

ryō shirakome
takaçaki

#5

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAI SAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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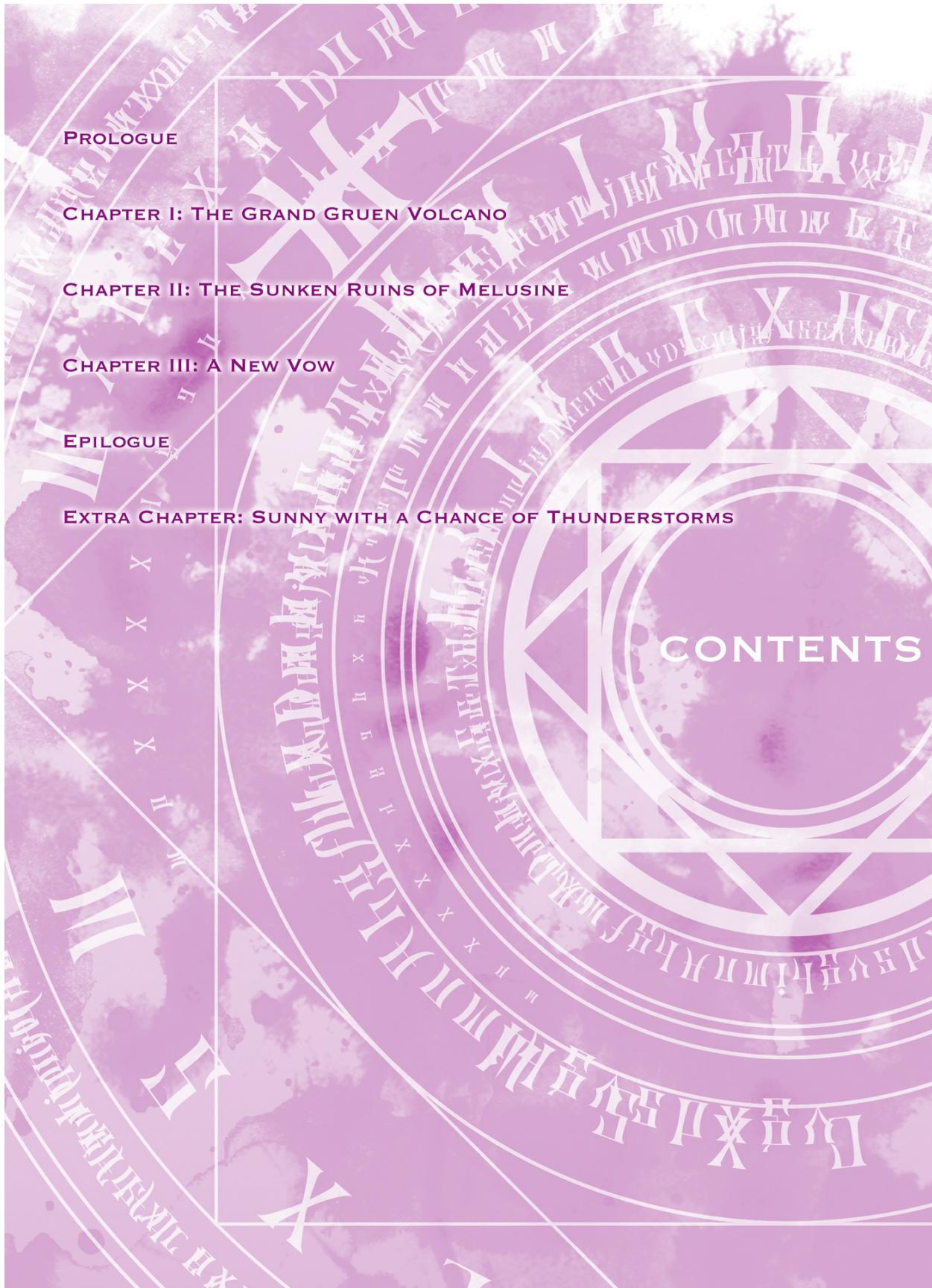
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Prologue

A single man's footsteps echoed loudly through the palace's grand hall. Everyone he passed by was startled by the grim expression on his face.

"Lord Freid." A strained voice called out to him. Though the man was clearly in a hurry, he turned around.

"Mikhail."

"Lord Freid. Is-Is Cattleya really dead!? I heard from the others when I returned from my mission. Tell me it's not true! Cattleya can't possibly be dead! She had your greatest monster, Ahatod, by her side, so she can't have ___"

The man Mikhail had addressed as Lord Freid put a trembling hand on his subordinate's shoulder. The strength he put into his grip told Mikhail everything he needed to know. It was true. Freid's beloved Cattleya truly had perished during her mission to conquer the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

"Why... How? Was the hero just that strong? If they're strong enough to kill a monster of that caliber, then our hopes of winning are..."

"Calm yourself, Mikhail. Our investigations were thorough. The current hero is nowhere near as strong as Cattleya."

"Then... how did she die!?" Mikhail clung to Freid, despair filling his eyes. Freid just shook his head and changed the topic.

"The plan to subjugate Ur ended in failure as well."

"Wha? Did the target not betray his allies like we expected?"

"No, he did. He raised an army of 60,000 monsters and should have had no trouble burying the 'Fertility Goddess' along with the town. However, his army was crushed by an unforeseen opponent."

"Unforeseen opponent?" Mikhail tilted his head in confusion. Freid's eyes narrowed, and he gazed sharply at some unseen enemy.

"A small band of four crushed the entire monster army. Reiss, who was in charge of the mission, even lost his arm. He had to use his emergency teleport to escape, and likely won't be able to return to the front lines."

"No way, even Reiss lost? I know the monsters there weren't strengthened

by your ability, Lord Freid, but can four people really take down an army of that size? Surely you jest.”

Freid returned his gaze to the shaking Mikhail.

“I wish I was... At any rate, it seems that insane party of four rushed off to the Great Orcus Labyrinth after they finished at Ur. They must have reached Cattleya around the same time she made contact with the hero party.”

“So you’re saying they were the ones that killed Cattleya?” A tiny red droplet fell to the floor. Mikhail was clenching his fist so hard his nails had broken skin. Anger welled up within him.

His hand still on Mikhail’s shoulder, Freid warned him in a stern voice.

“The enemy’s strength is beyond measure. I’m planning on heading to the volcano next. We must gain more ancient magic, no matter the cost. It’s our only hope of balancing the scales.”

“Lord Freid...” Mikhail couldn’t believe their strongest general would ever admit to being outmatched. He shivered, and Freid gave him a look that chilled him to the bone.

“Everything we do, we do for His Majesty, and the god which we serve. Hold down the fort while I’m gone, Mikhail. The war will begin in earnest soon. Polish your skills with what little time we have left.”

“Ah. Yes, sir. I swear I will avenge Cattleya.”

Freid nodded to him and turned on his heels. He saw Mikhail salute to him out of the corner of his eyes as he walked to where his partner was waiting.

When he was finally out of sight, his stern expression crumbled. He’d been holding his anger back in front of his subordinates, but there was no one to see him now.

“I don’t know who you are, but you’ll pay dearly for interfering with my holy mission. God is with me. The day we finally meet will be your last. Heretics have no right to live.” He muttered darkly to himself for a few more minutes before summoning his horde of monsters and leaving the castle.

The castle that lay at the heart of Garland, the demons’ capital.

Freid was the demon who had single-handedly destroyed the delicate balance between the humans and demons. And as fate would have it, he was headed to the very same place the monster of the abyss was.

Who would the goddess of victory smile upon when they finally met?

Chapter I: The Grand Gruen Volcano

Sand stretched on as far as the eye could see.

Hajime and his companions had finally arrived at the Gruen Desert. The grains of sand were so fine that the whole thing looked like one unbroken brown sheet. The incessant winds had covered the sky in so much dust that even it looked brown. Anywhere one looked, all they would see is sand.

The only thing breaking the monotony was the dunes that undulated through the desert like waves. The wind pushed them along at a steady pace, giving the desert the semblance of one massive living creature.

The sun's harsh rays heated the sand below until it glowed red. It was easily over 40 degrees Celsius. With sand flying everywhere too, it made for an inhospitable environment.

For normal travelers, anyway.

Brise tore through the dunes like it was nothing. And because it was completely enclosed, none of the sand or the heat bothered Hajime and the others. Furthermore, the magnetic compass Hajime had installed into the dashboard kept them from getting lost.

“Thank god we’re not traveling by horse. It looks miserable out there...”

“Indeed. I’m not so weak that a little heat and wind would hinder me, but... it certainly is more comfortable not having to brave it.”

Shea and Tio stared out of the window at the unforgiving wasteland they were currently traversing. Tio may have been a masochist, but even she wouldn’t welcome that kind of discomfort.

“It’s so different this time! Myu’s eyes don’t hurt, and it’s not hot! Daddy’s amazing!”

“That’s right~ Daddy is amazing~ Myu-chan, do you want some cold water?”

“Yeah! Thank you, Kaori-oneechan~”

Myu was sitting happily on Kaori’s lap. She was excited at how different this trip through the desert was compared to the first time, when she’d been abducted.

Her reaction was only natural. For an aquatic species like Myu, the desert crossing must have been doubly harsh. Considering how young she was, it was a miracle the trip didn't kill her. However, she was traveling in completely different circumstances this time. Brise was air conditioned, and it kept the wind and sand out.

Not only that, he'd stocked up on chilled provisions for the trip. It still bothered him a little that his opinion had been completely ignored when Yue had agreed to let Kaori join their party, but he was getting used to having her around.

Kaori pulled a bottle of cold water out of the mini-fridge Hajime had added to Brise.

"Hey, Shirasa... I mean, Kaori. Could you please stop calling me daddy? It just sounds really creepy."

"But Myu-chan calls you that all the time."

"It's one thing if it's Myu, but you know, being called daddy by someone my age is pretty weird..."

Kaori'd always been good at looking after others, so she'd ended up taking on the role of Myu's caretaker. However, because of that, she'd also taken to using Myu's nickname for Hajime.

It was acceptable, if still a little awkward, to have a little girl calling him daddy, but it was another thing entirely when a girl his age was doing it...

As an aside, the reason Hajime was calling Kaori by her first name was because she'd insisted until he'd finally given in. She'd thought it was unfair that he called everyone else by their first names, but only her by her last name.

"Really? Alright, I guess I'll stop... Until we actually have kids of our own, at least..." Kaori trailed off, blushing furiously.

An awkward silence descended upon the car. Hajime pretended he hadn't heard anything, but Yue wasn't about to let this go.

"Too bad. I'm going to be first. Hajime promised."

"Hajime-kun, what's the meaning of this!?"

"Is it really that surprising? It's not like I'm planning on having kids anytime soon, anyway."

"Fufu. I'm going to be the first to introduce myself to his parents too."

"Wha—!?"

"I've already planned everything out."

“Huh!?”

“Including all the dates we’re going on when we get back.”

“Ah!”

Yue’s words were like daggers, stabbing through Kaori’s chest one after another.

Still, Kaori was a strong girl. She wouldn’t break from just this. She’d spent the better part of her time in this world believing in Hajime’s survival, and had even had the courage to stand up to Yue. If someone hit her, she hit back.

“I know all sorts of things about Hajime-kun that you don’t! Like what he wants to be in the future, what his hobbies are, and even what genres he likes the most! I bet you don’t know what his favorite anime and manga are, Yue!”

“Hmph... I... That doesn’t matter. None of those things exist here. I just have to learn about them when we go to Japan.”

“Oh, but they do. Just look at Hajime-kun. His appearance practically screams anime character.”

“Gah!?” Though Yue and Kaori were the ones arguing, it was Hajime who was suffering. That last statement had gone right for his jugular.

“White hair, an eyepatch, even a magical fake eye... I’m pretty sure Hajime’s favorite character had all of those too... Even his weapons, those Cross Bits. They’re definitely based off of the ones in Gundam... It doesn’t matter what world we’re in, Hajime-kun will always be an otaku!”

“Guh!? K-Kaori...”

“U-Ugh... To think Hajime’s weapons were based off entertainment...”

“Hehe. You don’t even know what kinds of things the man you love likes.”

“You’ve got guts, Kaori. But do you know what kinds of positions Hajime likes in bed?”

“Wh-Wh-What!? In bed!? Ugh, you’ve already gone that far...”

“Fufufu. That’s how big the gap is between you and me.”

Everyone had gotten used to ignoring Kaori and Yue when they started arguing like this. At first Shea had fussed over the two of them, trying to mediate and make them get along. Eventually, however, she’d come to realize it was more trouble than it was worth. Especially since the two didn’t seem to actually hate each other.

In fact, the only person really suffering because of their arguments was

Hajime. As almost all of their arguments were centered around him, many of his embarrassing secrets were turned into ammunition to make a point. All the things he was self-conscious about were poked and prodded at until he couldn't take anymore.

Kaori covered her ears, trying to shut out the truths Yue flung at her. Painfully gripping his heart, Hajime tried to break the two of them up. However, before he could do anything, Myu spoke up.

"No, stop fighting Yue-oneechan, Kaori-oneechan! I hate it when you fight!" Myu hopped off of Kaori's lap and crawled to the back where Shea was sitting. She glared, pouting all the while at the two girls in front. They both looked at each other awkwardly. Having a little girl tell them she hates them was a surprisingly effective weapon.

"Sheesh, you two. You could at least stop when Myu-chan's around. You're a bad influence on her. I can understand getting worked up about Hajime-san, but you could at least act like adults about it."

"Unbelievable... To think I would be scolded by Shea..."

"I-I'm sorry, Myu-chan, Shea."

Never in her wildest dreams had Yue thought she would sink so low that Shea would be scolding her.

While Shea was Yue's best friend, Yue also treated Shea like a younger sister. Though she was also vying for Hajime's affections, Shea loved Yue just as much. It was a slightly different relationship than the one Yue had with Kaori.

On the other hand, Tio was just a pervert.

In a sense, Kaori was the first true love rival Yue had ever encountered.

Yue was confident that her bond with Hajime was stronger than anything. She had unwavering faith that only she was special to him. That was why, at first, she'd seen Kaori as a mere challenger. And she'd believed that it would be easy to beat her down.

And while her confidence remained unshaken, Yue had noticed Hajime and Kaori reminiscing about the life they'd had in Japan from time to time.

This was the one advantage Kaori had over Yue. She'd known him for longer.

And it was the one thing that let her fight Yue on equal footing.

For her part, Kaori was jealous of the fact that Yue was Hajime's current lover, but she was too honest and good-natured to try anything underhanded.

Because neither of them wanted to “cheat” their way to victory, their squabbles never escalated into anything truly serious. However, they were so frequent that they grated on the rest of the party. And today, Myu and Shea had finally had enough.

Normally, Hajime put an end to most arguments by professing his love for Yue, but he’d taken too much damage in a short span of time. He simply stared off into the distance, ignoring everyone else.

“Hm? What could that be? Master, there appears to be some commotion to your right.”

Hajime, who’d been muttering “I’m not an otaku” to himself over and over like a dead fish, suddenly returned to his senses and turned to his right. Kaori and Yue stopped trying to show Myu how well they really got along as well, and turned to see what was happening. Shea too, craned her neck to get a better look. They all spotted something in the distance.

A large number of sandworms, earthworm-like desert monsters, were congregating on a sand dune to their right. Their heads poked out of the top of the hill.

Sandworms were twenty meters long on average, and some of the really large ones grew up to 100 meters. They could only be found in the Gruen Desert. Normally, they lived underground and only surfaced to swallow their prey with their triple-layered jaws. Travelers who crossed the desert lived in fear of their nigh-imperceptible sneak attacks.

Fortunately, the sandworms didn’t have very good perception abilities themselves either. Unless someone was unlucky enough to walk over their lairs, they wouldn’t be spotted. *If they’re all surfacing now, they must have found some unlucky sap to prey on. But from the looks of it...*

“Why are they circling around like that?” Had they just come up to feed, Tio wouldn’t have considered it something worth pointing out either. Hajime’s skills let him sense incoming attacks himself, and Brise could easily outpace a sandworm. What was strange about this particular colony was that they’d surfaced, but were hesitating to attack their supposed target. They simply circled around the hill.

“They seem uncertain, as if they are unsure of whether their prey is safe to eat.”

“Looks like it. Does that happen often?”

“Not to my knowledge. They can eat most anything, so they normally

don't hesitate..."

Tio might have been a masochist and a huge pervert, but she had also lived longer than even Yue. And since unlike Yue she hadn't been sealed for most of her life, her knowledge of the world was vast. Including the habits of obscure monsters. So if this had even her confused, it was definitely something worth taking note of.

However, it was also true that there was no reason for Hajime to get involved. He decided to leave before they got wrapped up in something troublesome.

Just then—

"Wha—!? Hang on tight, guys!" Hajime gunned Brise's accelerator. A second later a giant brown creature erupted from the earth, grazing Brise's rear. A sandworm had just tried to swallow them whole. It looked like Hajime and the others were on the menu too.

Hajime swerved sharply, zigzagging through the dunes. Sandworms erupted one after another from the ground, each of them coming out from the spot Brise had been seconds before.

"Kyaaaaaa!"

"Hiii!"

"Wawawahah!"

Kaori, Myu, and Shea all screamed. Worried about Myu, Kaori turned around to check up on her. At the same time, Hajime made another sharp turn. Kaori lost her balance and tumbled forward... right into Yue and Hajime. She collapsed with her butt in Yue's lap and her head in Hajime's.

After a few surprised blinks, Kaori blushed slightly and clung to Hajime's waist. Much to Hajime's chagrin. His expression stiffened, and he tried not to think dirty thoughts. The lower half of Kaori's body was still sprawled across Yue's lap.

"Hey, Shira... Kaori! What are you doing!?"

"It's dangerous, so I'm hanging on to you for safety!"

"Kaori, you vixen. To think you would stick to Hajime while sealing my movements at the same time... You're craftier than I gave you credit for."

While they were fleeing for dear life, Yue and Kaori were still only interested in winning points with Hajime. Yue spanked Kaori's defenseless behind, but Kaori refused to loosen her grip. Instead, she buried her face in Hajime's crotch.

Having failed their initial ambush, the three sandworms began an overland pursuit of Brise. They moved far swifter than their size would suggest.

Had Hajime and the others been riding in a normal carriage, they would have been toast. However, Brise was an artifact with all of an otaku's ingenuity poured into it. Even if they managed to swallow it, it wouldn't suffer a single scratch.

Moreover...

"Come to think of it, this is a good chance to test that thing out." Hajime drifted so hard that he was driving in reverse, and then began pouring mana into another one of the attachments he'd put on Brise.

A series of metallic clunks reverberated throughout the car. Brise's hood slid back to reveal a quadruple rocket launcher.

The launcher swiveled back and forth, seeking out its prey. After a few seconds, it locked on to the nearest sandworm. With a flurry of red sparks, the launcher unloaded its salvo.

A glowing trail of orange followed in the rocket's wake. It sailed through the sandworm's open mouth and exploded. Chunks of flesh rained from the sky, spattering across Brise's windshield.

"Bleh... Shea, cover Myu's eyes, please."

"Already on it~ Ah...! Myu-chan I know it hurts, but don't pinch me there." Shea had buried Myu's head inside her ample bosom to shield her from the horrors Hajime was inflicting on the monsters. However, Myu had found it too suffocating, and pinched Shea in a rather sensitive spot. Hajime did his best to ignore the moaning coming from the back. Dealing with his own comrades was more mentally draining than fighting monsters.

It didn't help that Kaori was still clinging to his waist either. After a herculean effort, Yue finally pulled Kaori off and strapped her into her seat belt, locking her in place. She was blushing bright red, surprised at her own boldness.

"U-Umm, Hajime-kun. Sorry about that. I just acted on instinct... I wasn't purposely trying to do something dirty. I just wanted to know what it would feel like to hug you once..."

"And if you saw your chance, you'd push him down then and there?"

"Exact... No! Yue, please don't say such strange things. I'm not as lewd a woman as you."

"You're calling *me* lewd? Well, I suppose I can't really deny it,

considering the things we do at night.”

“Could you two shut up for a second? Also Yue, quit talking about our sex life.”

Hajime blasted the remaining sandworms to bits with his rocket launcher. Hearing the explosions, the other sandworms atop the dune turned to look at Brise. He steeled himself for another fight, but Kaori and Yue’s arguing distracted him. Their constant bickering was wearing away at his mental fortitude. And now he’d finally hit his limit and snapped at Yue.

Though nothing she’d said had actually been false. Hajime doubted anyone could beat Yue when it came to sexiness. Kaori could tell what he was thinking about, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Yue smiled victoriously and licked her lips. Kaori groaned, lamenting her defeat. Hajime’s annoyed outburst had only fanned the flames of their feud.

Shea leaned forward and sympathetically patted Kaori’s shoulder.

“I know how you feel, Kaori-san.”

Hajime ignored the lot of them and gunned Brise toward the sand dune. He could tell there were more sandworms moving around underground. The ground bulged slightly at their position, so it was clear they weren’t trying to be stealthy anymore. Right now, speed would avail them more than stealth.

Hajime retracted his rocket launcher and activated a new weapon. This time, a long rectangular box came out of the hood. Metal grated against metal, and the box transformed into a long-range rifle. It looked strikingly similar to Schlagen.

Red sparks ran down the length of the gun barrel. The robotic arm it was attached to adjusted its aim and fired. A dazzling streak of red cut through the muddy brown air.

A plume of sand rose into the sky as it slammed into the ground. Chunks of flesh and droplets of blood rose up with it. Hajime’s bullet had found its mark.

Hajime reloaded and fired again, then again. Each bullet created another eruption of sand and blood. The sandworms were obliterated without even a chance to surface.

“Hajime-kun, look over there!”

“Is that... a person?”

As Hajime retracted his rifle, Kaori suddenly shouted and pointed to a spot in front of them.

Yue's guess was correct. Some distance away lay a humanoid figure clad in all white. It was likely they were the person the sandworms had been trying to eat. However, from this distance, they couldn't make out anything out of the ordinary. Nothing to indicate why the sandworms had hesitated, anyway.

"Please, Hajime-kun. I'm a Priestess... I have to at least try and help him."

"Might as well, I guess. I'm kinda curious, honestly."

Kaori looked pleadingly up at Hajime. As he was interested in why the sandworms hadn't attacked the man himself, he saw no reason to refuse.

It was possible he had some unique item that warded off monsters, or knew some unknown form of magic. After all, if things like verdren crystals existed in the sea of trees, who knew what other strange wonders existed in this world. It might even be that whatever this man had been using possessed more potent effects than those verdren crystals.

Hajime made a beeline for the collapsed man.

He was wearing something resembling a jellabiya, a traditional Egyptian dress back on earth, and a big hooded overcoat on top of it. The hood was covering his face and he was lying face-down, making it difficult to discern his features.

Kaori hopped off Brise, dashed over to the man, and rolled him onto his back.

"What on..." Upon taking off his hood, Kaori discovered that he was young, probably in his early twenties. However, what had surprised her wasn't that. It was the state he was in.

His face was locked in a painful grimace, sweat beaded down his forehead, and his breath came in short, shallow gasps. He was so feverish that steam was rising off his body. His blood vessels were all straining against his skin, as if they were being pushed out from the inside. Furthermore, blood was dripping from his eyes and nose. There was obviously something wrong with him. And it wasn't just heatstroke.

Hajime was worried Kaori might get infected with whatever this guy was suffering with, but as she was the healer, he left handling the situation to her.

Kaori cast Magical Diagnostics on the man. The spell used her mana to investigate the condition of her target, and displayed its findings on her Status Plate.

The results that came back were unexpected.

“Mana overload? The poison in his body is causing his mana to go berserk?”

“What’d you find, Kaori?”

“L-Look. This is what it says...”

Kaori showed her Status Plate to the rest of the party.

Status: The target’s mana has overloaded and he is incapable of releasing the excess.

Symptoms: Fever, fainting, body pains, and ruptures of the capillary vessels.

Cause: A foreign liquid in the target’s body.

“My guess is he drank something poisonous and that’s what’s causing his mana to go berserk. And because he can’t get rid of any of it, it’s destroying his body from the inside. At this rate all his blood vessels will rupture and he’ll die. Even if that doesn’t kill him instantly, the blood loss will...

Heaven’s providence, grant succor to the doomed—Renewal!”

Kaori cast the healing spell Renewal. It was an intermediate-rank healing spell that dispelled status debuffs.

However...

“Oh no, it barely had any effect. How come? This spell can cure almost all status effects... Does that mean the poison is too deeply ingrained into him now?”

Though it had succeeded in preventing the poison’s spread, Kaori’s Renewal had been unable to actually cure him. The man groaned feebly in pain. His bleeding hadn’t stopped either. Kaori ground her teeth in frustration. She couldn’t think of a way to cure him, so for now she began to perform emergency treatment measures to keep his condition from worsening.

“May the grace of light bless you in this holy sanctuary. No evil shall pass so long as I hold the gates—Sanctorum!”

The high-level light spell Sanctorum allowed everyone within a set area to transfer their mana to one another. Normally, Kaori used it to transfer her mana to her allies and support them if they didn’t have enough left to continue casting large-scale spells.

However, there was no restriction on who could transfer mana to whom. Furthermore, the caster could forcibly transfer mana from one target to

another, if they so wished. In other words, it could function as a mana drain. But it took more time to drain mana from a target than it did to transfer mana to them. Because of that restriction, it wasn't suited to be used as a drain spell in combat.

Thanks to Kaori's extensive training, though, she'd shortened the incantation to the point where it was fast enough to be practical even in combat. Hajime could tell just how hard she'd worked to reach that point.

With Sanctorum in place, Kaori could begin siphoning mana from the young man. Though the Status Plate had said it was impossible to release his excess mana, Kaori hoped a powerful light spell would be able to forcibly drain it out of him anyway.

Purplish-white light enveloped the young man, making him look ethereal.

It made for a wondrous sight. Kaori closed her eyes and placed her hands over the man's chest. After a few seconds of furious concentration, Kaori too began to be enveloped in the same lavender light.

Yue and Tio murmured in exclamation at Kaori's impressive display of skill. As fellow mages, they were even more appreciative of her abilities than Hajime.

"So pretty..." Myu muttered in Shea's arms.

Kaori didn't even notice her new comrades praising her. She was focused fully on her task. She diverted the mana she drained from the man into the mana-absorbing bracelet Hajime had gifted her with. It appeared Kaori's magic was able to overcome whatever symptoms were preventing him from venting mana normally.

As an aside, Hajime had given her a bracelet and not a ring because he didn't want to be misunderstood again.

The man's breathing began to sound less labored. The swelling of his blood vessels stopped, and he stopped bleeding from his eyes and nose. Once she'd siphoned off most of his mana, Kaori dispelled her Sanctorum and cast Heaven's Blessing on the man to heal his internal injuries.

"He should be good for a little while, but I've only alleviated the symptoms. I still don't know how to cure him. If I took too much of his mana he would've died from exhaustion, so I could only drain a little bit. It's possible his mana might surge up and go berserk again... Or he might start leaking mana until he dies. I've never seen these symptoms before, so I'm not sure, but... Yue, Tio, do you two have any idea what this could be?"



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Kaori turned to Yue and Tio for help. A temporary fix like this was pointless if they couldn't cure the underlying cause of his symptoms.

The two girls searched their vast memories, but nothing came to mind. In the end, they still didn't understand what was wrong with him.

"Kaori, could you check us too, just in case? It's possible whatever he's sick with is infectious. Well, if it's something that just makes your mana go berserk, at least Myu's safe."

"Yes, that should be the case."

Kaori nodded and began diagnosing the rest of the party. Fortunately, it seemed none of them were infected. Whatever the disease was, they were certain it didn't travel through the air. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Around the same time, the young man groaned and opened his eyes. It seemed he'd recovered enough to regain consciousness. He looked around slowly, his gaze stopping on Kaori.

"A goddess? I see, you've come to take me..." he mumbled to himself.

He reached out a shaky hand toward Kaori. Annoyed, Hajime kicked him in the stomach. The heat and sand had made him even more irritable than usual.

"Urgh!"

"H-Hajime-kun!?" Hajime ignored Kaori's outburst and asked the man what had happened to him.

From what Hajime remembered, the man's clothes were the traditional garb of the Ankajians. Ankaji sat at the largest oasis in the desert. All that knowledge he'd amassed when he'd still been "useless" was starting to come in handy now. If Ankaji had been struck by some unknown disease, that made Hajime's crossing much more perilous. He was a lot more interested in the man's circumstances now.

Hajime's kick brought the man back to his senses, and he took a closer look at his surroundings. Seeing Brise almost sent him into shock again, and he didn't calm down until Kaori explained what was going on.

"I thought both me and the dukedom were doomed, but it seems god hasn't abandoned me yet." The man muttered quietly.

I wonder what he'd think if he learned that god of his was actually a heartless monster? Hajime looked up at the sky. If anything, that disease of his was probably a "present" from his god.

"Hajime-kun. Let's move him to the car for now." The poor man was

having difficulty even standing. The heat of the desert had left him dehydrated. Hajime still had questions he had to ask the man, so he couldn't have him dying just yet.

Sighing, Hajime nodded. He tossed the young man over his shoulder and carried him to Brise. When he laid him down in the air-conditioned backseat, the man exclaimed in surprise, "Is this the land of the gods!?"

Looks like he's still got some life left in him.

After chugging down a few bottles of water, the man had finally recovered enough to speak coherently. His expression grew grim as he began to talk.

"First, let me thank you for saving my life. Had I died back there... Ankaji would have been finished. My name is Bize Feuward Zengen. I'm the son of Ankaji's duke, Lanzwi Feuward Zengen."

Well that's a surprise. Didn't think he'd be royalty.

The Dukedom of Ankaji was responsible for transporting all of the marine goods that came out of Erisen. And Erisen was where 80% of the northern continent's marine products came from.

In other words, Ankaji had a near monopoly on humanity's supply of seafood. Their nobles were highly respected even within the Heiligh Kingdom.

Bize was just as surprised to hear the credentials of the people who'd saved him. Kaori was one of Ehit's warriors, while Hajime, Yue, Shea, and Tio were all gold-ranked adventurers.

"I see now, God! You sent your messenger down to save me!" The man exclaimed upon learning who Kaori was.

She stared at him blankly. She hadn't realized he was addressing her.

Hajime activated his Intimidation and once again pressed Bize to explain what was going on. Sweating profusely, Bize cleared his throat and began explaining.

According to him, this was what had happened:

Four days ago, many people in Ankaji succumbed to a fever of unknown cause. It had come out of nowhere and struck 20,000 of the city's 270,000 people on the first day alone. Of those 20,000, 3,000 had symptoms so severe they'd lost consciousness. Doctors worked around the clock to try and figure out what the cause was, but it eluded them. All they could do was delay the symptoms like Kaori had.

As the days passed, more and more victims appeared. Worse, many of the doctors fell prey to it as well. Soon, there weren't enough doctors left to look after all the patients. Finally, casualties started appearing. The remaining doctors were unable to siphon all of the patients' mana, and those who went without treatment for too long died. The city despaired. No one had heard of a disease that killed within two days of symptoms first appearing.

On a hunch, one of the city's pharmacists cast Appraise Liquid on the city's water supply.

Upon doing so, he discovered the wells had been tainted with a poison that made its victims' mana go berserk. Fearing the worst, they quickly assembled an investigation team to examine the oasis. As they'd expected, the oasis too had been poisoned.

For desert cities like Ankaji, oases were their lifeline. They were guarded twenty-four seven, and maintaining them was the city's highest priority. It would have been nigh impossible for an intruder to sneak past the guards and poison the oasis.

The investigation team couldn't fathom who'd done such a thing, or why. However, they had bigger problems to worry about. This meant that the only drinkable water in the city was whatever they'd gathered before the oasis had been poisoned. Plus, they still had no idea how to save the people already infected.

Actually, that wasn't strictly true. They knew of one way that might save those already infected.

A mineral known as stillstone. It was a special mineral that could silence mana near it. It grew in small quantities inside the Grand Gruen Volcano to the north, and was extremely valuable. Magical researchers often used it as a safeguard against accidents. By crushing it into a powder, they could feed it to the patients and calm their rampaging mana.

However, the distance between the city and the volcano was great. A round trip would take one month at the least. And all of the adventurers skilled enough to delve the Grand Gruen Volcano had already been knocked out by fever. Most adventurers didn't even possess the strength to make it past the eternal sandstorm that raged around the volcano.

Besides, even if they *had* capable adventurers left, they didn't have enough water to outfit them for the journey there. Their only remaining option was to ask the kingdom for help.

Of course, hoping the kingdom would provide Ankaji with enough water to slake the city's thirst for a month was a long shot. However, hoping they would dispatch adventurers capable enough to harvest stillstone in the meantime was even more of one. Ankaji may have been a vital outpost for the kingdom, but it would still be normal procedure for them to send an investigation team first. But by then it would be too late.

Hence why it was necessary for someone of the influential Zengen family to personally relay the situation and ask for immediate aid.

"Father, Mother, and even my sister were infected on the first day. We used what little stillstone we had left to cure them, but they still haven't fully recovered from the ordeal. They're definitely in no state to travel. Which is why I left Ankaji with my guard yesterday to head to the capital. Since I hadn't shown any symptoms, I thought I hadn't been infected... but I guess they were just delayed for me. I guess how long it takes for symptoms to appear varies from person to person. I had been so preoccupied with the events happening in the city that the possibility had never even occurred to me. I should have taken some stillstone too, just in case. Every second wasted is another precious Ankaji life gone... I can't believe I was so foolish!" He slammed a fist against his knee, lamenting his own helplessness.

Worse, his guards had died protecting him from the sandworms. *Nice to see that the next duke of Ankaji is someone who cares about his people.*

In a way, Bize had lucked out by being infected. It was the only thing that had kept the sandworms from eating him too. The poison had made him collapse, but it was also what had kept him alive, and what had led Hajime to investigating his location. Fate truly was a fickle mistress.

"I would, that is to say, the dukedom of Ankaji would like to formally submit a request to you. Please, lend me your strength."

Bize bowed his head low. Silence fell inside the car.

The sound of sand hitting the windows felt unnaturally loud. As the son of a duke, Bize knew bowing his head to others wasn't to be done lightly. However, this might have been his only chance to save his countrymen, so he couldn't afford to let pride get in the way.

Everyone turned to look at Hajime. Though they were leaving the final decision to him, it was obvious Kaori and Shea wanted to help. Kaori especially. As a Priestess, she felt duty-bound to assist those in need. Tio and Yue didn't seem to care one way or another. Myu was even more direct than

the others.

“Daddy, we’re going to help him, right?” Myu asked with all the innocence of a small girl. She honestly believed that Hajime could do anything, no matter how absurd. He was basically her hero. Seeing how both Myu and Kaori were clearly in favor, Hajime shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

“Guess that settles it.”

Shea and Tio giggled happily. Hajime turned his gaze to Yue and found her staring at him with the same deadpan expression as always.

No matter what Hajime chose, Yue would always wholeheartedly support his decision. Even if she didn’t say it, he knew that was what she was thinking. He gently brushed Yue’s cheek before turning to Bize and accepting his request.

Hajime had been planning on visiting the Grand Gruen Volcano anyway. Plus, he’d been planning on leaving Myu behind at Ankaji while he did so. Strong as he was, he didn’t want to bring a four-year-old girl somewhere that dangerous. He could easily pick up the stillstone Bize needed during his quest to reach its center, and since Myu was from a beastman tribe, she was safe from the epidemic that was ravaging Ankaji. She didn’t have any mana after all. Either way, all of Bize’s problems were something Hajime could solve without going out of his way.

“Hajime-dono, as you are a gold-ranked adventurer, I have no doubt you could easily procure the stillstone that I need. However, we also need to solve my city’s water problem. Can anyone operate this Artifact, or only you, Hajime-dono?”

“Well, everyone here except Kaori and Myu can drive it, but... There’s no need to go to the capital. I’ll do something about your water problem, so let’s head back to Ankaji for now.”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘do something about it’?” Bize had no doubt of Hajime’s prowess, but he doubted even a gold-ranked adventurer could procure enough water to sustain hundreds of thousands out of nowhere. His doubt was to be expected. However, there was one way to procure water that Bize hadn’t thought of. Using strong water magic to collect the moisture in the atmosphere.

Of course, most mages wouldn’t be able to draw nearly enough water for that many people, but Hajime had a genius magician within his party.

Yue.

And because she had multiple ways of restoring her mana quickly, she wouldn't even tire doing it. At the very least, she'd be able to provide the town with water long enough for Bize or his father to appeal to the kingdom for aid.

When Hajime told Bize as much, he was skeptical. However, it was also true that he was in no condition to make it to the capital. So with a little persuasion from Kaori, one of Ehit's trusted warriors, he finally gave in and agreed to return to Ankaji.

Bize was shocked to see how much ground Hajime could cover with Brise. However, at that point, it was just one surprise among an endless parade of them. He had no idea why a warrior of Ehit was traveling with these adventurers, why they had a Dagon girl with them, why she called Hajime daddy, why a rabbitman was traveling with them, or why the black-haired woman seemed so happy to be insulted. What he did know, though, was that there was still hope left. And that very hope was what allowed him to hold his head high as they continued their journey...

After a short drive, the walls of Ankaji shimmered into view. They were truly a sight to behold, towering higher than even Fuhren's impressive ramparts. The walls and buildings were all built from the same milky-white material, a stark contrast to the brown that surrounded them.

One other thing of note was the pillars of light that jutted from the walls at regular intervals. The pillars of light curved into each other and converged high in the sky, creating a dome that covered the city. Whenever anything hit the dome, ripples spread from the point of impact, as if someone had thrown a stone into a pond. It made for a wondrous sight.

From what Hajime could tell, the dome seemed to protect the city from the elements. The desert experienced fierce sandstorms every few months, so the dome was a necessity for the people living there. It turned raging storms into merely a cloudy day for the city's residents.

Hajime and the others approached the city gates, which were enshrouded in the same veil of light. It stood to reason that even the gates would need to be ensorcelled if they wanted to be sure of keeping sand out of the city. The gate guards had been mildly surprised to see Brise, but their reactions had been far more subdued than most people who saw it for the first time.

Ankaji's plight was likely occupying most of their attention. They were

barely focusing on their job. When they saw their lord sitting in Brise's backseat, however, they instantly snapped to attention.

Ankaji's gate stood at a higher elevation than the rest of the city. Apparently that had been done on purpose so that the first thing visitors would see was the entire city in all its splendor.

The great oasis lay to the east, sparkling in the early afternoon sun. Great big palm trees grew all around it. They were the first bit of green Hajime had seen since entering the desert. Small canals branched out from the oasis, crisscrossing the rest of the city. Though it lay in the middle of the desert, it seemed most people traveled by boat. More trees dotted the streets, and there were entire squares that had been converted into gardens.

To the north was the city's agricultural district. Hajime had read before that many fruit species thrived in Ankaji's warm climate. And it seemed that had been no exaggeration. The fruit groves stretched on past the horizon, further even than Hajime could see with his Farsight. To the west was the royal palace. Unlike the milky-white stone that seemed to be favored in the rest of the city, the palace was made of pure white marble. It set it apart from the rest of the city, which likely had been the intention of the architect. However, the effect was ruined somewhat by the crude rectangular buildings that surrounded it on all sides. Hajime assumed they were other administrative buildings.

Despite being in the middle of a desert, there was more water here than Hajime had seen in any other city.

"It looks... amazing."

"Yeah... It's a beautiful city."

Hajime and Yue muttered, stunned. The others all exclaimed in awe as well.

"But... it feels empty," Myu said quietly. She was right. Despite its magnificent appearance, an air of gloom hung over the city.

Normally, the city squares would be bustling with traders haggling over fruit and fish prices and tourists exploring the city's marvels. Right now, however, the streets were practically empty. Everyone was hiding in their houses, as if waiting out a storm. An eerie silence filled the streets.

"I wish I could have shown you what the city looked like before the plague struck. At any rate, my apologies, but we have no time to waste. I promise I'll show you around the city once this crisis has been averted. For

now, though, we must make for the palace. I need to report to my father.”

Hajime nodded, and the party headed toward the palace.

“Father!”

“Bize! What happened... Wait, what in Ehit’s name is that!?” The party had been able to head straight to the audience hall without being asked any questions thanks to Bize. Though he was still weak from the poison, it seemed Lanzwi had forced himself to continue working, using a combination of healing magic and guts to maintain consciousness.

His son had gone out to request aid just yesterday. That wasn’t nearly enough time to make it to the capital and back. However, what surprised Lanzwi’s more than his son’s early return was the state he was in.

It was only natural. After all, Bize was floating in the air.

To be precise, he was lying on a Cross Bit that was floating in the air.

Though he’d managed to recover a little during the car ride to Ankaji, he was still in no state to walk.

Kaori had offered to lend him her shoulder, but he’d refused, giving excuses like “I couldn’t possibly ask one of Ehit’s chosen warriors to carry me...” Hajime hadn’t liked the bashful look he was giving Kaori, so he’d interrupted them by forcibly putting Bize on a Cross Bit.

Hajime wasn’t jealous of Bize. That was what Kaori had thought, but in truth he just didn’t want to have to deal with people being jealous of her affection for him. He’d already had enough of that with Kouki and Hiyama.

Bize clung to the Cross Bit, afraid of falling off, as he explained what had happened to his father. Once he’d explained the situation, a butler came and gave him a small vial of powdered stillstone. The stillstone, combined with Kaori’s healing magic, was enough to get Bize back on his feet. He wasn’t fully recovered just yet, but it was still a far cry better than how he had been minutes ago.

The biggest issue was that this still hadn’t cured him. The stillstone could suppress the symptoms, but the root cause of his mana going berserk, the poison, was still running through his veins. Though it was possible his body would eventually be able to expel the toxin. All they could do for now was wait and see.

“Alright, let’s get moving. Kaori and Shea, you two go check up on the patients. Take all the empty magic stones with you. The rest of us are going

to get the city some water. Lord Lanzwi, is there a wide open space anywhere in the city? At least two hundred square meters large, if possible.”

“Huh? Oh yes, there’s one in the agricultural district...”

“That’s where we’re headed, then. Shea, once the magic stones are saturated, bring them over to Yue.”

Hajime swiftly gave out orders. His plan was simple. Kaori would use her Sanctorum to drain the infected people’s mana just like she had to Bize. Then, she’d siphon that mana into the empty magic stones Shea would bring her. Once they were full, Shea would pass them to Yue, who’d use the mana to create water.

