'd lost his right eye and left arm. There was no doubt that he must have suffered more than she could ever imagine. His body and soul must have been pushed close to the breaking point many times. In fact, they may have been pushed past that. This new him was likely a result of that. Still, despite everything that had happened to him, Hajime was able to make others smile.

The fog that had settled around Kaori's heart lifted. Everything began to click. She couldn't believe she'd been so blind. The man standing in front of her was Hajime. He was the very same Hajime she'd fallen in love with. The boy who'd been berated as worthless and cast into the abyss, only to crawl out with his own strength to come back and save her.

Sure, some of him had changed, but just as much of him hadn't. And that was only natural. All people changed with the passage of time, with new experiences and new meetings. What reason did she have to be afraid of him? What reason did she have to lose faith in him? Most of all, what reason did she have to lose faith in her own judgment?

If there was a new side that she didn't know, she just had to spend time with

him and get to know it. Hadn't she spent all her time in high school doing the same?

There was no way she was going to lose to Yue in the depth of her feelings for him. She'd be part of that smiling group too. She wouldn't let Yue laugh at her any longer. Determination welled up within Kaori. Shizuku smiled as she saw the resolve in her best friend's eyes. Kaori straightened her back, then nodded gratefully to Shizuku. It was time for her to step forward into a new battlefield. A battlefield of love. Hajime looked back and spotted Kaori coming toward him. He thought she was simply coming to see him off, but Yue stared at her warily. Shea watched on with great interest, while Tio mused her thoughts.

"Hoho, this will be quite the spectacle."

His companions' reactions alerted Hajime to the fact that this was no mere send-off. He suddenly had a bad feeling about the whole situation.

"Hajime-kun, can I also join your party...? Rather, I'm coming no matter what you say. Thanks for having me."

"...What?" Hajime was surprised by the fire in her voice. She hadn't started with a request, but a demand. For a moment, he wasn't sure how to respond. Yue stepped forward, answering in his place.

"You don't have the right."

"Why not? Do you have to love Hajime-kun to join? If so, my feelings won't lose to anyone."

Kaori didn't falter. Yue frowned. The two of them stared each other down. It felt as if a raging inferno blazed between them. Yue realized Kaori would probably be the strongest rival she would ever face.

She could see the determination in Kaori's eyes. After a few seconds, Kaori turned away and looked at Hajime. The determination was still there, but now it was accompanied by something more.

She clasped her hands together and took a deep breath. Her cheeks were red. She took another deep breath. This was the moment of truth. It was finally time to say the words she'd wanted to the first time she'd seen him kneeling in front of those thugs way back in Japan.

Her voice trembled a little, but it carried clearly.

“I love you, Hajime-kun.”

“Shirasaki...” Seeing her determination, Hajime felt he had to respond truthfully.

“Sorry, but there’s already someone I’m in love with, so I can’t respond to your feelings. That’s why you can’t come with us.”

Kaori bit her lip and hung her head. However, after a few seconds, she found her determination again. Holding back tears, she looked up at Hajime and nodded.

Behind her, the other students groaned in despair, but she paid them no mind. She’d already decided on her course of action.

“I know. It’s Yue-san, right?”

“Yeah, so...”

“But that’s not a reason to refuse to let me come with you.”

“What?”

“After all, Shea-san and Tio-san are in love with you too. Shea-san especially, it seems. Am I wrong?”

“That’s...”

“They know you’re in love with someone else, but you still let them join you. So tell me, why is it any different here? After all... my feelings for you are stronger than anyone else’s.” Kaori looked back at Yue as she said that, the fire burning bright in her eyes. She wouldn’t let Yue laugh at her any longer. This was her declaration of war. She would steal the spot of Hajime’s most beloved person for herself.

Yue’s lips curled up into a rare smile. It seemed Kaori would be a worthy rival after all.

“Fine, you can come. I’ll show you just how huge the gap is between us.”

“My name’s not ‘you.’ Call me Kaori.”

“Then you can just call me Yue. I’ll accept your challenge, Kaori.”

“Fufu. Very well, Yue. Don’t come crying to me when you lose, though.”

“Fufufufufufu.”

“Ahahahahahaha.”

The two of them were lost in their own world. Even though he was the one who’d been confessed to, Hajime felt as if he was suddenly left out. The decision to let her join had been made without even consulting him. Myu and Shea hugged each other and fearfully watched the two girls verbally duke it out.

“H-Hajime-san, is there something wrong with my eyes? I can see dark thunderclouds forming behind Yue-san. There’s a dragon there, too!”

“No, you’re seeing right. I’m pretty sure there’s a sword-wielding demon standing behind Shirasaki too.”

“Daddy! Onee-chan’s scaring me!”

“Haaah... Haaah, my body’s tingling just imagining what it would feel like... to have that scorn directed at me.”

Kaori and Yue had both brought out their stands and were staring each other down. *Were those two always like this?* Hajime wanted to break them up, but he was worried about what they’d do to him if he tried. And so, he just stood there, Myu and Shea clinging to him. Wise men knew when to hold their tongues.

Sadly, the resident hero was no wise man. As always, Kouki felt he needed to interject.

“W-Wait! I don’t understand. You love Nagumo? You’re going to go with him? What? What’s happening? Where did this all come from? Nagumo, what did you do to Kaori!?”

“The hell, dude?”

Kouki couldn’t seem to accept that Kaori actually liked Hajime. Dense as he was, this seemed to come out of nowhere. That was why he assumed Hajime must have done something to her. Hajime was amazed at just how clueless Kouki could be. He’d known it was bad, but this was on an entirely different level.

He was about to pull his sword out when Shizuku stopped him. She rubbed her temples in exasperation and tried to explain things in a way Kouki could understand.

“Kouki. Do you honestly believe Hajime would do something like that? Think about it calmly. You may have been too dumb to notice it, but Kaori’s been in love with Hajime for a long time. Since we were in Japan, in fact. Why do you think she always talked to him?”

“Shizuku... What are you saying? That’s just because Kaori’s kind. She just felt bad because Nagumo was always alone, right? How could she possibly have been in love with that lazy, uncooperative otaku?”

While Hajime couldn’t deny any of those allegations, they were still annoying to hear.

Noticing the commotion, Kaori finally broke eye contact with Yue. She turned to face her fellow classmates. It was best if they heard it from her own mouth.

“Kouki-kun, everyone, I’m sorry. I know it’s selfish of me to leave like this, but... I want to go with Hajime-kun, so I’ll be leaving the party. I’m truly sorry.” She bowed. Suzu, Eri, Tsuji, and Yoshino all cheered her on. They’d realized for a while now, and they had no problem with it. Nagayama, Endou, and Nomura had all known for a while too. While it was regretful she’d be leaving them, it wasn’t unexpected, so they sent her off with smiles.

However, Kouki still refused to accept it.

“You’re joking, right? This doesn’t make any sense. You’ve always been with me, Kaori... Why would you want to leave now? You’re my childhood friend... so... you have to stay with me. Isn’t that right?”

“Umm... Kouki-kun. We might be childhood friends, but... that’s no reason for me to stay with you all the time. I’m not sure why you think that’s even a factor, really...”

“Give it up, Kouki. Kaori isn’t your possession, and it isn’t for you to decide what she does with her life.”

After being ganged up on by the two girls, Kouki finally fell silent. He turned to face Hajime.

He wasn't even paying attention to them. He was busy dealing with the rest of the girls in his harem. Kouki's eyes narrowed in anger. The thought of Kaori joining that harem filled him with jealousy. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before. He tried one last-ditch attempt to convince Kaori to give up.

"Kaori. You can't go with Nagumo. I'm saying this for your own good. Look at him. He has girls all around him, and he's even got a daughter now... Worst of all, he's put a slave collar on that rabbit girl. And that black-haired girl called Nagumo her master earlier. He's probably forcing them to come with him. Nagumo probably thinks girls are nothing more than objects to add to his collection. He's scum. Look at how easily he kills people. And even though he's so strong, he's refusing to help us, his comrades. Going with him will only bring you misfortune. It's better if you stay with us. No, I'll make sure you stay with us. Even if you hate me for it, it's for your own good. I won't let you go, no matter what!"

The other students stared at Kouki in shock. They'd never seen him act like this. Still, now that he'd gotten himself fired up, it was too late to stop him. He turned to the other girls around Hajime, then started lecturing them as well.

"You girls as well. You shouldn't stay with him. Come with me! Our party would love to have people as strong as you. We can save the human race together. You said your name was Shea, right? Don't worry. If you come with me, I'll free you right away. We don't keep slaves here. You too, Tio. You won't have to call Nagumo your master any longer."

He flashed them his most handsome smile and held out his hand. Shizuku just slapped her forehead and stared at the sky, while Kaori was so dumbfounded she couldn't speak. Yue, Shea, and Tio just stared at Kouki.

"....."

There were no words that could express their feelings. They awkwardly turned away from Kouki and rubbed their arms. Upon close inspection, one could see there were goosebumps all over them. Kouki's statement had been so sickeningly off the mark that it had mentally scarred them. "This is not the kind of pain I like..." Tio muttered softly to herself.

Seeing them clearly ignoring his invitation, Kouki's smile stiffened. Not only were they unwilling to meet his gaze, they'd even retreated behind Hajime for safety.

Kouki's shock slowly transformed into anger. He recklessly drew his sword and glared at Hajime... before thrusting it into the ground. He pointed at Hajime and declared his intent for all to hear.

"Hajime Nagumo! Duel me! No weapons! If I win, you have to promise to never get near Kaori again! And to release those girls you're holding captive!"

"Oh god. This is so cringe. I can't watch this anymore."

"Stop mumbling! Are you a man or not!?"

The reason he'd challenged Hajime to a bare-handed duel was because he knew his sword could never match up to Hajime's guns. Yue, Shea, Tio, and even Kaori stepped away from Kouki. His actions had done nothing to impress them.

Still, Kouki had convinced himself of the righteousness of his cause. He fully believed he was saving his childhood friend, as well as those poor girls, from Hajime's clutches. His jealousy, combined with his straightforward attitude, had mixed together to form a disastrous combination. There was no going back for him now. And so, without even waiting for Hajime's reply, he charged.

Sighing, Hajime took a few steps back. Thinking he was scared to fight bare-handed, Kouki doubled down and charged faster. He was just a few steps away now. Hajime's arms were still at his side, and he hadn't taken any kind of stance. Certain of his victory, Kouki threw a punch with all the momentum of his run-up behind it. Just then—

"Ah!?"

Kouki vanished. Or rather, he fell. But he fell so fast it looked as if he'd disappeared. He'd fallen into a pitfall. When Hajime had taken his first steps back, he'd transmuted a pitfall where he'd been standing. He'd infused his shoes with the same transmutation magic circles on his gloves, which was why he hadn't needed to bend down.