Hajime would then use his Transmutation to create a makeshift reservoir to store all of that water in, after which he would start investigating the oasis. If he could analyze the poison he’d solve the city’s problem first. If he couldn’t, he’d head to the volcano like he’d originally planned. Simple, but efficient.

Everyone set about their respective tasks.

Kaori and Shea headed off to the makeshift hospitals that had been set up near the palace, while Lanzwi, along with his guards and attendants, led Hajime, Yue, Tio, and Myu to the largest open area in Ankaji.

The open field was over three times as large as Hajime’s minimum specifications had been. The area was normally used to grow crops, but it had been left fallow this year to let the soil replenish.

Lanzwi still wasn’t convinced Hajime could do what he claimed. If it turned out it was all some sort of elaborate trick, he would order Hajime executed on the spot.

His town was in desperate need of water, and he had no time to waste on charlatans. He’d only agreed to this crazy idea at all because he had no better options.

Fortunately for everyone involved, Lanzwi’s suspicions proved unfounded.

Though there was no wind, Yue’s hair started to flutter. The air became so saturated with mana that it glowed gold.

Yue was using one of the spells she’d created with the ancient magic she’d acquired.

“Asura.” A swirling black sphere appeared above the empty farmland.

The sphere stretched and flattened until it had morphed into a rectangle

200 square meters in size. After a brief pause, the rectangle silently sank into the ground, crushing the earth beneath it.

A massive depression formed where the rectangle had been.

Asura had gouged the earth with such force that it caused a localized earthquake. The shaking stopped relatively quickly, the earth's cries of protest fading away.

In an instant, Yue had created a massive reservoir to store all the water she was about to summon.

Hajime snuck a glance at Lanzwi and saw that his jaw was nearly hitting the floor. Him and his attendants were flabbergasted by what had just happened. They were all at a loss for words, which was the only reason they weren't screaming in shock.

Yue breathed a tired sigh. She'd only unleashed Asura at half strength, so it hadn't drained all of her mana. However, it had still taken a lot of effort to cast.

She could replenish her mana using the jewelry set Hajime had given her, but she wanted to save what was stored in there for the volcano. There wouldn't be any time to restock in between, so the more she used now, the less she'd have later. And since she wasn't in the middle of a fight, she had the time to replenish her mana using an alternate method.

Yue let her body fall backward. She didn't bother taking a falling stance or anything. After all, she knew she wasn't going to hit the ground. As she'd expected, Hajime caught her in his arms.

He lifted Yue up and turned her around. Yue smiled faintly and wrapped her arms around Hajime's neck.

She brought her face close to his—

“Thanks.” Then bit into his neck.

Drops of blood spilled forth. Yue ran her tongue down Hajime's neck, making sure to lap up every last bit of his blood. Yue had always acted more mature than her appearance would suggest, but she looked downright seductive when she was drinking Hajime's blood.

The bloodsucking went on for a good few minutes. The way Yue moaned softly between gulps made it almost seem like a sexual act. Despite the fact that having your blood sucked should have been something to fear, most of the men were watching Hajime with a look of longing on their faces.

Only Lanzwi had the presence of mind to maintain an austere expression.

He recovered from his surprise and organized his thoughts. His breathing was labored and his eyes slightly bloodshot, but surely he wasn't thinking of anything lewd.

Off to the side, Tio watched with an ecstatic expression on her face. She at least still had the presence of mind to cover Myu's eyes, though. Some things were too stimulating for a four-year-old girl to see.

Myu squirmed and complained, but she couldn't break free from Tio's boob prison.

Once her mana was fully replenished, Yue removed her fangs from Hajime's neck. She looked up at him and kissed him, her lips still stained with his own blood.

The two gazed deeply into each other's eyes for a few seconds until a loud cough brought them back to reality. Lanzwi couldn't bear to see much more of this or his self-control would crumble too. Hajime and Yue smiled awkwardly at each other... before turning away from the group and kissing again.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. Whether we can see you or not isn't the problem here. There's a mountain of things I'd like to ask about the bloodsucking and all, but first could you get us that water you promised!?"

Lanzwi was so nonplussed that he dropped his regal facade for a few seconds. Hajime and Yue shrugged their shoulders and reluctantly got back to work.

Hajime hopped down into the reservoir and brought Brise out of his Treasure Trove. He drove it around the reservoir, using his Ore Desynthesis skill to separate out the components of the soil that could absorb water from those that couldn't. Once that was done, he coated the surface of the reservoir with a thin layer of metal.

After he finished coating the floor, Yue stuck her arms out and cast a high-level water spell.

"Tidal Wave." As the name suggested, Tidal Wave was a spell that blasted its opponent with a wave of water.

Normally, the wave wouldn't be *that* huge, but Yue's spells were on a completely different level than those of an average mage. She summoned forth a wave 150 meters wide and 100 meters tall. It flowed into the reservoir, filling it up a few centimeters. The reservoir was large enough to hold 200,000 tons of water. Yue repeated the process multiple times,

stopping every so often to suck Hajime's blood. But he didn't have an infinite supply of blood, and by the time Yue had gotten the reservoir half-full, he was starting to get anemic.

If he lost any more, he'd probably faint. Fortunately, it was then that Shea came running over. Her arms were laden with magic stones Kaori had filled. Though she'd only drained a little from each patient, she'd already gone through thousands of people. Altogether, it was quite a lot of mana. What was even more impressive was that it had only been two hours since Kaori had started draining people. It was easy to forget because of how ridiculous Hajime and the others' abilities were, but Kaori was pretty overpowered herself.

Shea handed Yue all of her magic stones and ran back to help Kaori. A few hours later, the reservoir was filled to the brim with pure, drinkable water.

"This is unbelievable..." Lanzwi muttered to himself. He was staring at a reservoir of water nearly as large as the oasis itself. And it had been made from nothing in the span of a few hours. He didn't even know what to say.

"This should last you guys for some time. All that's left now is to investigate the oasis... If we can't purify it, then you should send a messenger to the capital for help. The water here should be enough to sustain you until then."

"O-Okay. There's still a mountain of questions I have for you, but... thank you. Truly. You've saved my people. Let me guide you to the oasis."

Lanzwi still hadn't completely recovered from his shock, but he knew now that Hajime and his friends were people he could trust. He no longer suspected them of having ulterior motives.

The party headed east, toward the great oasis.

They arrived at a vast sparkling expanse of pure blue water. It was hard to believe something that looked so clear was poisoned. However...

"Hm?"

"Hajime?"

Hajime narrowed his eyes, focusing his gaze on a certain location. Yue tilted her head, noticing the slight shift in his demeanor.

"It's just, my Demon Eye sensed something... Duke, what areas did your investigation team check?"

"According to the report, they examined the oasis itself, the rivers that

split off from it, and the nearby wells. They also examined the underground reservoir. I'm sure my son already told you what we found. The underground reservoirs were the only places that hadn't been poisoned. Basically, we examined everything within a few meters of the oasis. Though we haven't explored the bottom of it yet."

"Is there an artifact or anything sitting at the bottom of the oasis?"

"Huh? No. We use a few artifacts to secure the oasis, but nothing's been placed inside the oasis itself. Normally, the barrier artifact we have in place would make it impossible to pollute the oasis. This is the first time something like this has ever happened."

The barrier artifact Lanzwi was referring to was known as the Judgment of Truth. It was also the source of the dome of light that protected Ankaji.

It allowed things essential for life, like air and water through, while keeping sand and other nuisances out. The wielder of the Judgment of Truth decided what could and couldn't pass through it. Not only that, it could be used as a sensor. Like its barrier component, what it was set to detect was up to its wielder. As it incorporated dark magic into its design, the Judgment of Truth could even be set to react to certain thoughts.

In other words, if Lanzwi had set it to detect anyone who meant the oasis harm, it should have reacted when the person who poisoned the oasis entered the city. That was *if* Lanzwi had set it like that. Only he knew how he'd formatted the Judgment of Truth. At present, security around the oasis was thin. It had already been polluted, and so many people were going to and from the oasis that Lanzwi had seen little point in keeping a tight guard around it.

"Huh. So what's that, then?"

Hajime turned away from Lanzwi, who was clenching his fists in frustration, and pointed to the center of the oasis. His Demon Eye had sensed something emitting mana from the bottom of the oasis.

Lanzwi looked up in surprise. He couldn't believe there was something he wasn't aware of inside there.

Hajime walked up to the water and pulled out something shaped like a water bottle from his Treasure Trove. He then started pouring mana into it. Once he was done, he casually threw it into the oasis, backing up toward Yue as he did. Lanzwi shot him a questioning stare, but Hajime didn't say anything. Just as Lanzwi was about to run out of patience, there was a huge

explosion and a massive pillar of water erupted from the center of the oasis. Lanzwi's jaw dropped open.

"Tch, it's faster than I thought... Or wait, maybe its defense is just really high?"

Hajime pulled out a dozen more of his water bottle-shaped explosives and tossed them into the oasis. A few seconds later, another massive spout of water erupted from the center of the oasis.

What he'd thrown were actually custom torpedoes that he'd designed. He'd made them in preparation for their expedition into Melusine. According to Miledi, the sunken ruins were, shockingly, underwater, so Hajime had designed a few prototype torpedoes. And this mystery object had seemed like a perfect test dummy. So far, it appeared while their firepower was sufficient, his torpedoes were lacking in speed and tracking capabilities. *Guess I need to refine my design.*

Hajime had added ore enchanted with Sense Presence and Tracking into his torpedoes. Once they locked onto a target, they would chase after it until they got within the blast radius and then explode. Right now he'd had them lock onto whatever that mysterious thing in the water was.

"Hey! What are you doing, Hajime-dono!? Ah, you just destroyed the pier! I can see chunks of fish floating up from everywhere! The whole oasis is turning red!"

"Tch. Still not good enough? Fine, maybe fifty will do the trick..."

Hajime ignored Lanzwi's anguished screams and stepped forward, preparing for an even grander attack. Lanzwi's guards clung to Hajime, begging him not to do it.

They couldn't see the thing Hajime was trying to destroy, so to them it looked like he'd just suddenly started throwing explosives into the oasis. He'd already destroyed the pier and killed countless fish, and they needed to stop him before the damage got any worse.

As the Judgment of Truth didn't react, Lanzwi could tell Hajime wasn't trying to harm the oasis. However, that only made his destructive actions more confusing. Regardless, Lanzwi and his guards had a duty to protect the oasis.

Annoyed, Hajime brushed Lanzwi's guards off. But before he could throw his next batch of torpedoes—

"Ah!?" Countless tentacles of water suddenly shot out of the oasis and

headed straight for Hajime.

Hajime pulled out Donner and Schlag and started shooting them down. Yue froze as many of them as she could, while Tio evaporated the rest with fire magic.

Lanzwi stared, slack-jawed at the surprising chain of events that had unfolded one after another. Infuriated by Hajime's constant bombardment, the water rose up. Seemingly defying gravity, it created a mound ten meters high.

"What... in Ehit's name..." Lanzwi's hushed voice carried surprisingly far.

The water morphed from a mound into a horrific creature. Numerous tentacles wriggled all over its body, and there was a glowing red mana crystal at its center. It resembled the slimes Hajime had seen in video games.

However, its size was on a completely different level. It was ten times larger than any slime Hajime had ever seen. Also, the slimes Hajime remembered hadn't possessed the ability to manipulate water. Nor had they shot water tentacles at people.

"What... What kind of monster is this? Some kind of... Bachulum, maybe?" Lanzwi tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Bachulum was the scientific name given to the slime species of monsters in Tortus.

"Well, it doesn't really matter what it is. That's the thing that's polluting your oasis. It's unique magic probably has something to do with releasing toxins or something."

"That would certainly make sense. Still, how are you going to defeat it?" The Bachulum had been attacking continually, even while Hajime and Lanzwi had been talking. However, Yue and Tio had kept its tentacles at bay.

Hajime, too, had been firing Donner and Schlag continually while talking. He was trying to find an opening to shoot the Bachulum's core, but it kept moving around inside the slime, making it hard for Hajime to get a clear shot. It was as if it had a will of its own.

Lanzwi had gotten so used to being surprised that Hajime's insanely powerful artifacts, his guns, didn't even faze him. Instead, he calmly asked whether or not Hajime had a plan to deal with the Bachulus.

"Hmmm... Ah, don't worry. I've got it."

Hajime barely registered Lanzwi's question and gave a perfunctory reply. His entire focus was on the whizzing mana crystal inside the slime. After a few seconds, he holstered Schlag and held Donner with both hands.

Then, he wrapped his left arm around his right, bent his left elbow, and spread his feet slightly apart, with his right foot slightly in front of his left. He was copying the Weaver Stance he'd seen back on earth. If he wanted to get the mana crystal, he'd need ungodly precision.

Hajime's eyes were as sharp as a hawk, and he'd finally grasped the crystal's movement patterns.

He held the stance for a few seconds, silently waiting for the perfect opportunity.

Bang! A single streak of light trailed through the sky. The mana crystal moved directly into the bullet's path, as if it had been magnetically pulled toward it.

It was a clean hit, and the crystal shattered into a thousand pieces. With the slime dead, there was nothing left to control the water. It fell back into the oasis with a splash. Waves of water rippled out from the point of impact, as if signaling an end to the town's pollution problem.

“Is it over?”

“Should be. I don't sense any mana in the oasis anymore. Though I don't know if getting rid of the monster also purified the water.”

Lanzwi couldn't believe Hajime had solved their crisis so easily. Ankaji had been on the verge of ruin and he'd just waltzed in and fixed everything. One of his attendants hurried over to the water and appraised the oasis' quality.

“How is it?”

“The water's still polluted...”

Lanzwi had been hopeful, but his attendant shook his head. People who'd drank directly from the oasis had gotten sick as well, so everyone had known it was poisoned from the start. Still, it was disappointing that killing the slime hadn't also purified the water.

“Now now, there's no need to feel so depressed. Now that the source is gone, poisoned water will stop spreading everywhere. The underground reservoir should still be clean, so if you dispose of all the infected water you can replace it with that. Then, you'll have your old oasis back.” Tio tried to comfort Lanzwi and the others. Their gloomy expressions perked up a little, and they started thinking about how to revive their city. Their determination and unity showed Hajime just how much the citizens and their lord cared about the city. Even in these dire straits, no one was thinking of abandoning

Ankaji.

“But just what kind of monster was that Bachulum-like thing...? Was it some new species that found its way to the oasis through one of the underground tunnels?” Lanzwi tilted his head and stared at the oasis.

Hajime was the one who provided him with an answer.

“It was... probably the work of the demons, right?”

“Demons!? Hajime-dono, you must have some basis for making that accusation, right?” Lanzwi quickly recovered from his initial surprise and pressed Hajime for more information. After seeing how swiftly Hajime had dealt with both their water issue and the monster, Lanzwi had a lot of respect for him. Never again would he doubt Hajime’s abilities.

Since the Bachulus they’d encountered was a type no one had seen before, Hajime had guessed it must have been some new species the demons had created with their ancient magic. The slime had a lot of peculiarities that had matched up with the monsters that had attacked Ur and the ones that had attacked Kaori in Orcus. Chances were, the demons were building up their monster army still. And they wanted the humans as weak as possible before the war started in earnest so they were striking preemptively at the most important assets. Aiko had the potential to revolutionize the kingdom’s agriculture, while the heroes the Holy Church had summoned were the humans’ strongest trump card. They were definitely people the demons would want to eliminate as soon as possible.

Ankaji, too, was an important lifeline for the kingdom. It was a major crossroads where almost all of the northern continent’s seafood passed through. Best of all, since it was in a desert and all it was comparatively isolated. It made for a perfect target. That was why Hajime’s first thought was that demons were responsible.

When Hajime explained as much to Lanzwi, he groaned.

“I’ve heard about the other monster attacks. We did conduct our own investigation into the affair, but... we never thought they’d be able to launch an attack like this... We were too naive.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. Even people in the capital couldn’t have guessed they’d be making new species of monsters. The hero party was attacked barely a few days ago. The whole kingdom’s probably in an uproar and hasn’t had time to properly spread information.”

“I guess the demons are finally making their move. Hajime-dono, you said

you were an adventurer. But given that inhuman strength of yours, and those artifacts you carry, I can only assume that like Kaori-dono, you too are one of Ehit's warriors."

Hajime simply shrugged. Lanzwi guessed that Hajime had his own reasons for not elaborating, so he didn't pry. Regardless of what secrets he was hiding, Hajime was still Ankaji's savior. Besides, there were more important matters that had to be dealt with at the moment.

"Hajime-dono, Yue-dono, Tio-dono. I, Duke Lanzwi Feuward Zengen, humbly thank you for saving the city of Ankaji and its people. We will forever be in your debt." Lanzwi and his attendants bowed to Hajime and the others.

It was rare for the duke of a city to bow their heads to anyone, but Hajime had definitely earned that honor. It didn't matter if he was one of Ehit's warriors or not, his actions had saved thousands of lives. Hajime hadn't known Lanzwi for long, but he could tell the duke cared deeply for his people and his country. His attendants knew that as well, which was why they didn't try to stop him when he bowed to Hajime, electing to join him instead. Hajime could tell where Bize got his personality from. Even their mannerisms were similar.

Hajime grinned to himself and addressed Lanzwi.

"That's right, you guys owe me now. Don't forget it."

He could make use of their gratitude here too. When it came to turning things to his advantage, Hajime had no shame.

Lanzwi had been expecting Hajime to be humble about it while covertly trying to curry favor with him, so he was taken by surprise when Hajime just laid it out like that. Still, he'd been planning to repay his debt regardless, so it wasn't a big deal.

Honestly, Hajime didn't feel he did anything all that altruistic. Saving Ankaji had been Kaori's request, and he'd had a personal stake in ensuring the city's safety. After all, he would need to leave Myu here while he explored the Grand Gruen Volcano.

However, if Lanzwi was showing him gratitude, he would've been a fool not to capitalize on it. The more allies he had when the time finally came to deal with the Holy Church, the better. Lanzwi had been planning on returning Hajime's good faith regardless, but as a politician he understood that it was important to officially promise such things.

“Y-Yeah, of course. I’ll never forget the service you did us...
Unfortunately, my city is still suffering. Could I request your help in healing
the patients?”

He’d grown accustomed to dealing with odd people in his time as a politician, and so he recovered from his surprise relatively quickly. Then, he smiled ruefully and agreed to Hajime’s demand that they pay him back. Though he wanted his citizens restored to good health before he would do anything.

“I was planning on heading to the Grand Gruen Volcano anyway, so I don’t mind. How much stillstone do you need me to harvest?”

“Thank you so much... Hey, someone get me the medical reports.” Lanzwi sighed in relief and ordered one of his attendants to get him the reports on how many patients there were, and how much stillstone they’d need to cure them all. It turned out they needed quite a bit.

“We’ll be needing quite a lot. Would you like me to send porters with you?”

“Nah, no need. I’ve got a transportation artifact that merchants would kill to have.”

“At this point you could tell me you command the heavens themselves and I’d believe you. It must be the blessings of Ehit that guided you to us.”

Lanzwi threw his arms up in amazement. *Is there anything this boy can’t do?* he thought to himself with a wry smile.

Around the same time, Kaori and Shea were working frantically to treat the patients.

Starting with the ones in the worst condition, Kaori absorbed their mana in batches, her Sanctorum reaching everyone within a radius of ten meters. Her area of effect healing spells had about the same range, so she could cast healing magic on them at the same time.

Meanwhile, Shea carried away the patients Kaori had already treated and carried in new ones. Shea would fill an entire cart with people and transport them en masse. And instead of running through the buildings, she’d hop over their rooftops to save time. It was faster to bring patients in critical care to Kaori than to have her running around to each and every makeshift hospital that had been set up.

It was quite a sight, watching a diminutive girl carry entire carts of people

across rooftops. Many of the patients thought the disease had made them start hallucinating, and a fair few of them started panicking. Because of that, a few of the hospitals descended into chaos.

All of the doctors were amazed at how effortlessly Kaori juggled multiple high-level healing spells at once. Before long, she'd taken charge of the entire treatment operation and all the healers were taking orders from her.

Kaori was still in the middle of healing patients when Hajime and the others showed up. When they saw Lanzwi following behind Hajime, the patients and healers tried to bow to him. However, he raised up a hand to stop them.

“Listen to me, everyone! Just now we eliminated the source of the poison! It will still take some time, but we can get our oasis back! Not only that, we have secured a new source of water! Furthermore, it’s large enough to sustain us until relief arrives. Best of all, this gold adventurer here has agreed to harvest stillstone for us! Hang on for just a few more days, everyone! Together we’ll weather this storm!” His deep voice echoed through the room. Hajime could see why the kingdom had entrusted such an important city to his rule. He possessed both wisdom and charisma.

At first the patients were confused, but Lanzwi’s smiling face convinced them that this was no joke, or a white lie to raise their spirits.

Cheers rang out throughout the hospital. The citizens had been in despair, but now hope colored their faces once more. This ordeal could end without more lives being claimed. Families hugged each other, weeping openly. The healers patted each other on the back, relieved that their efforts would not be in vain. A number of people thanked Hajime and Kaori for saving them.

Lanzwi glanced over at Hajime. Noticing his gaze, Hajime turned over and grimaced.

“Duke, you...”

“Don’t look so concerned. If you don’t come back, we’ll just fall into despair.”

The implicit message of “If you don’t save us, we’re all dead, so you better not let us down. You promised you’d fulfill my request, so you better hold your end of the bargain,” hung in the air. Though he was grateful to Hajime, he had no one else he could rely on. He wanted insurance that Hajime would keep his end of the bargain. Hundreds of thousands of lives were on the line, after all. And so, Lanzwi had appealed to Hajime’s

conscience. He'd hoped this would make Hajime feel too guilty about running away to try it.

"You're a crafty one, huh?"

"You have to be, if you want to survive as a noble."

Hajime smiled ruefully and Lanzwi shrugged his shoulders. Though in truth, Hajime wasn't really mad. He'd expected something like this. In fact, if the duke hadn't tried to secure some kind of insurance, Hajime would have begun to doubt his competence. Though Hajime wouldn't feel terribly guilty even if he did flee. The destruction of Ankaji and the death of its citizens wouldn't really have weighed on his conscience.

Hajime turned away from Lanzwi and walked over to Kaori.

"Kaori, we're gonna head to the Grand Gruen Volcano now. How long do you think you can keep this up?"

"Hajime-kun..." Kaori smiled when she saw Hajime, but then her expression grew serious and she ran the numbers in her head.

"Two days," she replied once she'd done the math. That was the longest she could keep the patients alive for.

"Hajime-kun, I'll do everything I can here to heal the patients, so please bring the stillstone back as soon as possible. Also, I'm sorry... I know you don't care about the people of this world, but I still..."

"It was pretty much in our way, so it's not a big deal. Besides, I agreed to help. I can hardly leave Myu behind in a city filled with corpses."

"Hehe, that's right. She's relying on you. Don't worry, I'll look after Myu-chan while you're gone."

Hajime had explained everything he'd been through to Kaori while they'd driven through the desert. She knew about the mad gods and the fact that Hajime prioritized going home over everything else. He'd told her that if she couldn't accept that she was free to return to Kouki's party. But of course she'd elected to stay with him.

Even if he'd decided to abandon Ankaji, she still wouldn't have left his side. She would have tried to persuade him of course, but if he'd insisted she would have accepted his decision.

That being said, she had still wanted to help the people of Ankaji. Fortunately, her puppy-dog look had been enough to get Hajime to agree to help. She wasn't conceited enough to think that she could manipulate Hajime with her charms, but she was glad to know that her opinion at least had some

influence on his decision-making.

At the same time, though, she felt bad for basically forcing Hajime to go along with her own selfish desires.

That was why she'd apologized. However, Hajime apparently hadn't been all that bothered by the decision. He had seen through Kaori's worries, which was why he'd told her that it had been his decision in the end. Kaori, too, could tell Hajime was just trying to be considerate. She smiled at him, her gaze full of trust and love.

"I'll do my best here, so come back safely, alright? I'll be waiting."

"G-Gotcha."

She sounded like a housewife sending her husband off to war. It was surprisingly touching, and Hajime was at a loss for words.

Even back in Japan, Kaori had always been straightforward. She'd talked to Hajime every day in class, ignoring Kouki's warnings and the jealous stares everyone shot Hajime. Eventually, Hajime had gotten used to it, but she'd grown even more bold since confessing to him.

Hajime blushed and looked away, only to find himself face to face with Yue.

She was giving him an intensely cold glare. Hajime shivered. But when he turned back, he saw Kaori smiling at him again. Hajime despaired, trapped between two predators. It was then that Myu went and complicated things.

"Kaori-oneechan, are you going to kiss Daddy like Yue-oneechan did earlier?"

"Oh, you could see that, Myu?"

"Hweh? I could see through the gaps in your fingers, Tio-oneechan. Yue-oneechan looked really cute. Myu wants to try kissing Daddy too."

"Hmm... Even I have not kissed Master yet. Myu, you'll have to wait until you get older before you can do such things."

"Aww..."

Hajime glared at Tio, though there was no way she would have been able to stop Myu from peeking. As always, Tio derived immense pleasure from being glared at. However, Hajime didn't have any time to spare for her.

That strange sword-wielding demon had appeared behind Kaori again, and it looked angrier than ever. The arrival of her logic-defying stand was always bad news.

"Whatever could Myu be talking about, I wonder? Didn't you go out to

fix the oasis, Hajime-kun? So how come you were kissing Yue? What happened to doing your job? Or was kissing her part of your job? Don't tell me you two were off having fun while I was working myself to the bone treating patients. You couldn't possibly have done something so cruel to me, right? You didn't just leave me to get some alone time, did you?" The darkness in Kaori's eyes terrified Hajime. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead. He hurriedly tried to explain himself, but before he could say anything Yue stepped forward.

He mistakenly believed that Yue would solve the misunderstanding for him, but expecting anything from Yue when she was like this was a mistake. Instead, she put her hands on her hips and puffed her chest out, grinning triumphantly.

"It was great." That was all she said.

"Ahahahahahaha."

"Fufufufufufufu."

Kaori and Yue's laughter echoed through the hospital room. Until that point, the other doctors and patients had all seen Kaori as some kind of saint. But now that they'd seen her true colors, they backed away, pale-faced.

It was only natural. It was impossible to believe someone who had such a demonic spirit in their possession could be a saint. Worse, a giant thunder dragon had started forming behind Yue as well. Everyone was too scared to see what would happen next.

Sighing, Hajime walked between the two of them and flicked both of them on the forehead. It was just a flick, but he put quite a bit of force behind it. Kaori and Yue crouched down in pain, nursing their foreheads. They looked up at him reproachfully. Exasperated, he tried to explain.

"Kaori. I didn't suggest we split up so I could spend time with Yue. You should know that. Besides, Yue's my lover. You don't have any right to complain about what we do. You agreed to those conditions when you decided to come along."

"Um... I know, but... I can't control my feelings..." Kaori hung her head, but she still tried to argue back. Hajime sighed again and turned to scold Yue.

"And you, stop picking fights with her every chance you get." Upon hearing his words, Yue turned away, sulking.

"This is a fight between women... You have no right to interfere, Hajime."

"Is it just me, or am I being ignored more often now?" Shea lamented to

herself as she watched. Tio was still lost in the throes of ecstasy, so she'd missed the confrontation entirely, but Myu wasn't happy to see Kaori and Yue fighting again.

It took some time before Hajime could calm everyone down, but finally they were ready to depart for the Grand Gruen Volcano. As Kaori would be busy tending to all the patients, Hajime asked Lanzwi to help her look after Myu. Lanzwi was still stunned at how convoluted the relationships between everyone in Hajime's party were. Regardless, he happily agreed to help.

Hajime had already told Myu beforehand that he'd need to leave her behind for a bit while he explored the volcano, but she still wasn't happy about it. He bent down and patted her on the head.

"I'm going now, Myu. Will you be a good girl while I'm gone?"

"*Hic...* I will. So please come back soon, Daddy."

"Don't worry, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Myu clung to Hajime's shirt, trying her best not to cry. The way he comforted her was just like a real dad. People began to relax again. Hajime gave Myu's back a little push, and sent her off to Kaori. Then he turned to Yue, Shea, and Tio, telling them to get ready.

Before he could leave though, Kaori stopped him.

"Ah, Hajime-kun... Stay safe."

"Will do. Take care of Myu for me."

"I will. Also, umm... Could you give me a kiss? A... goodbye kiss?"

"Definitely not. Where'd that idea even come from?"

"Not even on the cheek? Please?" Kaori blushed, but her voice remained firm. She knew that in order to stand any chance against Yue, she needed to be bold. She'd been relatively bold even back in Japan, but all of her restraints had disappeared after her confession.

"Oh, give me one too!" Shea tried to grab Hajime's attention, but he ignored her. He opened his mouth, planning to refuse, but Myu butt in before he could.

"Myu wants one too. Myu wants Daddy to kiss her!"

She had decided she wanted to join the fun as well. Hajime tried to explain why he couldn't, but his words didn't get through to her at all.

"Do you hate me, Daddy?"

Hajime could feel his heart melting at that.

In the end, he ended up kissing Kaori, Myu, and for some reason even

Shea on the cheeks. The doctors and patients all watched on fondly. Feeling too awkward to remain even a second longer, Hajime hurriedly left for the Grand Gruen Volcano.

Tio had asked for a kiss as well, but Hajime had ended up just slapping her. Her panting had creeped him out way too much.

The Grand Gruen Volcano. It was approximately 100 kilometers north of Ankaji. It was around 5 kilometers in diameter at its base, and rose to a modest height of 3000 meters. It wasn't conical like most volcanoes, but shaped more like a dome. Its summit was flat, however, unlike most domes. Its slope was so gentle that it seemed more like a hill than a mountain. A really, really big hill.

Though the Grand Gruen Volcano was one of the only well-known labyrinths aside from the Great Orcus Labyrinth, it wasn't nearly as popular. It was more dangerous than the Orcus Labyrinth, and the monsters that roamed its depths had less valuable mana crystals inside them. However, the main reason for its unpopularity was how difficult it was to reach.

It wasn't just that it was in the middle of a desert.

"It looks like Laputa."

"Laputa?"

Yue and the others of course had no idea that Hajime was referencing a famous movie. Hajime just shrugged his shoulders and stared at the whirling sandstorm surrounding the volcano.

Just as Laputa had been surrounded by a veil of thick clouds, the Grand Gruen Volcano was surrounded by a massive sandstorm. The wind and sand was so thick that it looked more like a spinning wall of dust than a tornado.

However, that wasn't all. Sandworms and other deadly monsters lurked within the storm. Fighting them off would prove difficult with how low visibility was inside. Hajime could see why most adventurers weren't qualified enough to even make it past the sandstorm.

"I'm so glad we didn't decide to do this trip on foot."

"Even someone as sturdy as me wouldn't enjoy marching through that."

Shea and Tio murmured their appreciation for Brise as they stared out of the windows at the howling storm before them.

They wouldn't be able to take their time conquering this labyrinth. The stillstone deposits on the surface of the volcano weren't large enough to cure

all of Ankaji, so Hajime would need to harvest the stone deep below as well. If this was anything like the other labyrinths, there'd be a shortcut leading outside at the center of the labyrinth. It'd be faster to conquer the whole thing than to fight their way halfway down, then double back. Once they were out, making it back to Ankaji would be easy.

Hajime wasn't that invested in saving the lives of Ankaji's citizens, but if it was possible to save them without risking himself, then that sounded good to him. If nothing else, it would spare him from having to see Kaori's and Myu's tears.

Hajime gunned Brise's accelerator and charged into the storm.

Once inside, their vision was blocked by a wall of brown that surrounded them on all sides. Just like the mist they'd seen in the Haltina Woods, the sandstorm cut their visibility to practically nothing. And since the sand could physically harm them, unlike the fog, it was even more dangerous. Even with magic barriers and good equipment, breaking through this wall of sand while surviving attacks from monsters was no easy feat.

The sun's rays didn't penetrate down here either, so the only illumination was the green glowstone headlights Hajime had turned on. He slowed down to about 30 kilometers per hour. At that speed, he estimated they'd be out of the storm in another five minutes.

Shea's bunny ears suddenly perked up, and a second later Hajime's eyes narrowed.

"Hang on tight!" he yelled, before gunning the accelerator.

Seconds later, three sandworms burst from the ground behind him. Hajime swerved from side to side, dodging their attacks. Once he was clear, he started speeding up again.

With Brise's speed, it made more sense to push straight through the sandstorm than try to fight all the monsters that got in their way.

Two more sandworms erupted from the ground on either side of Brise, bearing down in a pincer attack. Their aim was perfect, and they were headed straight for Brise's side doors. While the impact itself wouldn't have been able to break the car's armor, Hajime wanted to avoid getting flipped over. He was just about to turn hard into a drift when Yue and Tio stopped him.

"Hm, leave this to us."

"Indeed, we can handle this, Master."

Hajime nodded and straightened the steering wheel. The sandworms were

so close that the party could see them with the naked eye.

However, just before they slammed into the truck, they were stopped.

“Wind Blades.” Yue summoned a barrage of wind blades that cut through the sandstorm, heading straight for the sandworm on the left. The blades sliced right through it, cutting it in half. Blood spurted everywhere as the sandworm was split down the middle.

The sandworm on the right suffered a similar fate as it was torn to shreds by Tio’s spell.

“A wonderful display, Yue. You executed your magic magnificently.”

“You’re pretty good too, Tio. I didn’t think you could use the sandstorm’s winds like that.”

Wind Blades was a beginner level wind spell, but the amount of mana Yue and Tio had poured into theirs had given them the force of intermediate spells. On top of that, they had utilized the sandstorm’s winds in different ways to further increase its force. Skilled magicians didn’t just have vast amounts of mana, they also knew how to utilize their environment and pick the best spell for the situation. While it sounded simple, it was easier said than done. Yue and Tio had both spent years practicing these skills.

The three sandworms that had popped up earlier caught up to Brise. Their underground speed was truly impressive. Annoyed by their persistence, Hajime activated one of Brise’s weapons. There was a loud clang from the back of the truck, and a couple of black, round objects rolled out from underneath it.

The moment they got close to the sandworms trailing behind Hajime, they exploded. The ground shook from the force, and chunks of sandworm flesh flew through the air. Hajime threw out another handful of grenades, finishing off any survivors. One of the sandworms was blown in half, and its head whirled through the sky before it was swallowed up by the sand.

“Wow, that was amazing. Hajime-san, how many different things did you add to Brise?”

Shea watched from the rear window as Hajime’s grenades decimated the sandworms. He grinned wickedly as he responded.

“It can also transform into a giant human-shaped golem to fight.”

“.....”

It sounded unbelievable, but knowing Hajime he might really have actually done it. Shea, Yue, and Tio all started looking around the car,

searching for hints as to how it would transform.

“I’m kidding. Even I wouldn’t go that far... Though I did want to,” Hajime added with a smirk. The girls were certain he’d do it eventually, even if he hadn’t already.

As they drove further into the storm they found themselves being attacked by giant ants and giant spiders as well. But the combination of Yue and Tio’s magic, and Brise’s built-in weapons, made short work of all of them. The monsters didn’t even have a chance to fight back.

Shea sulked in the back, lamenting her own uselessness. Hajime and the others ignored her, breezing through the sandstorm that was the bane of so many adventurers.

After a few more minutes, Hajime and the others burst through the other side of the sandstorm. Up close, the volcano looked an awful lot like Ayers Rock, just scaled up. The center was surprisingly silent. Without the wind whipping the sand everywhere, they had a clear view of the dazzling blue sky. *So this is what the eye of a storm is like, then?*

The entrance to the volcano was at its peak, so Hajime began driving Brise up its gently sloped side. The dark red rock sizzled and sputtered, vapors of steam rising here and there. Though it was an active volcano, it had never once erupted. Chances were, it had something to do with the fact that it was a labyrinth.

Finally, the mountainside grew too steep for Brise, and Hajime reluctantly put it away. They’d have to finish the trek on foot.

“Whoa... I-It’s hot.”

“Mhm...”

“Yeah. The stone’s even hotter than the sand was. Even if we didn’t have a time limit, this is one place I wouldn’t wanna spend much time in.”

“Hmm, personally I find this temperature quite agreeable, but... it certainly is a shame I cannot suffer the heat as you can.”

“Want me to drop you in some magma? Then you can suffer too.”

Everyone except Tio found the volcano’s temperature suffocating. The effects of the heat were made even worse because of how stark a contrast it was from the air-conditioned car they’d been riding in so far. *I probably shouldn’t have spent all my life in Japan holed up in my air-conditioned room. You reap what you sow, I guess.*

Aware that the clock was ticking, the group hurried up the mountainside,

complaining about the heat all the while. They reached the summit in less than an hour.

At the top they found a disorganized mess of boulders strewn all about, creating a complex rock maze. The juxtaposition of jagged, glossy boulders with polished, smooth ones made it look like a rock exhibit in a science museum. Also, the sandstorm looked close enough to touch.

One boulder stood out far more than the other among the mass of stones. It had been shaped in the form of an arch, which was at least 10 meters high.

As he approached it, Hajime spotted a staircase heading deeper into the volcano right beneath the arch. He stopped at the top of staircase, looked back at Yue, Shea, and Tio, then gave each of them a confident nod.

“Let’s do this!”

“Okay!”

“You got it!”

“Very well!”

Hajime had thought the insides of the Great Orcus Labyrinth and the Reisen Gorge had been ridiculous, but they both paled in comparison to the absurdity of the Grand Gruen Volcano. The monsters weren’t tougher or anything, but its construction was absolutely awe-inspiring. It was like nothing he’d ever seen, and what he was most surprised by was...

The sight of magma floating in the air, which filled up the whole space in front of him. It wasn’t like the treetop aqueducts Hajime had seen in Verbergen. Instead, there was quite literally a river of magma floating in the air. It snaked and swerved like an actual river, making it seem like a giant red dragon was flying through the volcano.

The passageways and rooms had magma flowing here and there as well, so challengers to the labyrinth had to be wary of lava both beneath and above them.

Furthermore—

“Kyaa!”

“Whoa, you okay?”

“Hawawa, thank you, Hajime-san. I didn’t think lava would spew out like that... It took me by surprise.” As Shea had said, there were spouts in the wall from which magma erupted at irregular intervals.

There was no warning either, so it was hard to prepare for. Nature had

provided the perfect traps for this labyrinth. *Thank god I have the Sense Heat skill*, Hajime thought to himself. Without it, they would have had to take the labyrinth very slowly.

However, what really made this labyrinth grueling was the heat, not just how hot all the surfaces were, but the atmosphere itself. Because of the abundance of magma everywhere, it felt like they were inside a superheated sauna. *This must be what an egg feels like when it's getting cooked*. That was the most dangerous part of the Grand Gruen Volcano.

Sweat poured off the party in buckets as they headed deeper into the volcano's bowels. They had to be careful to avoid drops of falling magma from above and spouts of it from the side, but they made steady progress. After some time, they arrived in a room that was clearly man-made. The room had been hollowed out by a rough tool, likely a pickaxe, and there was a glowing pink jewel slotted in one of the walls.

“Hm? That’s... stillstone, right? That glowing thing?”

“Indeed it is, Master.” Tio answered, drawing upon her vast library of knowledge. It appeared this was the excavation site most adventurers used to harvest stillstone.

“So small.”

“All the others are only as big as pebbles, too...”

Indeed, all of the remaining stillstone that the party could find came in chunks no bigger than their pinkies. *I guess that means this section's been almost completely harvested*. There was no way they’d be able to get enough in time only searching the upper floors. And so, their best bet was to make it all the way to the bottom and find a large stash of it somewhere.

Hajime used his Ore Appraisal on the stillstone just in case. His magic confirmed what Tio had said, and the party grabbed all the stillstone that was easily obtainable before hurrying onward.

They descended another seven floors, their irritation at the heat growing stronger with each new passage downward. According to the records Hajime had read, the seventh floor was as far as any adventurer had gone. Or at least, as far as any adventurer had gone and returned alive. Steeling themselves, the party descended the staircase leading to the eighth floor.

As they stepped into the eighth floor, the party was buffeted by a searing gust of wind. A second later, a massive gout of fire bore down on them. It shot toward them in a spiral, illuminating the corridor’s orange walls.

“Spatial Severance.” Yue instantly reacted with a defensive spell. A swirling black sphere materialized in front of Hajime and the others. This was another one of Yue’s gravity spells. However, this one wasn’t used to attack anything.

The conflagration, hot enough to melt even bones, was sucked into Yue’s sphere and vanished without a trace. Actually, “vanished” wasn’t the proper term for what had happened. Yue’s big, black gravity sphere had exerted a gravitational field strong enough to suck its surroundings in. Yue had calibrated it so it wouldn’t affect those she was trying to protect, making it an ideal shield.

With the flames no longer blocking their line of sight, Hajime and the others were able to see who’d shot those flames at them.

It was an ox monster. Magma covered its entire body, and it was standing in a pool of the stuff. Its two curved horns were wickedly sharp, and each breath it exhaled was accompanied by a small gout of fire. *I don’t care how strong you are, nothing should be able to survive being slathered in magma.*

The Magma Ox kicked angrily at the ground, sending drops of magma flying. It prepared to charge, angry that its flames had been repelled.

Yue snapped her fingers. Her gravity sphere sped toward the beast. Once it got close, it shot out the flames it had sucked in back at the monster who’d cast them. Those flames had been compressed by Yue’s gravity sphere, and they came out like a barrage of flaming lasers, with far more force than the cow had sent them.

Yue’s flame bombardment spoiled the Magma Ox’s charge. It was rather ironic that it would be stymied by its own flames.

There was a loud boom and the magma the cow was standing on was blown away by the force of Yue’s bombardment. The ox was blown away with the magma, and it flipped through the air a few times before crashing into the wall behind it. It screamed in pain, but quickly got back up and charged again. It wouldn’t let these intruders live.

“Mrgh... I guess fire won’t work on a fire monster.”

“I mean it’s already surrounded in magma, so... yeah?”

Yue sounded unhappy. Smiling wryly, Hajime made to pull out Donner, but Shea stopped him.

“Leave this to me, Hajime-san!” Shea had already unsheathed Drucken, and her breathing was rough.

She's being unusually assertive today. Hajime's Demon Eye picked up which part of Drucken Shea was sending her mana to, and realized she wanted to try out the new feature he'd added to it. After a moment's hesitation, Hajime nodded to her.