Once Kouki fell through, Hajime transmuted the floor back to its original

shape. A muffled explosion shook the earth. As an afterthought, Hajime had chucked a flashbang grenade, a tear gas grenade, a noise grenade, and a paralysis grenade down the hole as well. Nothing fatal, obviously.

Chances were, Kouki had been hit with them all as he was trying to claw his way out of the hole. Each of his senses had been momentarily destroyed, and the paralysis grenade prevented him from even writhing around in pain.

Hajime then transmuted a small breathing hole near his head, so he didn't suffocate to death.

All of this he'd done so fast it looked like he hadn't moved at all. To the onlookers, it seemed as if Kouki had fallen of his own accord. In a way, it seemed almost pitiable.

"Hey, Yaegashi. He's still alive, so you can dig him up later if you want."

"There's a lot I want to say about what just happened but... okay."

Even when they'd been in Japan, it had been an implicit rule that Shizuku had to clean up after Kouki and Ryutarou's messes. Shizuku sighed, lamenting the job she'd been saddled with.

Finally, Hajime was ready to depart for real. Only to be interrupted again. This time, by Hiyama. According to him, their party wouldn't last without Kaori's support. He was apparently worried there might be casualties if she left, so he also tried to convince her to stay. He argued his case passionately. Everything he'd been working for was about to slip through his fingers... And his expression made it clear that was what he was really thinking.

Hiyama and his gang knew Kaori was too stubborn to change her mind, so they instead focused on Hajime. They pleaded with him to rejoin the group. Spouting bullshit like, "We're sorry for what we did in the past so please come back."

Everyone, including the other students, knew Hiyama wasn't one bit sorry for what he did. Even they found it disgusting how shamelessly he tried to butter up Hajime. Hajime looked at Hiyama properly for the first time since he'd seen him again. There was a madness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. The prospect of Kaori leaving had really rattled him.

Hajime decided now was as good a time as any to learn the truth of what had happened the day he fell. He figured he may as well get his questions out of the way before Shizuku started tearing into him. And so, he smiled sardonically and asked Hiyama the top question on his mind.

“Hey, Hiyama. Have you gotten better at using fire magic?”

“Huh?” Hiyama was caught off-guard by the sudden question. His face paled as what Hajime was trying to ask slowly dawned on him.

“Wh-What are you talking about? I’m part of the vanguard... And the element I have the highest affinity with is wind.”

“Huh. And here I thought it was fire.”

“I-It’s not. Why does it matter, anyway...”

“Well, you must like fire a lot still. Fireballs specifically. Remember throwing any recently?”

“.....” Hiyama was as white as a sheet. His reaction all but confirmed Hajime’s suspicions. And judging by how distraught he seemed at Kaori’s departure, Hajime could guess his motives, too. Hajime was amazed Hiyama hadn’t assaulted her already.

At this point, he really didn’t care about getting revenge anymore. If Hiyama insisted on making himself Hajime’s enemy, he’d kill Hiyama without hesitation. Otherwise, though, Hajime would just leave him alone. To Hajime, Hiyama wasn’t even worth the trouble killing him would bring. Hiyama’s very existence itself was worth less than nothing in his mind.

Hajime distanced himself from Hiyama and addressed him, along with the rest of his group.

“I don’t want your apologies, and I don’t care about what happened in the past. As far as I’m concerned, you guys are worthless. The same goes for anything you have to say. If you understand, then get out of my sight! You’re all eyesores!”

Kondou and the others bristled at Hajime’s attitude, but Hiyama understood what was behind that knowing grin of his. He nodded silently, then told his

cronies to back down. Hiyama knew that Hajime knew. If he wanted to stay alive, his only option was to obey Hajime's commands.

Kondou and the others were surprised by Hiyama's uncharacteristic obedience, but his serious tone brooked no argument, so they reluctantly gave up on persuading Hajime.

At last, there was nothing else to take care of. Kaori had gone back to grab her things from the inn, which was the last thing Hajime was waiting on before he left. Hiyama and the others had offered to go with her, but Hajime had put a stop to that. While Ryutarou was digging Kouki out, Shizuku walked up to Hajime.

"Umm... Sorry. For everything, I mean. Also, thanks again. Both for saving us, and for coming to see Kaori." Hajime chuckled to himself. She tilted her head in confusion.

"What's so funny?" Shizuku asked.

"Ah, sorry. It's just, it feels like you haven't changed at all. Even when we were in Japan, you'd always be coming up to me to apologize and say thanks. And now you're doing the same thing here... You should really look after yourself more too, or those wrinkles on your forehead will become permanent."

"I can take care of myself, thank you very much. Anyway, you seem to have changed quite a bit yourself. I can't imagine the old you having so many girls hanging around him... and a daughter to boot..."

"I'm only in love with one of them, though..."

"I know it's not my place to say this, and I know it's selfish of me to ask, but... try to look after Kaori too, okay? Please."

"....." Hajime had no reply. Seeing as he had no intention of returning her feelings, he honestly didn't even want to bring her along. Yue had made the decision regardless, of course. He couldn't fathom why his girlfriend, of all people, was okay with all these other girls openly vying for his affection. Still, he put those thoughts to the side and looked off into the distance.

Realizing he was trying to ignore her, Shizuku pulled out her trump card. She

wasn’t going to hand her best friend over to Hajime without some guarantees.

“You better promise me, or else... I’ll make life miserable for you.”

“Miserable? How would you—”

“What do you think of Alabaster Executioner?”

“Huh?”

“Or wait, how about something more overt? Devastator: Lord of all Destruction, maybe?”

“Wait a second, what are you...”

“I’ve got more. How about Obsidian Tyrant? Or the Crimson Thunder Synergist?”

“D-Don’t tell me you...”

At first, Hajime had been confused by the barrage of strange titles, but Shizuku’s planning became evident soon enough. He paled in response.

“Fufufu, you know, I’m one of Ehit’s chosen warriors, and a member of the hero party. If I wanted to make certain nicknames popular around the world, I could. With my influence, they’d spread like wildfire. So, Nagumo-kun, which do you prefer? The way you look’s made it real easy to think up of quite a few. I get the feeling they’d stick, too.”

“Wait! Please, wait! How do you even know about every otaku’s greatest weakness!?”

“Kaori dragged me around everywhere when she was trying to learn more about you. She spent a lot of time watching anime and reading manga so she had things to talk about you with. And I got roped into doing it with her, so I’d say I’m pretty knowledgeable about these things. I believe in Japan they call people like you chuuni—”

“Stop! Please stop!”

“Oh my, it looks like it’s even more effective than I thought... You’re surprisingly self-conscious.”

“Y-You damn demon...” Hajime fell to his knees, shivering in fear. His dark

middle school past was coming back to haunt him. All the memories he'd sealed away flooded through his mind.

"Fufu. So, do you promise to take care of Kaori?"

"....."

"Hmm. Eulogy of Demise: Shotgun Chaos. Disaster of Disasters: Reverse Calamity..."

"O-Okay, okay, I get it! Just stop with the names already!"

"Do you promise to take care of Kaori?"

"...I promise I won't treat her badly, at least."

"That's good enough for me. I'd feel bad about tormenting you any more than this, but... If you ever go back on your word, I swear I'll write a novel about you and spread it everywhere. Both here, and back home in Japan."

"You're the actual last boss, aren't you? You're scarier than everyone else." Hajime cradled his head in his hands and kneeled at Shizuku's feet. Everyone else, Yue and the others included, trembled in awe. Shizuku had brought the almighty Hajime low with words alone.

While Hajime was struggling with the traumas of his past, Kaori jogged back into view. Her eyes went wide in surprise when she saw Hajime on his knees before Shizuku.

Interested in this terrifying girl, Yue asked Kaori about her. After getting a basic description of Shizuku, and explaining to Kaori what had happened, Yue lapsed into thought. Kaori looked from Shizuku to Hajime and muttered her thoughts.

"Come to think of it, the two of them often talked about something in secret back in Japan..."

Both of them came to the same conclusion. It was possible Shizuku was the last boss they'd have to face in the battle for Hajime's affections, too.

With new questions to ponder, Yue and Kaori got ready to depart. Shizuku, Suzu, the rest of the girls, Nagayama, his companions, and Meld all came to see Hajime off at the town gate.

Still not completely over the shock of Hajime's survival, and his subsequent transformation, everyone awkwardly wished Hajime safe travels and thanked him again for saving them.

Still, today's surprises weren't over. Their jaws dropped open again when Hajime pulled Brise seemingly out of thin air.

Shizuku and Kaori held each other's hands. Out of all of them, Shizuku was the one Kaori would miss most. Thinking this was a good opportunity, Hajime pulled a sword out of his Treasure Trove and presented it to Shizuku.

"What's this?"

"You lost your old sword, right? I'm giving you a new one. You have it hard enough as it is, and I'm taking your support away from you. Plus, you helped me out a lot back when we were in Japan."

Shizuku accepted the sword and carefully pulled it out of its jet-black sheath. The blade, too, was jet-black. In fact, it was so dark that it seemed to suck the light out of its surroundings. There was no markings on the hilt, and the blade had a slight curve to it. The whole thing was double-edged. It had a striking resemblance to one of Japan's most famous swords, the Kogarasu Maru. Hajime wasn't very well versed in Japanese blades, but he'd had a lot of practice making the Haulia clan's weapons. He'd used his extensive transmutation experience to cover for any deficiencies and used the manga he'd read as a reference for the basic framework.

"It's made from a compressed sheet of the hardest ore in existence, so I can guarantee it'll never break. Even an amateur could cut through steel with this. As for maintenance... Well, you know swords better than me, Yaegashi."

"This is amazing... I guess you're still a Synergist at heart. Thank you. I'll gladly accept it."

Shizuku gave the sword an experimental swing. It effortlessly sliced through the air. She smiled and thanked Hajime. Shizuku had learned all of her sword techniques with a Japanese sword, so she'd had a hard time adapting to the swords of this world. That was why she was so happy to obtain a proper katana.

"So she's the last boss?"

“Shizuku-chan...”

“Huh? What is it? Why are you two looking at me like that?”

Yue watched Shizuku with a guarded expression, while Kaori seemed at a loss for what to say. They left the town of Horaud, Shizuku’s question left unanswered.

The weather was perfect. Their destination was the Gruen Desert. Within it was one of the Seven Great Labyrinths they needed to conquer, the Grand Gruen Volcano. This miraculous reunion had ended with Hajime adding a new comrade to his ranks.

Epilogue: The Creeping Silver Malice and Madness

“Fuck! Shit! Dammit! You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!” Late at night, Daisuke Hiyama drove his fist into one of the many trees surrounding him. He was standing in one of Horaud’s public parks, and cursing in a low, but vehement voice.

Hatred, fear, and impatience warred within him. He was on the verge of descending into insanity.