"Alright, say your prayers you cow!" Shea leaped fearlessly at the charging ox, which had closed a good bit of the gap between them already. Then, she spun around in the air, adding centrifugal force to her swing before coming down on the charging ox. Her aim was on point, and Drucken slammed into the Magma Ox's skull. Ripples of blue mana spread out from the point of impact, each one a powerful shockwave. The Magma Ox's head went flying as if it had been blown off.

Shea used the force of her swing to flip over the headless beast, who was still carried forward by its own momentum, and landed safely on the ground.

"W-Wow. Hajime-san, that was amazing. I'm the one who did that and I can't believe it just happened. This upgrade is crazy!"

"Yeah, looks like it. I wasn't sure how well the shock converter would work, but this is..."

Even Yue and Tio were impressed by the attack Shea had just pulled off. Her increased strength was all thanks to the shock converter Hajime had added.

Shock Conversion was a derivative skill of Mana Conversion that Hajime had acquired from one of the new monsters he'd eaten. It allowed the user to convert their mana into pure force.

It had come from the horse-headed monster Hajime had saved Kaori and the others from back in the Orcus Labyrinth. When he'd recovered his pile bunker from its corpse, he'd taken some of its meat with him as well.

Normal monsters had long since stopped giving Hajime new skills, or even improving his stats. But as the horse-headed monster was something Kouki hadn't been able to defeat even while he was using his Overdrive, Hajime had guessed it must have been stronger than most others. And as he'd expected, it had indeed possessed a new skill for Hajime to absorb. His stats hadn't seen too much of a jump, but the new skill had been worth it.

Then, with his creation magic, he'd added Shock Conversion to Drucken.

Hajime wanted to examine the ox's head that Shea had knocked off, but Yue hurried him onward.

As they continued down the floors, the monsters grew more varied. They

encountered bats that shot burning hot magma from their wings, eel-like things that swam through the walls, melting them as they passed, porcupines that fired flaming spines, chameleons that attacked with whip-like tongues from inside the magma, snakes that swam in the magma rivers and could ignore gravity... The list went on. Not only did their magma coating provide an excellent defense against most lower-level spells, they could use the magma as camouflage to launch surprise attacks. What made them truly dangerous, though, was that just touching one would kill most humans. And because they could utilize the magma in their surroundings, everything was a potential weapon for them. On the off chance the battle went poorly for them, they could use the magma as a cover to hide in, too.

Even adventurers who could clear the sandstorm wouldn't stand a chance against magma monsters like this. Now Hajime understood why no one had made it past the seventh floor. Not only was it dangerous, but the reward didn't match the risk. The monsters themselves were no stronger than the ones found on the 40th floor of the Great Orcus Labyrinth, they just had magma to enhance them. However, that meant their mana crystals weren't that large, and the amount of stillstone to be found wasn't that much higher than what was harvestable on the higher floors.

Worst of all, though, was that the heat kept growing.

"Haaah... Haaah... It's so hot."

"Saying that out loud will only make you feel hotter, Shea. Just imagine that we're swimming through water... Nice, cool water. Hehehe."

"M-Master! Yue's finally snapped! Her eyes have glazed over!"

Aside from Tio, everyone was taking most of their damage from the heat. Hajime had taken out all of the cooling artifacts that he possessed, but it was like trying to push back a storm with a fan. Drenched in sweat and barely conscious, Yue, Shea, and Hajime were nearing their limits. *We're going to need a break soon*, Hajime thought to himself as he wiped sweat off his chin.

In the next room they found, Hajime went to the wall furthest from any magma and transmuted himself a hole. Once everyone was inside, Hajime closed it up, leaving just a small hole for air to come in. He then used Ore Desynthesis and Compression Synthesis to coat the walls with a superdense metal. That way stray eels or jets of magma had no chance of getting into the room.

"Phew... Yue, can you make some ice for us? We'll take a short break

here. If we keep going like this, we'll probably slip up sooner or later."

"Mmm... Okay."

Though her eyes were still glazed over, Yue easily summoned a massive block of ice in the center of the room. Tio then cast some basic wind magic to circulate the cold air around the room. The temperature quickly began to drop.

"Haaawaaah... It feels so good~ I feel alive again!"

"Fwah~"

Yue and Shea sank to the floor, enjoying the cold breeze wafting over them. They looked like half-melted snowmen.

They look cute like that, Hajime thought to himself as he pulled towels out of his Treasure Trove and passed them out to everyone.

"Yue, Shea, you can relax all you want, but wipe yourselves off first. If you don't, you'll get too cold."

"Okay~"

"Roger~"

Once he'd passed out the towels, Tio walked up to Hajime.

"You don't seem to be having that hard of a time, Master."

"I wouldn't say that. You're probably the only one who's not affected by it at all. Man, this heat's killing me. I should have made some better cooling artifacts."

"Hmm, if it's bad enough that even you're suffering from the heat, then... it seems to me that heat is the theme this labyrinth was built around."

Even Tio, who hadn't been affected by the heat at all in the beginning, was starting to sweat. She wiped herself off with the towel Hajime handed to her as she talked.

"Theme?"

"Indeed. From what you told me, Master, the labyrinths are all trials, correct? Trials to determine who is worthy to challenge the gods... From the way you described them, it seemed as if each had its own theme. For example, the Great Orcus Labyrinth is filled with a large variety of monsters, and is designed to help challengers obtain different kinds of battle experience. The Reisen Gorge is designed to force challengers to clear obstacles without the aid of magic. And it appears this Grand Gruen Volcano is designed to see how well challengers can keep their focus and respond to constant surprise attacks while under extreme stress. In this case, that stress is

heat.”

“I see. I figured I’d have to clear them all eventually, so I didn’t give it that much thought before, but... now that you mention it, the trials certainly seem like lessons the Liberators left behind for us.” Hajime nodded in agreement. Underneath her perverted exterior, Tio was quite the scholar. On top of that, she was exceptionally beautiful, with her golden eyes and long black hair. *It’s a shame her personality puts all of that to waste.*

Hajime watched as a bead of sweat trailed down Tio’s neck and vanished into her voluptuous bust. Embarrassed, he turned away. Unfortunately, on the other side sat Yue and Shea, their clothes so drenched with sweat that he could see the skin underneath. This time, he was captivated by Yue’s alluring figure.

She’d unbuttoned the top of her white shirt to wipe off the sweat underneath. Because of the heat, her skin was slightly flushed. Glistening with sweat and panting slightly, Yue looked extremely seductive without even trying.



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Hajime found himself unable to look away. After a few seconds Yue looked up, and her gaze met Hajime's. Hajime mentally berated himself for letting his lust distract him and tried to look away.

However, Yue's captivating smile held him in place. He couldn't turn away even if he wanted to. Shirt still unbuttoned, Yue crawled toward Hajime. Her back was arched like a cat's. Hajime's eyes darted between her inviting gaze, her flushed cheeks, and her nearly exposed breasts. Once she was next to him, Yue looked up and said something in a pleading voice.

"Will you clean me up, Hajime?" Those were dangerous words. Hajime silently accepted the towel she offered him. He still couldn't look away.

Crap, I'm screwed now. There's no way I can get myself out of this one. Hajime smiled bitterly to himself and moved his hand toward Yue's neck. But before he could do anything, Shea interrupted them.

"YOU TWO! This isn't the time or the place for this! We're in a hurry, and this is a labyrinth! Sheesh, I can't believe you guys!"

"Uhh, well, I mean, it's not my fault. Yue's just too seductive. How am I supposed to refuse her?"

"Hajime's cute when he's staring at me like that."

"Reflect on your actions! Also, how come you don't look at me like that, Hajime-san? I was sitting right next to Yue, all drenched in sweat too... *Hic...* I'm starting to lose confidence in my looks. Come on Tio-san, you say something too."

"Hmm, those two seem quite deeply in love with each other to me. I'm not sure there's anything to say. After all, I too wish to be berated no matter the place or time. Besides... it seems as if Master is at least a little interested in my breasts. For me, that is more than enough. Gufufu."

As always, Tio's masochistic nature shone through. However, she had shrewdly noticed Hajime's interest in her breasts.

"But he didn't even glance at mine!" Shea wailed, and began stripping then and there. It seemed she'd already forgotten what she'd yelled at Yue for. Wanting to join in on the fun, Tio started stripping as well. Hajime stopped them both with a rubber bullet from Donner.

Thank god Kaori isn't here to see this. Shea was writhing on the ground, her breasts in plain view. Meanwhile, Tio was squirming in pleasure as Yue continued wiping herself down.

Hajime guessed that the Grand Gruen Volcano was likely fifty floors deep.

Coincidentally, that was about how many floors they'd gone down already. As for why he only thought it was "likely" despite having gone down that far, well, that was because their current situation was a little unique. It was hard to tell exactly what floor they were on.

Why? Because currently Hajime and the others were riding a dark brown boat down one of the volcano's magma rivers.

"This must be what Indiana Jones felt like on his adventures." Hajime muttered to himself as he marveled at the absurdness of his situation.

As for how they'd ended up like this, well, that had been Hajime's fault. A little while ago, they'd been progressing through the floors, harvesting stillstone wherever they found it. At some point, Hajime had noticed the magma that was surrounding them would occasionally move in strange ways.

Despite the fact that there were no boulders, the rivers parted around the air as if there were, and at places the flow slowed, though there was nothing to slow it down. Plus, it dripped down from above only in certain places.

Normally it had only dripped in places away from the path, where it wouldn't be an obstacle to their advance, so Hajime hadn't paid too much attention to it. However, at one point he'd used his Ore Perception skill near where a section of river was dripping and he discovered that it was stillstone that was causing such unnatural behavior. The magma was being propelled through the air with mana, and the stillstone neutralized that mana whenever the river got too close to a deposit of it. That was what was causing it to act erratically.

Of course, it then stood to reason that places where the river was dripping was where there were large quantities of stillstone. Upon investigation of those locations, Hajime found out his idea was right on the money. Thanks to this new discovery, the party was able to quickly collect enough stillstone. In order to get a little more so they'd have enough to spare, Hajime and the others headed to where they assumed another deposit was.

They'd seen the river giving this section of wall a wide berth, so Hajime figured it contained stillstone. He had transmuted a makeshift staircase toward that section of wall and his Ore Perception had found that there actually was a large quantity of stillstone in the wall.

Hajime quickly used his Ore Desynthesis to take the stillstone out of the

wall. However, the constant heat, and the routine way in which previous extractions had gone, caused him to drop his guard. He hadn't been paying attention to what was inside the wall.

It was only after he'd put the harvested stillstone into his Treasure Trove that he realized his mistake. Without the stillstone to stop it, a huge fountain of magma burst through the wall.

He'd instantly jumped out of the way, but there had been a lot of magma dammed up on the other side. More and more started bursting through the walls, flooding the area.

Surrounded by magma on all sides, Hajime and the others had acted fast. Yue had erected a barrier to protect them temporarily, while Hajime fashioned a boat for them to all ride the flood in. The magma's extreme heat burned through the boat at a fast rate, but Hajime used Diamond Skin's derivative skill, Diamond Protection, to strengthen the rock. With that, the boat was able to ride the magma without melting.

The flood of magma joined up with the magma river, and soon the party was taking the express route down to the volcano's center. After braving a few magma rapids, Hajime and the others arrived at the section of the river they were traversing now.

On a side note, when Hajime and the others had first started riding the magma, the boat had threatened to sink, so Shea had used her gravity spell, Fluctuator, to make it float. Fluctuator let Shea regulate the gravity of anything she touched, much like she did with her own weight.

"Ah, Hajime-san. Look, it's another tunnel."

"By my calculations, we should be nearing the volcano's base. It's likely we'll find something on the other side."

Hajime looked over in the direction Shea was pointing and saw a massive hole in the wall, which had the magma river running through it. The magma doubled as illumination, so everyone could see that the tunnel was angled downward. So far every time they'd gone through a tunnel they'd found themselves one floor lower. One good thing about riding the magma river was that it was much faster than descending normally.

The party nodded grimly to each other as the current carried them through the tunnel. On the other side they found their floating magma river snaking its way down the center of a massive cavern. The magma's flow continued to slow as they descended, until finally it stopped at a curved section... where it

suddenly turned into a magma waterfall.

“Not this again... Everyone, hang on tight!” The girls nodded and hung on to the edges of the boat, or to Hajime. Hajime’s stomach churned. It was just like riding a water coaster, except the water here was fatal. Finally, they reached the end of their slow descent and plunged down the falls.

The wind roared in their ears as they fell. Shea’s gravity magic and Tio’s wind magic kept stray splashes of magma from pelting the party. They found themselves accelerating at a breakneck pace, even though magma was supposed to be viscous.

Hajime transmuted the bottom of his shoes into spikes to hold him in place as he examined his surroundings. He didn’t want to be caught off guard by anything. Knowing the Liberators, this was the point where they set up an ambush.

“Tch, I knew it.” Hajime clicked his tongue, pulled out Donner, then quickly took aim and fired. There were three loud bangs, and three streaks of red light shot out from Donner’s barrel. A flock of magma bats had swooped down to attack them.

On their own, the bats weren’t much of a threat. They could fly pretty fast and fire magma fireballs, but that was about it. For Hajime and the others, they were basically small fry.

In a group, though, they became somewhat more of a threat. Where there was one, there was sure to be more. They swarmed out of the walls like cockroaches, dozens of them appearing from every crack and crevice.

Hajime had shot down three of them, but he heard many more flapping toward them. There was enough of them that the sound of their wings drowned out the roaring of the wind.

“Hajime, leave the left and the back to me.”

“You got it. Shea, Tio, make sure our boat doesn’t fall apart.”

“Roger!”

“Leave it to me. May I ask for a spanking as a reward?”

Hajime couldn’t figure out if Tio was being serious or joking, so he ignored her. Yue and Hajime stood back to back, angled diagonally from the sides of the boat. As always, they were in perfect sync.

The flock of magma bats bore down on the party in a single coordinated rush. They were so close to each other that they looked like one giant flaming dragon. Their burning red wings melded into each other seamlessly.

As they approached, the bats split into two groups. One attacked from the front, while the other circled behind them. Weak as they were individually, when they came en masse like this they made for a formidable foe. Most people wouldn't have enough ammunition to take them all down even.

Unfortunately for the bats, they were facing one of the most overpowered parties in existence. They'd fought a far larger group of monsters back in Ur.

"Fight numbers with numbers. Eat lead, you flaming freaks." Hajime pulled his gatling gun, Metzelei, out of his Treasure Trove. Then, he braced it against his hip, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

The distinctive *ratatatata* of machine gun fire echoed throughout the cavern as Hajime mowed down the magma bats. The deadly hail of gunfire pierced through even the waves of monsters furthest back. Metzelei fired with such force that the wall behind the bats was riddled with holes.

However, there were more magma bats than even Metzelei could handle, so Hajime pulled out Orkan with his free hand and started firing rockets into the bunched up group of monsters as well. The rockets left a trail of sparks as they struck clumps of magma bats, blowing dozens of them into smithereens.

The bats never stood a chance. A torrent of bat chunks fell to the ground. Hajime had quite literally made it rain blood.

The magma bats behind him suffered a similar fate at Yue's hands.

"Storm Serpent." A giant green globe of wind appeared in front of Yue's outstretched hand. The globe elongated and sprouted wings, transforming into a dragon. The dragon eyed its prey for a moment before opening its maw wide and charging forward.

The bats split up into smaller groups, trying to avoid the deadly storm dragon. They pelted it with fireballs as they flapped out of the way. However, Yue's dragon was composed of gravity magic. It couldn't be hurt by fire. Wind blades swirled around inside the dragon, trapped there by Yue's gravity magic. Once it had set its sights on something, it wouldn't let it escape.

Like with Yue's Draconic Thunder and Sapphire Serpent, Storm Serpent exerted a gravitational field that drew enemies to it. The magma bats were sucked into the dragon, where the wind blades ripped them to shreds. Yue had chosen a wind dragon this time because the bats were resistant to heat, and ripping their wings off with wind seemed the most efficient way of dealing with them.

Once the dragon had swallowed up most of the bats it flew to the center of

the room and burst apart. The trapped wind blades flew out in all directions, cutting down the few bats lucky enough to avoid being sucked in.

“No matter how many times I see it, Yue and Master’s ability to annihilate hordes of enemies never ceases to amaze me.”

“Yeah, they’re amazing.”

Tio and Shea exchanged a glance as they continued to steer and fortify the boat. Hajime put Metzelei and Orkan back into his Treasure Trove, patted Yue, who was puffing her chest out proudly, on the head, then turned to see what lay ahead of them. Meanwhile, Yue once again started keeping watch.

Tio and Shea were pouting, angry that Hajime had taken yet another chance to flirt with Yue while ignoring the two of them. Feeling a little guilty, Hajime sheepishly scratched Shea’s bunny ears and pinched Tio’s cheek.

It seemed rather odd to Hajime that such simple acts were enough to pacify the two of them.

Hajime and the others had little difficulty dispatching the monsters that tried to attack them as they made their way down the magma rapids. After a few minutes, though, something changed. The magma river began angling upward instead of down.

After climbing for a few dozen meters, the party could make out a light in the distance. It was the cavern’s exit. Unfortunately, the river came to a dead halt right before it.

“Hang on, guys!” Everyone once again clung to the edges of the boat. They fell down their steepest drop yet as their boat rushed toward the cavern exit.

Their descent was so fast that Hajime felt weightless for a few seconds. However, he quickly reoriented himself and examined his surroundings. The room they’d found themselves in was even vaster than the floating arena they’d fought Miledi in.

But unlike that arena, this room wasn’t spherical. It seemed to follow the natural contours of the rock, making it difficult to grasp the exact size of the space. The floor was covered in magma, with a few boulders jutting out here and there to provide footholds.

The walls also had protrusions large enough to stand on, and in other places the wall had sunken in to form alcoves. Numerous magma rivers crisscrossed each other in the sky, each of them spilling into the sea of

magma below.

Fountains of magma occasionally spewed from below. If there was a cauldron in hell, chances are it was based off of this. Hajime and the others exclaimed softly in wonder.

Still, what was even more amazing than this marvel of nature was the island sitting in the center of the room. It was made from the same rock as everything else, and rose a good ten meters above the boiling magma. That alone didn't make it anything special. What was special about it was the fact that there was a giant dome of magma on it. From afar, it looked like the island housed a mini-sun. It certainly wasn't a sight one saw every day.

"Updraft!" The fall had tossed the boat nearly upside-down, so Tio righted it with her magic. Once it was in place, Hajime and the others leaped through the air back onto the boat. Then, Yue adjusted the boat's speed with her own Updraft.

As they floated across the magma sea, Hajime and the others warily examined their surroundings.

"Is that where this labyrinth's Liberator lived?" Yue pointed to the island with the magma dome.

"Considering how far we've descended, it seems likely. But then that also means..."

"This is where we will have to face the guardian of this place?"

Tio finished Hajime's sentence, her eyes scanning the room like a hawk. Sometimes Hajime almost forgot that she was a hopeless pervert. Shea didn't let her guard down either, but she tried to take a more optimistic view of their situation.

"Maybe we skipped past it because we took a shortcut here?"

Hajime turned to where Shea was looking and saw a staircase that ended at one of the raised platforms above the magma sea. Chances were that was where they would have come out had they taken the normal way down.

As unthinkable as it might have been for the labyrinth's designer that anyone would try and ride the magma rivers, Hajime doubted they would have been careless enough to let anyone skip the final guardian. Even Shea didn't really believe they'd somehow slipped past it.

Unfortunately, Shea was right to be skeptical. Without warning, bullets of magma shot out of the sea, heading straight for the boat.

"Hmph, let me handle this!" Tio summoned her own balls of magma from

the sea and fired them at the oncoming bullets, neutralizing them.

However, that first attack had just been an opening volley. As the shattered magma bullets dropped to the ground, another salvo came at them. This time they came not just from the sea, but also from the rivers above.

“Tch, everyone scatter!” If they stayed on their boat they’d be burned to ashes in no time. Hajime and the others leaped off the boat and onto nearby boulders. A second later, their boat was bombarded with magma, and sunk into the fiery ocean.

As the party landed on their respective footholds, they began beating back the barrage of magma balls. While the waves of bullets weren’t so numerous that they couldn’t handle them, Hajime and the others soon began to grow irritated at the endless hail of magma. Part of the reason for their irritation was the heat. The sky had grown so thick with magma that it had begun to blur.

Hajime knew he needed to do something fast. He finished reloading his revolvers and, without turning around, aimed Schlag behind him. He fired a buckshot from his artificial elbow to clear the bullets closest to him, while also shooting down the ones that had been closing in on Yue behind him.

Yue realized what Hajime wanted her to do without him having to say anything. She used the reprieve he’d granted her to cast one of her gravity spells.

“Spatial Severance.” A black sphere materialized at a spot directly in between where the four of them were standing. It then began sucking in all of the magma balls the room was shooting out. Once inside the sphere, the magma was crushed by the immense pressure.

Now that he no longer had to worry about fending off magma bullets, Hajime was free to move. He leaped through the air with Aerodynamic, heading for the central island.

The most dangerous thing about this endless barrage was that they could see no obvious way to halt it. This was obviously the final trial of the Grand Gruen Volcano, but unlike the other labyrinths Hajime had conquered, there was no actual guardian to defeat. Because of that, he had no idea what they needed to do to clear this one. Their only clue was the strange island in the center.

As he sped toward the island, Hajime spoke to the others via Telepathy.
“I’m going to investigate the central island. Cover me.”

“Mmm... Okay.”

As Hajime left the effective range of Yue’s Spatial Severance, magma bullets started heading toward him again. Yue shot them all down with her own magma balls, maintaining her Spatial Severance all the while.

Tio backed her up, supplementing Yue’s magma balls with a few of her own. Shea helped as well, shooting down the bullets with Drucken’s shotgun mode.

With everyone’s help, Hajime was able to progress quickly. However, just before he could make the final leap onto the central island, he was interrupted.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Ah!?”

A bestial roar shook him to the very core. A second later, a giant magma serpent flew out of the sea, its jaws open wide.

Because of how hot their surroundings were, Hajime’s Heat Perception hadn’t been able to sense it at all. And because the entire magma sea was filled with mana, his Mana Perception skill hadn’t been able to sense it either. For the first time since leaving Orcus’ labyrinth, he’d been caught truly by surprise.

Hajime reacted with superhuman reflexes. He twisted to the side and just barely managed to dodge the serpent’s jaws. It flew past him, its mouth closing over the spot he’d just been in.

Hajime used Aerodynamic to flip himself around in the air and fired at the serpent as it passed. His bullets sped toward the serpent’s head, each one finding its mark.

“What the!?” Hajime yelled out in surprise. The serpent should have died, but it hadn’t.

Hajime’s bullets had passed straight through the serpent’s head, dislodging a bit of magma as they’d done so. The thing was hollow. All of the other monsters Hajime had faced so far in the volcano had possessed physical bodies underneath their coating of lava. This was the first time he was facing a creature created purely from magma.

He quickly recovered from his surprise, and tried shooting at other sections of the serpent just in case. Unfortunately, the rest of its body was hollow as well. As he’d feared, the whole thing was made only of magma.

“Man, what a pain. I don’t have time to be dealing with you.”

Hajime fired enough bullets through the serpent so that it could no longer maintain its shape. Once it was rendered impotent, he slipped past it and once again sped off toward the central island.

Still, the serpent wasn't done with Hajime yet. Though the magma comprising its head and much of its body had been shot away, it could still move. It lurched toward Hajime, trying to tackle him.

Hajime used the recoil of his elbow shotgun to push himself out of the way. Just then, chills ran down his spine. Trusting in his instincts, Hajime fired a second and third shotgun blast, pushing him even further backward. He augmented that with an Aerodynamic-powered leap, trying to gain as much distance as possible.

Not even a second later, multiple magma serpents shot out of the sea below, each of them chomping down where he'd been nanoseconds before.

Hajime beat a hasty retreat and landed on a nearby platform. Yue alighted next to him. The storm of magma bullets had stopped once the serpents had shown up.

"Are you alright, Hajime?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Looks like this is gonna be the real test."

Yue placed a hand on Hajime's arm. He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, but he did put his own hand on top of hers. More and more magma serpents popped up.

"I guess that basically confirms the center island's our goal. And if we want to make it there, then we'll have to destroy all the serpents."

"But the one you destroyed is regenerating already. How are we going to get rid of them?"

There were more than twenty of them now, and they had Hajime and the others surrounded. Just as Shea said, the first one Hajime shot holes through had already begun to regenerate. Back when they'd found the regenerating golems in the Reisen Gorge Shea had been in a panic, but now she had enough experience to calmly think the problem through. Her rabbit ears flopped back and forth as she considered their options. Hajime smiled, proud at how far Shea had come. Then, he offered a suggestion of his own.

"I think they're like that giant slime we fought. There should be a core somewhere that's controlling the magma. But because there's mana in everything, I can't use my Demon Eye to search for it... We'll probably have to smash everything and hope we get it."

Everyone nodded at the same time the twenty-plus snakes attacked.

The magma serpents spat out fireballs that shone as brightly as a solar flare. The fireballs closed in on them from all sides, followed closely by the serpents themselves. Any normal party would have been swallowed by the flames and burnt to a crisp.

“It’s been some time since I was able to go all out! Behold my power!” Jet black mana swirled around Tio’s outstretched hands. She compressed it into a single point and fired off a pitch black laser. She was using her prized dragonbreath.

It was the very same ability that had managed to force Hajime on the defensive. The black stream cut through the fireballs and vaporized the magma serpents in front of her. She slowly turned, her breath cutting through everything like a massive black blade. Within seconds eight serpents lay dead.

Hajime and the others used the opening she’d created to escape their encirclement.

They had thought that if they vaporized the serpents in their entirety, then they’d be sure to destroy the mana crystal powering them too. Sadly, things were never that easy in a labyrinth.

The remaining serpents crashed into the platform the party had been standing on seconds before, pulverizing it, and sank into the sea. When they emerged once more, their depleted numbers had been replenished.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. I saw their mana crystals shatter. Does that mean defeating them’s not the goal?”

Hajime tilted his head as he thought. He’d used Riftwalk to watch the moment Tio’s breath ripped through the serpents in slow motion. He’d definitely seen a mana crystal inside each one, and he’d definitely seen her breath vaporize them.



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Shea pointed to the central island and shouted, breaking Hajime out of his musings.

“Hajime-san, look at that! The boulder’s glowing!”

“What?”

Hajime turned to look and saw that part of the boulder was indeed glowing. He hadn’t noticed before, but there were some strange rocks buried within the island’s boulder, a few of which were now shining bright orange.

Hajime used his Farsight to examine the island more closely. It seemed there were more of those rocks buried at regular intervals within the boulder. They were almost the same color as the island, so it was hard to make out the ones that weren’t glowing. The island was cylindrical in shape, and Hajime guessed based on its circumference and the distance between each rock that there were around one hundred in total. Of those hundred, eight were glowing right now. *And Tio killed eight of them earlier.*

“I see... So we have to kill a hundred of these things to clear this trial.”

“So it’s meant to be a battle of endurance in the heat. It seems I was correct about what this labyrinth’s theme is.”

Anyone who made it this far would have been exhausted from the constant surprise attacks and the ever-present heat. And yet, this final trial required more concentration and focus than any up to this point. It was just like the Liberators to ramp up the difficulty at the very end.

Even Hajime and the others, overpowered as they were, were beginning to grow weary. Still, they were all smiling. As long as they knew how to clear the trial, they were confident they could beat it.

Knowing what the goal was had revitalized everyone. They readied themselves for the magma serpents’ next charge. The barrage of magma bullets began once more and the serpents began acting unpredictably, keeping the party on their toes.

Hajime and the others split up again, deciding it would be easier if they all counterattacked individually.

Tio sprouted dragon wings from her back and took to the skies. She then unleashed a tornado that shot out wind blades in a deadly barrage. She’d cast the intermediate-rank wind spell, Infinity Gust.

“That’s the ninth one! It looks like I’m in the lead, Master! If I destroy the most, will you please punish me? Of course it will have to be just the two of us, all night long!” Tio shredded her ninth serpent with a smile. Hajime tried

to tell her he wasn't going to do that even if she did destroy the most, but Shea cut him off.

"Wha!? It's no fair if only you get a reward, Tio-san! Let me join the contest too! Hajime-san, if I win you have to spend a whole night with me instead!"

Shea leaped into the air as she said that and smashed Drucken down on the head of one of the serpents. Blue ripples spread out from the point of impact, creating shockwaves. The force of the blow was so great that even some of the magma sea below was blown away. Glimmering fragments of the serpent's mana crystal floated in the air for a few seconds before falling into the sea below. Shea's shockwaves had been enough to shatter it.

A magma bullet hurtled toward Shea, who was still hanging in mid-air. However, she fired Drucken's buckshot and used the recoil to dodge out of the way. Still, one of the magma serpents had predicted she would leap backward and was waiting with open jaws, putting her in danger.

But Shea didn't seem worried. She focused her mana into her boots. The metal plates inserted in her soles began to glow, and shockwaves of pale blue light spread out from under her feet. Shea leaped off the mana platform she'd created and soared through the air.

Since Shea was the only one who couldn't fly through the air naturally, Hajime had created boots enchanted with Aerodynamic for her. And because she could render herself weightless with her gravity magic, she could utilize it to even more effect than Hajime.

The magma serpent passed harmlessly by. As it did so, Shea took aim with Drucken and pulled the trigger. It wasn't her usual buckshot that came out, but instead a high-caliber shotgun slug.

It wasn't just any shotgun slug, either. Hajime had crafted it out of a special material and enchanted it with Shock Conversion. It unleashed powerful shockwaves on impact. In terms of pure power, it was more destructive than his grenade launcher.

The slug round slammed into the serpent, blowing off both its head and body in a massive explosion. Fragments of another shattered mana crystal flew through the air.

"Hey, you two. Don't just go deciding that on your—"

"Then if I win, you have to go on a date with me." Yue interrupted him before he could finish, stating her desire to participate in the competition as

well. With how many comrades they had now, Yue rarely had the chance to spend time alone with Hajime. She had him all to herself at night, but she wanted to spend a day with him too.

Smiling faintly, Yue once again proved that she was a mage to be feared. She pulled out her favorite spell, Draconic Thunder. But instead of just one dragon, she summoned seven. Her practice was finally beginning to pay off. Each dragon picked a target and flew off. Their howls shook the walls. The hunter became the hunted as the magma serpents heading toward Yue all found themselves swallowed up by dragons larger than them. Their mana crystals were all burnt to a crisp.

“I knew Yue-san was the one I should have been watching out for!”

“Now that’s hardly fair! Yue is far too strong to compete against!”

Grumbling to themselves, Shea and Tio began launching even more ferocious attacks. They were *not* going to let themselves fall behind.

“I guess it’s fine. Everyone looks like they’re having fun at least.” Hajime shrugged his shoulders and sighed. He shot down the magma serpent closing in from behind without even turning around.

The bullets all landed at once, their shockwaves blowing away the serpent’s magma body. Its mana crystal flew through the air, exposed. Hajime nimbly dodged its head as he shot the falling mana crystal with Donner.

He had loaded shockwave shells similar to the ones he’d given Shea into Schlag. These ones lacked Drucken’s power though, as he’d had to make them small enough to fit into Schlag’s chambers. If he’d wanted power, he could have always pulled out Schlagen. However, he’d wanted to see how well these new bullets worked with his handguns first.

His revolvers didn’t have enough force to blow away the serpent’s magma body and destroy their mana crystal at the same time, so he’d adopted a two-shot strategy. He used Schlag to get rid of the magma, then he sniped the mana crystal with Donner. Schlagen would have been able to pierce both the magma coating and the mana crystal in one shot, but it had too much piercing power, which made it hard to do pinpoint shots.

Hajime flipped through the air, dodging two more magma serpents that tried to attack him. Then, he took aim with Schlag while upside-down, and fired.

There was only a single bang, but Hajime had fired four times. The

serpents didn't even have time to notice Hajime wasn't there before Hajime's bullets scattered their bodies.

Hajime fired Donner twice, accurately destroying both of their exposed mana crystals.

He glanced down at the central island and was surprised to see that they only had eight more serpents to kill. Barely ten minutes had passed since they'd begun fighting.

If, as Tio had suspected, the theme of this labyrinth was to see how well challengers could handle a prolonged battle requiring intense concentration under strenuous conditions, then Hajime and the others must have completely surpassed the creator's expectations.

Tio's breath mowed down another pair of magma serpents.

Six more to go.

Shea's shotgun slug took out two serpents at once.

Four more to go.

Another team of serpents tried to pincer Yue. One came up from below, while the other bore down from above. They found themselves stopped short by another one of Yue's thunder dragons, which had coiled itself around her. Then, they found themselves surrounded by four more of Yue's dragons and were summarily destroyed.

Two more to go.

A magma serpent rushed up to Hajime and fired a barrage of fireballs at him. Hajime danced through the air like a leaf riding the wind, dodging the fireballs. He fired on it with Schlag as it opened its maw to swallow him. The serpent was blown back, and Hajime shot down its mana crystal without even looking.

The last remaining serpent tried to launch a sneak attack from beneath the magma sea. Hajime leaped up with Aerodynamic and fired Schlag into its open mouth.

Red shockwaves spread out from the point of impact, pushing the magma serpent back. Its mana crystal glinted in the red light.

Hajime took careful aim with Donner. Yue and the others watched with satisfaction as Hajime finished off the trial.

"And now it's over." Hajime glanced over at the others before pulling the trigger that signaled the end of the Grand Gruen Volcano's trial.

A second later, an aurora of light poured down from above.

What the!? Crap, I won't be able to dodge in time— Hajime's eyes were glued to the light. It looked just like the rainbow-colored light that had nearly killed him back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

Judging by how bright this is, it might be even more dangerous... It felt as if the very air was being torn apart by the light. The labyrinth's creator had purposely timed this trap to activate when everyone was at their most defenseless... right when they thought they'd won.

The light of destruction swallowed Hajime whole, and he vanished without a trace.

“H-Hajimeeee!”

Yue let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Shea and Tio had just been standing in place, stunned. It was Yue's scream that had brought them back to their senses. They'd never heard her so much as raise her voice before.

The giant wall of light swallowed up the remnants of the magma serpent Hajime had just killed and crashed into the sea below. The impact sent magma flying everywhere, and for a second, the base of the volcano was visible.

The light grew fainter as it bore through the rock. Eventually, it faded entirely, vanishing without a trace, leaving not a speck behind.

Yue flew through the air, rushing to see what had become of Hajime. As the light faded, she saw him, still floating in the air. His clothes were a tattered mess. He'd used his arms to protect his face and torso, keeping his vitals intact. However, he no longer had the strength to remain airborne, so he plummeted toward the magma.

“Updraft!” Yue used her magic to keep his limp frame afloat. From the looks of it, he'd lost consciousness. Once she got close, she grabbed him and carried him over to a nearby platform.

“Hajime! Hajime!”

Shea and Tio had never seen her so panicked. Yue fumbled through her pockets and pulled out a vial of Ambrosia that she quickly fed to Hajime.

He was in pretty bad shape. So much of his right arm had been burned off that bone was showing. Plus, his artificial left arm had melted together. His eyepatch had been ripped off, and the right side of his face was bleeding profusely. Worst of all, though, his stomach had been burnt black. The fact that his organs were intact was a testament to how much he'd grown since

fighting the Hydra.

In the moment he'd had before the aurora struck, Hajime had twisted his body away from it while simultaneously activating Diamond Skin's derivative skills, Focused Hardening and Diamond Protection. Thanks to that he'd been able to protect his head with his hardened left arm, while at the same time he saved his lungs and heart with his right. His stomach had been protected with monster leather that he'd enchanted with Diamond Protection. Most importantly, his ridiculously high Magic Defense stat kept the aurora from melting right through him. His wounds were certainly terrible, but not fatal.

"Mmm... It's taking too long to heal." Yue's impatience showed on her face. The Ambrosia was barely healing Hajime.

Back when they'd been fighting the Hydra, Hajime had been demolished by this same light when he was protecting Yue. She'd sworn to herself on that day that she'd never let something that terrible happen to Hajime ever again. And yet, it had happened again. This was the exact same situation. Her mouth twisted in grief, her frustration at being unable to save Hajime spilling over into her expression. Unfortunately, their enemy wasn't going to give her time to grieve.

"Fool! Above you!"

"Ah. Oh no—"

Just as Tio shouted out her warning, countless beams of light rained down on Yue. They were all miniaturized versions of the first blast that had hit Hajime. Most of them had hardly a tenth of the strength the first one had, but even that was enough to kill most people.

Yue had been too caught up in feeding Hajime Ambrosia to notice the attack. It was only when Tio screamed out her warning that she looked up. There wasn't any time to cast a spell, as the light would have hit her far too quickly. *If only I had three... No, one more second...* Yue desperately tried to cast a defensive spell anyway.

"I won't let you! Cloudburst!" Fortunately, Tio managed to buy the time Yue needed. Cloudburst was an intermediate-rank wind spell. It created a compressed wall of air, which Tio used to hold back the deadly light. The wall of wind bent inward as the light hit it. Normally, it would rebound whatever attack struck it, but when faced against an attack this powerful it was all Tio could do to keep the wall from shattering. Even then, she could

only hold the wall for a few seconds.

Still, few seconds was more than enough.

“Hallowed Ground!” Yue cast the strongest barrier spell she knew. If she’d had the time she would have used Spatial Severance instead, but forming the image she needed for gravity magic still took her longer than all the other elements. Practice had shortened that time, but casting Hallowed Ground was still faster. That was why it was the best option for Yue.

A bright barrier of light appeared in front of her outstretched hands. It spread out into a dome, protecting Yue and Hajime. A split second later, Tio’s Cloudburst shattered, unable to hold back the barrage of mini auroras. Their fury unabated, the beams of light slammed into Yue’s barrier.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! A hailstorm of light pounded against Yue’s Hallowed Ground, making it crack.

“Gwaaaaah!” Realizing the barrier wouldn’t last at this rate, Yue transformed it from a dome into a shield that only covered the area above them. The less area her barrier had to cover, the stronger it would be.

No longer protected by Yue’s shield, the ground around them was pelted by rainbow-colored light. The auroras destroyed all of the boulder they were on except for the spot where Hajime and Yue stayed.

The light attacks seemed to be focused on Hajime. A few beams fell toward Shea and Tio as well, but only enough to keep them busy while the bulk attacked Hajime and Yue. That being said, it took a lot to keep Shea and Tio busy. Being able to keep Tio, Shea, and Yue on the defensive simultaneously was no small feat.

“Hajime-san! Hajime-saaan!”

“Calm yourself, Shea! If you leave my barrier, then you’ll just end up killing yourself!”

“But Hajime-san’s in trouble!”

Tio tried to hold Shea back while simultaneously maintaining her Cloudburst so that they wouldn’t be drowned in deadly rainbow light.

Tio was just as worried about Hajime as Shea was. She understood her feelings of wanting to run over and help him, but she also knew that jumping out in the middle of a barrage of light powerful enough to nearly kill even Hajime wouldn’t do anyone any good. Tio grabbed Shea by the collar and pulled her back to the safety of her Cloudburst barrier.

Time slowed to a crawl. Tio couldn’t tell if ten seconds had passed, or a

minute.

After what seemed like an eternity, the barrage finally abated. Most of the boulders had been pulverized, and white smoke rose from the few that hadn't.

Yue and Tio were both panting heavily, their mana nearly spent. They used the respite they'd been given to drain their magic accessories' reserves.

As they were recovering, a man's voice spoke to them from above. He sounded almost impressed.

"Your strength is certainly formidable. Ambushing you here was the right choice. You four are too dangerous to let live. Especially that man over there..."

The three girls looked up at the ceiling. Their eyes opened wide in surprise. A massive number of dragons filled the sky. One of them was far larger than the others, and was pure white from snout to tail. Riding atop it was a red-haired, dark-skinned, pointy-eared demon.

"To think he could survive even a direct hit from my Uranos' breath... Plus, those strange weapons of his that were mentioned in the report are even stronger than I imagined... You girls as well. It's amazing you were able to withstand a concentrated barrage from fifty Ash Dragons. Who on earth are you people? How many ancient spells have you already acquired?"

His eyes glowed golden, like Tio's. He met the girls's gaze and glared pointedly at them. He seemed to be under the misconception that Yue and the others' strength came from the number of labyrinths they'd cleared.

"How about you tell us your name first before asking questions? Or do all demons have no manners?"

The person who replied was Hajime. The demon furrowed his eyebrows. Before he could answer, though, Yue shouted,

"Hajime!"

"Hajime-san!"

"You're alive, Master!"

Hajime had managed to prop himself up, but it looked like he was ready to collapse at any second. Yue rushed to help him. Tio and Shea leaped over to what remained of the crumbling platform to get a closer look at his condition too.

Hajime smiled to reassure everyone and rose to his feet. He was in no condition to fight, though. The effort it took to stand had left him sweating. But even so, he looked the demon in the eye and smiled fearlessly.

“I have no reason to give my name to those who are about to die.”

“I know what you mean. I just figured I’d play out the cliche. To be honest, I don’t care who you are. By the way, how’s your friend doing? I did him a favor if you ask me. It was a pretty ugly arm.”

Hajime was only talking in order to buy time until he healed, which was why he purposely tried to goad the demon. From the demon’s mention of a report and the fact that he’d been waiting to ambush them here, Hajime had already guessed that the demon who’d barely escaped with his life back in Ur had told this one about Hajime and the others. He was the one who’d been sent to deal with them, presumably.

The demon’s eyebrows twitched, and he growled in a low tone.

“I’ve changed my mind. Carve this name into your memories, scum. I am Freid Bagwa. A faithful apostle of god, sworn to bring divine judgment to the heretics.”

“An apostle of god, huh? Someone sure thinks highly of themselves. What, you think knowing some magic from the age of the gods makes you good enough to be their apostle? That magic doesn’t let you control monsters, does it? There aren’t enough monsters in the world that can shoot out those auroras. It must let you create them somehow. If you could create an unbeatable army with that, then maybe you’d be qualified to call yourself their apostle.”

“You’re a sharp one. That’s right, it was when I obtained the ancient magic that god spoke to me. They told me I was their apostle. It was then that I decided to devote my all to them and work to see their wish granted. I denounce you, who dares to stand in my lord’s way.”

He reminds me of that pope, Ishtar. Only a fanatic would denounce us for a reason like that.