“As I thought, you’re pretty shaken up about this... Well, I suppose it’s understandable. Your poor, precious Princess Kaori got snatched away from you by some other man.” Someone called out to Hiyama, their voice full of scorn. Hiyama froze, then let out a sigh of relief as he realized it was the person he was supposed to meet. He clenched his fist and replied through gritted teeth.

“Shut up! Fuck! It... It wasn’t supposed to be like this! Why’s that fucker still alive!? What do you think I tried to kill you for in the first place...”

“Could you at least hang on to your sanity long enough to listen? I’d rather not be found by anyone here. It’d be hard to explain.”

“I don’t have any reason to listen to you anymore... My Kaori’s already...”

The second figure was hidden by the shade of the trees. Hiyama turned to face them and slammed his fist into the tree behind him. He’d only agreed to cooperate with them because he’d been promised Kaori in return. Now that she was forever beyond his reach, Hiyama saw no reason to continue following this person’s orders. Even if they threatened to tell everyone about his attempted murder, it hardly mattered. Hajime himself knew Hiyama was guilty. If he wanted to, Hajime could divulge that whenever he so chose.

However, the figure before him smiled darkly and offered an option he hadn’t considered.

“If she was stolen from you, all you need to do is take her back. Am I wrong? And fortunately for us, I have the perfect bait to lure them in.”

“Bait?” Puzzled, Hiyama repeated the word. The figure grinned and nodded.

“Yes, bait. Even if she chose to follow her heart over following her comrades... do you really think she could abandon her best friends in their time of need? If she knew they were in trouble, what do you think she’d do?”

“You...”

“It would be a simple thing to lure her back here. There’s no reason to get so upset. Though I must say, it was a close call this time... Fortunately for us, things still ended up working out. In fact, you could even say this turned out in our favor. Shall we put the finishing touches on our plan once we return to the capital? When we succeed... your wish will be granted too.”

“.....” Hiyama glared at his co-conspirator, though he knew they wouldn’t be fazed by it in the least. As expected, their smile didn’t falter.

While Hiyama wasn’t aware of the details of his accomplice’s plan, he was certain it would end up harming many of his classmates. They would be betraying the people they’d fought alongside for so long. And frankly, what scared Hiyama the most was that his partner didn’t seem to feel any guilt at all.

This is nuts... But I can’t turn back anymore. To get my Kaori back, I’ve gotta do this... I can’t hesitate now. This is all for Kaori. I’m doing the right thing.

Hiyama was too far gone to notice how illogical that train of thought was. The reason he’d been able to do so many terrible things so far was because he’d justified it to himself. He’d done it all for the sake of Kaori.

His accomplice understood Hiyama quite well, which was why they’d picked him to be their pawn. Smiling, Hiyama agreed to the figure’s terms.

“Fine, I’ll do it. I’ll keep cooperating with you. But...”

“Yeah yeah, I know. You’ll get what you want, and I’ll get what I want. Give and take, right? Anyway, we’re almost at the moment of truth. I’ll be counting on your help when we reach the capital.” The figure turned on its heel and faded away into the darkness without waiting for Hiyama’s reply.

A dark flame began to burn in the young boy’s clouded pupils.

Around the same time that Hiyama and his accomplice were having their little talk, a young pair was staring each other down in the moonlight. Unlike Hiyama's meeting place, they were out in the open, atop an arch-shaped bridge. It spanned a small canal that had been dug between the town's main street and its back alleys.

There were a few such canals that served the water needs of the many restaurants and inns that dotted the streets. The waning moon was reflected off the gently flowing stream, which illuminated Kouki's handsome features.

He was hanging his head over the bridge, looking down at the canal below. His pensive expression marred his perfect features, and he seemed a far cry from his normal, bright self.

Tortus' great hero looked like a small business owner who'd gone bankrupt and was saddled with massive debt.

"You're not going to say anything?" Kouki said, not taking his eyes off the moon's reflection. The other figure on the bridge was his childhood friend of 10 years. Shizuku Yaegashi, the other female member of his group.

She had her back to the railing and was looking up at the actual moon. Her trademark ponytail fluttered in the breeze.

Like Kouki, she didn't take her eyes off the moon as she responded.

"Do you want me to say something?"

"....."

Kouki said nothing. No, perhaps he couldn't say anything. He was looking down at the canal, but all he could see was that scene of Kaori confessing her feelings to Hajime. She'd looked so nervous, but at the same time, seemed so happy to finally be able to let him know how she'd felt. Even someone as dense as Kouki had to accept that her feelings had been the real deal.

He'd known Kaori for 10 years, but he'd never seen her make an expression like that before. It had been so powerful, so beautiful, that even he couldn't help but be moved. Now that he'd calmed down enough to think about it rationally, anyway. Her confession had been a bolt out of the blue to him. Even now, when he thought back to it, he felt this indescribable feeling well up in his

chest. It was dark and heavy, and threatened to crush him with its weight.

Until that point, he'd always assumed that Kaori would be with him forever. He'd had no basis for it, but he'd never questioned that belief. Loathe though he was to admit it, he'd thought of Kaori as his. In short, Kouki was jealous.

Whether that jealousy stemmed from love, or simply a desire to monopolize Kaori, Kouki didn't know. All he knew was it felt as if Kaori had been stolen from him.

However, the person who'd stolen her, not that Hajime himself would ever claim to have done such a thing, hadn't really taken her. Kaori had chosen to travel with him of her own volition. The reality he still didn't want to accept, his anger toward Hajime, and his own feelings of helplessness that came from challenging Hajime to a duel and losing all whirled around in his head, turning it into a jumbled mess.

And so, he'd tried to distract himself by talking to his other female childhood friend, but he'd been met with a curt dismissal. Unable to think of a reply, Kouki fell silent.

Shizuku shot Kouki a brief glance and sighed. *What a hopeless guy.* Reluctantly, Shizuku opened her mouth.

"You know, those feelings of yours are completely irrational."

"Irrational?" That was certainly not what Kouki had been expecting. Shizuku looked at Kouki properly for the first time and elaborated.

"Yes. You know Kaori was never yours, right?"

"Well... Does that mean she was Nagumo's?"

Kouki was just being contrarian for the sake of it at that point. He knew that wasn't right, but he couldn't stop. Shizuku flicked his forehead.

"Ow!" He covered his forehead as Shizuku calmly continued.

"Moron. Kaori's her own person. She doesn't belong to anyone. What she chooses, where she goes, all of those are for her to decide. Including who she wants to pledge herself to... It's always been up to her."

"Since when? You always knew, right Shizuku?" Even without clarification, his

question was clear. Shizuku nodded.

“Since middle school. That was when Kaori first met Nagumo-kun. Though he’d completely forgotten... or rather, he hadn’t even realized they’d met back then.”

“What the heck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ask Kaori yourself if you really want to know. It’s not for me to say.”

“Then is the reason Kaori was always talking to Nagumo in class because she... well... liked... him?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“.....” Kouki scowled bitterly. Even though it was the truth, he hadn’t wanted to hear it. For her part, Shizuku didn’t really care if Kouki liked it or not.

Shizuku’s lack of sympathy annoyed Kouki, and he started whining to her.

“Why him? Back when we were in Japan, he was a nobody. Just a lazy, unmotivated otaku who wasn’t even good at studying or sports. Always smiling like an idiot. He just did whatever it took to escape the situation he found himself in... He wasn’t even that nice to Kaori... Plus, he was an otaku... I’d never treat Kaori like that. I was always nice to her. I did everything I could for her... so how come Nagumo’s the one with the harem? He doesn’t even respect those girls! Besides, he’s a murderer! He killed that demon, even though she was helpless to resist. There’s something wrong with him! I knew it, it’s just too weird that Kaori likes him. He must have done something to— Guaah!?”

Before he could get so heated up that he started misinterpreting reality again, Shizuku hit him with another forehead flick. This time it had the added power of her No Tempo behind it. Kouki glared at her, but she just ignored him. She was getting tired of his bullshit.

“This is a bad habit of yours, you know that? How many times have I told you not to make baseless assumptions?”

“I don’t make baseless assumptions...”

“Yes you do. Kouki, you don’t even know the first thing about Nagumo-kun. Not about what he was like in Japan, or what he’s like now. All of those girls

looked happy to be with him, you know that? You're the one ignoring reality and interpreting things however you want... Even though all you really want is to convince yourself that Nagumo-kun's some kind of demon who doesn't deserve Kaori. If that's not making baseless assumptions, I don't know what is."

"B-But... he still killed someone!"

It was a poor argument, but Shizuku still hesitated for a second. After some deliberation though, she came to a conclusion and spoke with conviction.

"Back then, I was planning on killing her too. I just didn't have the strength to do it. From now on... if we run into enemies like that again, I'll strike to kill. In order to survive, in order to protect those important to me, I'll need to do it. I'm not sure if I'll have the confidence to really go through with killing someone when the time comes, but... Well, at the very least, I tried to kill her too... Do you think I'm a murderer as well?"

Kouki was stunned by Shizuku's confession. He couldn't believe his strong, caring, responsible, and above all, righteous childhood friend would even consider killing someone. It was like he suddenly didn't know her anymore. However, he could sense a shadow of the fear and regret she'd felt from behind her wry smile. In the end, Kouki just silently shook his head.

Shizuku continued talking, her words meant more for herself than for Kouki.

"Of course his transformation was pretty surprising. Considering how he was back in Japan, it's almost like he's a different person now. Still, Kaori seemed to think he was the same Hajime Nagumo at the core. And it's not like he's completely changed... We can't forget that he came here to save us. He just killed that demon for us in our stead."

"Are you saying killing her was the right thing to do?"

"No... I don't think murder can ever be 'right.' No matter the circumstances, murder is murder... I can't really justify that, and I don't think anyone should."

"Then..."

"But you know, I don't think we have the right to judge Nagumo-kun for it. After all, the reason he did it was because we were too weak to do it ourselves..."

They, who'd just powerlessly watched from the sidelines, had no right to complain. It was their own fault that they hadn't been strong enough to guide things to a conclusion they'd wanted. They could hardly blame Hajime for his choice when they'd left the decision to him.

When Kouki thought back to how he hadn't been able to do anything, he fell silent. Shizuku had a point. Hajime was the one who'd saved them. *But still, murder is wrong!* Kouki scowled again.

Seeing his unwillingness to relent, Shizuku finally talked about all of the things she'd implicitly understood when they'd come to this world.

"You know, I actually like that straightforward and righteous side of you, Kouki."

"Shizuku..."

"But still, that doesn't mean you can just assume you're always right."

"You want me to doubt myself?"

"Yes. You need a strong will to achieve your goals. But blindly believing in yourself and rushing forward without thinking about anything will warp even the purest of ideals. That's why you need to learn to think about the situation you're in, and the people involved at all times. You need to really question whether your will is still 'justice' or not. And if it's not, is it something you still want to do regardless? Sometimes what you want to do isn't always the objectively right thing to do. In fact, I think living a just life is one of the hardest things to do. Ever since coming to this world, it's something I've been thinking about... After all, even we've killed monsters."

Kouki was shocked. He hadn't thought Shizuku would have been worried about killing monsters, of all things.

"Kouki. You have to understand that you're not always right. And sometimes, even when you are, that sense of righteousness is dangerous. Though this time, you weren't right at all. Just jealous."

"I-I wasn't jealous, I was just..."

"You look pretty lame when you try to make excuses like that."

“.....” Kouki hung his head and once again examined the moon’s reflection in the water. This time, though, his expression wasn’t as dark. He seemed deep in thought.

Shizuku heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed she’d stopped him from drowning in a negative spiral of his own emotions this time.

Thinking he probably wanted some time to himself, she quietly started heading back to their inn. Kouki called out to her retreating back.

“Shizuku... You won’t leave me, right?”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Please don’t go anywhere, Shizuku.”

“.....”

He was practically begging her now. Had he said those words to any of his fans back in Japan, or the noble ladies here who were infatuated with him, they’d probably have fainted with joy. Sadly, all Shizuku felt was disgust.

He’s probably just depressed over losing Kaori. Shizuku looked down at the shimmering reflection of the moon. The crescent floating on the water’s surface seemed very different from the one she’d been looking at until now.

“I’m not as ephemeral as that moon you’ve been staring at, but... I’m not very fond of clingy guys.” With that, Shizuku walked out of sight. Kouki stared at the alleyway she’d disappeared down for a few minutes before turning back to the moon’s reflection. A certain saying came to mind.

“The moon’s reflection, huh...”

The moon’s reflection is forever out of one’s reach. It meant there were things people could see, like the moon’s reflection, but never make their own. For Kouki, Kaori was the same. Like the reflection he was staring at, he could never make it his.

However, Shizuku had said she wasn’t. In other words, she was still within Kouki’s reach. Though her words right after had been pretty harsh. Kouki smiled bitterly to himself. Why on earth had he spilled his guts out to Shizuku?

Kouki stopped looking at the illusory moon in the water, and stared up at the

real one in the sky. The things he'd always believed were within reach felt so very far away now. Sighing, Kouki began to ponder his stern but kind childhood friend's words.

Whether he changed his attitude or not was all up to him in the end, and so he spent a very long time mulling over his recent experiences.

Three weeks had passed since Kouki and the others had learned of Hajime's survival and Kaori had left their party.

They had all returned to the capital. There was one very important thing they had to do before they headed out again. Help Kouki overcome his reservations against killing people. If he was to fight in this war, he would need to be able to kill, one way or another. Otherwise, he would likely find himself dead before long.

There wasn't much time left. Kouki and the others had heard about the events at Ur. It was clear the demons were gathering their forces. The battle would start soon. And so, it was imperative that Kouki overcome his aversion to killing as fast as possible.

He was currently training for anti-personnel combat with Meld and his knights. Ryutarou, Kondou, Nagayama, and the others had all been somewhat prepared to kill, but their resolve had been shaken when they'd seen Hajime blow the demon's brains out. They accompanied Kouki for his training, wondering all the while if they'd really be able to do it when the time came.

The knights were worried as well. They needed the kids to be ready to kill, but it was meaningless if the mental strain of it broke them.

It was in the middle of this that good news finally reached the castle.

Aiko and her guard had returned. Normally, it fell to Kouki and his charisma to keep everyone in high spirits, but now that he himself was dejected, the other students had no one to turn to. An air of gloom had fallen over the castle. Demoralized from their loss, and still grappling with the issue of murder, the students were on the verge of breaking. The only things holding them together were Shizuku and Nagayama's calm leadership, and Suzu's cheerfulness, but they weren't able to lift the heavy fog that had settled on the students' hearts.

That was why they were all extremely grateful for Aiko's return.

Shizuku was the first to act when they learned she'd come back. She ended training early and ran off to see her. She wanted to exchange information with Aiko before the other students talked to her. Shizuku was worried their opinions about Hajime would bias her objective viewpoint.

She dashed through the halls of the palace, the jet-black sword she'd received from Hajime dangling at her waist. For some reason, the maids all stared longingly at her when she passed by. Even in another world, Shizuku was more popular with the ladies than the guys. Worse, everyone, including older ladies, had taken to calling her "Onee-sama."

Shizuku had read reports about Hajime's exploits in Ur, but she wanted to hear the details directly from Aiko. It was possible her opinion of Hajime could tilt the scales of Kouki's heart in an undesirable direction. So as always, it fell to Shizuku to make sure everyone was taken care of.

"I bet he pulled all sorts of crazy antics in Ur too. I mean, he's strong enough to hand out weapons like this like they're nothing. What do you mean 'It's just sharp and unbreakable?' This katana's probably stronger than any artifact in the kingdom's treasury!" Shizuku traced the jet-black sheath as she mumbled to herself. As she ran to Aiko's room, she recalled the conversation she'd had a few days ago. In order to learn how best to maintain her new sword, she'd visited one of the king's personal blacksmiths.

For lack of a better term, she'd christened her new katana "Black Blade."

At any rate, she'd gone to the best blacksmith in the country and showed them the Black Blade. They'd been respectful at first. She was one of Ehit's chosen warriors after all. However, when they'd appraised her weapon, their manners had gone out of the window. They'd grabbed her shoulders and demanded to know where she'd gotten it from, and whether or not it was something she'd found, or something someone had made for her.

Confused, Shizuku had asked what had gotten the blacksmith so worked up. According to them, the holy sword Kouki was currently using was the only thing that could even compare to the splendor of her weapon. Black Blade didn't have the same capacity to deflect magic that Kouki's holy sword did. Nor could

it output as much energy. However, the precision of the craftsmanship and the strength of the weapon itself far surpassed that of the holy sword's.

Furthermore, by pouring mana into it, Shizuku could elongate the katana. More specifically, a 60-centimeter long blade of wind sprouted from the tip. Not only that, she could sprout more blades from the hilt and fire them off like shockwaves.

Even the sheath had additional features built into it. By pouring mana into that, Shizuku could wrap the sheath in a veil of lightning. Then, by pressing a switch, she could fire needles at supersonic speed from the tip of the sheath.

Lastly, since both the blade and the sheath were made of azantium, they wouldn't ever break, and didn't require maintenance. All Shizuku needed to worry about was occasionally replenishing the stock of needles in the sheath.

The only problem was there were no magic circles anywhere that Shizuku could use to transfer her mana to Black Blade. Hajime had originally designed this for himself, and he could directly control his mana, so as far as everyone else was concerned, it was just a very hard sword that could cut through anything.

Once their amazement had died down, the blacksmith had actually been rather puzzled over this oversight. Why would the weapon's creator add all of these amazing features, but then make them unusable?

Their pride as a blacksmith couldn't let such a defect go unfixed. They'd never be able to make a sword that well-crafted, but they could at least modify this one so it was usable. After three days and three nights of ceaseless work, the kingdom's best blacksmiths had managed to add magic circles to Black Blade. They'd ignored all other work, and had neither eaten nor slept during that time.

Thanks to their efforts, Shizuku could utilize the full potential of Black Blade. Exhausted, the blacksmiths had all been out of commission for the next few days. But each and every one of them had slept with a contended look on their face.

Shizuku brought her thoughts back to reality as she spotted the door to Aiko's room. She knocked, but there was no reply. One of the nearby servants explained that Aiko had gone to give her report to the king and not yet

returned. Shizuku leaned against the wall and decided to wait.

Aiko finally returned after half an hour. Her mouth was a grim slash, and she was heedless of her surroundings. It seemed she was pondering something serious.

She passed by Shizuku, and the door to her own room, without even noticing it. Wondering what on earth had her so lost in thought, Shizuku loudly spoke up.

“Sensei... Sensei!”

“Hwuh!?” Aiko started and looked around wildly. After a few seconds, she spotted Shizuku leaning against the wall. She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

“Yaegashi-san! I haven’t seen you in ages. How are you doing? You’re not hurt, are you? Is everyone alright?” Despite the fact that she was quite clearly struggling with her own problems, she put her students first as always. Shizuku smiled, glad to see that “Ai-chan-sensei” hadn’t changed at all.

The two made small talk for a few minutes before moving on to the main reason of Shizuku’s visit. The two of them went inside Aiko’s room to swap stories.

“I see... So Shimizu-kun was...” A cute claw foot table separated the two girls. They both sipped their black tea and lapsed into thought. Aiko had just finished telling Shizuku what had happened at Ur.

Shimizu’s death weighed heavily on Aiko and Shizuku, too, was saddened to hear of it. Aiko’s shoulders drooped as she thought back to that day. Shizuku didn’t know what to say. Considering how much Aiko valued her students, Shizuku knew it must have been a heavy blow. Even if Hajime’d had a valid reason for killing him.

Still, she did her best to cheer Aiko up.

“What happened to Shimizu-kun is truly unfortunate. But still, I’m glad that you’re okay, Sensei. Thank god Nagumo-kun was around to help you guys.” Shizuku smiled at Aiko, and Aiko smiled back. She didn’t want to burden her

students with her own problems.

“Indeed. You know, when we first reunited with him he acted like he didn’t care about any of us, or this world at all... I can’t believe he’s changed so much that he came to save all of you. To think he’s become the guardian of a little girl too... Hehe, I guess his old self is finally starting to come back. Or maybe he’s simply learning to be kind all over again... Either way, I’m glad to hear he’s not as apathetic as before.”

For some reason, a slight blush spread up Aiko’s face as she said that. Shizuku shot her a puzzled glance. *There’s something off about her expression. She doesn’t look like that when she’s thinking about any of her other students.*

Noticing Shizuku’s gaze, Aiko quickly cut short her reminiscing and cleared her throat loudly. However, the damage had already been done. Shizuku saw the need to probe into this a little further. Her expression wooden, she glared at Aiko. She didn’t want to believe it was possible, but for Kaori’s sake she needed to make sure.

“Sensei. You mentioned that Nagumo-kun saved you from certain death. Can you go into a bit more detail about that?”

“Huh!?”

“I’m just curious how he managed to heal such a fatal wound.”

“W-Well...”

Shizuku had already guessed Hajime had used the same medicine he’d used to heal Meld, but she feigned innocence. Aiko’s blush grew more pronounced. Her eyes darted about the room, and she clearly didn’t want to talk about it. *Suspicious. Too suspicious.* Shizuku went in for the finishing blow.

“Sensei. Did something... happen between you and Nagumo-kun?”

“N-Not at all! Wh-Why would you even ask such a thing? We’ve got a perfectly normal student-teacher relationship!”

“Sensei. Calm down. I didn’t even say anything yet.”

“Ah!”