Hajime’s smile didn’t waver. The Ambrosia was still working slowly, but Hajime augmented it with one of Mana Conversion’s derivative skills, Healing Conversion. Thanks to that, he’d at least stopped the bleeding. His left arm was useless for now, but though his right arm had been burned to the bone, it hadn’t broken. He could use it if he really had to. *I can still fight!*

“Stole the words right from my mouth. Anyone who stands in my way is an enemy. And... I kill all of my enemies!”

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Hajime swung Donner up and fired at Freid.

His arm screamed in pain at the recoil, but he ignored it, focusing his energy only on killing the enemy before him. He activated Riftwalk as well, and sent out his Cross Bits. Yue, Tio, and Shea all attacked at the same time as him. Yue sent out her Draconic Thunder, while Tio fired her breath and Shea shot another one of her shotgun slugs.

A number of the things Freid had called Ash Dragons flew in front of him and created multiple layers of triangular, dark-red barriers to defend against the attack.

The barriers shattered one after another in the face of Hajime and the others powerful barrage, but more Ash Dragons flew in and supplemented the defense with their own barriers. With so many shields to break through, even their best attacks began to peter out. Hajime noticed that there were turtle-shaped monsters riding atop the Ash Dragons. Their shells were glowing dark red, which led Hajime to assume they were the ones casting the barriers.

“Did you think I only brought dragons with me? You won’t be able to break my defenses that easily. Now let me show you the other power I’ve obtained. This is the true might of magic from the age of the gods!”

Freid began chanting a spell, falling into an almost trance-like state. *If it’s something he just recently got, that means it’s probably whatever magic you get for clearing the Grand Gruen Volcano.* Hajime and the others knew firsthand just how dangerous magic from the age of the gods was. They focused their attacks, determined to stop Freid before he could finish chanting.

But every time they destroyed a barrier a new turtle appeared to craft one in its place. Normally, Hajime would have charged forward to attack Freid directly, but he still wasn’t fully recovered, so he limited himself to ranged attacks. He ground his teeth, frustrated that he couldn’t do more.

He holstered Donner and pulled out Orkan instead. Then, he unleashed all four of its rockets, but all they managed to do was kill a few of the dragons. None of the explosions reached Freid. His Cross Bits were too weak to even penetrate the barriers.

Before he could set up any other attacks, Freid finished chanting his spell. Their time was up.

“Cosmic Rift!”

“Behind you, Hajime-san!”

Freid and the white dragon he was riding on disappeared. Specifically,

they vanished inside a veil of blinding light that had appeared.

Hajime whirled around, reacting to Shea's warning.

Directly in front of him was the white dragon, its gaping jaws inches from his face. Freid was glaring coldly down at him from atop it. There was a massive amount of heat and mana radiating from the dragon's mouth.

Hajime instantly held Orkan in front of him, shielding himself from the point-blank aurora blast.

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!"

The force of the light sent Hajime flying backward. Injured as he was, his body wouldn't be able to take much more of this. He screamed in pain as the aurora's shockwaves buffeted him.

"Hajime!"

Yue and the others tried to attack the white dragon, hoping to distract it from Hajime. But before they could, the Ash Dragons up above fired a barrage of light at them, forcing them to defend.

Though he hadn't taken a direct hit, the force of the blast had reopened Hajime's wounds. Blood soaked the ground beneath his feet.

Fuck, that hurts. At this rate we're done for.

Hajime came to a decision. There was no point in holding anything back since things were this bad. It was time to use Limit Break.

Dark red mana swirled around Hajime's body and he could feel his strength multiply exponentially.

"Raaaaaaaaah!" Hajime wrenched Orkan upward, deflecting the aurora burst toward the ceiling. He was unable to deflect it all though, and a few traces of the aurora slammed into him, gouging into his wounds.

The white dragon followed up with a barrage of mini-aurora balls. Its attack patterns were almost identical to the Hydra's. But the dragon's aurora was more powerful than the Hydra's had been, which meant its mini-auroras would be as well. Hajime couldn't afford to take any more hits.

"Cross Bits!" Hajime's concentration was so intense that the world around him passed by in slow-motion. He weaved through the aurora balls with expert precision, sometimes dodging them by only a hair's breadth. He felt some of them scrape past his clothes, but he didn't let himself get distracted for even a moment. He knew he needed to stay focused if he wanted any hope of mounting a counterattack.

Hajime tossed Orkan, which had been mostly destroyed by the aurora,

back into his Treasure Trove and pulled out Donner. Then, he fired a short burst while summoning his Cross Bits to him. They also fired at Freid, supplementing the barrage.

“Such persistence! To think you can keep barely dodging for so long!” Freid retreated behind the safety of his turtles’ barriers once more. He hadn’t expected Hajime, wounded as he was, to put up such a tough fight. He continued flying backward while he started chanting another spell.

“Not this time!” Freid had been so focused on keeping his distance from Hajime that he’d forgotten about the rest of Hajime’s party. He turned in surprise as a deep voice roared next to him. Before he could see what was happening, something crashed into his side.

He clung to his dragon, barely keeping himself from falling off. The shock was enough to break him out of his chant. When he saw what had hit him, his jaw dropped open.

“Impossible. A black dragon, here!?”

“Don’t be so proud of those mock dragons of yours! I will not allow you to hurt Master any longer!”

Tio had transformed into her dragon form. She knew it was dangerous to expose her existence to a demon, but she’d taken the risk anyway. Tio was smaller than Freid’s white dragon, but the pressure she exuded was far greater.

Tio had joined Hajime’s party because she liked him, but she’d also done it to get a better idea of what these people who were summoned from another world were like. In order to do that, she had needed to hide the fact that she was a dragonman.

If the world found out dragonmen still lived, her village would be in danger. Though each dragonman was strong individually, they were helpless against humans’ sheer numbers. Tio had learned that lesson the hard way, five hundred years ago.

But Hajime, the one person she’d believed utterly invincible, had almost died. Seeing him crippled from the aurora’s light had shaken Tio.

She’d been a fool. Strong as Hajime was, he wasn’t invincible. A moment’s carelessness could get him killed too.

How could she have forgotten something so obvious? It was only now that she realized what her oath had really meant to her. She’d sworn to serve Hajime. Not just because she found him interesting, and not just because he

was her Master.

No, it was because Tio didn't want to lose him. He was an irreplaceable friend, and the man she loved.

That was why she'd thrown caution to the winds, choosing to reveal her dragon form. If she prioritized her mission over the lives of her friends, then she had no right to travel with them. Nor did she have any right to call herself a Guardian. Even if this decision led to her clan being persecuted, she had to do it. More than anything though, Tio Klarus would never put her own safety before the lives of her friends.

"Behold, boy. This is what a true dragon's breath looks like!" Deadly black light gathered in Tio's mouth.

She unleashed it with a roar. The black light closed in on Freid with unbelievable speed.

The white dragon turned to face Tio and countered with its own breath. White and black clashed, sending massive shockwaves across the room. Waves of magma spread out from beneath the point of impact.

At first the two beams of light seemed evenly matched, but eventually Tio's started pushing the white dragon's back.

"Gah, to think I would run into the remnants of the dragonman clan here... It seems I have no choice. It's somewhat dangerous, but I'll have to blow this entire—"

"You won't be doing anything."

"Ah!?"

Freid was genuinely surprised that Tio was a dragon. That hadn't been mentioned in his reports. He began chanting a new spell, hoping to create an opportunity to retreat, but was stopped once more.

He felt something hit his back, and stumbled forward.

He turned around to see Hajime, who was bleeding from multiple wounds, leveling Donner at him. In a short few seconds, Hajime had gotten behind him. Hajime fired another six rounds. They all landed at once, each with pinpoint accuracy.

The turtles surrounding Freid put up a barrier, but it was no match for six bullets fired at point blank range. The barrier shattered, leaving him defenseless. Hajime leaped forward, closing the distance between the two of them.

He wreathed Donner with a Gale Claw and swiped at Freid.

“Gwaaaaah!?” Freid stumbled backward, narrowly avoiding being cut in half. Hajime’s claw still gouged deep into his chest though, leaving him severely injured. Hajime didn’t let up his attack, and followed up with a Shock Conversion-enhanced roundhouse kick.

“Gaaah!” Freid blocked it with his left arm, but he wasn’t able to kill the force of the attack. Hajime’s kick shattered Freid’s arm, damaged his internal organs, and sent him flying off his dragon.

Distracted by what was happening to its master, the white dragon let up its aurora attack. That allowed Tio’s breath to punch through.

It slammed into the dragon a second after Hajime jumped off its back, sending it flying.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!” Though it had been injured heavily, the dragon managed to straighten itself and fly up toward the ceiling. Freid was waiting there for it, riding one of his Ash Dragons. Once the two were level with each other, Freid hopped off the Ash Dragon and onto the white one.

Hajime tried to chase after him with Aerodynamic, but—

“Ngh!? Gah!”

The red mana swirling around him vanished, and he coughed up blood. His Limit Break was up. His injuries had made it last shorter than usual, and there was also more recoil as well. Unable to keep his Aerodynamic going, Hajime plummeted toward the magma sea below.

“Master, get ahold of yourself!”

“Guh T-Tio...”

Tio soared down and caught Hajime on her back. Hajime was barely conscious, but he managed to struggle to his knees. His eyes still burning with determination, he glared up at Freid.

The Ash Dragons that had been attacking Yue and Shea clumped around him.

“Hajime!”

“Hajime-san!”

Free from the barrage, they rushed over toward Hajime. Tio landed on a nearby platform and let Hajime down. Considering the state he was in, she couldn’t fight with him on her back. He’d likely fall. Shea and Yue arrived at the platform Tio had landed on and helped him stand.

“Your combat prowess truly is impressive. And the women you have with you are quite strong themselves. The dragonmen should have died out, and

yet one travels with you. Furthermore, you have a mage who can cast spells without incantations and a rabbitman that has some strange precognitive powers. I didn't think anything could press me this hard now that I have ancient magic at my disposal. Had my surprise attack not succeeded, I likely wouldn't have stood a chance." Freid spoke quietly, but there was a fire in his eyes. His breathing was ragged, and he covered his wounded chest with his good hand.

"You say that like you've already won. I'm nowhere near done yet." Hajime frowned and glared at Freid. Though he could barely stand, his bloodlust remained undiminished.

"So it seems. No matter how badly I injure you, your determination doesn't waver. What's truly frightening about you isn't your physical strength, but the inexorable persistence you show in killing your enemies... No, perhaps it would be more apt to call it your will to survive."

Freid looked down for a moment, steeled himself, then turned back to Hajime.

"I didn't want to have to use this. But if that's what it takes to get rid of someone as dangerous as you, it's a price I'm willing to pay."

"What are you going on about?"

Freid didn't respond. Instead, he whispered something to the bird-shaped monster sitting on his shoulder.

A series of loud noises followed. *Dundundundundun! Thud! Crash!* The entire volcano shook, and the magma sea began to seethe.

"Whoa!?"

"Hm!?"

"Kyaaa!?"

"Nuoooh!?"

The impact knocked all four of them off-balance, and they struggled to regain their footing. The rumbling increased, rising to an earthquake of at least 7 in magnitude. Pillars of magma rose up from the sea.

"Hajime-san, the magma's rising!"

Hajime looked down. The magma was indeed rising, and the amount of rock left for them to stand on was rapidly shrinking.

"What did you do?" Hajime yelled at Freid. It was obvious he was behind this. Freid flew over to the center of the room, directly above the main island.

"I just destroyed the keystone."

“The... keystone?”

“Didn’t you ever find it strange, looking at all this magma? The Grand Gruen Volcano is clearly an active one. And yet, it’s never erupted. That can only mean something in the volcano is controlling the magma’s flow.”

“And that was the keystone... Wait, don’t tell me—!?”

“It is as you suspect. Now that I’ve destroyed the keystone, the labyrinth will be submerged in magma. It’s a shame I cannot share this ancient magic with my comrades... but this is the only way to destroy you. Sink into the depths along with this labyrinth!”

Freid held up the pendant hanging from his neck and glared coldly down at Hajime. Cracks started appearing all along the ceiling of the room. It opened up near the center, revealing a circular passage heading straight to the summit.

That pendant was probably what he got for clearing the labyrinth. And that’s the shortcut back out... Freid looked at Hajime one last time before turning his dragon around and flying through the opening.

The sea of magma had turned into a raging whirlpool, and magma pillars erupted from the center one after another. Magma started pouring down on the boulder they were standing on. It was as if they were watching the world end.

Hajime closed his eyes and considered his options. After a few seconds he came to a decision and struggled to his feet.

Though Freid had gone up, he’d left behind his Ash Dragons. They once again started bombarding Hajime and the others with aurora balls. He wasn’t taking any chances.

Yue cast Spatial Severance to keep the aurora balls at bay, while Tio prepared to fire another breath attack at them. Hajime grabbed his Treasure Trove and tapped Tio’s cheek to get her attention.

“Tio, listen to me. Take this and escape through that passage in the ceiling.” Her expression went from confused to hurt as she realized what Hajime was saying. She growled at Hajime in a voice full of rage. She would not abandon her comrades and escape alone.

“Master, are you saying I alone am not worthy to fight with you until the end? Are you truly asking me to abandon you all? I will not—”

“That’s not it, Tio. We don’t have much time, so I’m only gonna explain this once. I haven’t given up. We’re still gonna get the ancient magic from

this labyrinth, and we'll get back at that bastard soon enough. We still have to keep our promise to bring stillstone back to everyone, too. But I can't do it all alone. I need your help. Only you can get back to Ankaji in time. Please, Tio. I need you to do this."

Hajime stared into Tio's eyes. This was the first time she'd seen him look at her so seriously. Hajime, who'd always been so confident in himself, was asking someone else for help. In order to fulfill all of his promises, in order to come out ahead, he needed her help. Without Tio, they'd fail.

Hajime had no intention of giving up here, and this wasn't part of some noble self-sacrifice.

When Tio realized that, her face lit up with joy. The man she'd fallen for had entrusted her with an important mission at this critical point in time. If she couldn't live up to his expectations, then she didn't deserve to travel with him.

Filled with determination, Tio nodded.

"Leave it to me!" Hajime stuck the Treasure Trove into a gap between Tio's scales. He positioned it so that when she transformed back into a human it'd already be in her hand.

After making sure it was secure, Tio nuzzled Hajime's head. In this form, it was all she could do to show her affection. Hajime patted her gently one last time, and she took to the skies. Before she left, she glanced down at Yue and Shea. They nodded back at her resolutely. They hadn't given up either.

"Tio, tell Kaori and Myu that we'll see them soon. I'm counting on you."

"Fufu. I shall." She smiled at how casual Hajime's message was. A second later, she wrapped herself in a gust of wind and shot up toward the ceiling. The Ash Dragons focused their fire on her, but she avoided the aurora balls with a barrel roll and slipped past them. Realizing how dangerous it would be to let her escape, the Ash Dragons turned to chase her.

Tio deflected the next barrage with her breath, but the continuous bombardment made it difficult to keep all the balls at bay. Before their attacks could overwhelm her though, a good chunk of them were wiped out by a beam of their own light.

Yue had sent a powered-up version of their attacks back at them by using the light she'd absorbed into Spatial Severance. Shea followed up by a wave of shotgun slugs. Their shockwaves blew apart quite a few of them as well.

The passage Freid and the white dragon had left through began to close.

Realizing she didn't have much time left, Tio shot forward, focusing only on speed. Now that she was no longer holding the Ash Dragons back, some of their aurora balls started hitting her.

"Hmph, this is nothing! In fact, it feels good! Bring it oooooon!" Tio sped up even more, the aurora balls giving her a boost. She was using one of Draconification's derivative skills, Pain Conversion. It transformed the damage she took into a boost to her stats. She'd learned it back when she'd first met Hajime, and it was the first derivative skill she'd acquired in centuries. She really had opened the door to a world of new possibilities when Hajime had beaten her senseless.

Even the Ash Dragons were astonished by her speed. Tio broke through the storm of aurora balls and shot through the opening just before it closed. Above her, she could see a faint light. That was the surface. There were a number of doors she'd have to pass through first, and they were all closing.

Tio poured all of her remaining mana into the wind that was pushing her forward, leaving only enough to maintain her Draconification.

She flew faster than the raging wind, faster than she had ever before.

She blew past one door, then another, then another. There was just one door left between her and the summit. She blasted forward, surrounded by a storm of jet-black wind. A wall of rainbow-colored light rained down on her from overhead.

It seemed Freid had noticed she was trying to escape and had launched one last attack to slow her down. The door was already mostly closed. She had to decide now if she was going to dodge out of the way or take the hit and push through.

The white dragon had burned through most of its mana, so the aurora didn't have as much strength as before. Tio guessed it was only half as powerful.

But even so, it was far more devastating than the aurora balls the Ash Dragons had been firing at her. If she tried to intercept it or dodge it, she'd lose speed. In turn, that meant she wouldn't make it through the door in time.

"Let's see what you've got!" Tio prepared herself to take the hit and convert the pain into speed.

But just before it reached her, a few small shadows flitted past her and interposed themselves between her and the light.

Tio recognized those shapes. They were Hajime's Cross Bits. He'd sent

them to follow after her.

Three of the Cross Bits glowed dark red and angled themselves to deflect the blast. The light quickly melted through them, but they held on long enough for Tio to push through. The remaining four stuck close to Tio, protecting her as she flew.

“What a surprise! Master, I truly love you!” Even when he was surrounding by a rising sea of magma, Hajime had managed to control his Cross Bits to protect Tio.

She’d never met anyone who’d been strong enough to protect her before. Even among her village, she’d been the strongest. Until now, she’d always been the one who’d protected others. She’d never known just how wonderful it was to have someone else protecting her.

“Graaaaaah!” The white dragon let out a mighty roar as Tio slipped through the final door. A swirling black gale shot up into the sunlight. Though the sandstorm raged all around Tio, the eye of the storm was calm.

“You managed to escape under those circumstances!? You truly are a pack of monsters. But even a black dragon of your caliber must be weak after sustaining all those injuries. I’ll have no problem—”

Freid hurriedly tried to prepare a follow-up attack, but stopped short. The remaining four Cross Bits had Freid and the dragon he was riding on surrounded.

He instantly ordered the turtle he’d brought with him to create a barrier. He’d learned earlier the Cross Bits couldn’t break through it. Had Hajime loaded his Cross Bits with the same exploding shells he’d put into Drucken, Donner, and Schlag it might have been different, but he hadn’t had time. His and Shea’s primary weapons had taken priority.

But what Freid didn’t know was that the Cross Bits had one other powerful attack available to them. Freid was certain the Cross Bits couldn’t harm him, and therefore let his guard down. It was in that instant that Hajime chose to activate his Cross Bits’ trump card.

Freid had only a second to ponder why the Cross Bits were glowing even brighter instead of firing before they all exploded.

There was a huge bang.

Shockwaves assailed Freid from all four sides, followed by a hailstorm of bullets. The explosions had released all of the Cross Bits’ remaining ammo in a deadly barrage.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Demon and dragon screamed as they were blasted into the distance. With the last of her mana, Tio added her own powerful tornado into the mix. She wanted to make doubly sure they got him. She'd wanted to use her breath to guarantee the kill, but she no longer had the mana left for it.

Tio observed the direction Freid had fallen in for a few seconds in case he miraculously got back up.

Once she was certain he wasn't coming back, she looked back down at the oddly silent volcano.

“I believe in you, Master, Yue, Shea.”

Tio turned toward the sandstorm, her whisper carried away by the wind.

Her destination was Ankaji. She needed to deliver what had been entrusted to her.

She vanished into the sandstorm...

A few minutes later, the Grand Gruen Volcano shuddered.

The shaking was followed by a massive eruption. The force of it blew away the surrounding sandstorm for a short while. Black smoke rose from the volcano's peak as it spat out gouts of magma and chunks of white hot rock. Forks of lightning flashed within the smoke released from the volcano.

This was the first eruption of the Grand Gruen Volcano in known history. The historic event faded from view as the sandstorm veil covered the volcano again a few minutes later.

Though the volcano itself was obscured, the plume of smoke rising from its peak could be seen as far away as Ankaji.

The two girls who were waiting for Hajime's return watched it anxiously.

“There's just something cool about going out in a blaze of glory.”

“Hajime?”

“Hajime-san?”

Hajime grinned, prompting Yue and Shea to stare at him in confusion. They were still being assailed by the Ash Dragons' aurora balls. Hajime just shook his head and, with Shea and Yue's help, managed to leap onto the central island.

In the few minutes since Tio had left, the magma had gotten even more violent. Only the central island was still above the writhing sea of death. In

another five minutes, even the central island would be submerged.

Yue's Spatial Severance was doing a perfect job of dealing with the aurora balls, and the Ash Dragons were starting to get desperate. They began diving down, trying to attack the party directly, but Shea swatted down any that got close. Another ten dragons fell.

The magma dome that had been covering the center of the island had vanished, revealing a jet-black building. Next to the building was a disk that was floating a few centimeters off the ground. It seemed that was what was normally used to transport people through the shortcut back to the surface.

There were so many magma pillars shooting out now that the remaining Ash Dragons had to cut their attacks short to keep out of their way. Hajime watched them out of the corner of his eye as he walked up to the building.

There didn't seem to be any door, but one of the walls had the familiar Liberators' crest on it.

The party stopped in front of it, and the wall fell away to reveal an opening.

They stepped inside just as the magma started flowing over the central island. The door closed behind them seconds before the magma reached them.

The party watched the door warily for a few seconds, but it didn't seem like the magma was melting through it. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Hajime had guessed that if they'd built their house in a place like this, they'd have made it impervious to magma in case something happened to the volcano. It had still been just a guess though, so Hajime was relieved to discover the building really was magma-resistant.

"Looks like we can rest for a bit now. I can't believe this room even dampens the shaking..."

"Mmm... Hajime, there."

"It's a magic circle."

Hajime marveled at how well the building nullified the volcano's shaking. His musings were interrupted by Yue pointing out the magic circle. It was more complex than most he'd seen. Stepping into it would likely grant them this labyrinth's ancient magic. The three of them nodded to each other and walked into it.

Just like the circle in Oscar's room, this one read their memories, tracing their path through the labyrinth. Once the circle had confirmed they'd

defeated all the magma serpents, it imprinted the knowledge needed to use this magic onto them.

“So this labyrinth was spatial magic.” As Yue had said, the Grand Gruen Volcano’s magic was spatial magic. *Looks like this magic’s pretty crazy stuff too.* Hajime wasn’t even surprised anymore at how ridiculously powerful it was.

“We can teleport with this.”

“Yeah, that’s what he used to get behind us, isn’t it?”

Yue thought back to their earlier fight. Shea nodded, remembering his sudden appearance.

He’d probably used that magic to launch the first surprise attack, too. Hajime would need to test it some more before he could be certain whether it actually allowed teleportation or just the warping of space. Either way, it was still unbelievably powerful. Had it not been for Shea’s Future Sight, that first attack would have likely killed Hajime. *He really got me good.*

As the magic circle’s glow faded, there was a dull clunk and a section of the wall fell away, revealing a small alcove. Glowing letters appeared inside it.

I pray the day comes where people can be free. —Naiz Gruen

“Short and sweet, I see.” Hajime gave his honest impressions. Looking around, they noticed Gruen’s hidden hideout was rather Spartan. Unlike Orcus’ place, there wasn’t even any furniture or household appliances. There was just the magic circle.

“I guess he put his affairs in order before coming here.”

“Yeah, it looks like the only thing Naiz-san left for us here was the magic circle.”

“Come to think of it, Oscar’s diary mentioned Naiz. It said he was a pretty quiet guy.”

Yue left Shea to support Hajime and walked over to the alcove. She groped inside it and pulled out a pendant. It was slightly different than the things they’d received so far as proof of clearing a labyrinth. The pendant was circular, inlaid with an ornate pattern. Yue walked back and put it around Hajime’s neck.

“Alright, we’ve got the magic and we’ve got our crest. Now we just have to figure out how to get out of here.”

“Any ideas?”

“You have a plan, right? The whole place must be filled with magma by now.”

Both Yue and Shea were confident Hajime could get them out of this mess. Happy that they trusted him so much, he began to outline his plan.

“We’re going to swim through the magma.”

“Hm?”

“Come again?”

Has the blood loss finally gotten to him? the two girls thought at the same time. His suggestion definitely didn’t seem sane.

“Hold on, I’m not crazy, I swear. I’ll explain it all, so don’t give me that look. Okay, so the truth is, I left a submarine outside. I figured it made sense to make one since Melusine comes next. I wasn’t sure if it’d survive the magma, but since our strengthened boat could, I’m sure it’ll work. Glad I tried that out.”

“When exactly did you have time to...” Shea stared at Hajime in shock. Even Yue widened her eyes a little in surprise.

When Freid announced that he’d destroyed the keystone, Hajime had instantly pulled his submarine out and dropped it into the magma. If it had melted, Hajime would have told everyone to ride Tio out and forced his way through. He tracked its movements with the spirit stone he’d put in it and saw that it was perfectly fine.

However, with how chaotic things were getting there was a possibility they wouldn’t make it back in time to save Ankaji. They would’ve had to take risks to make it back in time, and Hajime wanted to avoid that. And so, he’d sent Tio on ahead just in case. He knew she’d be able to make it back with time to spare.

“As for the route we’re going to take, we have the shortcut Freid took. Yue, I’m going to need you to make a barrier to hold back the magma until we’re in the sub. Can you handle that?”

“Yeah... No problem.” Yue nodded and deployed a tri-layered Hallowed Ground. The shimmering dome surrounded the three of them. They nodded to each other and walked up to the door. Hajime clutched the handle and slid it open.

Burning hot magma rushed into the room. Yue’s barrier protected them from it, but they couldn’t even see two inches in front of their faces because of how much of it there was. Though he’d planned for the situation, Hajime

was still amazed. They were seeing what a volcano looked like from inside. Chances were, the three of them were the only people in the whole world to have experienced something so strange.

“It’s not far. Let’s go!”

“Okay.”

“R-Roger!”

At Hajime’s command, the three of them slowly walked forward. Though they couldn’t see anything, the submarine really was only a few feet from the room’s entrance. Yue extended her Hallowed Ground to make them a path.

The three of them ran over to the entrance hatch and hopped inside. Once they were safely inside, they all relaxed.

Just then, a massive quake ripped through the volcano. And, at the same time, the magma began rushing violently toward something. The submarine was carried by the flow, and Hajime and the others rolled around inside it like bowling balls.

“Gwaaah!?”

“Hwaaa!?”

“Hawawa!? Owww!”

They cried out in pain as they slammed into the sub’s walls, floor, and ceiling. Yue deployed a miniature version of her Spatial Severance to keep everyone from flying around. The contained gravity field stabilized them enough that they could regain their balance.

“Th-Thanks, Yue.”

“Thank you very much, Yue-san.”

“Mmm... Anyway...” Yue manipulated her Spatial Severance to drop Hajime off into the cockpit. Hajime began pouring mana into the submarine’s control system, but he made little headway trying to steer it. The thickness of the magma and the speed of its flow made stabilizing the sub very difficult.

“Tch... If only this meant the volcano’s erupting. We would have had our express ticket out.”

“It’s not?” Yue tilted her head quizzically.

“Yeah, it’s not. I added lodestones to the Cross Bits when I sent them out. That way, I’d always know what direction we’re going in. I dropped them on the summit before I made them blow up, so I know where the shortcut comes out... But we’re getting further from there, not closer.”

“Wait, does that mean the magma’s taking us further underground?”

“Yeah. It’s going at a slant, but we’re still descending. I wonder where we’re heading... Yue, Shea. It looks like we won’t be making it back anytime soon. All we can do is see where this takes us.”

Yue and Shea smiled gently and sidled up to Hajime.

“All I want is to be with you. If I can have that, I don’t care what else happens.”

“Hehe... So this is what ‘through hell and high water’ really means... As long as I can be with you two, I don’t care where we go!”

“I see. Fair enough.” Hajime smiled back.

The three of them huddled together in the submarine as the ocean of magma pushed them along.

While Hajime and the others were being pushed along by the magma, Tio was flying through the sandstorm. Her silhouette was the only thing that wasn’t brown in the sky.

“Mmm. This does not bode well. Unbelievable, to think that charlatan’s breath would... I suppose I have no choice. Master, please forgive me.” Even with Hajime’s protection, some of the white dragon’s aurora had hit her when she’d pushed through. And now, its insidious poison was eating away at her wounds. At the rate things were going, she would collapse long before she reached Ankaji. She reached into the Treasure Trove and pulled out one of Hajime’s few remaining Ambrosia vials. Then, she popped the whole thing, vial and all, into her mouth with a muttered apology for taking it without permission.

The vast amount of mana she’d spent casting multiple breath attacks and speeding through the volcano regenerated at an alarming rate. Her wounds didn’t start healing right away due to the poison, but the aurora’s effects were diminished.

After flying for a few hours, she finally spotted Ankaji in the distance. If she got any closer, Ankaji’s lookouts would spot her. Tio considered changing back to her human form.

“Well, now that the white dragon tamer’s seen me, I guess there’s no point in hiding it.” *Besides, if I’m going to continue traveling with Master, a time when my dragon form will be needed again will surely come.* In the end, Tio decided not to stop.

Her hidden village wouldn’t be found that easily. Even if it was, her clan

was notoriously hard to kill. More than anything though, she had Hajime. If by some chance the whole world turned against them again, then she could count on him to have her back. He tried to act tough, but Tio knew he'd do anything for those he cared about.

Only a few kilometers remained between her and Ankaji. When she looked down, she spotted the lookout panicking and pointing in her direction. Tio didn't want to have to deal with them accidentally attacking her, so she angled down toward the main gate and landed there.

She kicked up a massive cloud of dust as she landed. A contingent of Ankaji's soldiers were waiting for her. She glanced up and saw another squad of soldiers aiming their bows and staves down at her from the walls.

The wind began to sweep away the dust cloud and soon Tio's silhouette was visible. The soldiers gulped nervously. However, when the sand finally cleared all they saw was an exhausted woman.

A girl pushed past the bewildered soldiers and ran up to Tio. It was Kaori.

Bize and the soldiers tried to stop her, but she ignored them. She only stopped when she was next to Tio, who was doubled over and panting.

Kaori had known Tio was a dragon, so the moment the lookout had reported that one had been spotted she'd run to the main gate.

"Tio, are you alright!?"

"Oh, Kaori. Despite how I look, I shall be fine. I'm just a little tired."

Kaori paled when she saw how hurt Tio was. Every inch of her was covered in wounds. Kaori kneeled down next to Tio and began examining her injuries. When she realized the damage had been caused by an unknown poison, she quickly cast a cleansing spell, followed by a healing spell.

"How come... Why can't I purify you?" The aurora's poison was so potent that even Ambrosia took some time to flush it out. Kaori's skills weren't nearly good enough to get rid of something like that.

Though, she was still far better than any other healer. The combination of her magic and the Ambrosia healed most of Tio's more serious injuries. Tio smiled and patted Kaori's head.

"Don't worry child, the rest will heal soon enough," she said.

Kaori smiled in relief as she saw Tio's wounds begin to close up. It seemed there really hadn't been any need to worry. Still, her expression grew worried again as she noticed no one else was with Tio.

"Tio... Umm, where's Hajime-kun? Did you come back alone? And what

was that eruption..."

"Calm yourself, Kaori. I will explain everything. But first, can you please calm those soldiers, and find somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Oh, uh, of course." Kaori turned back, as if she'd only just noticed the army of soldiers behind her. Still a little worried, she nodded and began reassuring them. The only reason she wasn't panicking was because Tio didn't seem sad.

Kaori explained the situation to Bize and Lanzwi before taking Tio somewhere they could talk in peace.

"So then, Hajime-kun and the others are..."

"Indeed. They should be joining us soon. Master didn't seem worried at all. I didn't have time to ask for details, but I am certain he has a plan."

Kaori clenched her fists, looking pale as a ghost. The worry she'd felt when she'd first seen the eruption returned with a vengeance.

Tio gently placed her hands over Kaori's and gazed sternly into her eyes.

"Kaori, I have a message from Master."

"From Hajime-kun?"

"Yes. Well, technically, he said it was for both you and Myu... Regardless, the message is 'we'll see you soon.'"

Kaori had expected him to say something reassuring like "Don't worry" or "I promise I'll come back." Not something casual like "We'll see you soon." He made it sound like he was just going out for a bit to get groceries.

An image of him smiling fearlessly flashed in the back of her mind. She could just imagine him saying "Come on, this isn't even worth getting worried over." He was the kind of person who'd overcome any hardship thrown at him with a big grin on his face. Kaori smiled wryly to herself. *He must have said something lighthearted like that because he knew it'd reassure me more than a serious promise.*

"I see. Well, I guess he's fine, then."

"Precisely. Master is the kind of man who can overturn any kind of hopeless situation and make it look easy. You can't help but trust in him..."

"Yeah... As long as Hajime-kun's there, they'll be fine. I should focus on my job here while I wait."

"That you should. Allow me to assist you."

Though Kaori felt the same despair she had when Hajime had fallen into

the depths of the Orcus Labyrinth, she told herself Hajime would be fine and decided to focus on what she could do. She wiped her eyes and stood up. Lanzwi and his attendants had likely finished crushing the stillstone Tio had brought them and would be distributing it to the patients. In the meantime, she needed to heal all the people in critical condition so that they could recover quickly.

On her way to the hospitals, Kaori stopped by the palace and explained what was going on to Myu. Lanzwi's daughter, the fourteen-year-old Ailee, was taking care of her.

Myu started crying when she learned Hajime hadn't returned, but Tio shushed her by saying Hajime's daughter had to be a strong girl and strong girls didn't cry. And so, Myu held in her tears and tried to be strong.

Though Myu was a Dagon, everyone had treated her kindly. There was, of course, the fact that she was part of Kaori's party, but that wasn't all. Once they got to know her, everyone couldn't help but be moved by how adorable Myu was. Ailee especially had taken to Myu immediately.

Lanzwi and the others had been surprised to learn Tio was a dragonman, but they didn't seem to hate her for it. In the end, she'd risked her life to save theirs, and they owed her for that regardless of who she was.

Two days later, Hajime still hadn't returned. Kaori had been busy healing patients, but she knew she couldn't distract herself with work for much longer.

Tio had flown back and forth from the volcano multiple times, but she hadn't found any trace of Hajime or the others.

The evening of the third day since Tio's return, Kaori made a suggestion.

"I finished healing all of the patients that were in critical condition. The ones left will heal naturally given time or can be looked after by Ankaji's doctors. So... I think it's time we start looking for Hajime-kun."

"We're going to find Daddy?"

"Hmm, I suppose we should. I was thinking of going to look for him myself."

Myu leaned forward eagerly, while Tio lapsed into thought.

"But we can't really take Myu with us to the Grand Gruen Volcano, can we?"

"Indeed. Master left her here because it was too dangerous to bring her along. Besides, searching the area will be difficult now, since it just erupted."

“Yeah. I agree. I think we should get Myu to her mom in Erisen first, then turn back to look for Hajime-kun.”

“Hmm, that does sound sensible... Very well. It will be faster if you ride on my back. Through the air, Erisen is only a day’s journey from here. We should arrive tomorrow evening if we leave early enough in the morning.”

Myu watched the two of them with a puzzled expression on her face. The conversation was moving too fast for her to follow. Kaori kneeled down and explained what they were talking about to Myu. She frowned when Kaori said they couldn’t go look for Hajime right away. However, she really wanted to see her mother again too. Reluctantly, she agreed to go home first and wait for Hajime there.

Tio and Kaori smiled ruefully at how calculating Myu had been in her decision. She’d picked between Hajime and her mother, just like Hajime would have done in her position.

They set off the next day. Lanzwi seemed reluctant to let them go, while Bize saw them off with tears in his eyes. Kaori and Myu got on Tio’s back and the three of them headed off to the west. The townspeople cheered them as they went, their voices resounding through the desert.

Kaori was determined to find Hajime. She’d done it before and she could do it again.

Little did she know they’d be reunited very soon.

Around the same time back in Heiligh, Kouki had thrown himself wholeheartedly into training.

It wasn’t because he wanted to improve his skills, though. He still didn’t know if he could really kill someone when time came for it, so he’d tried to find the answers in his training.

However, there was no way just training would hold any answers. Though his skills improved, Kouki was no closer to knowing.

In a way, even he knew he was just trying to distract himself from facing the problem head-on. His irritation at himself grew with each passing day. Though he knew he had to make a decision soon, he couldn’t bring himself to take that step forward.

And since their leader was feeling this way, the other students, even the ones who hadn’t participated in combat since the Orcus Labyrinth incident, began to feel more stressed as well. A gloom hung over the castle.

Training had ended for the day, but there was still someone present at one of the less-used training grounds.

“Hmph, faster.” A series of sword strokes cut through the air. The jet-black sword moved so quickly that it was back in its owner’s sheath before the afterimages had disappeared. A second later, it shot back out with such speed one couldn’t even see the drawing motion.

Each stroke was sharp enough to cut steel. Every time Shizuku Yaegashi swung her blade, her ponytail swayed from side to side.

She was training alone in the deserted practice grounds, swinging the sword Hajime had given to her.

After she finished her flurry of strokes, Shizuku took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

A woman’s face appeared in the back of her mind. Red hair and dark skin. The demon who had nearly killed them all. She’d controlled a horde of monsters and could use powerful earth magic.

She had been a member of the army that had driven the humans into a corner. Shizuku could still remember every detail of that fight vividly. When she looked down, she noticed her right hand was trembling slightly.

I’ll cut them down. The next time one shows up, I’ll do it. If I don’t kill them, it’ll be my friends who end up dead instead. Shizuku tried to steel her resolve. Back then, a miracle had saved them. Hajime had swooped in, like a fairytale hero. However, miracles didn’t happen that often. Shizuku couldn’t count on one to save them again. She knew she’d lose someone precious to her if she didn’t take this seriously. That was why she was training.

“Haaah!” She let out a yell and slashed at the air with all her might. Her sword cut through where the imaginary demon was standing. Still, that wasn’t good enough. She knew that her own weakness had made her hesitate. Had that been a real fight, her slash would have been too slow to be fatal. She couldn’t afford to be weak, so she struck again.

“Go forth... Gale Claw!” A faint breeze began to blow along the blade’s length. This was the skill imbued into the sword Hajime had given her. Originally, it would have been impossible to invoke without being able to manipulate mana directly. However, the kingdom’s best alchemists had worked tirelessly to modify it into a usable state.

The masterfully crafted black sword transformed Shizuku’s image into a spell, and this time she cut through the image of the demon without

hesitation. A second later—

“Ugh...” She groaned. Shizuku dashed over to a corner of the practice grounds and threw up.

“Bleh... Haaah... Haaah... Sheesh, I can’t believe this happens every time I train. What a waste of good food. Though I guess eating only healthy foods that look and taste like crap isn’t really a good thing, either.” Shizuku sighed and smiled bitterly at herself.

She tottered over to the sandwich and water bottle she’d left underneath the shade of a tree. Honestly, she’d been expecting to throw up. Still, even if she wasn’t hungry, she needed to replenish her body’s energy or risk collapsing. She’d force the food down her throat if she had to.

She sat down on a protruding root and took a big gulp of water. The refreshingly cool water washed away the bitter taste in her mouth.

“Haaah...” She breathed another sigh and looked up at the sun setting in the west.

Just then, she heard something unexpected.

“Meow...”

“Huh?” Looking down, she spotted a chestnut-colored cat purring next to her. It seemed cats in Tortus looked just like cats back home. They were just as prevalent too.

“Where’d you come from, little fella?” The practice grounds was inside the palace complex. In other words, it was surrounded by tall walls on three sides and the mountain behind it. There was no way a cat should have been able to find its way in. Shizuku tentatively reached a hand out to it, and the cat didn’t shy away. It seemed content to let Shizuku pet it. Its fur was clean and well kept.

“Must be some noble’s pet... Did you run away from your master?”

“Meow~”

Shizuku scratched it lightly on the neck. The cat purred happily and nuzzled against her. It seemed to be enjoying Shizuku’s petting. Surprised, Shizuku muttered something lightly.

“S-So cute...” Then, she smiled. Both her irritation at herself and her burning bloodlust vanished. She was totally absorbed by the cat.

The constant training had exhausted her, so it was understandable. Shizuku, who prided herself on her reputation as an aloof and mysterious beauty, had allowed herself to cut loose.

“You’re so cuuute... But you can’t be running away from your owner. Bad kids like you need to be punished.” Right, she started a conversation with a cat. If any of the noble ladies who’d taken to calling Shizuku “Nee-san” had spotted her they would have likely doubted their sanity. Or possibly break out in a nosebleed.

Shizuku continued petting the cat as she talked to it.

Remember, Shizuku was exhausted from the constant training.

After a few more minutes of petting, the cat padded over to the basket holding Shizuku’s sandwich and poked its nose inside.

“Oh? Do you want meow sandwich?” The cat gazed longingly at Shizuku.



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Its cuteness melted Shizuku's heart. She started cooing. Naturally, she wouldn't refuse the request. However, her sandwich was too big, so she would need to cut it into smaller chunks.

"Wait just a little bit. I'll cut it up meowcely for you." There was no one around to ask why she was cutting it with her sword and not just ripping it with her hands. Or even why she was getting in a battle stance to cut it. She got into the same stance she had when she was practicing cutting imaginary demons. She threw the sandwich into the air and prepared to draw.

It was rather clear by this point, but to repeat once more... Shizukat was extremely tired. "Go forth... Gale Claw!" Hajime could never have guessed his sword would end up being used to cut a sandwich. But cut one it did, and splendidly too.

The sandwich still looked whole when it fell back into Shizuku's hand, but the moment she sheathed her blade it fell apart into evenly cut squares.

Shizuku struck a pose, as if her swordsmanship would somehow impress the cat.

"Meow that's what I call a cut." Shizuku turned around—

"....."

"....."

And locked eyes with Princess Liliana. Liliana was staring at Shizuku with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

Shizuku's smile froze in place. The princess didn't say anything. Silence stretched on for a few minutes. The cat finished its meal and ran off somewhere.

After an ominous gust of wind, the princess finally broke the silence.

"Meow that's what I call a cut?" She asked. To which Shizuku replied, loudly.

"M-Meooooow!" She was still talking like a cat.

"Don't look at me. Please, don't look at me! In fact, just kill me right now."

"C-Calm down... It's not that big a deal. In fact, I thought you looked rather cute, Shizuku."

Shizuku buried her face in her hands. Liliana squatted down next to her and tried to console her.