Aiko started mumbling “I’m a teacher he’s a student, I’m a teacher he’s a

student...” over and over to herself. It was obvious she was rattled.

Shizuku’s worst fears had been confirmed. She wasn’t sure how deep they ran, but she was certain Aiko had feelings for Hajime. *What on earth did you do to Ai-chan, Nagumo-kun!?* Her eyebrows twitched menacingly.

Hajime’s tendency to unconsciously make girls fall for him had become even worse than Kouki’s. The only difference was, Hajime wasn’t as dense as a black hole. Though in this particular instance, it was possible he hadn’t noticed either.

Shizuku looked up at the ceiling and sighed. This was the last place she’d expected to find one of Kaori’s rivals. *Maybe I should start spreading rumors about Hajime’s chuuni nicknames after all...* Shizuku only just managed to reign her anger in.

The two of them cleared their throats and moved on as if nothing had happened.

“Anyway, Sensei. How’d your report to the king go? It seemed pretty serious from what I heard.” Aiko frowned angrily. Whatever had happened in there, it wasn’t good.

“The Holy Church has branded Nagumo-kun a heretic.”

“What...!? Why? Actually, I can probably guess why, but... aren’t they being too hasty in their judgment?”

Hajime’s strength was unparalleled. His tiny party had wiped out a monster army 60,000 strong. Each of his companions was strong beyond measure, and they all wielded artifacts no one had seen before. Despite which, the Holy Church had decided they were going to oppose him. Shizuku could understand why the nobles and priests considered him dangerous.

However, it was still too reckless to declare him a heretic without even considering the consequences.

Now that he was considered an enemy of the gods, anyone could try to kill him at any time, and it would be sanctioned by the government. It was entirely possible they would mobilize holy paladins, or even the army to purge him, which meant that Hajime would see them all as his enemy, and likely slaughter the lot of them. The nobles and the priests should have realized this danger.

And yet, they still chose to oppose Hajime. Their decision baffled Shizuku.

Aiko nodded sympathetically.

“I feel the same way. Besides, Nagumo-kun was the one who saved Ur and its people. I told them they shouldn’t make an enemy out of him just because he won’t follow their orders, but they wouldn’t listen. I thought I’d have more influence with the king after Nagumo-kun worked so hard to make me famous, but it seems that’s not the case.” Aiko looked down and shook her head.

“According to my guards, rumors of ‘The Fertility Goddess and her Holy Knight’ have already started spreading through the land. To the people, declaring him a heretic is the same as declaring me one. That’s why I’d thought my words would carry some weight with them. But they still passed down that decree. Now that I think about it, it’s strange. Ishtar-san was always a devout believer, so his behavior is understandable, but there was something off about the king and his nobles when I was giving my report...”

“That’s certainly worrying. What could they possibly have been thinking... At any rate, our problem now is who they’re going to send to kill Nagumo-kun. Considering how strong he is, they only have one option.”

“That’s right! They’ll probably...”

“Ask us to do it, yep. But there’s no way I’m doing that. I like living. Just the thought of fighting Nagumo-kun sends shivers down my spine.” Shizuku shivered, and Aiko gave her a sympathetic smile.

Aiko knew she needed to tell everyone what Hajime had told her about the mad gods that ruled this world, and what his true goals were, before Ishtar tricked Kouki into fighting Hajime. She had no proof, though. It was possible Kouki and the others wouldn’t believe her. After all, they’d fought on thus far thinking the gods would send them home if they won the war.

However, the truth was that those gods were twisted psychopaths who reveled in watching people suffer. Their only hope of returning home lay in conquering the labyrinths and finding the hidden lairs of all the Liberators. Unfortunately, that was a hard tale to swallow.

Will they believe me? Or will they think I’m just spouting nonsense and keep

fighting like they have been until now? Either way, Aiko had to at least persuade the students not to trust the Holy Church too much. She'd had her own suspicions, but Hajime's tale, and their current attitude had convinced her.

"Yaegashi-san. There's one other thing Nagumo-kun told me. He didn't want to tell anyone else because he thought they'd just get angry at him for saying it."

"What... was it?"

"Well, it has to do with the gods the Holy Church worships, and what Nagumo-kun's true goal is. There's no proof backing up any of it, but... I think it's important that I tell everyone. Could you gather everyone tonight... No, by this evening?"

"That's... No, forget it. I could get them all right now if you want?"

"No. I don't want it to seem suspicious. It's better to wait until a time we'd all be together anyway, like dinner. That way we'll be able to pass it off like we're just trying to catch up with each other."

"I see... Alright then. We'll do it at dinner."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before parting ways. Neither of them knowing what would happen between then and dinner.

The sun was just beginning to set. Aiko strode through one of the castle's deserted hallways. Its cold stone walls were painted a brilliant orange by the sun's dying rays. The dark shadows that lay over the areas not lit by the sun contrasted beautifully with the light.

Aiko was admiring the sunset when suddenly she heard footsteps. She came to a stop, wondering who it was. She looked in front of her and saw a female figure hiding in the shadows. The figure was standing in the middle of the hallway, her back ramrod straight. She was wearing the traditional garb of an Ehit priestess.

She spoke in a beautiful, but eerily inorganic voice.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Aiko Hatayama. I have come to

collect you.” The woman’s robotic voice sent chills down Aiko’s spine.

“Umm, nice to meet you? What do you mean you’ve come to collect me? I was just about to go eat dinner with my students.”

“I’m afraid your plans have been changed. You must accompany me to the temple.”

“Huh?”

The woman stated it as a command, not a question. She stepped out of the shadows, and Aiko got a good look at her for the first time. Aiko gasped when she saw who it was. Her supernatural beauty left Aiko awestruck.

Silver hair that scintillated in the sunlight, striking blue eyes, and an ageless appearance that made her seem like both a mature woman and a little girl at the same time. She was the perfect embodiment of feminine beauty. She was tall for a woman, almost 170 centimeters. Aiko had to crane her neck to look up at her. Her skin was like fine porcelain, and her limbs were slender. Her breasts were modest, but not small. They fit her frame perfectly.

However, her face was utterly expressionless. So much so that it seemed like she was wearing a mask. She had the kind of beauty that stirred artists, but at the same time, she seemed entirely artificial.

The woman continued speaking.

“My master is displeased with what you are attempting to do. They would find it much more... interesting, if your students continued down their current path. Thus, I must remove you from the game board until events have run their course.”

“Wh-What are you...”

The woman took a few steps forward. Aiko took a few steps back. The woman’s priestess robe rustled and her eyes glimmered. A second later, a haze descended upon Aiko’s consciousness. She instinctively focused her mind, like she did when she was trying to cast magic, making the haze disperse.

“I understand now. You truly are worthy of the title ‘goddess.’ To think you could repel my charm. Very well, I suppose I shall have to take you back by

force.”

“S-Stay back! Wh-What are you after!?” Aiko began chanting a spell. However, before she could finish, the woman closed the distance between them and slammed her fist into Aiko’s solar plexus.

As she felt her consciousness slip away, Aiko could faintly make out the last words the woman said.

“Fear not. I won’t kill you. You are a very precious pawn. Plus, your abilities may be required later in eliminating that irregular.”

Hajime’s face flashed in her mind. Even though she knew there was no way her voice could reach him, she tried to warn him before her consciousness was completely swallowed up.

Nagumo-kun!

“Hmm?” The woman picked Aiko up as easily as she would a feather and threw the teacher over her shoulder. She then turned around, looking behind her suspiciously. After a few minutes of careful scrutiny, she walked up to one of the guest chambers and opened the door.

She made sure her footsteps could be heard clearly, then stomped over to the closet. Without a moment’s hesitation, she threw its doors open.

However, there was no one inside. The woman tilted her head in confusion, and once more examined the room. Eventually, she decided it must just have been her imagination and headed out of the room.

Once she was gone, a tiny whisper echoed through the silent room.

“I have to... tell someone...” There was still no one in the room. However, the faint sound of footsteps could be heard going in the opposite direction the woman had left in.

A few seconds later, silence filled the room once more.

Extra Chapter: Kaori Shirasaki, Age 17. Specialty: Shock and Awe

The first time she'd ever seen him was in a busy street filled with people. On that day, she'd had to go to the supermarket one city over to get groceries.

She'd been staring at her text messages and going over the long list of ingredients. Kaori's mom was an exceptional cook, but the spices she needed to make her dishes could only be found in specialty markets.

Still, in return for going out of her way to get obscure ingredients, Kaori got to eat three-star meals every single day. It was hard to find places that stocked the things Kaori needed sometimes, but it was kind of fun to go exploring and see new places.

Besides, Kaori never could say no to her mom. Not that she ever wanted to, anyway. After all, her mom was so nice. Plus, she was elegant and beautiful and everything Kaori idolized. Though when she got mad, she turned into a demon. Whenever she glared at Kaori, it felt as if she were being swallowed up by some monstrous beast. Even her father couldn't stand up to Shirayasha, Kaori's mom. In fact, it was almost pathetic how easily he capitulated to his wife's demands. Just what was it about her mother that was so scary? *I feel like it'd be dangerous to probe too deeply into that.* Kaori spotted the supermarket that was her destination. At the same time, she heard someone yelling in the distance.

"Hey granny. These are vintage jeans, you know that? Do you have any idea how much they cost? An apology won't cut it, old hag! You better pay me back for this!"

"Really, I'm so sorry. I'll pay the cleaning costs, so please..."

"Didn't you listen to a word I said!? No amount of dry cleaning can fix this!"

Kaori turned to see what the commotion was. A terrified young boy was hiding behind his grandmother, who was continually bowing her head to a

group of what appeared to be university students.

The university students seemed to be threatening the poor old lady. To be honest, they seemed more like delinquents than students.

The boy's takoyaki had spilled to the ground, and a very tiny amount of the sauce had splashed on the delinquent's "vintage" jeans.

Kaori understood what must be going on. It's not like the delinquents were being very subtle about it.

"What should I do... The right thing to do would be to save them, right?" Kaori mumbled to herself.

But maybe his jeans really are as expensive as he's saying. If they are though, why would he wear them in a busy street like this? Besides, normally you wouldn't ask someone to compensate you if it's just an accident. Regardless, they were in the wrong for terrifying such a little boy over something so trivial.

But even if helping is the right thing to do... I'm scared... Kaori stood stock still, unable to take a single step forward. The more she thought to herself she needed to save them, the more she grew terrified of the delinquents. Her mind focused on their dyed hair, the familiarity with which they shook the poor grandmother down, and the intimidating glint in their eyes. Her legs began to tremble.

"S-Someone..." Kaori frantically looked around, looking for someone to turn to. She knew it was pretty pathetic of her to beg someone else to help, but that was all she could think of to do.

However, while there were a few other curious onlookers, all of them seemed unwilling to even meet her eye, much less step in.