It took some time before Shizuku was willing to look her in the eye. Once

Shizuku had finally calmed down, she glared at Liliana and asked her something.

“So, what were you doing here, Liliana? Did you have some business with me? I can’t think of any other reason you’d come to this practice ground.” Liliana grimaced.

“It’s true that I also had business with you, but... I didn’t see you with Kouki-san and the others.” It seemed she’d been worried that Shizuku wasn’t with her comrades. Shizuku smiled at Liliana.

“Thanks for worrying about me, Lily. But I’m fine, don’t worry.”

“Then why were you here alone...”

Because I wanted to be alone. Shizuku swallowed those words.

Unfortunately for her, Liliana had grown up in the ruthless world of court politics, which meant she’d gotten very good at reading people.

“Shizuku, you always push yourself too hard. Perhaps it’s presumptuous of me to say this when I’m one of the people who’s making you fight for our cause, but...”

“I don’t think it is. We all know just how hard you’re working for our sakes, Lily. And I’m not pushing myself. It’s just that Kouki and the others can be a bit difficult at times. Sometimes I just need to get away from them for a while.”

Liliana knew that couldn’t be everything, but she also knew pressing any further would just make things harder for Shizuku. And so, she decided to go along with the change of topic.

“They can definitely be a handful sometimes.”

“Yeah. It’s not easy to get over the defeat we suffered in the labyrinth. It’s worse for Kouki because there’s what happened with Kaori, too.” Shizuku stared westward, thinking of her best friend.

“Are you lonely?” It didn’t show on Shizuku’s face, but Liliana guessed how she was feeling from the way she looked off into the distance.

“I’m not exactly lonely. Even if she’s not here, I’ll always be connected to Kaori. Yeah, I’m sure of that. Besides, I have a princess who’s worried about me right here, don’t I?” Shizuku smiled playfully, and Liliana blushed. She felt like those noble girls who thought of themselves as Shizuku’s little sisters.

“You really are like everyone’s big sister.” Shizuku pinched Liliana’s cheek. She wasn’t happy about everyone else calling her Onee-sama. Though

most of the other girls considered a pinch from Shizuku a reward. Liliana could imagine how jealous the other noble ladies would be.

“So, what is it you needed me for?” Tired of talking about herself, Shizuku brought the topic back to why Liliana had come. Liliana blushed again and answered.

“I was wondering about the change in the demons, and about Nagumosan.”

“I should have known. Have the king and the Holy Church come to a decision?”

Ever since the heroes’ return from the labyrinth, the country had been in an uproar. It was only natural. Their report had stated the demons could control an army of extremely powerful monsters. Strong enough that they’d defeated the hero party once already. If that was true, humanity was doomed.

Hajime was another reason everyone was in a panic. Supposedly he’d annihilated monsters that had driven the hero party’s strongest into a corner.

Also, reports had come in from Ur about Hajime destroying an entire monster army even before the battle in the labyrinth. Though, most people hadn’t really believed them. The events at Orcus had lent far more credence to those tales, however.

Everyone was interested in the boy who had once been labeled “worthless” now. His unbelievable strength, along with his unknown artifacts, likely held the key to saving humanity.

Yet he hadn’t returned to his old comrades. Instead, he had struck out on his own.

Neither the king nor the pope were happy about that. They’d been spending the past few days discussing how to deal with Hajime. However, they had yet to come to a conclusion.

Shizuku had hoped Liliana might have come with news about a verdict, but Liliana sighed uncharacteristically in response to Shizuku’s question.

“They still haven’t made a decision. All they’ve been talking about is how they need Kouki-san and the others to get stronger as fast as possible. I think they want to reexamine everyone’s jobs, too. They’re hoping if there was one student who could control monsters there might be more. They don’t understand the problem is mental and not physical. They think because you were chosen by Ehit for this mission that you should be happy to fulfill it. To them, the idea of killing demons isn’t a big deal.”

Like all other humans, Liliana was a devout follower of Ehit, so it surprised Shizuku that she would speak so irreverently of her god.

Sensing the unspoken question, Liliana smiled bitterly.

“I think it’s important to be able to separate your emotions and your beliefs when examining a problem objectively.” That was one thing the princess was good at, and a core part of her personality. Shizuku was amazed a girl as young as fourteen could be so mature.

“Also, I feel the priests weren’t this radical before... Perhaps it’s a sign of how cornered they feel. Regardless, you should be careful. The Holy Church may try something drastic soon. Kouki-san and the others are still feeling uneasy, so the pope will probably take the opportunity to push them in a dangerous direction. I thought I should warn you ahead of time.”

“That certainly makes sense. Okay, we’ll be careful. Thank you, Lily.”

Just being ready for something made a world of difference. Knowing it was coming when it came would let you ride it out, and keep your thoughts from getting muddled.

“What about Nagumo-kun?” Liliana hesitated for a moment. Shizuku suddenly had a very bad premonition. One that turned out to be true.

“They’re considering declaring him a heretic.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

They were thinking of making him a heretic. That would mean any human was allowed to legally kill him. He’d be branded an enemy of Ehit, which would mean he no longer possessed any rights. Worse, any humans would be forbidden from aiding him. The world would have effectively turned against him.

“It hasn’t been set in stone yet. They’re still just considering it at the moment. They can’t just brand him one because he refused to obey the Holy Church’s orders. It takes more than that. Still, rumors are going to spread. Even if it was something one of the bishops said in the heat of the moment, word will get out and people will talk. The mere fact that he was considered by the Holy Church as a potential heretic will ruin his reputation.”

“So you want us to stop those rumors before they get too far?”

“Yes. The fate of the human race was at stake, and one of the bishops became too heated and made a careless remark. That was the only reason Nagumo-san’s name was brought up at all. Please try and keep the story to just that. I suspect the official decision of what to do with Nagumo-san will

come after Aiko-san returns and gives her report.”

Shizuku understood why Liliana was trying so hard to save Hajime’s reputation. She wanted to make sure Hajime had a place to return to. Not just for his sake, but for Kaori’s too. She didn’t want Kaori to suffer the pain of seeing her loved one become a hunted man.

“Thank you so much, Lily.” Shizuku spoke sincerely.

“Though it may have been Ehit’s decree, it’s still our fault you’re wrapped up in this. If I don’t do everything I can to help you, then how will I ever face Ehit in the afterlife? Besides... you and Kaori are my friends.” Liliana blushed and turned away. Shizuku hugged her and said some rather embarrassing words.

“Not just any friend... You’re one of my best friends!”

Liliana’s face grew even redder.

After getting all of the heavy stuff out of the way, Shizuku and Liliana began talking about more trivial matters. Liliana had to support a nation, while Shizuku had to support her troublemaking classmates. They both had no end of worries. Still, it was precisely due to those duties that they could talk so candidly with each other.

Those healing conversations came with a price, however. Namely, the dignity of all the people they talked to each other about.

For example, Liliana complained about how Lundel came to her crying every night because the love of his life, Kaori, had run off with Hajime.

On the other hand, Shizuku regaled Liliana with tales of the time when Lundel had run up to Kouki and accused him of being a coward for letting Hajime steal Kaori from him. The conversation had left Kouki writhing on the ground.

Liliana followed up by telling Shizuku how she’d left Lundel on the ground afterward by saying the exact same things to him. At some point, the conversation shifted to Hajime’s appearance.

Had Kouki or Lundel or Hajime been present for the conversation, they likely would have cried themselves to sleep that night.

Conversations between girls was something the men of the world were destined never to know about.

“Well, Shizuku. I should be heading back now. Please don’t overdo it.”

“Mhm, I know. I think I’ll go back to my room, too. Thanks for everything, Lily.”

The sun had long since set, and the stars were twinkling in the night sky when the two girls finally finished talking. They were both smiling, glad to have had an opportunity to let off some stress.

They walked back to the castle together, then parted ways at the corridor that forked in the direction of their rooms. Shizuku watched the closest friend she'd made since coming to this world vanish down the hallway. Feeling content, Shizuku turned the other direction and started walking back to her own room.

“Ah!?” For the briefest of moments, she felt a terrible chill fill the room.

She placed a hand on her sword and fell into her battle stance. She observed her surroundings for a few seconds, but she saw nothing in the dimly-lit corridor.

“Was it just my imagination?” She tried to use magic to sense for other beings, but discerned nothing.

I'm probably just nervous because of what Lily told me. Shizuku sighed and took her hand off her sword.

She once again began walking toward her room, her pace far faster than before.

It was as if something was pushing her onward.

Chapter II: The Sunken Ruins of Melusine

Blue as far as the eye could see.

The sun dazzled overhead in a cloudless sky. Yet it didn't feel hot. In fact, the weather was positively pleasant. A gentle breeze blew past, keeping the temperature moderate.

However, there was not a single object in sight, making the scene a somewhat lonely one.

That was to be expected, though. After all, this was the middle of the ocean.

A single boat drifted gently through the waves. Though perhaps boat wasn't the best term to describe it. At the very least, the people of this world wouldn't have considered it one.

The not-boat was jet-black, narrow, and had no visible place from which to board. Two wings jutted out from its side in a V-formation, its rear had a propeller of some sort jutting out of it, and its rudder looked like a tail of sorts. Though, it wasn't in the best of shape, since the entire thing looked like it'd been ravaged by a fierce storm. From a certain angle, it almost looked like a flattened whale.

The people of this world would likely think it was some kind of monster, not a boat.

In truth, it was the top half of a submarine. Specifically, the submarine that had saved Hajime, Shea, and Yue's lives when the Grand Gruen Volcano had erupted. It had been damaged by its journey through the magma, and was barely holding together.

Hajime lay atop the submarine, admiring the scenery. He'd repaired his melted left arm using some of the material that made up the submarine. Right now, it looked as good as new. Though most of the features and abilities he'd packed into it didn't work.

"Hajime, how do you feel?" He'd been about to nod off, but a voice from

behind brought him back to wakefulness. Yue's head popped into view. She was looking at him worriedly.

Hajime had taken quite a bit of damage from the white dragon's aurora attacks, and the poison had slowed the healing of his wounds.

"Pretty good. My wounds have all closed up. They'll probably be fully healed in another day or so... How about you, Yue? You were pretty exhausted after that fight, right?"

"Mmm... I'm fine. Shea let me drink some of her blood." Yue climbed out of the hatch and crawled over to where Hajime was lying. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she started straddling him. Her plump butt fell directly over a very sensitive part of Hajime's body.

"Yue, why are you climbing on top of me?"

"Because you're there?" Yue copied a certain mountain climber's quote and stared seriously down at Hajime. She didn't have the same allure around her that she did when she was trying to seduce him.

"Don't move..." she said as she bent down over his neck. Then, she ran her tongue down it before sinking her fangs inside, lapping up the drop of blood that welled out.

"Mmm, it looks like the poison's mostly gone. You should be fine."

It seemed Yue could tell the state of Hajime's body by tasting his blood.

"I told you I was fine."

"...Mmm. But I was still worried. I'm glad you're finally able to rest, even if it's in the middle of the ocean."

"Yeah. To be honest, I never expected things to move so fast. I can't decide if it was good luck or bad..." Hajime smiled wryly and Yue arched an eyebrow.

Neither of them could decide whether they should be grateful they made it out alive at all, or chalk up all the horrible events that led to them riding a magma torrent into the ocean to bad luck.

They had spent almost an entire day riding the underground magma channel after the eruption.

Hajime had spent a sleepless night worrying the current might be taking them to the planet's mantle. Around that time, there'd been a change in their journey.

Their submarine had been hit by an impact far stronger than any before. So strong, in fact, that it had broken through the Diamond Skin defense of the

submarine and damaged the hull directly. The force had sent the sub flying.

Hajime had hurried to make sure there weren't any leaks anywhere. When he'd checked the outside of the sub, he'd been greeted by an unbelievable sight. They were no longer surrounded by magma on all sides, like he'd expected. Instead, they had found themselves at the bottom of an actual sea, with spiraling ribbons of magma swirling around them.

It seemed the underground channel had taken them to an underwater volcano. The impact they'd felt had been a phreatic eruption that had spit them out into the ocean.

The eruption had damaged the submarine pretty badly, but by a stroke of luck, the hull hadn't been breached. Though Hajime's expert engineering probably had more to do with that than luck.

Hajime and the others had breathed a sigh of relief at finally reaching the surface, but their troubles had only just begun. With the propeller and the rudder both broken, they had been forced to manually move the submarine with mana. All the while, they'd been attacked by deep-sea monsters.

First they'd had to grapple with a giant squid. It had been thirty meters long and had over thirty tentacles. Hajime had dubbed it the Kraken.

The Kraken had continually assaulted the submarine as they'd tried to rise to the surface. They'd nearly been caught and eaten, but Hajime's torpedoes and Yue's magic had somehow managed to fend it off.

Next, they'd been hounded by a school of sharks that wrapped water around them like a tornado. After that had been a giant marlin with a revolving horn. Then, a giant turtle that spat mines out of its ass... The list was endless.

Eventually, Hajime's weapon reserves ran dry and they were reliant entirely on Yue's magic. Yue drained all of her magic accessories as well, and since Hajime was still weak from blood loss, she ended up drinking Shea's blood to replenish her mana.

The strain from their earlier fight at the Grand Gruen Volcano had taken its toll as well, and they were barely able to fight off all the creatures that attacked them. Shea, who'd hated being powerless to help, had given so much of her blood to Yue that she'd fainted.

Once they'd made it into relatively safe waters, Hajime had sent Yue and Shea to rest as he guided the submarine back to the continent. It had been half a day since then. The weather was perfect and the sea was calm. Since there

was no immediate danger, Hajime had decided to stop the sub and treat himself to a little sunbath. It was his first proper rest in quite a while, too.

It really had been one thing after another since they'd cleared the Grand Gruen Volcano. Any other party wouldn't have been able to survive the journey. Hajime could understand why a certain anime character who punched people into living their lives correctly was always complaining about his misfortune.

"How's Shea?" Hajime brought himself back to the present and looked up at Yue.

"Still sleeping. I drank a lot of her blood, so she probably won't wake up for a while." According to Yue, the amount of mana she got from Hajime's blood and the amount she got from Shea's blood were different. Hajime was the one she'd made a blood oath with, so his blood gave her exponentially more mana than Shea's.

Yue's blood oath was a double-edged sword. The mana she obtained from the person she made a pact with rose drastically, but the amount of mana she obtained from others fell.

"I see. Well, we can take it easy for a bit. We have no idea how far we are from the continent, so there's no telling how long it'll take to get back. It's better to rest now while we have the chance. Who knows what else we might have to deal with later."

"Yeah."

The ocean was to the west of the continent, so Hajime was sure he'd reach it eventually if he just went east. Yue could make water for them with her magic, and they could catch fish to eat. There were no fish in the sea that could escape Hajime's submarine and Yue's magic, so though it looked like they were stranded in the middle of the sea with nothing, they'd be able to get by easily enough. Plus, it was safer to wait until night so they could use the stars to confirm their bearing. Hence why they were resting for now.

Hajime laid back and relaxed. Yue watched him closely.

"Yue, may I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm giving you energy." Yue smiled seductively and leaned in close. She was definitely giving him energy. Only to a certain part of his body, though. As Hajime stared into her eyes, all thoughts of resisting melted away.

"Mmm...Fufu, looks like you're ready."

"Never thought I'd be doing this in the middle of the ocean half a year

ago.”

Hajime and Yue enjoyed themselves thoroughly, savoring the feeling of still being alive. For a while, the submarine rocked from more than just waves.

“It sounded like you two were having fun...”

The two of them were met by a glaring Shea as they entered the submarine.

“Hm? I didn’t know you woke up. How’re you feeling?”

“Thanks for glossing over that like it never happened. All of your rocking and moaning woke me up. All that loneliness and sadness gave me strength, so I’m feeling a lot better now. Well, enough to smack you right now, in fact.”

“That’s good.”

Shea groaned at how casually Hajime took her pointing out that she could hear their sexual escapades. Realizing he was being a bit too cold to Shea, Hajime smiled and invited her to sit next to him.

Shea had felt really left out when she’d woken up to the sounds of Hajime and Yue having sex on top of the submarine, and she made up for it by clinging to Hajime even more than usual.

Yue, too, took a seat beside Shea instead of her customary place by Hajime. She started stroking Shea’s ears in an attempt to improve her mood.

With that, Hajime started pouring mana into his sub and propelled it eastward.

Monsters still came out to attack them occasionally, but Yue was able to fend them off with ease.

Hajime drove them through the night, and he spotted land finally around the time dawn was beginning to break.

He’d triangulated their position from the stars during the night. By his estimation, they were somewhere north of Erisen. That meant if he followed the coastline south, he’d eventually reach Erisen and the port that connected the sea to the Gruen Desert.

Relieved, the party followed the coastline south for two days. Around noon on the second day, Hajime stopped the submarine and the group went up to the deck to eat lunch.

Lunch consisted of fish, just like it had for the past two days. Hajime was

reminded of his days in the abyss as he used Lightning Field to grill the fish. Since he'd given Tio his Treasure Trove they didn't have any seasonings or dishes.

Still, the three of them enjoyed their meal as they gazed out at the sea. In a way, the spectacular scenery provided flavoring for their meal. It was the same way food tasted different on a beach, or at a festival.

Just as Shea was finishing off some unknown species of fish, her ears twitched. She instantly began moving.

A split second later Hajime noticed it too. His mouth, which was full of giant fish, turned toward the water.

A number of human-shaped silhouettes surrounded the submarine. They leaped out of the water and pointed their tridents at the three of them.

There were at least twenty of them. Upon closer inspection, Hajime noticed they all had emerald-green hair and fins for ears. They were all dagons. They watched Hajime and the others warily.

The one standing directly in front of Hajime thrust his spear out and asked a question.

"Who are you people? Why are you here? And what is that thing you're riding?" Hajime's mouth was still full of fish, so he couldn't answer. It was rather unfortunate as he had no intention of fighting these dagons, but the fish was surprisingly tough and hard to chew through. It would take some time to get it all down.

Hajime wanted to take this conversation seriously, but even he knew it must've looked like he was making fun of them. Instead of talking, he was just casually eating his lunch.

A vein pulsed in the man's forehead. His anger seemed a bit overblown for just having found humans in the sea. Realizing the situation could blow up at any minute, Shea tried to placate the man.

"U-Umm, please calm down. We're just—"

"Silence! A mere rabbitman like you has no right to speak!"

It seemed even outside the sea of trees, rabbitmen were looked down upon by the other beastmen. There was also the fact that they wanted Hajime himself to answer. To them it seemed as if he were looking down on them by continuing to eat his lunch. The man turned his trident on Shea and thrust at her.

The man's attack would likely not even have scratched her due to her

body strengthening, but she still dodged out of the way. He'd aimed for her cheek, hoping that injuring Hajime's comrade would make him take the encounter more seriously.

He seemed almost desperate. From what Hajime remembered, the dagons weren't such an aggressive race.

But regardless of what circumstances they had that had driven them to such aggression, they shouldn't have turned their fangs on Hajime or his friends. Even if it was just meant as a warning, Hajime didn't like anyone attacking his friends. And so, he unleashed a wave of Intimidation so strong that it sent ripples through the ocean.

The lead dagon man turned to Hajime, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets. A second later, there was a loud thud. The dagon man flew through the air in a tailspin and bounced off the surface of the sea a few times before sinking into the ocean.

The other dagons turned to look back at Hajime. He was holding one of his grilled fish, and it looked like he'd just smacked a golf ball with it.

The sea glimmered in the sunlight. Hajime's dead fish glimmered, too.

"Wh-What?" The dagons still couldn't grasp what had happened.

Hajime slung the half-eaten fish over his shoulder and glared at the dagon man standing next to the one he'd sent flying. He'd already been scared senseless by Hajime's Intimidation. The added pressure of his glare made him snap, and he charged forward with a wild yell.

"Zaaaaah!" It was perhaps the most noble moment in that man's life. In the face of certain death, he'd unleashed the strongest attack he could. However, Hajime blocked it with his dead fish. The man's trident stuck fast inside the fish's mouth.

"Huh? Wh-What the..." Hajime spun the fish, pulling the trident clean out of the man's hands. The trident's shaft struck the other dagons as it spun, leaving them reeling.

Then, Hajime swung the fish again as they clung to their bloody noses.

The dagon who'd lost his spear stared dumbfounded at this human boy who was glowing dark red and slapping them around with a fish.

"Bwah!?" Hajime sent this one flying the same way he had the last. A faint stream of water trailed behind him as he flew off into the ocean.

"*Gulp.* Okay, now I really don't want to fight you guys, so let's calm down and talk this through. I won't hold back if you try and hurt my

comrades, but... Oh, I went easy on those guys I sent flying, so they should still be alive." The red glow surrounding Hajime faded and he released his Intimidation.

Even Hajime didn't want to fight Myu's people. He wouldn't be able to face her if he accidentally ended up killing her neighbor or something.

However, it seemed the dagons weren't interested in talking. Even if he hadn't killed their comrades, he'd still knocked them around. More importantly, however, it hurt their pride that Hajime didn't even consider them worth fighting when he was the one at a disadvantage in the sea.

Plus, they were still wary of humans and didn't trust Hajime's words. They weren't going to let their guards down around him. The dagons backed up and prepared to throw their tridents.

"Is that how you tricked her? Are you here to kidnap more of our children!?"

"We won't let you use magic again! The sea is our domain! Don't think you'll be making it home in one piece!"

"We'll get her location out of you even if we have to rip your limbs off!"

"Don't worry, we won't kill you. We need you as a hostage to trade with the kingdom, after all."

There's definitely something strange going on here. They weren't just wary of Hajime, they hated him. Judging by what they'd said, Hajime could guess it had something to do with Myu. *Did they mistake us for the criminals that kidnapped her?* They'd come in on some strange machine, with what seemed to be a rabbitman slave in tow. It was only natural that they'd be suspected.

Beastmen were known for being extremely close-knit. They were protective even of other species, but especially so of one of their own.

The Haulia tribe had abandoned the sea of trees for Shea, and the bearmen had ignored the council's decision to try and get revenge for their leader. The dagons were no exception. Even if Myu wasn't their daughter, they were just as protective of her.

She had all of these guys to choose as her dad, so why'd she pick me? Hajime smiled bitterly to himself. He decided to bring up Myu in order to solve the misunderstanding.

"Uh, about that girl that was kidnapped—"

"Get him!"

But before he could, the dagons threw their tridents at him. They were all swimming in the ocean, and yet they still managed to put a lot of force behind their throws. From the way they aimed at his shoulders and legs, Hajime guessed they really didn't plan on killing him. They attacked the submarine from below as well, making it shake.

Any normal opponent would have lost their balance and been unable to dodge. They might even have fallen into the sea to be torn apart by the waiting dagons. Of course, Hajime was no normal opponent.

"Liquid Rampart." The sea rose up around them, knocking down all of the tridents. While the dagons were still marveling at Yue's ability to cast magic without an incantation, she created twenty balls of electricity.

As the walls of water crashed back into the sea, the dagons saw the electric balls flying at them.

"Ah!? T-Take coveeer!" One of the dagons cried out. Their faces paled and they quickly tried to swim away, but it was already too late.

The balls homed in on each of the dagons and hit them with a powerful shock. They spasmed and screamed for a few minutes before floating limply to the surface.

"Nice job, Yue."

"Yeah... Hajime, the thing they were talking about."

"Yeah, they probably meant Myu."

"You just have to cause a commotion wherever you go, huh? I guess I should expect this by now. We haven't gone through a single town without making a stir..."

"Oh come on, Shea. To be honest, I do feel a little bad about this. Damn... This wouldn't have happened if we'd had Myu with us..."

Hajime sighed and started collecting the dagons' unconscious bodies.

Hajime dumped the dagon men into the impromptu trunk he'd crafted into the submarine and headed toward the city.

Yue had kindly held back, so they woke up relatively quickly. Once they were awake, Hajime explained the situation to them.

A few of them had thought he might still be the culprit because he was able to describe Myu's features so well. They tried to jump at him, but he slapped them silly with a fish until they calmed down. Eventually, they were convinced as well.

Patience is an important virtue when it comes to persuasion.

Their cheeks were swollen, but the dagon men were finally willing to listen to Hajime. When he told them Myu was waiting in Ankaji, they requested to first stop by Erisen and then choose a few members to accompany Hajime.

Though they still weren't sure they could trust Hajime, they chose to believe his words. However, they were still going to accompany him to make sure he was telling the truth.

Hajime agreed to their request and started steering the submarine to Erisen.

He learned along the way that all of the dagons who had attacked him knew Myu personally.

Myu's kidnappers had hurt Myu's mother pretty badly as well, so the men held a deep-seated resentment against them. Hajime didn't want Myu to see all her friends with Afro hair and bruises, so he reluctantly healed them all.

After a few hours, they spotted Erisen.

"Ah, Hajime-san! There it is! I can see a city, and people!"

"Hm? Wow, it actually is in the middle of the ocean."

Shea pointed excitedly at the city. Hajime looked over and saw a city literally floating on top of the ocean.

He headed to one of the many docks he saw jutting out of it. Dagons, visiting human tourists, and traders all watched in awe as his mysterious vessel rode past. Hajime ignored them all and stopped at an empty dock.

The dagons specifically began murmuring worriedly to each other when they saw a few of their unconscious brethren riding in the trunk.

"Hey, explain the situation to them. The more time we waste dealing with stuff here the longer it'll take to get to Myu."

"O-Okay!" One of the dagon men nodded, trembling. He didn't want to face Hajime's fish slaps again.

The youth spotted a contingent of human and dagon soldiers making their way over to them and quickly intercepted. Hajime wanted to hurry up and rendezvous with Tio, Kaori, and Myu, so he didn't want to have to waste any time here. He watched impatiently as the dagon youth talked to the soldiers' captain.

Sadly, things were never as simple as Hajime wanted them to be. The soldiers shoved aside the youth and marched up to the sub. They surrounded

Hajime, leaving him trapped on the tiny dock.

“Until we know what your intentions are, we’ll have to detain you. Don’t resist.”

“Hey, did you even listen to that guy?”

“I did. We will send some of our own men to confirm your story. You, however, will stay here.” The man spoke curtly. Hajime didn’t like his attitude one bit, but he restrained himself. *Remember, this is Myu’s home.*

“Okay, look here. I’ve got comrades waiting for me back there. I was planning on heading straight back there, but I took a detour to deliver these guys to you. They’re the ones who attacked me, you know?”

“And we have yet to verify whether or not they were justified in doing so. If the kidnapped child really isn’t in Ankaji, you’re just a suspicious boy who came in on an unknown vessel. What proof do we have that you won’t try and run once you leave Erisen?”

“That’d be kind of pointless, don’t you think? If I wanted to run, I could have just left these guys in the ocean and gone somewhere else.”

“About that. You are within our territory without permission. Furthermore, you attacked one of our patrols. We cannot let you move freely within the city.”

“They’re the ones who attacked without even listening to us. What, did you want me to just sit there while they chopped my limbs off? Gimme a break.” Hajime narrowed his eyes dangerously. The man frowned, seemingly unperturbed by the enormous pressure radiating from Hajime.

Hajime recognized the crest on the man’s uniform. It was the Heiligh Kingdom’s coat of arms. That meant he was the captain of the peacekeeping force assigned to Erisen. That explained why he wasn’t affected by Hajime’s glare. Hajime wasn’t even using Intimidation yet, after all. Though the dagon captain’s face paled, he also held his ground against Hajime.

Hajime really didn’t want to cause a stir in Erisen. Not only was it Myu’s hometown, he would likely spend some time here searching for the Sunken Ruins of Melusine’s entrance. It was another one of the Seven Great Labyrinths, so he needed to conquer it.

He knew Myu was in Ankaji, so there was no worry of them finding nothing there. But after everything this world had thrown at him, it was almost a reflex to fight back against anything that tried to stop him. He’d sworn he wouldn’t back down to anyone when he’d crawled his way out of

the abyss. He wasn't feeling like breaking that oath here.

Still, he also didn't want to cause an uproar, which made the situation rather dicey.

Just when he'd convinced himself that he should accept their conditions for Myu's sake, he heard something.

"Hm? What's..." Shea's bunny ears perked up and she started scanning the sky.

Hajime turned away from the captain and followed her gaze.

"What'd you see?" he asked. However, before she could reply, Hajime heard a familiar voice.

"...dy!"

"Huh? What was that?"

"...dy!"

"Wait, no way!?"

"Daddy!"

Hajime looked up and saw a vaguely human-shaped object falling from the sky. She had her arms spread wide and was smiling happily.

"Myu!?" It was indeed Myu. It seemed she'd gone skydiving without a parachute.

He then noticed Tio, in her dragon form, following closely behind with Kaori riding on her back.

His body moved faster than he could think. He activated Air Dance and Supersonic Step, then shot into the sky.

The force of his jump destroyed the wooden dock, making the soldiers scream as they fell into the sea, but Hajime didn't even notice.

He used Aerodynamic again in the air to propel himself further upward and activated Riftwalk. He caught Myu in slow-motion and expertly controlled the speed of his descent to kill the impact of her fall.

With Myu safely in his arms, he zipped back to the ground. His whole body was covered in cold sweat.

"Daddy!" Unaware of how panicked she'd made Hajime, Myu happily nuzzled his chest. Tio had probably told Myu she'd spotted Hajime.

Then, either by accident, or perhaps on purpose, Myu had fallen toward him. Judging by her smiling face, she'd had no doubt that Hajime would catch her.

Still, it took a ridiculous amount of courage to jump off a dragon's back in

the middle of the sky. *What kind of four-year-old does that!?* Hajime frowned, then began scolding Myu for being reckless.

“*Hic... Hic...*” Myu stood next to the destroyed dock, crying. The area was filled with onlookers and soldiers, but none of them said a word.

The girl who’d been kidnapped had fallen from the sky, and a young boy had caught her in midair with superhuman abilities. Not only that, there was a dragon flying overhead. But what surprised everyone the most was that the boy was scolding Myu. That, and the fact that Myu called him her father.

“*Hic... I’m sorry, Daddy...*”

“Do you promise not to do anything that dangerous again?”

“I promise...”

“Then it’s fine. Now, give me a hug.”

“Daddy!”

Hajime kneeled down and Myu launched herself into his chest. The whole exchange had looked exactly like a father scolding his daughter. In many ways, Hajime really had become Myu’s father.

Everyone watched with dumbfounded amazement. They would never have expected a dragon girl to start calling a human boy her father, especially since she’d been kidnapped. They were all thinking the same thing.

What the hell is going on?

Hajime lifted Myu into his arms and gently patted her back. As if that was some unsaid signal, the onlookers all started talking at once.

Hajime ignored the commotion and started walking back when he felt someone hug him from behind. He turned around and saw Kaori resting her head on his shoulder. She was trembling.

“Thank goodness... I’m so glad you’re okay...” Now it was Kaori’s turn to start crying. Though she’d acted strong, she’d been worried sick. She’d believed Hajime was still alive, of course, but that hadn’t stopped her from worrying. Especially since he’d disappeared shortly after she’d finally reunited with him. She’d been through a lot.

“Sorry I made you worry. But as you can see, we’re all fine. So... please don’t cry. If a certain someone found out I made you cry... Well, she’d probably kill me.”

“Waaah... *Hic...* Th-Then, let me stay here like this for a while longer...”

Hajime looked away awkwardly, but he used his free hand to gently pat

Kaori on the head. Her tears didn't stop though, and she buried her face into Hajime's shoulder. She hugged him with all her might.

"Hey, you. What on earth is going on? I demand an explan— Bwah!?"

"Hm? Oh, my apologies."

The captain had dragged himself out of the water and stalked up to Hajime, dripping wet. Before he could start yelling at Hajime he was knocked back into the water by Tio. She'd turned back into human form upon landing and had accidentally bumped into the captain in her haste to get to Hajime.

Tio didn't seem sorry at all, and she grabbed Hajime's head and pulled him into her bosom.

"Whoa!? Hey, Tio!"

"I believed in you. I believed... you would return... Still, you made me wait quite some time, Master."

Hajime extricated himself from Tio's massive melons and looked up at her face. Tears dripped from her eyes. She hugged Hajime tight, as if he would vanish if she let go. He'd put Tio through a lot, so he let her do as she wished for a little while.

Myu joined in as well, hugging Hajime around the neck. Yue and Shea didn't feel like being left out, so they crowded around Hajime and joined in on the fun.

Hajime was buried underneath a pile of girls of all ages and sizes.

The confusion gradually faded from the onlookers' faces, replaced by a gentle warmth. Even the dagons who'd attacked Hajime before lowered their weapons. Though a few other guys picked up weapons of their own. As always, there were some that were jealous of Hajime's harem.

"You bastard... Not once, but twice now! Interfering with a royal soldier's duty is a criminal offense!"

The captain dragged himself out of the water again and stalked toward Hajime. He held his weapon at the ready.

Considering Myu's attitude toward Hajime, it was unlikely he was the kidnapper, but there was still a lot about this situation that didn't make sense to him. He still wanted to interrogate Hajime.

Since escorting Myu back to Erisen had been an official request from Fuhren branch chief Ilwa, Hajime hadn't worried about being arrested. His explanation would have cleared things up. The only problem was that he

hadn't had any proof of the request. Fortunately, now he did.

Tio gave Hajime his Treasure Trove and he pulled out his Status Plate and the letter Ilwa had given him.

"What? Just showing me your identity now won't— Wait, you're a gold rank adventurer!? And you have a personal introduction from Fuhren's branch chief!?"

Hajime also pulled out the letter detailing his request and handed it to the captain. The letter was originally addressed to the mayor and the captain of the guard anyway, so Hajime would have given it to him eventually even if this hadn't happened.

The captain scrutinized the letters. Once he was done reading, he sighed. After a moment's hesitation he shrugged his shoulders and saluted.

"I verify that you have indeed completed the assigned task, Hajime Nagumo-dono."

"Glad to know I've been cleared of suspicion. I'm sure there's a lot you want to know, but we're kinda busy here. Could you hold off on your questions for a bit? I want to bring Myu to her mother first. Is that alright?"

"I suppose so. However that dragon, those unbelievable abilities of yours, and this strange boat are all things I cannot overlook."

The captain was no longer talking down to Hajime. In fact, he was being almost respectful. But still, he had to do his job, and his job required investigating all of these things.

"It's fine if we talk about all of that later, right? We're planning on staying in Erisen for a while, so it's not like we're going anywhere. Besides, there's no point in sending a report to the capital. They already know all of this."

"Hmm, I see. In that case, as long as we can talk, I'll be satisfied. You said you want to take her to her mother, but... do you know what kind of state her mother is in?"

"No, but it shouldn't be a problem. We've got some of the best medicine in the world and a top-class healer here."

"I see... Very well, then. In that case, I shall return once things have settled down."

The captain gave Hajime his name, which was Salze, and got to work dispersing the onlookers. He seemed very dedicated to his job.

All of the people who knew Myu came up to talk to her, but Hajime

silenced them with a look. He appreciated their enthusiasm, but if they got started now they'd never make it to Myu's mom.

"Daddy, Daddy. I wanna go home. Mommy's waiting! I wanna see Mommy!"

"Yeah. Let's go see her."

Myu excitedly took Hajime's hand and dragged him toward her house. It had been nearly two months since she'd last seen her mother. Her excitement was only natural. She'd laughed and smiled around Hajime and the others, but at night she'd cried for her mom.

As they made their way to Myu's house, Kaori worriedly walked up to Hajime and asked something.

"Hajime-kun. About what that soldier said earlier..."

"Well, it seems her life isn't in danger at least... Her wounds are pretty bad though, and it must have been a shock to lose her daughter. Seeing Myu again will probably help with the latter. I'll be counting on you for the former."

"Don't worry. Just leave it to me."

Their conversation was interrupted by a commotion coming from further down the street. One of the voices was female, while the others were male.

"Remia, calm down! You can't go anywhere on that leg!"

"He's right, Remia-chan. We'll bring Myu-chan to you!"

"No! She's my daughter! I have to be there to greet her! I have to!"

The men were trying to hold the woman back. It seemed someone had told Myu's mother about her return.

When she heard her mother's voice, Myu's face lit up. She called out to the twenty-something woman collapsed at the entrance of her house and dashed off toward her.

"Mommy!"

"Ah!? Myu!? Myu!"

Myu tottered up to her mother and leaped into her arms.

Mother and daughter embraced tightly, and the onlookers watched with smiles on their faces. A few of them even teared up.

Remia apologized to Myu over and over. Hajime couldn't tell whether she was apologizing for taking her eyes off Myu, or for not coming to get her. It might have been both.

Tears streamed down Remia's cheeks. She was both relieved to have her

daughter back, and angry at herself for being unable to protect her. Myu patted her mom's head reassuringly.

"It's okay, Mommy. I'm here. It's okay."

"Myu..." Remia stared at her daughter. She hadn't expected to be consoled by her.

Myu stared back at her mother, worry etched over her face. Before she'd been kidnapped, Myu had been a spoiled child who was quick to throw a tantrum. Despite that, even though she must have suffered far more than her mother, she was the one worrying about others.

Myu smiled, and Remia hugged her daughter tight. She'd spent many sleepless nights agonizing over what kind of horrors her daughter might be facing, but while Remia had been fretting, Myu had grown stronger over the course of her journey.

Remia smiled, admiring her daughter's growth. Her tears dried up and the tension drained from her shoulders.

The pair hugged each other again, but then Myu suddenly shrieked.

"Mommy, what happened to your legs!? Do they hurt!?" Myu had finally noticed the wounds on Remia's legs. They'd been bound with bandages, and looked pretty bad.

Hajime remembered what Salze and the dagons who'd attacked him had said. Not only had the slavers kidnapped Myu, they'd hurt Remia so badly that she couldn't even walk.

No one had actually seen what had happened when Myu had gone missing, so at first they couldn't be sure she had actually been kidnapped.

However, their suspicions turned to certainty after Remia had run into them.

She'd gone searching for her missing daughter, and ran into a group of shifty-looking men trying to cover their tracks at the beach. She hadn't wanted to approach them, but she needed all the information she could get, so she'd gone up to ask if they'd seen her daughter, and they'd attacked her.

Realizing they must have been the group who'd taken Myu, she'd evaded the men's attacks and tried to get her daughter back, but Remia had no combat skills to speak of. She could only dodge for so long, and eventually one of the mages' fireballs had hit her legs. The attack had sent her flying back into the ocean, and left her unconscious.

The other dagons had grown worried when she didn't come back and sent

out a search party. They'd found her floating in the sea and brought her back.

They'd managed to save her life, but the injuries had been grave, and she would likely never be able to walk or swim properly again. Naturally, Remia had tried to continue searching for her daughter anyway, but with her legs the way they were, she'd been left with no choice but to leave the search to the other dagon and the kingdom.

Even now, Remia could barely stand.

She didn't want to worry her daughter anymore, so she smiled reassuringly and just muttered that she was fine.

Still, now Myu had Hajime on her side, and he could do anything, so she turned to him for help.

"Daddy! You have to help Mommy! Her legs are hurt!"

"Wha!? M-Myu? Did you just say...?"

"Daddy, hurry!"

"Huh? Daddy? Myu, who's Daddy?" Remia stared at her daughter in confusion.

The other dagons all started whispering to each other, too.

"Did Remia...remarry? No way." "Remia-chan's finally found a new husband! How wonderful!" "No way. Someone tell me this isn't real... My Remia-san..." "Daddy!? She didn't mean me, right!?" "It's probably just a nickname or something. I'm sure everyone calls him that." "Guys, we need to hold an emergency meeting! Gather all of the members of the Remia and Myu protection committee!"

It seemed the two of them were quite popular within Erisen. Remia was still young, being only in her mid-twenties. And though she'd grown gaunt in the months since her daughter's absence, one could tell she'd originally been quite pretty. Once she regained her health, she'd likely be turning heads in the street again.

Hajime grimaced. *I really don't want to deal with those guys.*

He was sure if he'd explained Myu had just started calling him that because she didn't have a real father and that he wasn't interested in marrying Remia the other guys would understand, but rumors often spread quickly.

Still, this was a stroke of good fortune. Hajime could leave Myu with her mother and continue his journey without worry. Once they'd cleared the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, he'd have to say his farewells. She'd initially clung so tightly to Hajime and the others because there was no one else she

could trust so far from home, but now that she was back with her mother, she'd soon start forgetting about them. She'd probably cry at first, but she'd get used to it in time. Especially since it seemed the other townspeople cared a great deal for her.

"Daddy, hurry! You have to save Mommy!" Myu looked over at Hajime, and everyone's gazes turned to him. Many of them only just noticed his presence. Hajime resigned himself to dealing with this misunderstanding and walked over to her.

"Daddy, Mommy's..."

"It's alright, Myu. We'll heal her, so don't cry."

"Okay..."

Hajime patted Myu's head and turned to Remia. She stared blankly back at him.

The surrounding guys' whispers grew even more heated. For now, Hajime figured he should focus on healing Remia. That'd be easier to do inside her house.

"Sorry about this."

"Huh? Wha!?"

Hajime effortlessly hoisted Remia into his arms and followed Myu into her house. He could hear some of the guys screaming behind him, but he ignored them. Remia was too flustered to say anything at all.

As they entered the living room Hajime spotted a sofa, so he put Remia down on it. Then, he sat himself down next to her and called Kaori over.

"Kaori, how's it look?"

"Let me examine her. Remia-san, I'm going to need to touch your legs. If it hurts, please say something."

"O-Okay? Umm, what's going on?"

Not only was there some guy Myu was suddenly calling daddy, he was surrounded by a bunch of beautiful girls. Remia's confusion was certainly understandable.

Kaori finished her examination and told Hajime that while the injuries were serious, they were within her capabilities to heal.

"But it'll take some time. A lot of fragile nerve endings were damaged, so I'll need a few days to heal her completely. It might be a little inconvenient, Remia-san, but please bear with it. I promise I can cure you."

"Oh my... I didn't think I would ever walk again... I don't know how to

thank you..."

"Hehe, it's fine. We can't leave Myu-chan's mom like this."

"Oh, about that... What kind of relationship do you have with my daughter... Also, umm... why is Myu calling you daddy?"

Hajime explained everything that had happened since Fuhren as Kaori began healing Remia. Including the events at the slave auction that had led to Myu calling him daddy.

When he finished, Remia bowed her head and thanked Hajime over and over again, tears in her eyes.

"I don't know how to thank you... It's all thanks to you that I was able to see my daughter again. I swear I will repay the favor, even if it takes me my whole life. If there's anything I can do for you, anything at all..." Hajime and the others told her not to worry about it, but Remia insisted. She couldn't accept not doing anything for the people who'd saved her daughter's life.

Eventually, Kaori's treatment reached a point where she could stop safely for the day. Hajime and the others began discussing where they would stay for the night, and Remia interjected that they were free to use her house.

"Please, at least let me do this for you. Fortunately, my house has plenty of space. There's enough rooms for all of you. At least for as long as you're in Erisen, think of my home as yours. Besides, I'm sure Myu would be happier that way, too. Isn't that right, Myu? You want them to stay with us too, don't you?"

"Huh? Are you going somewhere, Daddy?" Myu, who'd been dozing in Remia's lap, groggily got up and looked at Hajime in confusion. It appeared to her that the fact that Hajime would stay here had already been a guarantee. In fact, she couldn't even understand why her mother had bothered to ask.

"I was thinking it might be better to spend some time away now that she's back with you..."

"Oh my... Don't you know a father should never leave his daughter?"

"Well, I mean, I told you before, we're..."

"I know you'll be leaving on your journey eventually, but that's precisely why I'd like for you to act as her father for as long as you're here. Don't you think parting with her after spending time apart would be even more sad?"

"Well, I guess you've got a point..."

"Ufufu... You're welcome to stay here as her father forever too, if you wish. I did say I would do anything to repay you..." Remia blushed and put a

hand to her cheek. Normally, Hajime would have been reassured by seeing her smile, but he could feel the room temperature dropping rapidly.

“Please don’t joke around like that. A certain someone might kill me if you do...”

“Oh my, I see you’re quite popular already. Still, it’s been nearly five years since my husband passed away... and Myu seems to be pining for a father.”

“Huh? But Daddy’s already my daddy.”

“Ufufu... There you have it, Daddy.”

If the room got any colder, Hajime would freeze to death. It felt like he’d just stepped into the tundra.

Remia didn’t seem to notice, or rather she didn’t seem to care. She continued joking with Hajime despite the cold glares Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori were giving her. Remia weathered their ire with a smile. She was surprisingly strong-willed.

In the end, Hajime and the others decided to stay at Remia’s house. She caused another stir later by saying “Husband and wife are supposed to sleep in the same room, right?” And Myu had only made things worse by following up with “Daddy and Mommy are going to sleep together~” It was late by the time Remia and the girls finally stopped feuding with each other.

They’d begin their hunt for Melusine tomorrow, so Hajime wanted to spend the night repairing his damaged gear, creating new weapons, and testing out the new ancient magic they’d acquired. However, he’d also wanted to make the most of his remaining time with Myu, so he made sure to play with her a bunch. By the time he crawled into bed, he was dead tired.

Five days had passed since Myu had reunited with her mother.

The dagon men had been extremely jealous at how close Remia and Hajime looked. He’d had to fight a good number of them off, and deal with all of the neighborhood ladies’ gossip. Thanks to that, Yue and the others had come on to Hajime even more aggressively, and he’d spent every night pinned to the bed by Yue. In the end, they hadn’t gotten any real exploration done the past few days, but now they were finally ready to embark.

Even though this parting would only be for a short while, Myu was still sad to see Hajime go. She clung to him for dear life, but Hajime eventually managed to pull her off and head to his newly repaired submarine.

Myu waved and shouted goodbye as Hajime ducked through the entrance

hatch.

“Goodbye, Dear!” Remia shouted. Hajime still couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not. If nothing else, it certainly looked like his wife and daughter had come out to see him off at work.

He could feel Yue and the others’ sharp glares behind him. Out in front, the dagons were glaring jealously at him, too. *Maybe I should just leave right after we clear the ruins.*

They traveled roughly three hundred kilometers northwest.

That was where the Sunken Ruins of Melusine were hidden, according to Miledi Reisen.

However, they hadn’t had time to get its precise location out of her before she’d flushed them out. On top of that, she’d mentioned something about the moon, and needing Gruen’s crest.

For now, Hajime decided to find the ruins’ location, and then go from there. They arrived at the location Miledi had mentioned around noon, and began searching the bottom of the ocean. Unfortunately, they found nothing of note. Since it was a sunken *ruin*, Hajime had expected to find some trace of it on the floor, but there was nothing.

The only difference was the depth. The surrounding areas were around one hundred kilometers deep, but the supposed location of the ruins was slightly shallower.

The party reluctantly cut their search short and decided to do as Miledi had said. They patiently waited for the moon to come out.

At present, it was sunset. The sun had almost completely sunk beneath the horizon, and was illuminating the sky with the last of its rays. Both the sea and the sky were dyed a dazzling shade of vermillion. A single streak of light ran through the water, connecting the horizon and the sun.

No matter the world, nature’s beauty was unchanged. Hajime anchored the sub and headed up to the deck. *Maybe if I follow that ray of light all the way to the sun, it’ll lead me back to Japan...* Hajime thought idly. *Heh, how ridiculous.* He smiled at his own foolishness.

“What’re you thinking about?” Kaori walked over to him.

She’d just gotten out of the shower he’d installed into the submarine, and her hair was damp. Yue, Shea, and Tio followed behind her.

It seemed they’d all been taking a shower, as their skin was slightly

flushed and their hair damp. It was quite an alluring sight. The shower poured hot water directly from the ceiling, so it was possible for them all to take one together. *Guess they're all getting along now.*

The reason Hajime had come up to the deck in the first place was because he hadn't wanted to get roped into joining them in their shower.

Tio had actually invited Hajime to take a shower with her earlier, which of course meant Yue, Shea, and Kaori had all insisted they join in as well.

Hajime had made it clear that the only person he wanted to see naked was Yue. However, Kaori and the others had completely ignored him. Tio and Kaori had pinned Hajime down, while Shea attempted to knock him out with Drucken.

In the end, he'd fled up to the deck, fearing for his life. Though he was beginning to wonder if he was a failure of a man for not accepting their advances. Hajime shook his head, banishing such dangerous thoughts, and turned to Kaori.

"I was just thinking about Japan. We have the same kind of sunset back home."

"I see. Yeah, you're right. It's exactly like the sunsets we used to see in Japan... How nostalgic. I can't believe it's only been half a year since we came here."

"It feels like the days here stretch on forever."

Kaori sat down next to Hajime and nodded, her eyes gazing off into the distance. She was thinking back to their days in Japan.

Feeling lonely at being left out of the conversation, Yue tottered over to Hajime and sat down on his lap. She leaned back and looked up at him.



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Her eyes were begging to let her into the conversation. Yue was interested in hearing more about Hajime's homeland. Though it was hard to resist Yue's cuteness, Hajime could feel Kaori's devil stand rising up again. He leaned over to Kaori and pinched her cheeks.

That seemed to be enough to improve her mood, though that wasn't what he was going for. He couldn't understand why they were all so obsessed with him, especially since he'd made his intentions clear. He didn't say anything, though. He felt it would be a betrayal of their feelings to ask something so crass.

Shea came up to Hajime too, her eyes sparkling. She obviously wanted his attention as well. He patted her bunny ears with his spare hand. She grinned and leaned closer.

Tio walked up and sat down, leaning against his back. She didn't ask for anything, just quietly sat there. He could tell from her posture that she was completely relaxed, though. He'd been expecting her to ask for something perverted, so he was surprised when she didn't give him a reason to chuck her into the sea.

Though it seemed just sitting next to him was arousing enough, as her breathing grew heavy before long. The five of them quietly sat there, enjoying the sunset. There was still some time until the moon came out. Hajime decided to spend the time until then telling everyone stories of his homeland.

Yue and the others listened with rapt attention, while Kaori chimed in with stories of her own.

Time passed in the blink of an eye, and the sun set before they knew it. The moon appeared in the sky, shining brightly.

Hajime pulled Gruen's pendant out of his pocket and held it up. The design engraved on it was that of a woman holding up a lantern, framed in a circle. The lantern had been cut-out, leaving a hole in the center.

While in Erisen Hajime had tried pouring mana into the pendant or holding it up against the moon, but nothing had happened.

He still couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do with this pendant, but he tried holding it up to the moon again just in case. He angled it so the moon was visible through the lantern-hole.

He kept it like that for a while, but nothing changed. Sighing, Hajime took the pendant down and thought of other ways he could use it.

But just then, the pendant began to glow.

“Look, the lantern’s shining. It’s so pretty.”

“You’re right... How strange. There’s a hole there, but it’s glowing...”

Kaori and Shea examined the pendant with great interest. The lantern had seemingly absorbed moonlight, and now glowed with a pale silvery light. It filled the hole, spreading out like a wispy liquid. Yue and Tio leaned in as well, and Hajime held the pendant up for them.

“It didn’t do that last night...”

“Hmm, Master. I suspect it only activates in this location.”

Tio’s probably right.

Once the entire lantern was saturated, it shot a stream of light directly downward, to the bottom of the ocean.

“That’s an impressive trick. Better than Miledi’s, at least.”

“Totally. This is like something straight out of an RPG. It’s pretty cool.”

Hajime and Yue watched in awe as the moonlight quite literally showed them the way. Shea, who’d been with them for the Reisen Gorge, seemed impressed as well.

There was no telling how long the light would last, so they decided to hurry. They scrambled back into the submarine and followed the trail.

The sea was even darker at night. Practically no light made it down past the first few kilometers. It quickly grew pitch black, and Hajime turned on the sub’s headlights. Those, and the light emanating from the pendant, were the only sources of light in the sea.

The pendant’s light easily pierced through the transparent crystal Hajime had used in place of glass for the front windshield.

As they grew closer to the sea floor, Hajime realized the light was pointing to a rocky section of the bottom. Countless massive boulders were next to each other, creating an underwater mountain range of sorts. When they’d explored that section in the afternoon, there had been nothing there. The light hit a specific part of a boulder, and the entire formation began to shake with an ominous rumbling.

Part of the rock crumbled away, almost like a door. It revealed a passage leading further inside. The passage was pitch-black, like the gateway to some hellish underworld.

“I get it now. No wonder we couldn’t find anything no matter how hard we looked. It was all a waste of time.”

“We had the time anyway, and it was fun.”

“Yeah. Sightseeing at the bottom of the ocean in another world was a great experience.”

Hajime slumped his shoulders dejectedly, but Yue and Kaori seemed to have enjoyed the undersea adventure.

Hajime steered the submarine into the newly-revealed passage. The pendant still had around half of its light left, but once they were in it suddenly stopped emitting any. All that remained to illuminate the surroundings was Hajime’s headlights.

“Hmmm... I’ve been thinking about this since I heard the ruins were underground, but normal people would be unable to even reach the entrance.”

“Yeah... You’d need a really strong barrier.”

“On top of that, you’d need to create air, and light, and hold back the waves at the same time.”

“You can’t even enter unless you’ve cleared the Grand Gruen Volcano, though. If you can beat a labyrinth, you’re already not someone normal.”

“I guess the expectation is you’d use air magic to make it down here.”

They discussed how they would have made it down here if Hajime hadn’t built a submarine as they continued down the passage. *Considering you’d need a party of extremely skilled mages just to make it to the entrance, I’m betting this labyrinth is harder than the others.*

Hajime and the others steeled their resolve and stared warily out of the windshield. Just then—

“Uoooh!?”

“Hm!?”

“Wawah!”

“Kyaaa!”

“My word!?”

Something hit them from the side, sending them spiraling in the other direction. Like before, the submarine flipped around in the current, but unlike the time with the magma, Hajime had countermeasures in place. The weightstone comprising the bottom of the ship’s hull grew heavier, stabilizing the sub.

“Ugh, I was hoping we wouldn’t have to deal with this again.” Shea paled and shook her head. She hadn’t enjoyed the ride out of the Grand Gruen Volcano one bit.

“Don’t worry, I stabilized us already. The real question is where this current is taking us...” Hajime grimaced and looked out of the front windshield.

The green glowstone headlights chased away the darkness and illuminated the cavern. From the looks of it, they were being pushed down a long tunnel.

Hajime stabilized the sub, but otherwise let the current take them where it would. After a while, Hajime’s alertstone picked up on a number of creatures that were glowing dark red.

“Something’s coming toward us. It’s probably monsters. Nothing else glows like that.”

“Should I kill them?” Mana gathered in Yue’s hands as she casually offered to wipe them out. Her harsh words were a stark contrast to her cute face.

“Nah, let’s try out my new weapons. I wanna see how effective they are.”

Hajime activated one of the mechanisms he’d added to the rear of the sub. A barrage of small torpedoes shot out of the sub’s stern. He’d painted images of smiling sharks on all of them.

They had to fight against the current, so they didn’t travel very fast. As a result, they ended up sitting in place, creating a minefield behind Hajime.

The monsters closed in on the minefield, and the party got a good look at them for the first time. They were shaped like flying fish, just much larger. They swam headfirst into Hajime’s torpedoes.

Then, there was a huge explosion. It was so massive that it made the entire tunnel shake. The flying fish were enveloped in a cloud of frothy water. The explosion tore them apart, and chunks of flesh whipped past the submarine, blown along by the current. There had been so many of them the water was dyed red with their blood.

“Yeah, this is definitely better than before. Looks like my upgrades worked out.”

“Whoa, Hajime-san. I think I just saw a dead fish’s eyes staring at me.”

“You probably did. I just killed a lot of them.”

“I was thinking about this for a while, but the artifacts you make are completely broken, Hajime-kun.”

They ran into schools of other monster fish, but they had no problem dispatching them.

As they were underwater, Hajime had no way of tracking how long that

went on for.

Eventually, though, Hajime felt a subtle change in their circumstances. The current had carried them to a place where the walls were severely damaged. Dead eyes stared at Hajime from the cracks in the rock, and he realized the fishes he'd blown up had become stuck there.

"Have we been here before?"

"Seems like it... Guess we're going in circles?"

They'd just been looping around. Hajime had thought he'd been advancing further through the labyrinth, but it turned out they'd just been shunted into a regular underwater cavern. He stopped letting the current carry them along, and the group carefully searched the cavern as they advanced.

Upon closer inspection, the group realized there was more to the place than met the eye.

"Ah, Hajime-kun. There's something there too!"

"That's the fifth one..."

They'd been finding fifty-centimeter stretches of wall where Melusine's crest had been engraved. Her crest was a five-pointed star, with a line going from the top vertex to the center. Said center had a crescent moon housed inside it. There were five of those crests in total.

Hajime moved the submarine back to the first crest they'd found in order to examine it more closely. The current was pretty strong, so it took effort to keep the sub anchored in place.

"So we've got five five-pointed stars and this half-lit pendant..." Hajime took the pendant hanging around his neck and held it up to the crest. As he'd expected, the lantern began to emit light again. The beam of moonlight hit the crest, which absorbed it and began to glow.

"This would be pretty hard for people who came here using magic... You'd have to catch on quick or your mana would run out." Kaori was right. Completing these series of steps while struggling to keep yourself from drowning would not be easy. It seemed this labyrinth had been designed to test one's limits in a completely different way than the Grand Gruen Volcano.

They went around lighting up the remaining crests, and it wasn't long before they reached the last one. The lantern had lost a proportional amount of light at each crest, and it had just enough to light up one more.

As Hajime lit up the last crest, part of the rock fell away, revealing yet another passage. There was more rumbling as the boulder slid away.

They advanced inside and found a passage heading straight down. Hajime angled the sub down and descended. As they entered the passage, something pushed them down with force. The sub fell so fast that everyone felt weightless.

“Whoa?”

“Mmm.”

“Hyaah!?”

“Nuoooh!”

“Hawawawa!”

All five of them yelped as they fell. Hajime felt the same kind of tingling in his crotch that he did when rode a roller coaster.

The submarine landed on something solid with a resounding thud. Everyone groaned as they landed, especially Kaori, who was physically weaker than the others.

“Ugh... Kaori, are you alright?”

“Ugh... I-I’m okay. Where are we?” Kaori grimaced and looked outside the windshield. They weren’t surrounded by water anymore. There didn’t seem to be any monsters nearby either, so Hajime and the others tentatively stepped out of the sub.

They found themselves in a large dome-shaped cavern. Directly above them was the hole they’d fallen through. Due to some trick of magic, the water didn’t cascade through it. Not a single drop fell through as the water swayed to and fro within the top half of the hole.

“I guess this is where things get serious. Looks like we’re not underwater anymore, either.”

“It’s better that it’s not all underwater.”

Hajime put the submarine back into his Treasure Trove and called out to Yue before they advanced.

“Yue.”

“Okay.” Yue immediately deployed a barrier around them.

A second later, jets of water slammed into it from above. It was the same Rupture spell Yue had made use of back in the Reisen Gorge. The water jets had enough force behind them to cut people to ribbons, but Yue’s barriers, even makeshift ones, were made of tougher stuff. It easily deflected the barrage of water jets. Hajime had instantly detected the surprise attack, and Yue had easily picked up on Hajime’s thoughts. Their superhuman

combination made surprise attacks largely ineffective. Naturally, Shea and Tio had sensed the attack coming too, so they weren't surprised in the slightest.

However, Kaori wasn't on that level.

"Kyaaa!?" She screamed in surprise and staggered backward. Hajime caught her as she stumbled.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Eh, don't worry about it."

She glanced at Hajime, pale-faced. Normally, she'd be blushing at the opportunity to be in his arms, but right now she was just depressed at being the only member of the party to be shaken by the attack.

She was also still in shock at how amazing Yue's magic skills were.

Back when she'd been in Kouki's party, Kaori had often supplemented Suzu's barriers with her own, so she knew a fair amount about defensive magic. She'd trained herself to death in order to reduce her casting time for barrier spells to the same level as Suzu's.

Compared to Yue though, Kaori's skills were nothing.

She'd felt like this when Hajime had saved her back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth too. That feeling of inferiority she'd pushed down to convince herself she was fit to travel with Hajime reared its ugly head once more.

Am I just slowing everyone down? That thought whirled around her mind.

"What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing."

"If you say so..."

Kaori forced herself to smile. Hajime narrowed his eyes, but he didn't say anything.

Kaori felt both a little disappointed and a little relieved that he didn't push the issue. She noticed Yue, who was still fending off the torrent of deadly water, staring at her. It felt as though Yue was seeing right through her. Angry, Kaori glared right back.

She wouldn't let Yue make fun of her feelings any longer. If she let Yue walk all over her, she wouldn't be fit to even call herself Yue's rival.

She absolutely couldn't let that happen.

Yue just smiled faintly at Kaori and turned her attention back to the ceiling. Tio unleashed a gout of flames at the same time, caking the ceiling with fire. Monsters dropped to the ground, burnt to a crisp.

At a glance, they looked almost like barnacles. They were likely what had been unleashing those water jets. They'd been hiding inside the cracks in the ceiling, which was why Kaori hadn't noticed them. Now that they'd been burned to death, they looked rather disgusting.

It seemed sea creatures like these were especially weak to fire. Tio's Spiral Blaze had taken them all out in one shot.

With the barnacles dead, the party was free to advance further into the cavern. The passage was narrower than the cavern they'd landed in, and was filled knee-deep with water.

"Grr..." Yue growled to herself. She was so short that the water came up to her waist, which made walking difficult. Hajime nodded to her, then lifted her onto his shoulders.

"H-Hajime... This is a little embarrassing."

"But it looks like the water gets deeper further in. Besides, don't you like it more up here?"

"I guess..."

The party continued wading through the water. Yue blushed, feeling like a little child. She wrapped her thighs around Hajime, hugging him tight. Shea and the others didn't seem jealous at all. In fact, they were all snickering. They gave Yue looks that were full of pity.

Yue felt even more embarrassed, and shrunk back. Hajime had never seen her like this.

"Hehehe, you look really cute right now, Yue-san."

"Ugh..."

"I see you've taken over Myu's favorite spot."

"Ngh..."

"Fufufu... Should we start calling you Yue-chan from now on?"

"Do you want to die, Kaori?"

"How come I'm the only one you're yelling at!?"

Yue blushed with embarrassment, but when Kaori joined in on the ribbing her glare turned stone cold. Hajime watched the exchange with a laugh.

Their lighthearted banter came to an abrupt end when another wave of monsters assaulted them.

These monsters resembled shuriken. They came spinning at Hajime and the others. Hajime calmly unholstered Donner and shot them all down. As they fell lifeless to the ground, Hajime realized they were actually starfish

who had been spinning so fast they looked like shurikens.

Yue noticed a horde of sea snakes slithering toward them right after, and skewered the lot of them with ice spears.

“Aren’t these a little too weak?” Everyone except Kaori nodded.

Normally, the monsters that appeared in labyrinths were dangerously powerful on their own, or had abilities that made them annoying in groups. Or both. However, the monsters they faced were around the same level as the monsters who’d attacked the sub when the underwater volcano had spit them out. In fact, they might have even been a little weaker. Certainly nowhere near labyrinth level.

Only Kaori, who didn’t have any experience with labyrinths, wasn’t confused by their weakness. But they didn’t have to ponder for long, as the answer was revealed in the next room.

“What the...” The corridor opened up in a massive room. As they walked inside, a translucent, jelly-like substance blocked the passage forward.

“I’ll get it! Oryaaah!” Shea leaped forward and smacked the jelly wall with Drucken. Some of the jelly at the surface of the wall scattered, but the blockade itself remained in place. Some of the jelly splashed onto Shea’s chest.

“Hyawah! What is this stuff!?” She screamed in surprise. Hajime and the others turned to her. The jelly had begun melting through her clothes. Her voluptuous cleavage came into view as the cloth covering it melted away.

“Shea, don’t move!” Tio burned away the jelly with masterfully controlled fire magic. A few stray flames singed Shea’s skin, making it turn red, but the fire otherwise hit only the jelly. It appeared the jelly had caustic properties.

“Watch out!” The party leaped away from the wall, but this time countless tentacles came down from the ceiling. The tentacles’ tips were pointed, like a spear, but they were made of the same jelly as the wall, which meant they were likely just as dangerous. Yue hurriedly jumped off Hajime’s shoulders and deployed a barrier above the party. Tio cast her flame breath at the same time, burning the tentacles away.

“Man, the combination of Yue’s barriers and Tio’s fire is broken.” An ironclad wall combined with one of the most powerful attacks. Frankly, Hajime was impressed.

Confident Yue and Tio could handle things, Shea sidled up to Hajime and

puffed out her mostly-visible chest. She blushed and looked up at Hajime.

“Umm, Hajime-san. I got burned a little here, so could you put some medicine on it?”

She never missed an opportunity to come onto Hajime. Truly a clever bunny girl. Sadly, Hajime just gave her an exasperated look.

“Is this really the time?”

“Well... I mean Yue and Tio are unbeatable, so it should be fine. If I don’t show off at times like these, I’ll start losing to even Kaori-san.”

Shea showed off the numerous small burns on her breasts. Just then—

“Grant respite to these divine warriors— Divine Blessing!” Kaori healed Shea’s wounds with a smile.

“Nooo! My chance to let Hajime grope me!” Shea wailed, but everyone just stared coldly at her.

“Hm...? Hajime, this jelly can melt magic, too.”

Hajime looked and it did indeed seem that the tentacles were melting the barrier wherever they touched it.



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“Ah, that explains it. I was wondering why my flames had been having so little effect. It seems the tentacles can disintegrate the mana my fire is composed of.” If what Tio was saying was true, then this jelly was far more dangerous than Hajime had initially thought. Plenty powerful, and plenty annoying. This was what he’d come to expect from labyrinths.

Just then, the monster controlling the jelly showed itself.

It squeezed out of a crack in the ceiling, and expanded in midair. It was translucent, and roughly in the shape of a human. Though its limbs were shaped like fins, and its entire body was covered in minuscule, glimmering red flecks. There were also two feelers of sorts growing out of its head.

The way its limbs sort of floated in the air reminded Hajime of a sea angel. A sea angel that was ten meters long and oozed caustic jelly was a pretty monstrous sight, though.

Without warning, the giant sea angel launched a barrage of tentacles from its body. At the same time, it spit out a rain of jelly from its head.

“Yue, you focus on attacking! I’ll protect us! Hallowed Ground!” Kaori’s derivative skill, Delayed Activation allowed her to cast a spell she’d already chanted the incantation for ahead of time. Yue nodded curtly and combined her strength with Tio’s. The two of them shot a barrage of flames at the giant sea angel.

The flames all found their mark, and disintegrated the monster. Yue turned back to Hajime proudly, but instead of praising her he yelled out a warning.

“It’s not over yet! I’m still sensing something. Kaori, keep that barrier up. What the hell is this? I can sense it everywhere in the room...” Hajime’s Sense Presence was picking up a reaction from every corner of the room. When he checked with his Demon Eye, he saw the entire room covered in dark red. It was almost as if the room itself was a monster. Hajime looked around warily. He’d never seen anything like this before.

His fears had been well founded, as the giant sea angel reformed itself in the center of the room. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a large number of the starfish and sea snake monsters they’d defeated earlier melting inside the sea angel’s stomach.

“I see... So the monsters we found too weak were nothing more than this creature’s sustenance. Master, if it keeps regenerating indefinitely we’ll be worn down. Where is its mana crystal?”

“Come to think of it, how come we can’t see it? The thing’s transparent.”

Shea nodded and looked over at Hajime. Hajime focused his Demon Eye on the sea angel, but what he saw only confused him.

“Hajime?” Hajime scratched his head and reported what he’d seen.

“There isn’t one. I can’t find one anywhere inside it.” Everyone stared at him in shock.

“H-Hajime-kun? If it doesn’t have a mana crystal... does that mean it’s not a monster?”

“Beats me. I guess if I had to say, its whole body seems like a mana crystal. The whole thing shows up dark red on my Demon Eye, and so does the rest of the room. Be careful, guys. It’s possible we’re already inside the thing’s stomach!”

The giant sea angel attacked again as Hajime finished his explanation. This time, it sent chunks of its body out like torpedoes in addition to the tentacles and jelly rain.

Hajime pulled a giant black rifle out of his Treasure Trove. There was a compressed gas canister where the magazine would normally go. It was too large in radius to be a bullet of any caliber.

Which made sense, since it wasn’t actually a rifle. *Whooooooooosh!* It was a flamethrower.

He’d created it out of liquid flamrock. The flamrock ignited as it left the barrel, spreading unquenchable 3,000 degree flames everywhere. His target was neither the giant sea angel, nor the jelly attacks it had sent at them. Instead, it was the walls of the room. He knew Yue and the others could handle the sea angel’s attacks.

It seemed the sea angel could use camouflage as well. For when Hajime’s flames hit the wall, parts of it peeled away, transforming into jelly as it burned. Hajime breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank god the whole room isn’t the monster.*

But no matter how much of the jelly Hajime burned, more of it kept oozing out of cracks in the walls and floor. A sizzling sound came from his shoes.

Yue and the others redoubled their attacks on the sea angel as well. It seemed to finally be taking them seriously, and an unbelievable amount of jelly trickled out of every crack and hole in the room. The water level began to rise as well. At first it had only come up to their knees, but now it was up

to Hajime's waist. For Yue, it was already up to her chest.

No matter how many times Yue and Tio destroyed the giant sea angel, it just absorbed the nearby jelly and regenerated. There didn't seem to be any end in sight.

Unless they found a way to eliminate it for good, they'd just be wasting their strength. On top of that, the rising water levels meant they'd soon be fighting underwater. The worst part was they couldn't even hole up and hold out. Both Yue's barriers and Hajime's submarine wouldn't last long against that caustic jelly.

It might be best to retreat for now. The problem was, all the exits were covered by jelly. Hajime desperately examined his surroundings. He noticed one of the fissures in the floor had a small whirlpool above it.

"Let's retreat and regroup! There's a room below us, though I don't know where it leads. Be prepared for anything!"

"Okay."

"Roger."

"Understood."

"Alright!"

Hajime swung his flamethrower around, burning all the jelly around him. Once the area was clear, he transmuted the floor around the fissure. It grew wider, forming a hole large enough for them to jump through.

Hajime ducked underwater and pulled a small, cylindrical fifteen centimeter long object out of his pocket. It had a snorkel and a mouthpiece attached to the middle. The canister was actually an oxygen tank. He'd used creation magic to enchant the canister with air magic. The space inside was much larger than it seemed, all filled with air.

He'd originally wanted to make the space as large as his Treasure Trove's, but he hadn't had time. While in Erisen he'd prioritized repairing his damaged equipment. On top of that, he found enchanting things with air magic was extremely difficult for him. As it was, one of these canisters only had 30 minutes of air in it.

Keeping the time limit in the back of his mind, Hajime continued transmuting the hole, digging deeper until he finally hit open space. Then, he pulled out his pile bunker. He anchored it underwater and began charging.

It let out a loud hydraulic hiss as the mechanism engaged. A second later, it bore through the floor Hajime had weakened.

The sound was muffled by the water, but the vibrations could still be felt by everyone.

Water started rushing through the massive pit he'd created. The current was so strong that it knocked everyone off their feet and carried them to the hole.

Hajime pulled a massive boulder and a few incendiary grenades out of his Treasure Trove. He held fast against the current long enough to toss them before letting himself be swept away.

The boulder blocked the hole he'd made, while the grenades exploded all around the sea angel. Though Hajime had no way of telling if that had actually bought them any time, it felt like the smart thing to do.

"Ugh, ack..."

"Haaah... Haaah, you alright, Kaori?"

"Y-Yes. Somehow... How's everyone else...?" Kaori looked around, coughing up water. She noticed Hajime was holding her up, and that they were on a sandy beach of some sort. A dense jungle stretched out in the distance, and water floated near the ceiling above. Kaori didn't see anyone else nearby. It seemed there was some sort of barrier keeping this area clear. The beach was massive.

"Looks like we got separated... Well, I've given everyone mini Treasure Troves, so they should be fine."

"Yeah..."

Hajime put Kaori down and scratched his head. He could tell that hadn't really reassured her.

Kaori watched as Hajime started changing right in front of her, then thought back to how they'd gotten here.

They'd all had to retreat from the giant sea angel. The giant room they'd fallen into had dozens of holes in the floor. Seawater gushed out from some, but flowed into others. The water's currents had been unpredictable and wild, like a storm. The group had tried to stay together, but the water mercilessly tore them apart. Yue tried to control the current with her magic, but it was so random that she didn't make much headway. Shea had managed to use her gravity manipulation and Drucken's natural weight to fix herself in place and somehow link up with Tio.

Hajime had wanted to pull out his submarine and herd everyone inside, but the current made it impossible. And so, he'd grit his teeth and pulled out

some extremely dense rocks from his Treasure Trove. He'd been hoping to use their weight to anchor himself like Shea had.

Luckily, Yue was being carried toward him as well. If he could just stay in place they'd collide with each other. Tio and Shea had already fallen down one of the holes and had vanished from sight.

Hajime had been about to reach out to Yue when he'd spotted Kaori being swept away to one of the holes. His eyes met hers. He turned back to Yue, who had her hand outstretched to him.

He had two options at that point.

If he caught Yue, Kaori would likely be swept down a hole, alone. And if he caught Kaori, it would be Yue who would be alone.

As it was, Hajime only had the ability to grab one of them. Time slowed to a crawl as Hajime deliberated. He exchanged one last glance with Yue, and made his decision.

Hajime pulled more stones out of his Treasure Trove and sank like a rock. On his way down, he grabbed hold of Kaori. He decided to prioritize her over Yue.

Kaori's eyes opened wide in surprise, but then she had to shut them a second later as the current beat against her. Hajime held Kaori tight as they were sucked down a hole.

He activated Diamond Skin as they fell, then covered Kaori, protecting her from the stray boulders that hit them on the way down. Finally, the current began to weaken, and Hajime saw a light above them. He floated up to it.

When he surfaced he'd found himself at the coastline to the beach they were now standing on.

“Hey, Hajime-kun. Why... did you save me?”

“Huh?” Hajime had his back turned to Kaori, as he was still in the middle of changing. *Where'd that come from?*

“Why did you save me and not Yue?”

“I mean, if you fell by yourself you'd probably die. I figured Yue'd be fine on her own. Yue wanted me to save you too. I could tell from her eyes.”

“You really trust her, don't you?”

“Of course I do. We're partners.”

“.....” Kaori's expression grew even more glum. She noticed a shadow above her, and looked up. She saw Hajime looking down at her, his face

inches from her own. They were practically touching. If he moved just a little closer, they'd be kissing. She stared into Hajime's eyes. The moment was ruined as he grabbed her cheeks and pulled.

"Owww! What was that for!?" Tears sprung to Kaori's eyes.

Hajime ignored her protests and continued toying with her soft cheeks. By the time he was done, her cheeks were red and swollen. She looked at him reproachfully, and Hajime snorted

"There's no time to sit around moping. We're in the middle of a labyrinth here. How long were you planning on staying in those soaked clothes? Or were you hoping to earn my sympathy by walking around like that?" Kaori blushed at Hajime's rebuke. It was as if he'd just told her she didn't belong here.

"Th-That's not it! I just spaced out for a bit. I-I'll change right away. Sorry."

"....."

Kaori hurried to her feet and pulled out a spare change of clothes from the mini Treasure Trove Hajime had given her. He'd made one for everyone at Erisen, though they were far smaller in scope than Oscar's. Hajime nonchalantly turned around. Normally, Kaori would have tried to flirt with him and say something like "It's fine if you want to watch," but right now she didn't feel in the mood.

"I-I'm done. So, what are we going to do now?"

"Let's see. Even if we went back we'd have no idea where the others are, so I guess our best bet is to keep searching for the labyrinth's end. Yue and the others are probably doing the same."

Hajime stared at the jungle for a few seconds before turning back to Kaori. She smiled and nodded, trying to hide her melancholy. Hajime narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but in the end he didn't say anything.

Sand crunched underneath their boots as the pair made their way to the jungle. Thick grasses and dense bushes barred their way forward, and Hajime pulled out a machete to hack through them. Kaori followed silently behind him.

After a few minutes, Hajime suddenly came to a halt and turned back to Kaori. He wrapped a hand around the back of her head protectively.

"Huh? U-Umm, Hajime-kun? Th-This is a bit sudden..." She blushed, but when she saw the thing Hajime had pulled off her neck the blood drained

from her face.

It was a spider. It was as big as Hajime's hand, and it had twenty legs. Purple liquid dripped from its fangs. Its feet grew not only from its abdomen, but also from its back. Kaori had never seen anything so disgusting.

"Don't let your guard down. These labyrinths are way more deadly than the upper floors of the Orcus Labyrinth. If you think the monsters you face will only be as strong as the ones you fought there, you'll end up dead."

"O-Okay. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful."

"....."

The spider Hajime had picked up didn't have a mana crystal. That meant it was just a very ugly spider, and not a monster. Kaori felt even more depressed. Not only had she almost been killed by something that wasn't even a monster, she'd needed Hajime to save her again.

In Kouki's party she'd been one of the best mages they'd had. But here, she was just dead weight. That fact continued to nag at her. She kept an even more vigilant eye on her surroundings as they advanced, not even breaking her concentration to talk to Hajime. The two of them continued silently through the jungle.

Eventually, they found something.

"Is this a... ship graveyard?"

"Amazing. I never realized ships were so huge..."

Once they'd made it out of the jungle they found themselves in a rocky plain. A number of massive sailing ships nestled among the boulders, their masts rotting and their sails tattered. Every one of them must have been at least a hundred meters long. Some of the larger ones Hajime saw were more than three hundred.

The two of them stopped in their tracks to admire the surreal sight, but they couldn't gawk forever, and eventually they shook off their awe and started walking forward again.

They marched their way around the boulders, climbing those they couldn't circumvent. At times they walked across the ships' decks as well. Though all of the ships were rotting, they hadn't decayed to the point where they were completely falling apart yet.

"You know... these all look like warships."

"Yeah. That really big one in the back looks like a passenger ship, though. It's all decorated and stuff..."

The warships here didn't have gunports like the ones Hajime was used to seeing back on earth. His reason for believing they were warships was all the battle scars they had. From the looks of it, they'd all been bombarded with magic. Some of their masts had been cut clean through, while others had burn scars all over their wooden decks. Some of them even had their sails and ropes petrified.

Since there were no gunports, Hajime imagined long distance battles between warships had been done via magic in the past.

It turned out that he was right. When they were about halfway through the graveyard, they were attacked.

“Uoooooooooooooh!” “Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Wh-What the!?”

“Hajime-kun, around us!” Hajime heard the screams of countless men and his surroundings began to warp.

Hajime and Kaori stopped in their tracks. Everything blurred, and a second later they were standing on the deck of a ship.

They were no longer in the graveyard of ships. Instead, they were in the middle of the sea. Hundreds of ships lined up against each other, and men yelled as they brandished their weapons.

“Wh-What on...”

“H-H-Hajime-kun? Am I dreaming? Are you seeing this too? You are, right?”

The two of them were so shocked all they could do was blankly examine their surroundings.

A flare rose up in the sky, and the mass of ships on Hajime's side began advancing forward. Another flare rose up from the other side, and those ships advanced as well.

Once the two sides were close enough, they began exchanging volleys of spells. Neither side slowed down, though, and it looked like they were planning to ram into each other.

“Whoa!?”

“Kyaaa!”

Fireballs raked the deck, burning holes through the wood. A raging tornado attempted to splinter the mast. Chunks of the ocean froze over, stymieing both sides' advance. Grey spheres flew through the air, petrifying any sails unlucky enough to be struck.

The deck Hajime and Kaori were standing on had caught fire. Sailors hurried to cast water magic to put it out.

This was a war. That was how large the scale of the battle was. A chilly breeze rolled past the combatants. Then, a fireball came hurtling toward where Hajime was standing. If he didn't do anything, it would hit him head-on, but he was still dumbfounded.

How on earth did we wind up in the middle of a naval battle? The question whirled around inside his head as Hajime pulled out Donner and fired at the fireball.

A streak of red light struck it, but contrary to expectations, the fireball didn't disappear. In fact, Hajime's bullet passed right through it and vanished into the sky.

"What!?" He let out yet another yell of surprise. He made to grab Kaori and dive out of the way.

"Wait, I'll stop it! Light Wall!" She deployed a beginner-level light barrier.

Hajime had figured it'd be best to dodge, since even shooting through its core hadn't dispersed the spell, but he didn't want Kaori to feel useless. So he stood there, activating Diamond Skin just in case.

However, Hajime needn't have worried. Kaori's barrier stopped the fireball.

Did I miss? Hajime thought dubiously to himself. He tried again, aiming for yet another fireball. He watched with his Demon Eye, making sure he shot precisely through the core of the spell. But once again, his bullet passed cleanly through the fireball, vanishing in the distance.

"So that's how it is." Hajime had figured out why his attacks hadn't worked, and attempted a different tactic. He stopped Kaori, who was about to put up another barrier, and wreathed his revolver in a Gale Claw. Then, he leaped out of the way and sliced through the fireball. This time the attack connected and dispersed the flames.

"Umm, Hajime-kun?"

"It looks like this isn't just a hallucination. Though it's not exactly reality either. Physical objects can't interact with the vision, but mana can. Though I still have no clue what the hell is going on."

Hajime sighed and shook his head. Just then, he heard a man scream behind him. He turned to see a youth double over, holding a cutlass in one

hand and his stomach in the other. There was a pool of blood at his feet, a bloody icicle dropped on the ground next to him. He had been hit in that earlier barrage.

“Are you alright!?” Kaori rushed over and began casting healing magic on him. Lavender light enveloped the youth. A priest of Kaori’s skill should have been able to heal a wound like that instantly, yet that wasn’t what happened. The moment Kaori’s healing magic touched him, he faded away.

“Huh? What? Wh-Why did he...” Hajime lapsed into thought. After a moment, he explained his hypothesis.

“I think as long as mana touches any part of this illusion it’ll fade. It doesn’t matter what kind of spell you use.”

“Then that means I-I... killed him...”

“Kaori, none of this is real. It’s an illusion that we can interact with, that’s all. I mean, you can hardly call something that literally disappears from being healed human.”

“Hajime-kun... Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry. That surprised me a little, but I’m fine now.”

Hajime wasn’t blaming Kaori this time, but she still drooped her shoulders and apologized. However, she quickly recovered and smiled at him. Hajime thought back to how she’d been earlier too, and muttered something.

“Always an apology, huh?”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“It’s nothing.”

Hajime turned away from Kaori. Not because the conversation was over, but because he’d sensed something coming.

He looked around and noticed quite a few of the sailors were staring darkly at Hajime and Kaori.

Kaori noticed the change in Hajime’s attitude and looked around as well. With a resounding battle cry, the sailors attacked.

“My life for Ehit!”

“Glory to Ehit!”

“You damned heretics! Die in the name of our lord!”

The men had gone completely mad. Their eyes were bloodshot and spittle sprayed from their mouths. It was obvious they weren’t thinking rationally.

Hajime had already guessed this was some dispute between two

neighboring countries, but now he understood the reason for it too. It was a holy war. He could hear similar cries coming from the other side as well. The only difference was the name of their god.

Kaori was stunned into silence.

Hajime pulled Kaori close and started firing Donner over his shoulder. Instead of firing physical bullets, he was shooting off rounds of pure mana.

Mana Manipulation's derivative skills, Mana Emission and Mana Compression let him do such a thing. Since the mana wasn't structured behind a spell of any kind, normal enemies wouldn't have taken any physical damage. They would have just had their mana shaved off.

However, both humans and monsters became unable to move once their mana dried up, so it was a great way to immobilize targets without harming them. Until now, Hajime's enemies had all been too dangerous to simply immobilize, so he hadn't used it much.

In this situation, though, it was perfect. Streaks of red light shot through the foreheads of battle-crazed sailors. Each of Hajime's mana bullets pierced through multiple sailors, who dissipated when shot.

"Kaori, I'm gonna jump! Make sure you don't bite your tongue!"

"What? Kyaaaaaaaaaa!"

Hajime didn't want to deal with being surrounded on the narrow deck, so he grabbed hold of Kaori and leaped into the sky. She hadn't expected him to shoot up with such force though, so she screamed in surprise.

Hajime shot down the sailors on the crow's nest and appropriated it for himself.

The sailors down below glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

They'd been so busy fighting each other until just recently, but now for some reason some of the sailors had focused on the two of them. Though they'd been enemies seconds before, they were united in their hatred of Hajime and Kaori. The madness spread like a disease. At first only a small knot of sailors had targeted the pair, but before long the entire ship was after them.

Sailors locked in combat with each other froze and turned to face Hajime and Kaori instead. Then, with the same fanatical battle cries, they pointed their cutlasses at them. The insane spectacle had left Kaori pale-faced.

"Now then, how are we supposed to get out of this crazy vision?"