I suppose I don't have any right to blame them. After all, I'm doing the same thing.

"O-Oh, I know. I'll call Shizuku-chan... and Kouki-kun and Ryutarou-kun." Kaori suddenly remembered her friends, who were much more used to these kinds of conflicts than she was. She pulled out her cell phone and began dialing Shizuku's number, but before she could press the call button, the situation grew worse.

“Hmph, I’m getting tired of this shit. Just hand over your wallet, you hag. I bet you don’t have enough money on you to pay for this. We’re gonna go to the bank so you can transfer me what I need. I need your wallet to make sure you don’t try to run away.”

“B-But...”

“Hey, it’s your job to clean up the mess your little brat made! You better not be trying to talk your way out of this!” The delinquents were planning on squeezing the old lady for everything she had. Kaori began to panic. She looked around frantically, and nearly forgot about her phone call.

“Shizuku-chan... won’t make it in time. I-I have to do something about this myself!”

Kaori continued repeating the same thing over and over, while making no actual progress. *It’s just so scary. I’m terrified, but... they say women are made of courage. When you’re not sure what to do, start by taking a step forward!* Just as Kaori was about to do what Shizuku and Kouki were always telling her not to, something else happened.

“Umm... Don’t you think asking for her wallet is a bit much?” A boy walked up to the group of delinquents. He was about the same age as Kaori. She didn’t recognize his uniform, so she guessed he went to one of the schools nearby.

Kaori put down the foot she’d raised and once again began to stare.

The boy seemed ordinary in every way. He didn’t seem dazzlingly charming like Kouki, nor was he built like a bear, like Ryutarou. The only thing that stood out about him at all was his troubled smile. It seemed to Kaori that he’d have to be pretty brave to smile under these circumstances. Despite all of that, Kaori couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Huh!? You’ve got nothing to do with this, so scram before I beat your face in!”

“Uh well, I guess you’re right that I don’t have anything to do with this... b-but you know... I think it’d be best for everyone involved if you just took the cleaning fee and left it at that...” Though he seemed pretty scared himself, the boy wedged himself between the old lady and her harassers. He bowed deeply

to the delinquents.

He was purposely being evasive in an attempt to defuse the tense atmosphere. However, all he succeeded in doing was make the delinquents even madder.

“Fine then, you pay for her. It’ll cost 10k for the cleaning.” To that, the boy gave a simple reply.

“Sorry, I don’t have the money.” Despite his evasive attitude, his reply was surprisingly direct. Kaori actually found it kind of cute.

The delinquent grabbed the boy by his collar and lifted him up. The boy’s face paled, and sweat began pouring down his forehead.

He tried to talk his way out of it, but the delinquent just angrily thrust him to the ground. The delinquent looked even angrier than before. Kaori had seen Kouki and the others get into plenty of fights. She’d seen those kinds of eyes before, and she knew from experience what the delinquent was going to do next.

She opened her mouth to yell out a warning, but before she could—

“Gah!” The boy grunted. The delinquent had already started kicking him. As she’d thought, he was someone who had no compunctions about using violence.

The old lady tried to help the poor boy up.

“It’s okay, you’ve done enough,” she said softly as her grandson sobbed silently.

However, even the onlookers couldn’t ignore such a blatant display of violence. A few of them had pulled out their cell phones to presumably call the police. At least, Kaori hoped it was the police.

That’s right, the police! Why didn’t I think of that!? I’m so stupid! She’d gotten so used to Kouki and the other jumping in and resolving problems by force that she’d totally forgotten that the police were what normal people relied on for help.

God, I’m an idiot! While Kaori was lamenting her own uselessness, the boy

looked up at his attackers. His expression was so serious that Kaori momentarily forgot about the predicament he was in. She couldn't be sure, but it felt like the temperature rose a little even though it was still midwinter. Things progressed rapidly after that.

Grimacing in pain, the boy opened his mouth.

"Please, can't you be satisfied with just the cleaning fee? If not, I have another solution in mind." Kaori's eyes went wide with surprise. *Is he planning on fighting them? Maybe he's actually really good at martial arts or something?*

The delinquent was thinking the same thing, and his lips curled up into a sneer.

"Oh, you wanna go? Fine, bring it!" The lead delinquent cracked his knuckles menacingly. He was more than ready for this fight. However...

"I'm truly sorry for all of the trouble I've caused!" The boy interrupted him by apologizing at the top of his lungs. He then prostrated himself before the delinquent in an exaggerated fashion.

"The hell?" The delinquent, who'd been expecting a fight, was at a loss for words. He was so stunned that he actually took a few steps backward.

Everyone on the street stopped to stare. It wasn't every day that you saw someone prostrating themselves on the street.

It was the first time Kaori had seen something like this too.

Heedless of the attention he was attracting, the boy continued yelling.

"Please, find it in your heart to forgive them! I know this poor boy and his elderly grandmother ruined your precious jeans by accidentally spilling sauce on them! I know it's a fiendish act that deserves nothing but the most horrific retribution!"

"Huh? Uh, wait, I-I mean..." The delinquent faltered. Even for someone as shameless as him, it was embarrassing to hear a "simple accident" be referred to as a fiendish act. The effect was multiplied by the fact that the boy was kneeling at his feet.

However, the boy's eloquent apology didn't stop there.

“In truth, a million yen, no even five million yen, no even ten million yen wouldn’t be enough to make up for the wrongs we’ve committed upon you!”

“T-Ten million!? Now hold on a second, I never said it cost—” The delinquents started backing away. Even the old lady and the onlookers were surprised by the boy’s sudden outburst. However, that was exactly what he wanted. The situation grew more chaotic.

“Still, this poor old lady cannot possibly hope to pay such a price. She has to pay off the huge debt her late husband left her. Though her neighbors all vilify her for being a demonic old lady, she works hard every day just to save up enough money to see her grandson once every year! Can you imagine how much blood, sweat, and tears went into that single ball of takoyaki that young boy spilled!?”

No way!? That old lady really has to deal with all that!? The other onlookers, and even the delinquents seemed shocked. In truth, the old lady herself seemed just as confused.

“Umm, actually, my husband is still alive. And he’s not in debt...” She didn’t deny the part about her neighbors vilifying her, though.

Before she could argue any further, the boy continued.

“So please, I beg of you! Show mercy to these poor souls! Forgive them for their transgressions, I beseech youuuuuuu!” His voice resounded throughout the street.

Everyone present was likely confused as to what exactly was going on.

However, the boy’s speech was effective.

The delinquents were bright red with embarrassment. *I almost feel bad for them.* The boy’s actions had made them out to be some sort of exaggerated villains from a cheap B-rated drama. If they tried to shake down the old lady under these circumstances, they’d probably have their social lives destroyed.

“Y-You’re sick in the head, you weirdo! What do you even know about this old lady, anyway!” Of course, they tried to clear their names. However, before they could get more than a few words out, the boy interrupted again.

“I’m truly so very sorryyyyyyyyyyy!” Kaori didn’t think his voice could get any louder, but it did. It sounded so heartfelt, too. He was kneeling and everything.

“Sh-Shut up! Let’s go somewhere else and—”

“Please, anything but ten million yen! You’ll kill this poor lady!”

“Hey wait, I never asked for that—”

“Please, please, I’m begging youuuuuuuuu! Have mercyyyyyy!”

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck—”

“Mercyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” The delinquent grabbed the boy by the hair and forcibly tried to pull him up. When that didn’t work, he kicked and spat at him, but that had no effect either. It was like the boy was glued to the ground. Finally, the delinquents began to panic.

The longer they stayed there, the worse things got for them. Now even the old lady was playing along, hiding her face and trembling. Things would come to a head soon if someone didn’t do something.

In the end, the delinquents relented.

“Shit, forget it, I’m done here! Let’s head home!” The lead delinquent ran away as fast as his legs would carry them.

“Wait, H-Hide-chan!?” His two lackeys followed after him.

An awkward silence hung in the air. No one wanted to be the first to move, but eventually, the kneeling boy rose to his feet. He ignored the multitude of stares directed at him and grabbed the old lady’s wallet off the floor. He turned to face her and handed it back.

“Th-Thank you,” she stammered. Her smile seemed a little stiff.

“Sorry for turning it into something awkward. Anyway, I’m gonna go home now, bye!” With that, the young boy dashed off into the crowd. The old lady reached out to stop him, but before she could say anything he was gone.

“That was one amazing kid...” The crowd began to disperse, but Kaori remained rooted to the spot. She was looking in the direction the boy had run off in. She could feel a slight warmth blossoming inside her chest.

“And then, and then, you know what he did, Shizuku-chan? He just ran before anyone could say anything... Hey Shizuku-chan, are you listening to me? You haven’t said anything for a while...”

“I’m listening, I’m listening. This is the tenth time you’ve told me about the amazing kneeling boy, you know that right?”

“Not amazing kneeling boy, Shizuku-chan, Amazing boy who kneeled in the street! You make it sound like his kneeling was what was amazing.”

“Ah, my mistake. Sorry. Anyway, Kaori. It’s 2 AM, and we have school tomorrow. I get that you’re excited, but could you please stop now, for my health’s sake?”

“What? No way. It’s already this late!? S-Sorry, Shizuku-chan.”

Kaori looked at her clock in surprise. She couldn’t believe she’d spent so long talking to Shizuku. When she’d gotten back home, she’d felt this burning desire to tell someone about what she’d witnessed. And since Shizuku was Kaori’s best friend, she was the natural first choice. It had been 10 PM when she’d called. Four hours had passed while she repeated the same story over and over.

She felt guilty for keeping her best friend up for so long.

“Mmm, it’s fine. I’d like it if you don’t tell the whole story an 11th time, but... I get that it’s important to you. Hehe, but you know, I never thought I’d see the day you’d be this interested in a boy... I can’t even count how many guys’ hearts you’ve broken by now. I guess your spring has finally come.”

What’s Shizuku-chan talking about? And why does she sound so happy? Kaori easily imagined the grin that must have been on Shizuku’s face.

“Shizuku-chan, what do you mean? I’m not a swordsman like you, why would I be breaking anyone’s anything? Also, it’s still winter.”

“Kaori. In a way, I’m kind of happy you’re this much of an airhead. Also, just because I train with swords doesn’t mean I’m actually hurting people, alright!? Please stop assuming I go around killing people like some kind of maniac!”

Oops, I made her mad. Still, what exactly is she trying to say?

“Haaah... Whatever, I get it now. You’re just not aware of it. Well, he is your

first, as far as I know... And it's possible it's not even really a crush yet... Anyway, you should take a good hard look at your own feelings. Granted, considering how dense you are, you might not be able to figure it out after all. As your friend, should I just lay it all out for you? Hmm..." Shizuku started mumbling to herself.

Did Shizuku-chan just insult me?

"U-Umm, Shizuku-chan?"

"Huh!? Ahem... Uh, where was I?"

Now that Shizuku was paying attention again, Kaori could bring up the other thing she'd called Shizuku for. For some reason, she felt embarrassed to ask. She could feel the heat rising on her face. *Why is this so embarrassing?*

"U-Umm... there's somewhere I want you to go with me..."

"Oh, what's this? No need to hesitate. We're friends, right?"

Bolstered by Shizuku's words, Kaori continued.

"Thanks, Shizuku-chan. So uh, could you come with me to that boy's school tomorrow?"

"Que?"

Why'd she suddenly start talking in Spanish?

"Like I said, could you come with me to his school tomorrow? I, uhh... want to talk to him... A-And maybe see if he'd want to be friends."

Oh no. My face is definitely red. Why's this so embarrassing? Kaori started banging her feet on her bed. She then wrapped herself in her blanket and started rolling around. After a minute of silence, Shizuku finally responded.

"Now hold on just a minute here. You met the guy today, right Kaori?"

"Yep. I wish I'd had the chance to talk to him."

"If you didn't even talk to him, how do you know what school he goes to?"

"I looked it up, duh. I just made a list of all the middle schools in the area and checked to see which one had his uniform."

“.....”

Shizuku-chan’s really smart, so how come she couldn’t figure that out? And why’s she not saying anything now? Maybe she’s just really sleepy?

“Earth to Shizuku-chaaan. Sorry, are you tired? Should I call back later?”

“Ah, um, sorry. I just saw a side of you I didn’t think existed...” Shizuku cleared her throat.

“Anyway, I’m fine with it. We can go together. I’m used to you jumping headfirst into things without thinking by now. But you don’t even know his name, right? How are you going to find him?”

“He’d probably be annoyed if we went around the school asking for him, so... I was thinking we’d just wait by the front gate until he comes out. If we can’t find him there, we’ll try waiting at the place I saw him today.”

“You’re starting to sound like a stalker... Though I guess that’s really all you can do if you don’t even know his name.”

Come on Shizuku-chan, I’m not a stalker. Though the more she considered her actions, the more Kaori realized she was beginning to act like one. *Anyway, that’s not important right now.*

“Y-Yeah. If I’d known it would be this hard, I would have taken a picture of him when I had the chance... I’ll make sure to get one next time I see him.”

“Please don’t.” Shizuku’s voice was surprisingly stern. After that, Kaori heard Shizuku muttering to herself.

“Shit, I never realized my best friend was a natural at this...”

Wow, I’ve never heard Shizuku-chan curse. Is she really alright? Maybe I should hang up and let her sleep.

“Anyway, let’s go to his school tomorrow. I’m definitely going to find him and a-ask him to be my friend. And then, we’ll start hanging out on our days off, and maybe I’ll even get to go to his house... Ehehe. Shizuku-chan, I’m gonna do this!”

“It’s too late to stop her now. Mysterious kneeling boy, I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.” Shizuku apologized to the nameless boy whose life would

soon be turned upside-down.

Shizuku-chan's definitely acting weird today. I really should let her sleep. Sorry, Shizuku-chan.

A year had passed since that fateful day that Kaori met Hajime.

In that time, she spent time with her friends as usual. Getting wrapped up in Kouki's crazy antics, getting Kouki wrapped up in her crazy antics, and so on. Her final year of middle school was nothing if not hectic.

She spent a great deal of her time waiting around Hajime's school hoping to meet him, but in the end they never met.

Kaori herself didn't understand why she was so obsessed with him, but she knew she didn't want that to be only time she ever saw him.

As time passed, she grew to regret not calling out to him when she'd first seen him. Or at the very least, not taking a picture of him. *God, I'm such an idiot.*

Shizuku made sure to accompany Kaori every time she went Hajime-spotting. Shizuku couldn't afford to leave Kaori alone when she became like this. She knew from experience Kaori would just rush headlong into everything without even thinking. When Kaori had tried to tell Kouki and Ryutarou about the incident, Shizuku had stopped her. And so, their attempts to discover the true identity of Kaori's mystery crush remained a secret between the two of them.

Unfortunately, a year passed without Kaori ever finding him.

It was spring now, and she was a high schooler. Today was the day of her entrance ceremony.

The cherry blossoms were in full bloom. Their petals fluttered through the air as Kaori made her way to her new school. She was a little disappointed at being unable to meet the boy she was searching for, but she was still excited to start her new life as a high schooler.

"Kaori, what are you doing? If you don't hurry, we'll miss the entrance ceremony."

"Ehehe. Sorry, Shizuku-chan, I spaced out watching the cherry blossoms.

They’re so pretty.”

“Heh. I know what you mean. I could watch them for hours too.”

Shizuku stood next to Kaori and looked up at the blossoms. Her ponytail swayed gently in the breeze. Though she was just a high schooler, Shizuku’s mature expression made her seem like an adult. It seemed to Kaori that Shizuku had really grown up in the past year.

“So pretty...” Kaori mumbled.

“Yeah, they really are,” Shizuku replied while looking up. Kaori smiled. *I meant you, dummy.*

“Not the trees. I meant you, Shizuku-chan. You look like a goddess.”

“Wh-Where’d that come from?” Shizuku looked away in embarrassment. Her face and ears were bright red.

Oh, she’s blushing. How cute.

Kaori was starting to grow a little worried. Even though Shizuku was so beautiful, she still hadn’t ever had a boyfriend, or even a crush. At first Kaori had thought Shizuku might have had feelings for Kouki, since they’d known each other for so long, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. *It’d be terrible if Shizuku-chan got duped by some playboy because she’s too inexperienced. As her best friend, I need to warn her.*

“Alright, Shizuku-chan. You better listen up.”

“Kaori, who are you trying to imitate this time?”

“This is serious, girl! Anyway, you’re cute, Shizuku-chan. And really beautiful. Now that we’re in high school, boys are going to be all over you. But my dad taught me that all boys are wolves. You need to be more careful or you’ll get tricked by some boy who’s only after your body! Got it!? You need to watch out for any boy that tries to talk to you!”

“Kaori, do you know what a boomerang is?”

Where’d that come from?

“It’s that thing that comes back to you after you throw it, right?”

“That’s right. It’s that thing that comes back to you after you throw it. And your words right now are a boomerang.”

Huh? How come Shizuku-chan’s looking at me like that? Shizuku swept her gaze around the courtyard. Kaori looked around too, wondering what she was talking about. A bunch of students had gathered around the two of them. Most of them were male. Whenever Kaori’s gaze swept past one of them, they’d hurriedly look away.

“It’s been like this the whole time. Seriously, there’s a limit to how defenseless you can get. You should be more careful yourself, Kaori.” Shizuku grabbed Kaori’s cheeks and pulled on them.

“That hursh, Shizuku-shan! Shtop iiiit.”

“I can’t help it, your cheeks are too soft. I didn’t think there’d be this many people at the gym already, but I guess you’re just a people magnet. You sheltered, airheaded little girl.”

Shizuku continued toying with Kaori’s cheeks until Ryutarou finally came to get the two of them. Quite a few of the onlookers had nosebleeds by then, but a little blood loss was a small price to pay for the heavenly sight they’d been treated to.

Finally, it was time for the entrance ceremony. Shizuku, Kaori, and Ryutarou were all in the same class, so they sat next to each other. Kouki was as well, but as he was the freshman representative, he had to give his speech first.

“Do you think Kouki-kun’s nervous?”

“I doubt it. Kouki’s never been nervous in his life.”

“Yeah. He gave the middle school opening speech too, so he’s used to it.”

Shizuku and Ryutarou don’t seem worried at all. Guess I can’t really imagine anything making Kouki-kun nervous either. He’s always brimming with confidence. Plus, he’s our leader. And he was popular with the girls even in middle school. He’s probably so used to dealing with crowds now that he could give this speech in his sleep.

The principal finished his speech, his wig nearly falling off multiple times, and Kouki took the stage. The crowd erupted in cheers. The entire auditorium shook from the force of the girls' voices.

"I-I expected something like this... but it still amazes me every time." Shizuku watched the proceedings with a wooden expression.

I totally get how you feel. It was like they had suddenly stepped into an idol concert. The fanaticism of Kouki's female fans was certainly at the same level as idol fans.

Naturally, Kouki responded to the adulation with his trademark dazzling smile. He wasn't perturbed by the cheers at all.

Eventually, the cheers died down and Kouki began his freshman address. His fans hung on to his every word. It was like he was the head of some cult.

Halfway through his speech, Kaori heard some of the boys mutter to each other.

"Dude, look. That guy's straight up sleeping through all of this."

"I know people sleep all the time during stuff like this, but I can't believe the noise didn't wake him up... He's one heavy sleeper."

Someone slept through those cheers!? Kaori turned around to see who it was. The boy sitting directly behind her blushed when his gaze met hers, and he hurriedly turned away. Kaori smiled at him, mentally apologizing for startling him. The smile sent the poor boy's brain into overdrive. *I didn't know someone's eyes could roll that far back into their head.*

After exchanging the required amount of pleasantries, Kaori turned her attention to the boy sitting one seat further back. When she saw who it was, she gasped.

"Ah." Her heart skipped a beat.

The boy lazing in his chair with his arms folded across his chest was the same one she'd been searching for.

"It's him." Kaori's gaze was glued to him. She'd spent a whole year looking for him, hoping to talk to him again. And there he was, sitting right behind her.

Oh my god, my heart's beating so fast. I'm pretty sure everyone else can hear it too. Kaori zoned out Kouki's speech. The rest of the world faded away, and all that remained in her sight was the boy. All other sounds vanished. Her senses were focused only on him.

"Kaori. Earth to Kaori. Hey!"

"Hwuh!?" Kaori found herself forcibly brought back to reality. There was another round of cheering that was so loud it hurt Kaori's eardrums. *Looks like Kouki-kun's speech is over.*

The girls were going absolutely crazy. The auditorium once again came into view. Kaori noticed Shizuku-chan was shaking her shoulders.

"Hurry up and turn around! The teachers are glaring at you! Plus, that poor boy will die of blood loss if you keep looking back any longer!"

"O-Oh, okay." Kaori reluctantly tore her eyes away from the boy and turned back to the front.

Wow, that other kid really has a massive nosebleed... Wait, now's not the time to be worrying about that. Shizuku-chan's right, the teachers are all staring at me.

"What's gotten into you?" When the teachers finally stopped glaring at them, Shizuku turned to Kaori and whispered in her ear. Kaori clasped her hands over her chest and tried to calm the wild beating of her heart. Still a little flustered, she turned to Shizuku.

"U-Umm, he's here. He's *here.* What do I do, Shizuku-chan?"

"He? Who's he... Wait, no way? *That* he? Where!?"

"Behind us. Two rows back, the boy who's sleeping."