"Is there an exit somewhere... maybe?"

“We’re in the middle of the ocean, remember?”

“Maybe one of the ships has a portal out? You know, like the Anywhere Door?”

Hajime raised an eyebrow as Kaori brought up a certain blue cat robot’s very convenient tool.

“There’s around 600 ships here... I don’t think we can check every one of them. The battle’d end before we do.”

“Hmmm... It looks like some of the ships are already sinking, too. Maybe we’re supposed to end this war?”

“End it... I see, I get it now. You’re saying we’ve gotta kill everyone, right? You’re pretty sadistic, you know that?”

“Huh? No, wait that’s not what I—”

“Yeah, that’s gotta be it. I can’t really think of anything else, and this suits my style anyway.” Hajime casually shot down a few sailors who were trying to Tarzan their way to the crow’s nest using the mast’s ropes. *I should have made some mana bullets for a situation like this.* He used the derivative skill Remote Manipulation to shoot down a barrage of incoming fireballs as well.

“Kaori, I know you’re not really skilled at offensive magic, but here even healing magic’ll kill these guys. I’m still not 100% sure killing them’s how we get out, but since they’re coming at us we’ve got no choice but to take them down.”

“O-Okay!” Kaori berated herself for hesitating and began chanting. The insanity in these ghost soldiers’ eyes had shaken her, but she didn’t want to break down in front of Hajime, so she held her ground and fought.

Hajime surveyed his surroundings, protecting Kaori from any attackers.

Looking down, he noticed there were still pockets of sailors fighting each other in places. Unlike when Hajime killed them, the illusions bled when cut by other illusions.

Gutted entrails and hacked-off body parts littered the ship’s deck. It made for quite a grotesque sight. The men happily killed each other in the name of their gods.

The wind picked up, and a bloody mist rolled across the deck. Despite their losses, the sailors targeting Hajime and Kaori didn’t let up.

Whenever anyone got too close, Hajime mercilessly shot them down. He’d also set up a pseudo-barrier of bullets circling around him to destroy any illusion he missed, and to block any magical attacks sent his way.

This didn't deter them though, and the sailors continued rushing to their deaths.

A few dozen soldiers used air magic to fly over the crow's nest and attack Hajime from above. More came from either side, using the mast's netting to close in. With his Demon Eye, Hajime could see a number of casters on other ships targeting his. They were all casting high level spells.

Just as Hajime was thinking about shooting them down before they took down this ship, Kaori finished casting her strongest spell.

"Divine Mother, smiling down from heaven, encompass all in thy heavenly embrace— Aetherflow!" Ripples of light spread out across the battlefield. They extended a full kilometer out from where Kaori was standing. Every person it touched was wrapped in a faint halo of light.

This was one of the highest-rank healing spells, Aetherflow. It healed everyone in a massive radius.

The actual range of the spell depended on how skilled the caster was and how much mana they put into the spell, but it had a minimum reach of 500 meters. Furthermore, if the caster marked certain targets beforehand, they could control the spell to affect only them. Normally, this spell required the combined mana of a few dozen people, a ridiculously long chant, and a huge mana circle. It was a testament to how overpowered Kaori was that she'd been able to cast it in two minutes all by herself.

The light of Kaori's Aetherflow covered the battlefield, destroying every illusion it touched.

Kaori stumbled once her spell ended, her mana spent. Hajime caught her before she fell.

"Wow, it's like we're floating in a sea of ghost ships now. Nice one, Kaori. I knew you had it in you."

"Ah, um, i-it was nothing, really. You guys are way more amazing than me, anyway..." Kaori blushed at Hajime's sincere praise. Still, she was certain Yue would have been able to do a faster and better job. She smiled bitterly to herself and looked away.

In order to change the topic, she muttered something about needing to recharge her mana, and Hajime handed her a magic stone pendant. Kaori couldn't control mana directly, so Hajime had engraved it with a magic circle she could use to drain it.

Hajime opened his mouth to say something, but he shut it again when he

saw another wave of enemies approaching. They could talk about it later.

Normally, fighting an army of illusions who could only be hurt by mana and had no fear would have been extremely difficult, doubly so on the swaying deck of a ship. However, Hajime and Kaori were anything but normal.

The combined armies of two countries were decimated in just one hour by the two of them.

“Ugh... Sorry.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Once they destroyed the last of the illusions, Hajime and Kaori had found themselves back in their original location.

Hajime had breathed a sigh of relief, glad that killing them all had been the solution to the puzzle. A second later, though, Kaori had doubled over and started retching. It had been some time since she last ate, so she didn’t throw anything up, but it still didn’t look pleasant.

Tears in her eyes, Kaori held up a hand to Hajime, begging him not to get any closer, but Hajime walked over anyway and gently rubbed Kaori’s back. She hadn’t wanted him to see this side of her, but she was still reassured by the warm hand on her back. Before she knew it, she’d fallen into his arms. It didn’t take long for her to calm down and stop retching.

Hajime pulled out a pack of apple juice from his Treasure Trove and passed it to her. She gulped it down greedily, and the color began returning to her face. The sweetness of the juice washed away the taste of bile in her mouth.

“I’m really sorry...” Hajime narrowed his eyes as she apologized.

“It’s totally understandable. I found them pretty disgusting myself. I can’t believe people would let blind faith turn them into something like that. Let’s take a short break. I used up a lot of my mana too, so I need to rest.”

“Okay... Hey, Hajime-kun. What was that? Did it have something to do with all of these rotting ships here?” Kaori sat down on a nearby boulder. Hajime thought about it for a few seconds.

“My guess is that was a war that actually happened in the past, and whoever made this labyrinth recreated it with magic. I imagine the part where all the sailors attacked whoever enters was their own addition... It could be that this is part of this labyrinth’s theme.”

“Its... theme?”

“Yeah. Tio mentioned it in the Grand Gruen Volcano. She thought each of the liberators designed their labyrinth around a certain theme. If she’s right, then...”

“The theme of this one is to show us the tragedy the gods brought upon Tortus?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

Chills ran down Kaori’s spine as she thought back to what they’d seen. She shivered, her face pale. Their madness had disturbed Kaori enough that she’d thrown up. She’d never seen such religious fanaticism before. Their fervor, their actions, and the fact that their faith had led them to slaughter each other disgusted her.

Worst of all though, they’d been *laughing* as they fought. Some of them who’d known they were dying had even ripped out their own hearts to offer up to their heartless gods. Others had stabbed right through their comrades to get a better chance at hitting Hajime and Kaori.

It had been an unbelievably gruesome sight, especially because it had all been done in the name of god. Hajime sat down next to Kaori and took her hand in his. He couldn’t just sit and watch when she was grappling with atrocities like that.

Kaori looked up at him in surprise, but after a moment she smiled and tightened her grip on his hand.

“Hajime-kun, thank you...”

“Don’t worry about it. I know how painful it feels... to think you’re going crazy. I nearly lost myself when I fell into the abyss.”

“How did you manage to stay sane? Actually, I don’t even need to ask. It was Yue, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. If I hadn’t met her back then... who knows what I would have become.” Hajime looked off into the distance, reminiscing about those days.

Kaori felt as if a vice was squeezing down on her heart.

“It’s so frustrating. I wanted to be the one to protect you, Hajime-kun... the one to save you. Though I don’t know if I could have done it if it had been me down there. I couldn’t even keep my first promise to you. Haha, I guess it’s going to be tough to beat Yue.” Hajime narrowed his eyes at Kaori again. Normally Kaori’s smiles were full of warmth, but right now they were bitter, full of self-deprecation.

“You’ve been apologizing a lot since we came here. You’ve been smiling like that a lot, too.”

“Huh? Umm...” Kaori tilted her head in confusion, and Hajime’s next words made her forced smile crumble.

“Hey, Kaori. Why’d you come with us?”

“So I really am just in your way?”

Hajime sighed, and changed topics. This was going nowhere.

“I still remember what you told me that night, when you came to my room and we drank my shitty tea. That’s why I don’t understand why you still like me so much, after how I’ve changed.”

“Hajime-kun, I...” Kaori opened her mouth, but Hajime cut her off. He wasn’t done yet.

“But I have no intention of denying your feelings, or saying they’re a lie. I’m sure you have your own reasons for still loving me. No one else has the right to deny you that, or your determination. I already gave you my answer, and if you still say you love me despite that, then that’s fine. It’s not like Shea’s any different, after all. In fact, she’s so persistent that I’m worried she’ll just attack me one night.”

Her physical abilities had only continued to grow in the time they’d traveled together. It had gotten to the point where Hajime was worried he wouldn’t be able to fend her off if she seriously tried to overpower him. Kaori smiled wryly and nodded.

“Yeah, even I’m amazed at how outgoing and positive Shea is.”

“Even I have to admit I was pretty mean to her in the beginning. Yue was the only person special to me, so I just wanted her to give up.”

“.....”

“But no matter how roughly I treated her, no matter how much I told her she had no chance, she still looked like she was enjoying herself. Sure she cried and got mad and yelled at me, but she never looked unhappy. Even though she had no aptitude for magic and wasn’t nearly as strong as Yue, she never stopped looking forward. She never let herself wallow in her own inferiority.”

“I-I’m not wallowing...” Kaori trailed off weakly. She wanted to protest, but even she knew he was right.

“Did you know? All you’ve done since we came here is apologize. Even the way you smile’s changed.”

“What?”

“Hey, Kaori. Quit looking down. Look me in the eye.”

It was only after he said it that Kaori realized she'd been avoiding making eye contact with him, even though she'd always met his gaze before... She looked up with a start.

“I'll say this one more time. I love Yue. Even if other people end up important to me, they'll never be special like she is. If it really hurts that much, if comparing yourself to me and Yue brings you nothing but pain... then you should leave.”

“Ah...” Kaori looked down again. Hajime wasn't done yet, though.

“Back then, I agreed to let you come with me because I thought you were like Shea. I figured that was what you really wanted. That it was something you thought was best for yourself. Even though I'd told you I loved Yue, you insisted on coming anyway. So I thought sure, you'd be happier that way too. But that's not how it seems to me right now.”

Hajime let go of Kaori's hand.

“I want you to think about this seriously. Decide for yourself what it is that has you so down, and whether you really want to keep traveling with me or not. You're not like Shea. Shea loves Yue just as much as she loves me. If you think it's better to leave, I'll make sure to bring you back to Yaegashi safely, don't worry.”

“I-I...” Kaori looked down at her hand. She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. Things had grown awkward between them now, but they still needed to move forward. This was a labyrinth after all. The pair continued onward, until they reached a massive passenger ship in the back. It was even longer than 300 meters, and at least ten stories tall. Taller, probably, as part of it was buried underground. It was ornately decorated, so much so that even after rotting partly it still looked magnificent.

The two stopped for a moment to admire its majesty. Even on earth, few ships were this big. Those that were didn't look quite this elegant, either.

Kaori just stared in awe, while Hajime admired its craftsmanship.

“I'm amazed they managed to make something this big out of wood.” He was still a Synergist at heart. *Whoever managed to make that deserves respect.*

Hajime grabbed Kaori and used Aerodynamic to jump all the way up to the terrace on the top deck. As he'd expected, the air around them began to

warp.

“Looks like we’ve got another vision to go through... Prepare yourself, Kaori. We’re probably not going to like this one either.”

“...It’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

Kaori took a second to reply. Hajime mentally berated himself. He should have saved that conversation for when they were out of the labyrinth.

All he’d succeeded in doing was spoiling Kaori’s mood. It was something he’d needed to say eventually, but he could have picked a better time for it.

He just hadn’t been able to bear seeing Kaori smile sadly like that any longer. *Still, I could have waited until we cleared The Sunken Ruins of Melusine first.* Hajime awkwardly scratched his cheek.

The vision this time put them in the middle of a luxurious passenger ship.

It was night, and the moon was full. Lights glimmered all along the ship’s deck. Decorations hung from every railing and mast, and tables of food were laid out buffet-style. A large crowd of people milled about, sampling the rich food and chatting with each other.

“Is this... a party?”

“Looks like it. A fancy one too... Did I get Melusine’s theme wrong?”

Hajime was caught off-guard by the distinctly not gruesome sight in front of him. He and Kaori were standing atop a raised terrace that overlooked the deck.

As Hajime swept his gaze over the partygoers, the door behind him opened and a few sailors stepped onto the terrace. They lounged around, chatting with each other. *I guess they’re here for their break.*

Hajime listened in on their conversation. From what he could gather, this party was to celebrate the end of a war. It seemed the war that had been going on for years between these two countries had ended not with one country annihilating and invading the other, but with a peace treaty. The sailors seemed happy about that fact. Upon closer inspection, Hajime noticed that humans, demons, and beastmen were all in attendance at this party. They were all mingling together, with no regards to race.

“I guess a time like this existed too.”

“They must have worked really hard to make this peace happen. I don’t know how long it’s been since the war ended, but I can’t imagine everyone’s grudges have gone away. And yet, they’re all smiling and laughing together...”

“I’m sure the people here are the ones who fought for peace. There’s no way everyone else would be able to laugh like that with the people they’d been fighting a while ago.”

“Yeah...”

Hajime and Kaori smiled as they watched the party. After some time, a middle-aged man climbed up onto the podium at the end of the deck and waved to everyone. The talking gradually quieted down and people turned their attention to him. They were all looking up at him respectfully.

Behind him was someone Hajime guessed was his aide, along with a person wearing a hood. He thought it was rather rude to get up onstage in a hood, but none of the partygoers seemed to mind.

Once the ship was completely quiet, the man began his speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen, all of you who gathered here today are heroes. Brave heroes who fought not to make war, but to make peace. I am honored and humbled that you all agreed to come to this event. I cannot tell you how happy I am that this war has ended with my generation... Seeing peace come between our two nations has been always been my dream.” Everyone listened with rapt attention. The man continued, talking about the missteps they had along the way, the trials they had to face to overcome suspicion, and the lasting cornerstones of peace that they’d finally built. He spoke of the friends they lost along the way, and tears sprung to many of the guests’ eyes. Some looked off into the distance, while others recalled nostalgic memories.

It seemed this man was the king of the human kingdom. He’d spent his entire life working toward this peace. Hajime could see why everyone respected him.

Finally, his speech wound to a close. He roused everyone at the end with a spirited closer. The audience burst out in cheers. However, Hajime was struck by a sudden premonition. He felt as though he recognized the king’s face from somewhere.

“Now, after a year of peace, I’ve come to realize something... How worthless it truly is.” Everyone glanced about in confusion. They looked to each other, wondering if they’d misheard the king. The speech everyone had thought finished continued.

“Indeed, utterly worthless. Raising toasts with beasts and consorting with heretics... What is it, if not folly? Do you understand, ladies and gentlemen? You are all a pack of fools.”

“Wh-What are you saying, Aleister!? What’s gotten in to— Gah!?” The demon who’d stepped forward to protest coughed up blood. A sword was sticking out of his chest.

The demon’s eyes widened in surprise. He turned around to see a human behind him holding the weapon. From the demon’s expression, Hajime could tell the two must have been close. He fell to the ground, an expression of disbelief frozen on his face.

Everyone started talking at once. Cries of “Your Majesty, please!” rang out. Many of the guests were unable to comprehend what was happening.

“Now then, ladies and gentlemen. Like I said in the beginning, I am honored you all agreed to come. You have made my job that much easier. It grated me day after day to watch as you ungodly heretics attempted to create your own nation. As if monsters who’ve turned their backs on Ehit, the sole creator of the world, could ever be equal to humans. But that all ends today. You barbarians who worship a heretical god do not deserve to exist on Ehit’s holy Tortus. We will only have true peace when vermin like you are eradicated! If only you knew how much joy it brings me that all the leaders of all the nations willingly gathered here today. Believers of Ehit, bring down the iron hammer of retribution on these nonbelievers! Lord Ehit, are you watching!?”

King Aleister sunk to his knees and gazed up at the heavens in prayer. The sailors took off their uniforms, revealing gleaming soldier’s armor underneath. They surrounded the guests.

There was a massive mast right in the center of the ship’s deck. The terrace was built atop that mast, and so the soldiers positioned there had an unobstructed view of the entire deck. Unless the guests could somehow escape into the sea, the soldiers had an overwhelming advantage.

The various lords and ladies of every country realized that as well. Despair colored their faces.

A second later, the soldiers loosed magic at the undefended guests. They tried to fight back, but outnumbered and outmaneuvered as they were, their desperate struggle amounted to little.

A few managed to escape, but after a few seconds the majority of the guests were lying in puddles of their own blood.

Just a short while ago they’d been happily eating and drinking. Some of the guests had tried leaping into the ocean, but Aleister had prepared for that.

Small boats packed to the brim with soldiers had been lying in wait, and killed anyone who jumped over. The water around the ship had turned crimson.

“Ugh...”

“Kaori...”

Kaori leaned against the railing, one hand against her mouth all the while. She tried very hard not to throw up. This vision was even more horrific than the last. Hajime gently patted her back.

Once the slaughter was over, King Aleister went below the deck with his soldiers. He was probably going to hunt down the few who'd escaped into the bowels of the ship.

His aide and the hooded figure trailed behind him.

However, before heading downstairs, the hooded figure turned to look at the terrace. Hajime caught a glimpse of silver hair in the moonlight, or at least he thought he did.

Their surroundings began to warp again. It seemed there was no test in this vision. Melusine had just wanted to show it to them.

“Kaori, rest for a bit.”

“It's okay, I'm fine. That was a bit graphic but... was that it? It ended without us doing anything.”

“This is the end of the ship graveyard. We could craft a barrier and explore the ocean, but judging from what we saw, I assume we're supposed to go inside now. At the very least, the vision seems to be leading us there. Melusine wanted us to burn the atrocities the gods committed into our memory before letting us continue, I guess... Can't say it's a very pleasant experience. It'd probably be even worse if we were from this world.”

Almost all the humans in Tortus were believers of Ehit. It'd likely be quite a shock to see visions of what kind of monsters their faith could turn them into.

In order to conquer this labyrinth, powerful magic was a necessity. The ability to use magic depended greatly on the user's mental state. In many ways, it was the complete opposite of the Reisen Gorge. Fortunately, Hajime and Kaori weren't from this world, so it wasn't like their entire worldview was being shaken.

Still, the massacre had been horrific. They looked down at the deck, which had soaked up so many people's blood, and thought back to what

they'd seen. Hajime was just annoyed that Melusine was making them go through all this crap.

Once they'd prepared themselves, Hajime took them down to the deck and they entered the same door Aleister had in the vision.

The interior of the ship was pitch black. It was bright outside, so Hajime had expected light to be pouring in through the windows, but for whatever reason it wasn't, so he pulled a green glowstone lamp out of his Treasure Trove.

"About that vision from before... The king betrayed them after they'd already made peace, right?"

"Looks like it. But don't you think it was a little weird? It looked like everyone really respected the guy... Would they have really looked up to him like that if he secretly hated all the beastmen and demons?"

"You're right. Based on what he said, it had been a year since the war ended. Something must have happened in that time that changed him so drastically. The question is, what?"

"There's no doubts the gods were involved somehow. You heard what he was saying. He sounded pretty crazy at the end."

"Yeah, he reminded me of Ishtar-san... It was like he was in a trance. It was almost pitiful to watch."

Hajime almost felt a little bad for Ishtar. A high school girl thought the pope of the Holy Church was cringeworthy.

They walked forward for a while longer until Hajime's lamp illuminated something. A white, fluttering something.

The pair stopped in their tracks. Hajime pointed the light upward. It revealed a girl, wearing a pure white dress. She was swaying back and forth, her head pointed downward.

Hajime and Kaori both had a bad feeling about this, and Kaori's face was frozen stiff.

Hajime had no idea what a little girl was doing here, but he pulled Donner out anyway. He wasn't taking any chances in a labyrinth.

Just then, the girl crumpled to the floor. Her joints bent at inhuman angles, and she started scuttling across the floor toward them like some kind of grotesque spider.

"Kakakakakakakaka!" Ominous laughter rang out through the hallway. Her eyes, partially hidden by her bangs, glowed with an eerie light. She

looked like something straight out of a horror movie.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Whoa!? Calm down, Kaori! Let go of my arm!”

This was as cliched as it got, but that didn’t make it any less scary. Kaori clung to Hajime’s arm for dear life. Hajime tried to shoot down the monster, but Kaori ruined his aim.

“Kegyaaa!” With a strange scream, the monster girl leaped at Hajime’s face.

Hajime gave up on trying to shoot her and kicked her in the stomach. He enhanced the kick with Steel Legs just in case a regular one wasn’t enough.

The girl doubled over as she flew backward into the darkness. She bounced off the walls like a pinball, landing in a crumpled heap at the end of the hallway. Her limbs were bent at even odder angles now, and she didn’t get back up. Instead, she melted into the ground and vanished.

Hajime sighed and patted Kaori’s trembling head. She jumped at his touch and looked timidly up at him. There were tears in her eyes, and her lips were quivering. *Damn, I guess that really scared her.*

“Are you bad with horror stuff, Kaori?”

“Is there anyone who isn’t?”

“Just pretend they’re all monsters.”

“Hic... I’ll try.” Kaori finally let go of Hajime’s arm, but she still kept hold of the hem of his shirt.

Hajime’s words had given her a lot to think about, and she’s been less clingy after their discussion. However, now that ghosts and the like had shown up she’d thrown her reservations out the window. She wouldn’t let go until they were out of here. She was terrified. Absolutely terrified. Even more so than when she’d first confessed to Hajime, really.

They encountered a number of unsettling events after that. Bloody handprints on doors, noises coming from behind walls, water dripping down from the ceiling, ominous scratching noises, a strange monster with a severed head and an axe, the list went on. Hajime easily shot and kicked his way through most of them, but it was still slow going.

“I hate this. I want go home. Shizuku-chan, I want to see you again.” The countless scary events had left Kaori clinging to Hajime’s back. Her mental state had regressed to that of a child’s.

The reason she wanted Shizuku specifically to come save her was because

when Kouki had taken them all to a haunted house long ago, Shizuku had been the one to protect her. That was why she trusted Shizuku the most.

The creator of the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, Meiru Melusine, had been determined to mentally unnerve challengers to her labyrinth as much as possible. Hajime had already spent months in the darkness of the abyss, surrounded by monsters who would attack him without warning, so he wasn't too affected by Melusine's tactics. However, he had to admit a normal person would be pretty unsettled by her tricks. Though he couldn't imagine Yue or Tio being scared, either.

What happened to all those serious visions about the folly of man?

Despite her fear, Kaori was holding up pretty well. She mowed down hordes of supernatural apparitions with her Binding Blades of Light as they continued to move forward. Hajime had to keep her from fainting a few times, but he was still impressed by her grit.

After some time, the two of them arrived at the ship's hold. Hajime pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside. There was still cargo scattered here and there. The pair picked their way around crates and barrels as they headed further inward. Once they were about halfway, the door closed behind them with a slam.

“Hiii!?”

“.....”

Kaori shrieked and turned back around. Hajime was beginning to wonder if she even remembered what they talked about anymore. He really didn't want to have that conversation again.

Hajime sighed again and patted Kaori's shoulder. It was then that he noticed something odd. A thick fog had suddenly sprung up around them.

“H-H-H-H-H-Hajime-kun!?”

“Your voice is starting to sound pretty weird. Don't worry. It doesn't matter what we're up against, all we've gotta do is blow it away with magic like everything else.”

There was a sharp whistling noise, and something flew out of the dense fog. It was heading straight for Hajime. He raised his left hand up to block, and found a very fine thread wrapped around it. More whistling noises followed. This time, they came from all directions.

“A physical trap after all those magical ones? God, what a pain! Why'd all the Liberators have to make such annoying dungeons!”

“Guardian of light, lend us thy aid— Holy Shield!” Though Hajime was taken aback by the physical nature of the attack, he quickly recovered. He was easily able to knock down the threads, while Kaori protected herself with magic. A second later, the fog began to swirl around, and a powerful gale struck the pair.

Hajime transmuted spikes from the bottom of his shoes to keep him locked in place. He tried to grab Kaori too, but her shields worked against her here. He missed her by a split second, and she was carried away by the wind.

“Kyaaa!?” The gust dragged her into the center of the fog. Hajime clicked his tongue and tried to pinpoint Kaori’s position with Sense Presence.

However, it seemed this fog possessed the same properties as the fog surrounding the Haltina Woods. It interfered with one’s sense of direction, and nullified sensory magic.

“Tch... Kaori, don’t move!” Before Hajime could do anything though, a knight stepped forward, sweeping away the fog surrounding him with his longsword. Hajime didn’t know what kind of style he was using, but the knight was clearly proficient.

He blocked the oncoming strokes with Donner. Then, once he saw an opening, he stepped in and fired a magic bullet at point blank range with Schlag. It punched a giant hole through the knight’s stomach, making him vanish without a sound.

After that, he found himself up against a gauntlet of powerful knights, each a master of their chosen weapon.

“God, what a pain...” Hajime grumbled to himself and set a number of his magic bullets to circle around him. He then activated Supersonic Step, and went about defeating the knights. He was worried, since Kaori hadn’t responded to him.

Around the same time, Kaori was trembling in fear since she couldn’t see Hajime.

Horror was the one thing she just couldn’t deal with. She’d just freeze up whenever she encountered anything remotely scary, and she hadn’t been able overcome her phobia. Kaori had wanted to prove to Hajime she wasn’t just wallowing in her own inferiority, but she’d just ended up clinging to him again. She hated how weak she was.

She berated herself for being so pathetic and forced herself to stand through sheer willpower.

Just then, something laid its hand on her shoulder. Kaori hoped it was Hajime. He was fond of tapping her shoulder, so it wouldn't be surprising if it was.

"Hajime-k..." She was about to turn around, but then she realized the hand on her shoulder was lacking in warmth. In fact, it was ice cold.

A shiver ran down her spine. *That's not Hajime behind me, is it?* She was sure of it.

So then, who was behind her? She turned around slowly, her head creaking like a badly oiled door. What stared back at her was a girl's face. It was no ordinary face, though. Her eyes, mouth, and nose were all dark, bottomless pits.

"Awah!" Kaori was so overwhelmed that her brain did the only thing it could to protect her. It shut down.

In only two minutes, Hajime had succeeded in destroying almost fifty knights. Each knight only took a few seconds to dispatch.

As the fiftieth knight met his end, Hajime stopped. *Was that all of them?* However, the trial wasn't over yet. Another figure appeared from the fog. The knight this time was massive, and he carried a greatsword taller than Hajime himself.

Hajime sidestepped the knight's giant swing. The knight had seemingly predicted that Hajime would dodge. He utilized the rebound as his sword slammed into the ground to follow up with a lightning-quick attack.

Hajime leaped into the air and used his Diamond Skin enhanced prosthetic arm to grab onto the sword mid-swing. He swung himself up onto the flat of the sword and fired a mana bullet at the knight's head.

As the giant knight faded into mist, the nearby fog began to fade as well. *Alright, now it's definitely over.*

"Kaori! Where are you!?" Hajime once again cast Sense Presence. Though that proved unnecessary, as he spotted her almost immediately.

"I'm over here, Hajime-kun."

"Oh good, you're safe..." Hajime breathed a sigh of relief as Kaori walked up to him. She smiled cheerfully and sidled up close.

"I was so scared..."

"That bad, huh...?"

"Yep. So, won't you comfort me?" She wrapped her arms around

Hajime's neck and hugged him. Her face was so close that their noses were practically touching. She looked up at him with pleading eyes and leaned in closer. However, Hajime casually pressed Donner against her forehead.

"Wh-What are you doing?" She looked at him in confusion. There was murder in Hajime's eyes.

"Isn't it obvious? Killing my enemies, just like you tried to do to me." He pulled the trigger without hesitation. A crimson mana bullet shot straight through Kaori's forehead, sending her sprawling backward.

A rusty knife fell to the ground with a clang. It had been hidden up Kaori's sleeve.

Hajime walked over to Kaori's prone figure. She raised herself into a sitting position and looked up at Hajime with fear in her eyes.

"Hajime-kun, why are you doing—" He mercilessly fired another bullet into her.

"How dare you talk in Kaori's voice. How dare you take over her body. I can see right through you. Trash like you has no right to even touch Kaori. Don't speak. Don't even move."

Hajime's Demon Eye could clearly see the female specter that had taken over Kaori's body. The ghost grinned wickedly. Now that her identity had been discovered, there was no reason to continue pretending to be scared.

"Ufufu. So what if you know? This woman is already mi—" Hajime knocked Kaori to the ground and straddled her.

"Wait, what do you think you're doing!? This woman is your lover, isn't she!? Can you really bring yourself to hurt her!?"

"You're not a very good listener, are you? I said don't speak and don't move. Don't worry, I won't hurt Kaori. These mana bullets pass right through physical things. The only one suffering right now is you."

"If you destroy me, you'll destroy this girl's soul too! Are you willing to take that risk!?"

Hajime hesitated. It was possible she was bluffing, but Hajime had no way of knowing for sure. Thinking about it logically, he would surely hesitate to strike again. That was definitely what the specter assumed as well. She grinned and ordered Hajime to get off.

Contrary to expectations though, Hajime just fired another mana bullet into her.

The specter's pain was conveyed through Kaori's twisted expression.

Panicking, she yelled at Hajime.

“Are you insane!? Don’t you care what happens to her!?”

“Shut up, ghost. If I stop attacking, you’ll get to keep Kaori’s body forever. Besides, if only killing you will destroy Kaori’s soul, then I can do anything to you as long as you remain alive, right? I’ll just have to torture you until you’re begging to leave.”

The specter was at a loss for words. She’d never faced anyone so hell-bent on killing her.

“You hurt someone important to me. Don’t think you’ll get off lightly. Trust me, I have ways of making sure you won’t die no matter how much you suffer. I’ll make sure you’re perfectly lucid for every minute of it, too. Hell will seem like paradise once I’m through with you. You’re one of my enemies... but hey, at least you won’t die.” Ribbons of dark red mana swirled around Hajime, and his white hair stood on end. His gaze was as cold as ice.

Hajime was furious, more than he had ever been. Just killing this specter wouldn’t be enough for him. He would make her suffer every way he knew how.

The specter just stared at Hajime, frozen in terror. She couldn’t even muster the courage to say anything in her defense.

She had realized too late that she should never have picked a fight with the monster staring down at her. Now, she had no choice but to pay the price for her mistake.

Hajime pressed Donner against Kaori’s forehead again. The specter began to pray. *Please let this end quickly.* The mere thought of what Hajime would do to her already left her wishing she was dead, except she already was.

She was nothing more than what remained of a human’s particularly powerful grudge. Now though, she was even willing to forgo that grudge if it let her leave this plane of existence.

I don’t want to exist anymore! I don’t want to exist anymore! Just as Hajime was about to pull the trigger, Kaori’s body began to glow. She was enveloped in the light of the healing spell Consecration. It was one of the delayed cast spells she’d held in reserve for emergencies.

The specter looked down in surprise.

Don’t worry, I’m exorcising you. This way you’ll be able to pass on.

The light surrounding Kaori grew brighter. It wrapped itself around the specter, and she slowly began floating up to the ceiling. Her consciousness began to fade, and her spirit along with it.

A second later, Kaori opened her eyes. It seemed the specter had been banished.

Hajime looked down at Kaori. He'd confirmed the specter's disappearance with his Demon Eye, so there was no reason to be on guard anymore. He checked over Kaori, making sure the possession hadn't left any lingering effects.

Kaori could feel the intensity of Hajime's gaze. She could tell just how worried he'd been. It almost surprised her how serious he looked.

She met his gaze and lifted herself up. Then, she brought her face close to his, and kissed him on the lips. It was a brief one, but it was nevertheless Kaori's first kiss.

Hajime had been too worried making sure Kaori's soul really wasn't going to be destroyed to dodge the kiss in time. After a brief moment of surprise, Hajime pulled away.

"What're you doing?"

"Giving you my answer?"

"Your answer to what?"

"Remember, you asked me why I even decided to come with you... Well, I found the answer to why I decided to travel with you, and why I'll keep traveling with you."

She smiled, and it was the usual bright smile Hajime had begun to miss. This was the first time since entering the labyrinth that he'd seen her smile like that.

The whole time Kaori had been possessed, she'd actually been conscious. It was as if she'd been locked inside her own mind, forced to watch her body act against her will. However, since she'd been aware of everything that had been happening, she'd seen just how mad Hajime had gotten for her sake. She'd heard him call her someone important to him.

Seeing him like that had really moved her. She remembered how she had felt when she'd confessed to him.

No matter what anyone else said, no matter how much trouble it caused others, this was the one thing she wasn't going to give up on. She would make him reciprocate her love. That resolve hadn't changed.

She didn't want to be the only one left out of Hajime's group. She didn't want to be the only one not by his side. Even if she wasn't nearly as strong as Yue or the others, she wanted to prove her feelings for Hajime were every bit as strong as the other girls.

"I love you, Hajime-kun. I love you so much. That's why I want to stay by your side."

"Won't that just make it hurt more? Like I told Shea, I have no intention of being with anyone other than Yue."

"Maybe. I do want you to look only at me. I want to be the only one special to you. I'm definitely jealous of Yue, and I feel like I'm not as good as her... It'll definitely be painful if I stay."

"Then you should..."

"But I know if I back down here, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I'm sure of it. You're right that after coming here, I saw the difference between me and everyone else, and I started to lose faith... I began to doubt whether or not coming with you really was for the best. But I'm not worried anymore." She cupped Hajime's cheeks and smiled.

He wasn't sure how to react to that. In the end, though, it was her decision. If this was what she truly wanted, he wasn't going to refuse her. Happiness had a different meaning for everyone. It wasn't for Hajime to decide what would make Kaori happy, nor was it his place to dictate such things.

"I see... If that's what you've decided, then I won't argue."

"Good. I know I'll be causing you a lot of trouble, but please don't hate me for it."

"Bit late to be asking that. You were causing me heaps of trouble back when we were in Japan even... You're more of a troublemaker than you look."

"Hey, that's mean!"

"Well, it's true. You'd always come talk to me in school, completely oblivious of what everyone else thought. You didn't even notice the other guys in the class looked like they wanted to kill me every time you said anything remotely suggestive. Plus, you came to my room at night wearing nothing but a negligee..."

"Ugh... I-I didn't realize anything back then. I just wanted to talk to you... And that time I went to your room, I got super embarrassed about it

afterward..."

Kaori buried her face in her hands. Smiling wryly to himself, Hajime helped her up. He patted her on the shoulder and the pair made their way to the end of the hold. There was a glowing magic circle there.

Kaori grabbed hold of Hajime's sleeve, holding him back. She was still shaking a little. Clearly, being possessed had been quite an ordeal for her. Though it seemed not to have left any lasting effects, so it wouldn't take long for her to recover.

"Let's take a short break."

Kaori decided to make the most of her break, and jumped onto Hajime's back.

"What are you doing?"

"It's better to hurry, right? There's no telling how long that magic circle will stay active. If we stay here too long, the fog might come back, so this is more efficient, right?"

She's got a point. Hajime reluctantly allowed her to ride on his back and stepped into the magic circle.

Kaori wrapped her arms around Hajime's neck and hugged him tight.

Hajime had a hard time concentrating with her pressing so tightly against his back. Plus, Kaori whispering into his ear only made it worse. Her hot breath tickled his ear.

"Hajime-kun... Can you say that again?"

"Say what again?"

"When you got angry at the ghost. Remember?"

"Hmm, I can't say I do."

"Come on, you could at least say it one more time."

The two of them continued flirting amicably as Hajime stepped into the magic circle.

And, in a completely different location, pale light illuminated the ocean's surface as waves lapped against the ceiling.

In the center of the room was a shrine, which was supported by four massive pillars. It had no walls, and the ceiling was held up by the pillars alone. An altar lay in the center of the shrine, with a detailed magic circle engraved on its face. Also, it was surrounded by seawater, and four floating paths jutted out from it along the cardinal directions. They each ended at a

circular platform. There were magic circles carved into the floor at each platform.

One of the four started glowing faintly. A second later it exploded into light, and two figures stepped out. Hajime and Kaori.

“Where are we? Hm? Wait, is that the final magic circle? Don’t tell me we beat this labyrinth already...”

“Umm, is that bad?”

“Nah, I just didn’t think we’d finish it so fast. It feels like it was way too easy compared to the other labyrinths... I thought that sea angel thing might come back at the end, but I don’t sense it anywhere...” Hajime was a little disappointed they’d reached the end of Meiru Melusine’s labyrinth so easily. Kaori poked her head out from behind Hajime’s shoulder and grimaced.

“You know, Hajime-kun. I’d say what we went through already was hard enough. First, we had to find our way into an underwater cavern. You know most people don’t have submarines in this world, right? You’d have to use a lot of mana just to get here. If you mess up, you’d drown before even stepping inside. Then, we had to fight that crazy sea angel monster, and after that we had to fight a bunch of illusions. They couldn’t even be hurt by physical attacks, so we had to use mana again. After that, at the end, you had to fight an army of soldiers while exhausted. I wouldn’t call that easy.”

“Hm, you’ve got a point, but still...”

“The people of this world are pretty devout. Seeing something like that would have probably broken them...”

“Yeah, it’s possible just watching them go crazy would have been too much for them to handle...”

What Kaori was trying to say was that Hajime was just too strong. When he thought about it, Hajime realized the Grand Gruen Volcano had been a piece of cake too. Had it not been for Freid’s surprise attack, they would have cleared it without a single injury.

I guess it’s possible the labyrinth was so easy that we cleared it even before meeting up with Yue and the others again. Just as he was thinking that, the magic circle on the platform to his right began to glow.

Once the blinding glow of light faded, Yue, Shea, and Tio stepped out. *Perfect timing.*

“You guys got here at the perfect time. Is everyone alright?”

“Yeah. Did you... run into difficulties?”

“Ah, are you alright, Kaori-san?”

“Hm? You aren’t injured, are you? Shouldn’t you be able to heal yourself if you are?”

Yue and the others responded cheerfully. When they saw Kaori riding on his back though, their expressions changed to ones of worry. Kaori hurriedly reassured them.

“Thanks for worrying about me, everyone. But I’m fine. I’m just being a little lazy.” She smiled as she said that.

Yue glared at her, while Shea ended up muttering jealously.

“Wow, lucky you... Let me have a turn too.” Tio, on the other hand, simply had a knowing grin on her face.

“I see.”

“Wait, Kaori. You can stand now?”

“Ehehe. To be honest, I could have walked from the start... Sorry.”

“Haaah, just get off.” Kaori smiled guiltily and Hajime shrugged her off his back. The two of them joined up where the paths connected and headed to the temple.

“So what happened between you two? Come on, Master, you have to tell us. Something happened with you and Kaori, did it not? Don’t try to hide it now, I can— Bweh!?” Tio’s persistence was getting on Hajime’s nerves, so he slapped her to shut her up. Tio sank to the ground, a look of pure ecstasy on her face. She was already panting heavily.

“I-It has been a while since I felt such pain. Haaah... Haaah... Mmm... Master, will you please punish me more? You can even kick me if you like.” Hajime ignored her expectant gaze and continued walking toward the altar.

“One more! Just one more slap, please! I beg of you!” They heard Tio pleading with Hajime from behind, but everyone ignored her.

“So? What happened?” Yue asked the same question Tio had. However, her question was directed at Kaori, not Hajime. Kaori met Yue’s gaze and beamed. Her smile had the same warmth that Hajime had grown used to seeing in the classroom.

“We just kissed.”

“I see...”

“What!? Really!? Who started it!? Did you kiss him or, wait, did he kiss you!?” An edge of anger slipped into Yue’s voice, but Shea seemed excited for Kaori.

“I kissed him. After seeing how angry Hajime-kun got for my sake, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Wow, it’s just like what happened with me! I did the exact same thing before. We’re comrades now, Kaori-san!”

“Ufufu, I guess so, Shea. Shall we steal him together, then?”

“If we’re doing this, we have to make him ours for good.”

It almost sounded as if they were planning on kidnapping him. Cold sweat poured down Hajime’s face. True, it sounded like they were just joking, but there was a dangerous glimmer in their eyes. It scared him to see a pure girl like Kaori and a cheerful bunny girl like Shea stare at him as if they were wolves staring down their prey. Frankly, he never knew Kaori especially could be so aggressive.

“I thought you’d run away with your tail between your legs.” Yue looked probingly at Kaori.

She’d noticed how Kaori was letting her inferiority complex eat away at her. Honestly, she’d expected the labyrinth to break her spirit and convince her to give up on Hajime. Had that happened, Yue certainly wouldn’t have tried to console Kaori. After all, if Kaori’s feelings for Hajime were that shallow, then she had no right to be here anyway.

However, it seemed Kaori had managed to survive. More than that, her resolve was even firmer than before. Yue was curious as to how she’d managed to find her courage again.

“I thought so too. Hajime-kun even said I should leave. Still, it’s a bit too late to care about trivial things like... how much stronger you are.”

“So you’re determined, then?”

“I guess you could say that. But you know, I was determined from the start. I just lost sight of that when I saw how much stronger you all were. I won’t show you anything pathetic like that again.”

“It would have been better if you just gave up.”

“Hehe, scared? Worried I’ll steal Hajime-kun away from you?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, you troublemaker.”

“Hajime-kun called me a troublemaker too. But I really don’t think I’m that much of one...” Kaori frowned. It was a little disheartening that both the man she loved and her rival thought she was a troublemaker. Still, she got over it quickly enough. In all fairness, Yue, and in fact, all of Hajime’s group were pretty big troublemakers. Sadly, Yue herself wasn’t aware the word

could apply to her just as well.

“Well, maybe you’re right, Yue... But at least now I know I’m someone important to Hajime-kun. All that’s left is to steal the title of ‘special’ from you. I won’t give up, no matter what anyone says.”

“I see. Then like before, I accept your challenge.”

“Yep! Oh, by the way, I don’t hate you or anything. In fact, I feel like we’re just friends that fight a lot.”

“Friends? I’m your friend?”

“Yep, you’re my friend. In Japan there’s a lot of people like that. They show their friendship by fighting with each other. Just like us. We’re rivals in love, but we’re still friends, right?”

“Japan... That’s Hajime’s home. The more I hear about it, the stranger it sounds. But... I like it.”

“Glad to hear it. Ufufu, so let’s try and get along, alright?”

“Okay...”

It should have been a good thing that they were finally getting along, but for some reason it made Hajime feel lonely. He was the only one being left out of the girls’ conversation.

Kaori and Yue’s conversation reminded Hajime of the dialogue between certain Monogatari characters, but he didn’t say anything about it.