Shizuku turned around skeptically. *She doesn't mean the kid with the nosebleed, right?* The boy, thinking Shizuku might have an interest in him too, hurriedly straightened himself up, blood running down his face all the while. The boys sitting next to him gave him a look of pity.

Shizuku ignored the lot of them and spotted the sleeping boy sitting another row back.

“That kid who’s sleeping through all this noise is the one you’ve been looking for?”

“Y-Yes. I’m sure of it. What do I do, Shizuku-chan? If he’s sitting that close to us, that means he’s in the same class, right? What do I dooo!?”

I feel like my heart’s going to fly right out of my chest at this rate. There was a mini-Kaori jumping for joy inside her head. *Do miracles like this really happen in real life? I spent a whole year looking for him and now he’s just sitting behind me...* The world was cruel and kind in equal measure.

Unable to control her swelling emotions, Kaori grabbed Shizuku’s arm and started tugging on it.

The two of them were talking in hushed voices, so Ryutarou hadn’t heard what she’d said. He looked at them in bewilderment, wondering what was going on. Everyone sitting around them, and the teachers that had been glaring at Kaori earlier, looked to see what the commotion was.

However, Kaori was too preoccupied to notice.

Shizuku smiled and gently patted Kaori’s head to calm her down.

“Good for you, Kaori. As for what you should do, obviously you should ask him ou— Ahem, ask him to be your friend. Spend these three years of high school with him and make as many memories as you can. Basically, just get closer to him.” Shizuku’s words helped calm Kaori down.

She began envisioning what it would be like.

Going to school together with him. Making pointless small talk about what they’d eaten for breakfast, or if they’d finished their homework on time. Based on what she knew of him, the boy seemed pretty laid-back. He’d probably not put much effort into his appearance and come to school with bed hair and crumpled shirts.

We could eat lunch together every day. I could even make him lunch... and then after school we’d walk around town and just spend time together. It’d be nice to go to cafes and stuff every day, but I don’t have the money for that. Plus, what if people mistook us for a couple!? Kaori’s heart began to race as she thought of the years that were to come.

Just thinking about it made her happy. *These are definitely going to be the best three years of my life.*

Oh wait, there's still one big problem...

"Wait a second, Shizuku-chan! What am I supposed to say to his parents!?"

"How'd you jump to that already!? I get that you're excited, but you're taking this fantasy way too far! Are you planning on marrying him or something? Are you going to spend the rest of your life with him? But hmm, as for how to introduce yourself to his parents... Ah, wait, I can't start assuming this is a done deal! You can't, Kaori! You need to plan your future carefully if you want a happy family!"

Shizuku-chan's lost it! How can she say such embarrassing things in public!?

"Shizuku-chan, I just want his parents not to hate me, since I'm going to be his friend..."

"Huh!?"

"Sh-Shizuku-chan, your imagination is a little too overactive."

"Wha—!?" Shizuku curled herself into a ball and started rocking back and forth. Her ears were bright red, and she was hiding her face with her ponytail. *I just want to crawl into a hole and die right now.*

"What the heck have you two been whispering about this whole time?" Ryutarou stared at the two of them with an exasperated expression. Kaori looked up at him, then followed his gaze and saw one of the teachers grinning demonically at her.

Her first day at school began with her getting a long lecture in the staff room.

Around a year had passed since that fateful day.

And Kaori's wish had been granted. She'd gotten to spend time with Hajime Nagumo.

Though it wasn't in the same form as she'd imagined back at the entrance ceremony. Hajime was an otaku, which meant he spent all his free time playing video games, watching anime, or reading manga, so Kaori hadn't had any

opportunities to see him outside of school.

And even in school, he'd always come in right before the bell. Then he'd sleep throughout the day, waking up only after the final bell rang, leaving Kaori no time to speak with him even in school.

Well, at least now I get why I couldn't find him even though I spent so much time waiting around his middle school. He'd left for home right away each time, so Kaori was too late to catch him.

On the few occasions Kaori did manage to pull Hajime into a conversation, it would always be about the most trivial things. Though it pained her to admit it, she wasn't really friends with Hajime at all. In fact, they were hardly anything more than just fellow classmates.

Plus, whenever he talks to me, Hajime-kun has this nervous expression on his face... and his eyes keep darting about... It feels like he's always trying to end the conversation as fast as possible... and he's always looking at the people around us and not me...

"Nagumo-kun won't talk to me..."

"If the other guys heard you say that, they'd be crying tears of blood."

As always, Kaori went to Shizuku for advice. *Honestly, I'm amazed there's a guy out there who can resist Kaori's charms. This calls for a different approach.*

"How about you become an otaku too, then?" Such was the advice Shizuku had for Kaori. And so, Kaori decided to visit the store Hajime had mentioned the next day.

However, things didn't go according to plan. There were too many things in the store, and Kaori couldn't make heads or tails of any of them. All she learned from her visit was that there were a lot of anime girls with their panties visible. Though she'd been too embarrassed to get a proper look at any of them.

"Shizuku-chan, based on what I learned... I think I need to show my panties to Nagu—"

"Do not." Shizuku sternly pulled on Kaori's cheeks.

Yeah, I guess that is a bit much. He'd probably think I'm just a pervert. I might

even get arrested.

"Just tell him you're interested in anime and video games, and ask him for recommendations or something. After that, you can talk to him about his favorites."

That makes sense. The following day, Kaori put Shizuku's advice into practice and tried to talk to him about his hobbies.

At first Hajime seemed surprised, or rather suspicious, but Kaori's persistence finally won him over. He began talking to her about his favorite shows and games.

As time passed, Kaori developed a natural interest in them herself, so she became well versed in the culture. Unfortunately, Shizuku got dragged into that world with her. Including the times where Kaori accidentally tried to buy visual novels, or hentai anime, or h-manga.

Well, "accidentally." A growing girl like Kaori did have a passing interest in such things after all.

And so, the first half of Kaori's second year of high school passed. She'd gotten a lot closer to Hajime in that time, and she continued concocting absurd plans to close the distance between them in one go while their idyllic days passed by. Until that fateful day where the entire class was transported to another world. Their daily lives were turned upside-down, and the students began their new life in this cruel and unforgiving world.

Kaori still didn't like to think back on the day they'd been summoned.

She was full of regrets about the things she should have done back then. At the time, they still hadn't been aware of the dangers that they faced. Everything felt like a fairy tale. They got to meet a real king, and a princess, and they all had ridiculously strong magic. Honestly, they'd been kind of excited.

Everyone except Hajime, at least. He alone hadn't been blessed with any amazing skills or a powerful job. Kaori had been conceited back then. She'd felt like she was the only one who understood him, the only one who could help him when no one else would.

If she could go back to the past, she would've slapped herself for being so

dumb. *It was all my fault. If I hadn't been so full of myself, I could have helped Hajime before it was too late!*

Of all the students, only Hajime had realized how dangerous this world was from the start. The reason he'd studied so hard even though he had no special talents wasn't because he wanted to get back at his bullies. It was because he'd known.

He'd known that death was a real danger in this world.

While everyone else had enjoyed playing the part of the hero, Hajime alone had been learning how to survive. He was the only one who'd resolved himself.

Resolved himself to do what needed to be done, if the time came. To keep going, even when his legs were trembling in fear. To putting his life on the line if necessary, all for the sake of making it back to Japan.

He, more than anyone, had understood. After all, he was that kind of man. *And I should have understood too. It was that side of him that attracted me in the first place.*

When that poor lady and her grandson were being tormented by those college students, he'd been the only one to step in. While Kaori had been shaking in her boots, he'd had the strength to defend them. It was his greatest strength, but also what made Kaori worried about him.

She'd known. She'd *known.*

When everything was looking hopeless, who had been the first to step forward? Hajime. He'd been just as terrified as everyone else, but he'd had the resolve to take on the most dangerous task. Because there'd been people counting on him to protect them.

But because I hadn't realized that, I'd thought everything would turn out fine. Even though I had no basis for thinking that, I thought I'd be able to protect him. And because of my arrogance, I lost him.

Kaori remembered everything about that moment. How Hajime's hand stretched out one last time, grasping at nothing, before he tumbled into the abyss. It was then that she had learned the true meaning of despair.

But miraculously, Hajime had survived. And she'd been able to see him again. He hadn't come back alone, though. By his side had been a golden-haired, crimson-eyed beauty.

Kaori had been able to recover from the shock of losing Hajime once because Shizuku had been there for her. And because she'd been driven by the desire to see Hajime's fate with her own two eyes. She'd taken her regrets, her anger, and her sorrow, and turned them into an ironclad will. She swore not to stop until she saw the truth for herself.

However, after his return, everything changed. It was as if Kaori had lost him a second time. Hajime had transformed into a merciless monster that killed without hesitation.

And he had a woman who loved him with all her heart by his side. She was someone who had the confidence to stand by him no matter what kind of person he was.

Kaori's heart was shattered this time. She didn't know what to do. She didn't even understand herself, much less Hajime. All she could do was watch as events moved along, and he made preparations to leave again.

Ironically, it was her rival that woke Kaori from her stupor. Yue's harsh words were the catalyst that helped Kaori realize what it was she really wanted.

Her implication that Kaori wasn't even worth her consideration stoked the dimming fire within Kaori's heart. Yue's disdain angered Kaori more than even she realized. She wasn't going to lose to this rude little girl, especially not when it came to Hajime. Insults she could take, but she refused to let Yue hold on to the title of the person that loved Hajime most. Plus, it wasn't just that. Once Kaori looked at Hajime again with a clear mind, she realized he hadn't really changed that much at all. There was a little girl who adored him like a father, a bunny girl who clearly loved him with all her heart, and even a perverted older lady who seemed happy to stay by his side.

It was then she realized what she needed to do.

Her feelings hadn't been a lie after all.

She could hold her head up high and charge forward with all her might.

She could tell him the words she'd wanted to say for so long.

"I love you."

You better prepare yourself, Hajime-kun. I won't let you escape this time!

Shirasaki Kaori, seventeen years old. Her specialty? Shock and awe.

Afterword

Thank you to everyone who purchased this book. Resident chuuni, Ryo Shirakome here.

This volume was just packed with stuff. Myu made her first appearance, Kaori, our resident kind but scary stand user, got a lot more screen time, and a lot of the other students had their time in the spotlight.

Hajime's going to meet a lot more people, and grow quite a bit from here on out. I hope you look forward to seeing his next adventure.

For those of you who've already read the web novel, all of the bits with... End... that one guy who no one remembers, are new, so check them out.

And now for something completely different. I'd like to thank Takayaki, my wonderful illustrator, first and foremost. You always bring my stories to life. I'd also like to thank my editor, my proofreader, and all the wonderful people at the publishing division. Without you guys, this book wouldn't exist.

And lastly, a huge thank you to all of my readers. You're amazing, all of you.



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Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 4

by Ryo Shirakome

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