Hajime was a patient man after all, so he knew when it was time to wait his turn. Once they reached the altar, the party stepped into the giant magic circle together. As usual, their memories were examined to ascertain whether or not they’d actually cleared the labyrinth. However this time, each group saw the memories the other group had experienced as well. In other words, Hajime and Kaori got to see what Yue, Shea, and Tio had gone through.

It seemed they had traversed through the ruins of a giant underground city. Like Hajime, they’d been shown illusions made of magic. Their vision had been one where two armies had fought in the streets of the ruined city. At first, the invading demon army had attacked the human defenders. But once Yue had used magic, both sides had turned their blades onto them, just like in Hajime’s vision.

They’d made their way to the city’s castle while defeating the enemies that came after them. Once they got inside, they’d overheard a discussion among the country’s leaders.

It appeared the demons had overrun one of the human villages and

slaughtered everyone inside. Because of that, the humans had declared war on the demons. However, it seemed the attack had all been orchestrated by the humans' leaders. They'd wanted an excuse to eradicate all demons from the planet. Before they knew it though, the flames of war spread far beyond their ability to control. Soon enough they were the ones losing, and the humans had been pushed back to their capital.

From the sound of it, it seemed a high-ranking priest from the Church of Light had been the one to push hardest for war. They had also been the ones behind the attack on the human village. The Church of Light was apparently the predecessor to the Holy Church Hajime and the others were familiar with.

Driven into a corner, the humans had turned to desperate tactics. They attempted to sacrifice someone to appease their gods and gain their favor. A hundred little girls were invited into the church's grand cathedral, where they were summarily slaughtered.

Yue and the others had naturally been appalled at what they saw. Their faces paled as they were forced to rewatch those memories. It even looked like Shea was about to puke.

The memory scan finished, and the circle deemed that they had indeed conquered the labyrinth. Another branch of magic from the age of the gods was inscribed into their minds.

“Of course they’d put this magic here... This is the other tip of the continent, goddammit! Stupid Liberators!

“So this is where we were supposed to obtain the power of restoration.”

Hajime cursed at the long dead Melusine. The magic they'd received was regeneration magic.

Hajime recalled the time they'd gone to the Grand Tree in the Haltina Woods. The stone tablet had told them they would need the power of restoration. In other words, to conquer the labyrinth on the eastern tip of the continent, one would need magic obtained by clearing the labyrinth on the western tip of the continent. For Hajime, who'd gone to the east first, this was unbelievably annoying. At least he had a car to drive, though. Normal challengers would have been forced to make another year-long trek.

The Liberators just keep getting more and more annoying. As the light from the magic circle faded, a rectangular block rose up from the ground. It was like a miniature version of the altar they were on. It began to glow with a faint light, and a second later a vaguely humanoid shape formed above it.

Like Orcus, it seemed Meiru Melusine had left behind a message for the labyrinth's conquerors.

A second later the light coalesced and Meiru's features could be made out. She was sitting on the block, wearing a white one-piece dress and had long, emerald-green hair. Her ears were also shaped like fins. Surprisingly, it seemed Meiru Melusine had been a Dagon.

Like Oscar, she introduced herself and then began explaining the Liberators' true goal. She seemed like a gentle person. There was a look of profound sorrow on her face as she spoke of the atrocities the gods committed. Her speech was otherwise not too different from Oscar's. As she wound her speech down, she left a final warning for Hajime and the others.

"Please, don't cling to the gods. Don't rely on them. Don't grow accustomed to what's given to you. Struggle on, and grasp what you desire with your own two hands. Decide your own path in life, and walk down it with your own two feet. Remember, no matter how bleak things look, you'll be able to find the answers inside of you. Only you have those answers. Don't be deceived by the gods' honeyed words. Only when you live by your own free will can you find true happiness. I pray the path you walk will be forever showered in fortune." With that, Meiru Melusine's apparition faded away. As the light from the circle that summoned her dissipated, Hajime spotted a coin engraved with her crest resting atop the mini-altar.

"And this makes our fourth marker of strength too, Hajime-san. Now we should be able to challenge the labyrinth in the sea of trees. We'll finally be going back, won't we? I wonder how my dad's doing." Shea gazed nostalgically in the direction of her home. However, when she remembered how her father and the rest of her family had transformed into gangsters, she shook herself back to the present.

Hajime put the coin in his Treasure Trove and similarly tried very hard not to think about the gangster Haulia tribe.

The moment the coin disappeared into his Treasure Trove, the temple began to rumble. A second later, the water level began to rise.

"Whoa!? Tch, looks like we're getting another rough exit. Everyone, grab onto me!"

"Okay."

"Wawah, not so rough!"

"I don't want to go through another Reisen Gorge!"

“Water torture... sounds rather fascinating.”

They were completely submerged in seconds. Hajime didn’t even have the time to pull out his submarine. He handed everyone oxygen masks just in case this trip lasted a while, then had everyone huddle together so they wouldn’t be separated like last time.

The ceiling of the room opened up, just like it had in the Grand Gruen Volcano, and the water started flowing into it. The party was carried up by the powerful current, and they found themselves heading for the hole.

Hajime assumed this was the shortcut out of the labyrinth. Still, he would never have guessed that kind, gentle woman would have come up with such a violent way to take them out of the labyrinth. Especially since it was forced. *Maybe she was a lot more ruthless than she looked.*

After a while, Hajime noticed something. At the rate they were going, the current would crash them into the roof above.

Hajime activated Diamond Skin and moved to shield Yue and the others from the shock. However, just before they hit the ceiling, it too slid away to reveal a hole. The current bore them out and spit them into the sea. Hajime was sure of it now. Meiru Melusine was nowhere near as gentle as she appeared.

Now that they were in relatively calm waters, Hajime pulled out his submarine. He motioned for everyone to get inside.

Still, before they could, they were interrupted. By the worst possible enemy, at that.

“Ah!? Everyone, get out of the way!” He called out a warning with Telepathy.

A giant translucent tentacle slammed into the submarine, sending it spinning away.

Hajime turned back to see the enemy they’d failed to defeat earlier, the giant sea angel. It looked like a fairy, but its jelly melted anything it came into contact with and it could regenerate seemingly indefinitely. It seemed utterly unaffected by water resistance, and shot its countless tentacles at the party at unbelievable speed.

I can’t believe we have to deal with this thing even after beating the labyrinth. Hajime ground his teeth and called out telepathically to Yue.

“Yue!”

“Crystal Coffin!” She immediately created a barrier of ice around them,

freezing the surrounding water in place.

The tentacles slammed into the globe of ice protecting Hajime and the others. The impact was so strong that the party was rattled around like dice in a shaker.

“How are we going to handle this, Master!?” Fortunately, Hajime had a plan.

“Yue, we’ve gotta make it to the surface. We’ll just be slowly beaten down by it underwater. I’ll buy you the time you need!”

“Okay.” Hajime used the spirit stone-imbued ring on his finger to remotely control the submarine. The submarine stopped drifting aimlessly and charged headfirst at the sea angel. It did an underwater barrel roll to avoid the sea angel’s tentacle barrage, then launched a salvo of torpedoes at it.

The single salvo contained twenty torpedoes in it. Honestly, it was almost overkill already.

However, Hajime wanted to be absolutely certain he’d buy them enough time, so he launched all the remaining salvos in the sub as well. He set the submarine circling the sea angel with the hull pointed toward it, as he did so. The unnatural movements almost making it look like the sub was drifting.

All in all, he launched a grand total of 48 torpedoes at the monster. They came at it from all directions, and each and every one of them found their mark.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Explosions blossomed one after another. A massive amount of water around the sea angel was displaced. Jets of water broke the surface of the ocean one after another. That was how powerful each of his torpedoes had been.

While the sea angel was distracted, Yue manipulated the current to carry them to the surface. No matter how fearsome its powers of regeneration were, Hajime was sure that would keep it out of commission for a few minutes at least.

Unfortunately, Hajime and the others had underestimated its strength.

“Yue, above us!”

“No, I can’t stop in time!”

Hajime looked up and saw a membrane of jelly covering the area above them. In a matter of seconds, the jelly had reformed, and now the sea angel was above them.

It opened its mouth wide and swallowed the ice sphere they were riding in whole. They were now inside the sea angel's stomach.

“Shit, it regenerates too fast!”

“This isn’t good, Hajime-san. We’re surrounded in jelly now!”

It seemed the sea angel had been spreading its jelly ever since it appeared. It had planned for this exact situation.

“Hajime, my barrier won’t last long! There’s no water inside its stomach, so I can’t freeze more to reinforce it, either!”

“Tch, everyone, brace for impact!”

Yue did her best to slow the corrosion of her ice sphere. Hajime helped as well by coating the ice in Diamond Skin. At the same time, he used his Treasure Trove to pull out a large number of torpedoes and explosives. He placed them outside the barrier, but inside the sea angel’s stomach.

One again, the sea angel’s body was blown to bits, its pieces scattered to the four winds. The barrier was nearly corroded away at this point, and the explosion blew it to pieces. Hajime and the others were sent flying from the shockwave.

They were once again in the middle of the ocean. Hajime called his submarine back, hoping to at least get Shea and Kaori to the surface. The two of them were even more helpless underwater than the others.

However, his submarine had been caught. The sea angel had latched some of its jelly onto the bottom of the submarine, and now there was a huge hole in it. After being filled with water his submarine had become too slow to maneuver properly. Crippled as it was, the sea angel had easily been able to surround it with more of its scattered jelly and render it completely immobile.

Worse, it had realized they were trying to make a break for the surface, so it had created a translucent barrier of jelly directly above them. Considering how quickly it regenerated, Hajime knew it wouldn’t be easy to break through it.

Hajime inwardly cursed as he watched the sea angel devour his prized submarine.

“Yue, you’re going to have to use your trump card.”

“I’ll need forty seconds.”

“I won’t let it touch you. This is our only way out of the ocean now.”

“Okay... leave it to me.” Yue closed her eyes and began concentrating. Kaori and Shea supported her, making sure the current didn’t sweep her

away.

Tio barely held back the encroaching tentacles with a rapid barrage of mini breath attacks. However, she knew she wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. Breath attacks consumed a lot of mana, and down here they were hampered by water resistance. Moreover, because they were linear attacks, they pierced through the tentacles instead of destroying them. In a few seconds, Tio would be overrun.

Hajime quickly pulled massive quantities of ore out of his Treasure Trove and transmuted another globe-shaped barrier around them.

"Master, I cannot hold them back any longer!"

"You held out long enough, Tio! Everyone, get inside my barrier!"

Hajime made the sphere large enough to fit all five of them. They all scrambled inside, with Tio coming in last. Once they were in, he sealed the entrance. Dark red mana surrounded the metal sphere. Hajime had strengthened it with Diamond Skin. Furthermore, because he'd incorporated weightstone into the barrier's design, it wouldn't sink.

Numerous tentacles slammed against Hajime's sphere. The mana-corroding jelly ate away at his Diamond Skin spell. Before long, the metal itself was being dissolved by the jelly. Red sparks ran down the sections most worn away by the jelly, and they were filled with new metal.

By continually transmuting more ore into the barrier, Hajime was able to keep it mostly intact. Thankfully, Hajime had stockpiled so much extra ore that he had mountains of it stored in his Treasure Trove. He continued replenishing the walls of his barrier for the full forty seconds Yue needed to finish her preparations.

"Cosmic Rift!" Yue finished casting her teleportation spell. An elliptical ring of light appeared next to the party.

The teleportation spell, Cosmic Rift, was one of the many spatial magic skills they'd learned at the Grand Gruen Volcano. It connected two points in space. In other words, it created a warp gate. As Yue had acquired it only recently, it still took her nearly a minute to cast such a difficult spell.

"Everyone, get in!" At Hajime's command, everyone jumped into the warp gate. Hajime went last, transmuting the barrier until everyone was through. The gate vanished after Hajime leaped through it, and seconds later the barrier that had been protecting them was dissolved by the sea angel's tentacles.

As they passed through the gate, Hajime and the others were assailed by a sense of weightlessness. That was mostly because Yue had teleported them into the sky. In order to get them as far away from the ocean as possible, Yue had put the exit point of her Cosmic Rift one hundred meters in the air.

Tio instantly transformed into her dragon form and caught the others on her back. Yue slumped over, and Shea and Kaori hurried to hold her up. Casting that spell had taken all of her mana. She instantly began replenishing her reserves using the magic accessories Hajime had given her.

“Thanks, Yue. I knew I could count on you. Though it looks like spatial magic’s pretty difficult.”

“Haaah... Haaah... Yeah. I did it, but I’m not good enough with it yet that I can use it in combat.”

Spatial magic was far harder for Yue to use than even gravity magic had been. Like she’d said, under normal circumstances it wouldn’t be usable in combat. She’d been forced to use Image Composition to create an imaginary magic circle instead of simply controlling her mana directly like she did for other spells. On top of that, it had consumed twice as much mana as her highest-rank spells did just to teleport them one hundred meters into the air. Its mana consumption was still highly inefficient.

Still, it was thanks to the fact that she could use it at all that they’d been able to escape. Yue blushed as everyone, even Kaori, praised her skills. Everyone smiled in relief, but a second later those smiles froze.

Splaaaaaaaaash! A massive tidal wave bore down on Hajime and the others from behind.

No, massive didn’t do the word justice. The tidal wave rose up so high that it blotted out the sky. It towered over them, even though they were a good hundred meters above the water. At a guess, Hajime put it at five hundred meters tall and at least a full kilometer wide.

“Tch, Tio!”

“Understood!” Tio flapped her wings and shot forward. They couldn’t dodge to the left or the right, and spatial magic wouldn’t make it in time. In that case, the only option was to keep moving forward. Tio flew with a speed rivaling that of her flight from the Grand Gruen Volcano.

“Divine Shackles! Hallowed Ground!”

“Hallowed Ground.”

Kaori cast the spells she’d stocked up while they’d been waiting for Yue.

She joined everyone together with her chains while simultaneously casting the same barrier Yue did. Shea closed her eyes and concentrated. A second later, her eyes shot open and she shouted out a warning.

“Tio-san, watch out! That thing is hiding inside the tsunami! It’s going to send its tentacles at you!” She relayed the things she’d seen with Future Sight. Tio reacted instantly, twisting out of the way. Countless tentacles lashed at the spot she’d been in mere seconds ago.

They’d evaded the first attack. However, because of that, the distance between them and the tsunami had shrunk. Hajime fended off further attacks with his flamethrower, but Tio wasn’t able to recover enough speed to get away.

“Shit! Everyone, brace for impact!” Hajime hugged Yue, Shea, and Kaori protectively. A second later, the gargantuan tsunami crashed into them.

Thanks to Yue and Kaori’s barriers, they were able to withstand the impact. Still, the tsunami tossed them around, and before they knew it they were plummeting back into the ocean.

Moreover, the force of the tsunami had completely shattered one Hallowed Ground, and the other was filled with cracks. Had Yue and Kaori only deployed one barrier, they would have been sleeping with the fishes.

Hajime shook his head, clearing the dizziness that had accompanied being tossed around by the tsunami. When he looked up, his expression grew grim.

“So you’re not gonna let your prey go, huh?” The sea angel had caught up to them. It had gotten bigger, too. Now it was over twenty meters long. Apparently, it didn’t think that was big enough though. It continued gathering translucent jelly from its surroundings, growing even larger.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me. It doesn’t die, it can melt anything, and it can even control the sea... How are we supposed to beat it?”

“Hajime-san, can you kiss me? I’m not joking, I want to at least be kissed by you once before I die.”

“In that case, Master, I too wish for a kiss before death.”

Kaori was despairing, but Shea and Tio were smiling faintly, a look of resignation on their faces.

But when they looked up at Hajime, shivers ran down their spine. Even now, his eyes glimmered with determination. Bloodlust so thick it was palpable rolled off him in waves. He glared at the sea angel, completely undaunted.

He hadn't given up. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. All he was thinking about was how to kill the enemy in front of him and make it out alive.

The sea angel they faced was unbelievably powerful. But if Hajime was the kind of person who gave up because the enemy was too strong, he wouldn't have made it so far. He would have died in the abyss ages ago.

Yue had walked through the abyss with him, so she understood. She, too, was only thinking of how to defeat the foe in front of her. Surrender wasn't part of her vocabulary.

Kaori, Shea, and Tio's breath caught in their throat as they watched Hajime. They stayed like that for a while, until the sea angel, which was now thirty meters long, attacked and brought them back to their senses.

Kaori hurriedly put up another Hallowed Ground. Shea tried to use her Branching Paths ability to find a way out of this mess. Tio fired her breath at the sea angel. If Hajime hadn't given up, then they wouldn't either. If they didn't show their grit here, then they had no right to travel at Hajime's side.

Yue hadn't been able to come up with a solution, so she added her strength to theirs, hoping to at least buy time.

Hajime stood stock still, thinking furiously. He'd activated Riftwalk to accelerate his thought processes even further. He knew he needed to find a solution soon, or they were all dead. He went over all the information they'd gathered on the enemy so far. Every little thing was examined in detail in case it offered a potential solution. There was one point he came back to. Back when they'd first escaped from the giant sea angel. *Why didn't it chase after us back then? It could have chased us down easily. What was different between then and now? We're not...*

"We're not using enough fire." Last time both Tio and Yue had blasted the sea angel with fire spells. The fire had withered its tentacles, and the burned jelly hadn't regenerated.

Finally, he saw a ray of hope. He wasn't one hundred percent certain his conjecture was correct, but it seemed the sea angel couldn't regenerate indefinitely. It just had so much jelly that it appeared that way.

Furthermore, it likely could create more jelly given enough time. It seemed creating more jelly took a lot more time than regenerating what was already there, though. That was why it had taken it so long to recover after they'd burned so much of it last time. They'd been able to escape because it

had prioritized replenishing its jelly reserves over chasing them.

So to defeat it, they simply had to do the same thing as last time. Burn it down faster than it could regenerate and replenish. However, they were surrounded by ocean. Fire magic wouldn't be very effective with all this water around. Tio's breath was powerful, but she couldn't keep it up for long enough to burn away all the jelly. They had no weapons capable of burning it away.

In that case...

"I just have to make one." Hajime pulled out a large amount of ore and torpedoes from his Treasure Trove and started transmuting.

"Hajime? Did you think of something?"

"Yeah. This is the only way we're gonna be able to use fire around water. If this works, we'll be able to kill it."

"Do you really mean it, Hajime-kun!?"

"I knew I could trust you, Hajime-san! I never doubted you for a second!"

"Shea, were you not the one asking Master for a kiss before you died just moments ago... At any rate, good job, Master!" Tio joked around with Shea. The two of them had relaxed a little. The man they trusted most in the world had told them they'd make it. There was no reason to worry anymore. All that was left was to live up to the trust he'd shown in them.

"It's gonna take some time, though. I'm counting on you guys to hold it off."

Hajime smiled fearlessly, and the others smiled back at him. Then, he activated both Riftwalk and Limit Break while he worked. Bolstered by those skills, he transmuted faster than ever.

He finished one weapon and quickly started on the next. This new weapon of his required an unprecedented amount of precision and skill to craft, so he couldn't mass-produce them like his bullets. However, he needed a lot or it wouldn't be enough to burn away all of the sea angel's jelly. Firing them off one after another would just delay their inevitable demise. Either he got it all at once, or not at all. Limit Break caused dark red mana to swirl about him, and it looked like he was caught in a small crimson tornado.

Unfortunately, their situation was still looking rather bleak. Overpowered as they were, Yue and the others still couldn't hold back the sea angel for long. The ocean just gave it too great of an advantage.

They all tried their best to hold on, but it didn't look like they would be

able to endure long enough for Hajime to finish making his weapons stockpile.

“Three more minutes, that’s all I need!” Hajime used Telepathy to shout that to the others. The sea angel was almost right on top of them. It opened its mouth wide to swallow the party whole once more.

Hajime reluctantly decided he’d need to fire off whatever he’d made so far. It wasn’t enough, but there was no point in saving it if they were about to die.

Just then, though, a grizzled old voice spoke to them via Telepathy.

“Yo, Young Haj. You seem to be in a spot of trouble. This old man here’ll help you out.”

“W-Wait, I recognize that voice! Is that you, Fish-san!?”

“That it is. It’s me, your friend Fish-san.”

To Hajime’s disbelief, the fishman he had freed back in the aquarium at Fuhren was here. Hajime looked around in surprise, and saw a giant silver silhouette tackle the sea angel. The sea angel was taken completely by surprise, and was sent flying off to the side.

The familiar fish monster with a human head appeared beside Yue’s barrier. Yue and the others were stunned. Yue, Kaori, and Tio had never even seen the fishman before, so it was natural, but even Shea hadn’t expected to find him here.

“You’re the guy from back then!” Shea exclaimed, while Kaori shrieked in fear.

“Have you been well, Shea?”

“Fweh!? Umm, y-yes! I’m doing fine!”

“Excellent, excellent. Quit spacing out, Young Haj. You said you needed three minutes to beat that oversized Devourer, right? Then get to work. I can’t hold it off for long.”

“A-Alright. I’m still not sure what’s going on, but thanks for saving us, Fish-san.”

Hajime once again got back to work.

The giant silver silhouette continued fighting with the sea angel, dodging its attacks and keeping it away from Tio. Upon closer inspection, Hajime realized what he’d thought was one silver creature was actually a huge school of fish. Not monster fish, just regular everyday fish. However, there were hundreds of thousands of them all gathered together. With that many, even

they could hold their own against the sea angel. Still, they wouldn't be able to keep it up for long; thousands of fish died in every attack.

Why on earth is a fishman here? Shea stepped up to ask what everyone else was wondering. It was a rare sight to see Yue huddling behind Shea and not the other way around.

"U-Umm, Fish-san? Is it alright if I call you that? Uhh, what exactly are you doing here?"

"Hmph, I wasn't doing anything. I was just minding my business, swimming along, when I sensed this huge explosion of mana. I heard your Telepathy too, so I rushed over, only to find Young Haj about to be eaten by a giant Devourer. I didn't really know what was going on, but my friend was in trouble. I wouldn't be a man if I didn't help him out."

"Umm, what about those fish... Also, what's a Devourer?"

"That thing you're fighting. They're known as Devourers. They're creatures that used to live in the sea long ago... Actually, they're more natural disasters than creatures. People say they're the ancient ancestors of monsters. Oh, and I'm controlling those fish with my Telepathy. The kind of Telepathy my species uses lets me communicate to some extent with all sea creatures, even if they don't have mana."

Shea's jaw dropped open. Fish-san was a fishmancer. As he finished his explanation, the last of his fish army melted away. The Devourer once again chased after Tio, determined to swallow them all whole.

Fortunately, he had managed to buy them the three minutes Hajime needed.

Hajime set up his super-sized torpedoes around the edges of Yue's barrier. In three minutes he'd crafted roughly 120 of them. Floating next to him were a number of small circles equal to the number of his torpedoes.

Hajime poured his mana into the spirit stone and launched all of the torpedoes simultaneously. They left a trail of bubbles in their wake as they sped toward the Devourer. These were no normal torpedoes. Simple explosives wouldn't do any lasting harm to the Devourer, after all. It would just regenerate all of the jelly that had been blown apart.

Irked at being interrupted, the Devourer sent out a barrage of tentacles to swat down the torpedoes. However, Hajime guided the torpedoes to weave through the tentacles. With his Limit Break, he was just barely able to control all 120 of them at once.

“You’re not gonna dodge, are you? Hope you like my present, then.” Hajime muttered viciously. He figured since the Devourer dissolved anything that got close to it, it never bothered dodging.

His guess proved to be correct. After making it through the forest of tentacles, Hajime’s torpedoes all smashed into the Devourer. It hadn’t even tried to move out of the way.

However, there was no explosion. The torpedoes slowly melted into the Devourer. All of the black dots sticking out of it almost made it look like it had been poisoned.

Hajime needed to hurry and complete his preparations before the torpedoes melted completely. He pulled a large amount of sticky black liquid out of his Treasure Trove. It was liquified flamrock. Then, he poured the liquified flamrock into the circles floating around him.

A second later, the Devourer was dyed pitch-black. The blackness spread through its body like ink through paper. Black liquid moved to fill every inch of its translucent jelly. The liquid flamrock was being transported from the circles into the Devourer’s body.

The circles were actually all miniature warp gates connected to their respective torpedoes. Anything that fell into the circles around him appeared at the corresponding torpedo. His torpedoes hadn’t actually been the weapon, they’d just been its means of delivery. Their shells only existed to protect the warp gates inside of them from being corroded away instantly.

Naturally, the liquid flamrock itself began to dissolve inside the Devourer as well, but there was so much of it that it couldn’t get rid of it in time. It tried to split itself into pieces to save parts of it from being filled, but Yue and the others weren’t about to let that happen. They used barriers, ice spells, and breath attacks to keep it busy. Hajime hadn’t asked Yue to make the gate because he knew she wasn’t skilled enough with the magic yet to accurately open one inside a moving target. For now, the best she could do was connect two points in space.

The Devourer had gathered all of its jelly in one place to give itself an advantage over Hajime, but that backfired on it now. It would die precisely because it had gone all out. Hajime kept pouring flamrock in until he was sure the Devourer was thoroughly saturated.

He grinned wickedly at the Devourer, a sharp glint in his eyes. There was a small burning object in his hand.

“Let me show you what hell feels like.” He flicked it into one of his warp gates with his thumb. It stuck to the flamrock, pouring through and reappearing inside the Devourer. 3,000 degree flames spread to every inch of the monster’s body, devouring the Devourer whole.

It transformed from black to red in the span of a few heartbeats. As the flames were originating inside of it, the Devourer had no way to fight back. It could only watch in horror as its body was eaten away.

Soon, it couldn’t contain the flames inside it, and gouts of fire shot out of it. However, this just made it catch fire from both outside and in. The flames were so hot that they evaporated the surface of the ocean and a large cloud of steam covered the Devourer.

Jets of water shot up as the hyper-pressurized steam rose to the surface. The sea began to roil and bubble as the parts of the Devourer still underwater burned away. Yue’s barrier kept the choppy waves off them while the party searched the area, making sure no traces of it remained.

They combed the surroundings for a while, but they didn’t see any more jelly. Hajime used his Demon Eye and Farsight to check even more thoroughly, but still didn’t see anything.

Now he was certain. The ancient monster of the depths, the Devourer, was no more.

“Gah... That was hard...” Hajime’s warp gates lost their glimmer and fell to the ground as he stopped powering them. The swirling cloud of mana that had surrounded him so far faded away as well. He slumped to his knees and grimaced. He’d overexerted himself using Limit Break, so now he was left with a pounding headache. Still, his eyes glowed with the joy of triumph. They’d done it.

“Hajime, are you alright?”

“Hajime-kun, I’ll heal you right away, don’t worry!”

Yue walked over and helped him stand, Kaori started casting healing magic, and Shea and Tio ran up and hugged Hajime.

“We did it, Hajime-san!”

“Wonderful, Master. Your murder methods are as creative and cruel as always. That sent shivers down my spine.”

Kaori’s healing magic soothed Hajime’s headache, and he smiled at his comrades. A grumpy old man’s voice interrupted their celebration.

“Hey, Young Haj. Next time you’re about the blow the ocean up, tell me

first. I thought I was going to die back there.”

“Ah, Fish-san. Sorry. I was so focused on killing it that I forgot.”

The explosion of pressure caused by the heat had blown the fishman away too. Hajime had been so focused on killing the Devourer that he’d forgotten the fishman was also in the water. He also hadn’t expected an explosion. The interaction between the flamrock and the ocean had surprised even him.

“Well, I won’t deny killing Devourers is pretty taxing. You guys did a good job.”

“If you hadn’t saved us back there, we might really have died. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Though I was just repaying my debts, so don’t worry too much about it.”

“You’re so cool, Fish-san. My thanks to whatever coincidence brought you here.”

“Young Haj, a series of coincidences is what we call fate. It was fate that you saved me back in that city, just as it was fate that brought me here to save you.”

Hajime and the fishman smiled at each other. It almost looked like they were communicating silently. The girls whispered to each other as they watched this bizarre spectacle.

“Is it just me, or does it feel like they really understand each other?”

“Is this what friendships between guys are like?”

“Hajime-kun, is the first friend you made in this world really a fishman? I know you didn’t get along with other people back in Japan, but that doesn’t mean you have to turn to other species!”

“They were like that last time, too. I guess it’s the boys’ version of girls’ talk or something? Though he’s talking to an old man and not a boy... Actually, he’s not even an old man. He’s just a fish.”

They were both a little confused and a little creeped out that Hajime seemed closer to a fish than to them. After a while, it seemed Hajime and the fishman’s conversation came to an end.

“I’ll be leaving then, Young Haj. We’ll meet again, if fate wills it.”

“Yeah. Stay safe, Fish-san.”

The fishman turned around and swam off after hearing those words. However, just as he was about to vanish from sight, he stopped and turned to face Shea.

“Good luck. I know you’ve got a lot of rivals, but you can do it.”

Whenever you two have kids, let me know. I'll let them play with mine. I'll introduce you to my wife, too. Bye, then." He turned back around and vanished into the deep blue sea.

Hajime and the others were stunned.

"He's married!?"

No one had expected that. Hajime had thought the fishman just liked wandering around, but it turned out he was actually a deadbeat dad. It took a while for everyone's shock to wear off.

Chapter III: A New Vow

“Daddy! It’s morning! It’s time to get up!” A young child’s voice rang out through the second floor of a certain house in Erisen. The sun had crested over the horizon, and was making its way up the sky. Looking out the window, one could tell the weather would be great.

“Haaah...” Hajime rolled over in his bed. The young child, who was of course Myu, ran over to him to wake him up.

She jumped up onto his bed and landed squarely on his stomach. The full weight of her body pressed down against him.

She may have been a little girl of only four years, but people were heavy. She still weighed around 16 kilograms. If something that heavy slammed into a normal person’s stomach, they’d normally groan in pain. Hajime, though, barely felt it. Still, he wasn’t too happy about being forced awake.

“Daddy, get up. It’s morning. The sun’s out.”

“Hey Myu. Good morning. I’m up, so you can stop slapping me now?”

Myu had been happily slapping Hajime’s cheek to wake him up. He raised himself to a sitting position and lifted Myu off him. Her long emerald hair spilled out behind her. He smiled as he looked up at her. They really did resemble father and daughter.

“Mmm... Hajime? Myu?” A tired voice called out to Myu. Hajime pulled back the sheets to reveal Yue, sleeping curled up in a ball next to him

Despite the fact that she’d just woken up, her hair wasn’t messy at all. It glimmered in the sun, and her eyes shone like rubies. She blinked a few times. Like Hajime, Yue was naked. Her long hair fell over her shoulders, covering portions of her porcelain-white skin.

“Why are you and Yue-oneechan always naked, Daddy?” Specifically, Myu meant why they were always naked when she came to wake them up in the mornings. Hajime and Yue hadn’t become nudists since returning from Melusine’s labyrinth.

“You don’t have any pajamas?” Myu asked innocently. She looked at Hajime with pity, and he exchanged glances with Yue. There was no way

they could give this pure girl an answer that would corrupt her mind. After agonizing over it for a few seconds, Yue came to his rescue. She gave a very respectable, mature answer.

“Myu, you’ll understand when you’re older.”

“I will?”

“Yeah, you will.”

With that, they dodged a bullet. Yue would let Remia teach her daughter about sex. However, Myu wasn’t completely convinced. She tilted her head and, after a few seconds of thought, turned around and asked another damning question.

“Do you know because you’re big over here, Daddy? But I don’t have one of those... Does that mean I’ll never understand?” Myu started poking at Hajime’s morning wood. Hajime hurriedly pulled her off.

“Myu, don’t touch that. Listen up. You’re a girl, so it’s normal not to have one. Don’t worry about it. In ten years, no in twenty years you’ll... Actually, just never worry about it.” Hajime started spouting some very dumb things with a very serious face. Myu had no idea what Hajime was trying to say, but she nodded all the same. Satisfied, Hajime began combing her hair with his fingers. Myu forgot all about what she’d been wondering before and leaned into Hajime.

Yue watched the proceedings with an amused look on her face. His surprisingly insatiable libido combined with his overprotectiveness for Myu made for an interesting mixture.

Hajime averted his gaze. The three of them sat there in the morning sun for a while longer until Kaori and Remia showed up, wondering why Hajime still hadn’t come down.

Six days had passed since they’d ridden Tio back to Erisen after clearing the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. They’d been staying at Remia’s house, and since their return they’d been the talk of the town.

The party had spent the past six days mastering the new magic they’d acquired and repairing and improving their equipment. Though, with the great food and warm weather, they spent more time vacationing than preparing really.

Still, six days was a long time to spend even if they’d been both training and vacationing. The reason was of, course, Myu.

Hajime wouldn't be taking Myu with him on his travels any longer. There was no way he'd be able to take a four-year-old girl into a labyrinth located on the other edge of the world.

Worse, the two other labyrinths were in even more dangerous locations. One of them was located in demon territory, in the Frost Caverns of the Schnee Snow Fields. The other was on the Divine Mountain, of all places. Both would require them to dive right into the heart of the enemy. It was impossible to leave Myu somewhere safe while he challenged those labyrinths.

Myu herself seemed to have realized that too. Every time someone tried to bring up the topic, she'd start acting extremely spoiled and make it difficult for anyone to mention it. They dragged out their training more than they needed to just to have an excuse to stay longer.

"Still, we really need to get moving soon... Haaah, I'm going to have to tell Myu. You think she'll cry? Actually, she'll definitely cry... Man, this sucks." Hajime sat on the pier and sighed to himself. He was out transmuting more equipment for their upcoming trials. When he'd first left the abyss he couldn't have cared less about anyone in this world, yet now he was depressed over parting with a single girl. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"This is all your fault, Sensei..." Though his words sounded harsh, there was a gentle smile on his face. It had been Aiko's guidance that had led to such a shift in Hajime's thinking. He was no longer willing to sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of his goal.

As he watched Yue, Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Myu frolic around in the water, he realized he was glad Aiko had lectured him. Had he simply abandoned Myu in Fuhren, or decided to ignore Ankaji's plight, or just left Myu with Remia the moment they'd found her, chances were his comrades wouldn't have been smiling as happily as they were now.

It was true that leaving those people he'd saved to their plight wouldn't necessarily have caused Yue and the others to be depressed.

But still, he was certain they wouldn't be nearly as happy.

He didn't have any proof, but he was sure of it.

All because he'd taken Aiko's words to heart. He'd avoided going down what she'd said was a lonely path.

"Guess she was right." Hajime smiled ruefully to himself. He watched as

Myu skillfully evaded Yue and the others in a strange game of tag. Despite the fact that they were all overpowered beyond measure and were working together to try and catch Myu, her swimming abilities kept her ahead.

I never thought saying goodbye would be so hard... Hajime couldn't lie to himself. He sighed for the umpteenth time that day. The moment he brought up the fact that he'd be leaving, he knew he would end up marring her smiling face with tears.

As if sensing his worries, Remia swam up to Hajime. She stopped in front of his legs, which were dangling in the water. Seawater dripped off her emerald-green hair. She'd tied it back in a single braid, and was wearing a light-green bikini. When they'd first met her she'd looked haggard, but thanks to the restoration magic they'd found in Melusine's labyrinth she was as lively as ever. It was hard to imagine she was old enough to be someone's mother.

Hajime could see why every bachelor in town wanted to be her new husband, and had even started a fan club for her and Myu. Her beauty rivaled that of Tio's, and she looked absolutely stunning in her bikini. Furthermore, because she was in the water, she was eye-level with his crotch. Hajime, who'd been worrying himself sick over Myu, was taken completely by surprise.

Remia placed a hand on Hajime's knee and looked up at him. Her expression was one of gentle concern.

"Thank you, Hajime-san."

"Where'd that come from? I didn't really do anything deserving of thanks, I don't think." He looked quizzically down at Remia.

"Ufufu, don't be silly, you're worrying so much for my daughter's sake. As her mother, it'd be wrong of me not to thank you."

"That's... Guess I can't hide anything from you. And here I was trying not to be obvious about it."

"My, you do realize everyone's noticed, right? Yue-san and the others look like they don't want to leave either... I'm so glad Myu was able to meet such wonderful people."

Remia turned to watch a topless Shea chasing after Myu, who'd stolen the top of her swimsuit as a joke. Then, she turned back to Hajime and spoke in a more serious tone.

"Hajime-san. You've done more than enough. Everyone has, really. So

please don't look so worried. Go on to finish what you have to do.”

“Remia...”

“She's grown up so much since she met all of you. Even though all I did was spoil her while she was here, she's learned to care about other people. Myu knows too. She knows you'll have to go. Of course she's still young and doesn't really want you to leave, but... even then she's never once asked you directly not to leave. She knows she can't keep you here forever, so...”

“I see. Man, I'm pretty pathetic if I'm letting a little girl worry about me. Alright. I'll tell her tonight. We'll leave tomorrow.”

Remia's right. Myu doesn't want us to go, but she also doesn't want to say that because she doesn't want to make it harder for us. After having realized the depth of her resolve, Hajime steeled his own.

Remia smiled at him again.

“In that case, I'll make a feast for you all tonight. It'll be your farewell party.”

“Sounds good... I'll be looking forward to it.”

“Ufufu, glad to hear it, *dear*.”

“Seriously, could you stop calling...” Before Hajime could finish, a frigid wind passed over the two of them, and a voice colder than death interrupted him.

“Remia, you better not.”

“Remia-san, when did you... I can't let my guard down around you.”

“Hmm, from this angle, it almost looks as if she's servicing master. Exhibitionism... Wonderful!”

“Hey, Myu-chan? Could you give me my swimsuit back? People are starting to stare...”

Yue glared angrily at Remia. She absolutely wouldn't allow her to marry Hajime. This scene had played out numerous times over the past week. Everyone ignored Tio. Likewise, they all ignored the nearly naked crying bunny girl as well.

Remia's smile didn't waver in the slightest, despite Yue's bloodcurling glare. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking when she smiled like that, which was the reason Hajime was still unsure if she was serious about marrying him or just playing around.

Maybe that's just how widows tease people... Hajime's attention was diverted when he saw Yue in her swimsuit. He'd seen it quite a few times

already over the past few days, but it never failed to captivate him.

Her swimsuit was a black bikini. It was the kind that had to be tied around the front, so it was pretty provocative. The black contrasted nicely with Yue's pale skin. She'd also bound her hair into pigtails for once, making her look even younger than usual. The disparity between her young appearance and her mature swimsuit made her look extremely alluring.

Yue was in the middle of a fierce staring contest with Remia when she noticed Hajime's gaze. She smiled seductively and turned to face him.

Unwilling to let herself be outdone, Kaori came up to Hajime from the opposite side and took his arm. She blushed at her own boldness and pressed his arm into her white bikini. Then, she looked up at him, imploring him to pay attention to her too.

At the same time, Shea came up to Hajime from behind and pressed her massive knockers against him. Myu still had the top half of her swimsuit, so doing that was also a good way to hide her exposed breasts from view. Of course, having them pressed directly against his back only made things harder for Hajime.

Tio too, was dressed in a rather erotic swimsuit. But in her case, the effect was ruined by her disgusting panting. Hajime threw a piece of metal at her to knock her out of it. He might have thrown it a little too hard, as it literally knocked Tio out and left her floating like a drowned corpse in the sea.

Myu, too, jumped out of the water, eager to join in the fun. She landed between Remia and Hajime, then threw herself into his arms. She raised Shea's bikini up high, as if showing off her spoils of war, and placed it atop Hajime's head. It seemed this was her gift to him.

"M-Myu-chan!? Why are you... Wait!? Don't tell me Hajime-san asked you to? J-Jeez! If you wanted my swimsuit, Hajime-san, you should have just asked... I wouldn't have minded."

"Hajime, take mine too."

"M-Mine too! If that's what you're into, Hajime-kun... Ah, but it'd be too embarrassing to strip here, so come to my room later, okay?"

"Oh my, I suppose that means you want mine as well... Would you prefer the top, the bottom, or perhaps... both?"

Hajime Nagumo sat there, a bikini on his head, surrounded by girls pressing their swimsuits against him.

Water from Shea's swimsuit dripped down his cheek. Despite all the

excitement, his expression was as wooden as a board. This situation was beyond surreal.

The male onlookers were all crying tears of blood. From that day onward, rumors began to spread across Erisen. “Watch out for that white-haired eyepatch kid. He’s got a swimsuit fetish. He’s a pervert who ran around town with a girl’s swimsuit on his head.”

That evening, Hajime finally told Myu that he’d be leaving. She gripped the hem of her dress tight, and tried her best not to cry. After a protracted silence, she finally said something.

“I won’t ever see you again?”

“.....” Hajime didn’t know what to say. His goal was to return home to Japan. He still wasn’t sure how exactly he was going to do that, or even when he’d be able to.

Miledi Reisen had told him he needed to clear all the labyrinths if he wanted to see his wish granted. It was possible he’d be forcibly transported back the moment he beat the seventh one. He doubted he’d be returning to Erisen before his journey was complete, so it was certainly possible this would be the last time she’d ever see him. The last thing he wanted to do was lie to her.

“You’ll always be my daddy, right?” Before Hajime could come up with a reply, she followed up with another question. He gripped her shoulders and looked her squarely in the eyes.

“If that’s what you want.” Myu held back her tears and squeezed out a smile. Yue and the others were taken aback. Myu’s smile looked strikingly similar to Hajime’s when he was backed into a corner and up against a powerful foe. The two really were coming to resemble each other.

“Then when I get older, I’ll come find you, Daddy.”

“Find me? Myu, I’m going to be going somewhere really far away, so...”

“But if you can go there, I can too. Because... I’m your daughter.”

If Hajime could do something, she could too. Myu was certain of it. If her daddy wouldn’t be able to come back to her, then she’d just have to go find him.

Of course, there was no way Myu could understand Hajime was planning on traveling across dimensions to get back to his own world. Plus, it was unlikely that she’d be able to conquer the labyrinths on her own and chase after him to his world.

Despite her determination, it would be nearly impossible to actually follow Hajime to where he planned to go.

Still, no one dared ridicule her resolve. No one dared to tell her it was impossible and that she should give up. They knew they shouldn't. No, they couldn't. Hajime finally understood what Remia had meant when she'd said Myu had grown. Though they'd only spent a short time together, Myu had learned a lot from Hajime and the others.

And now, they were going to leave her. *Can I really just leave her like this? No, I can't. I definitely can't.*

Hajime made his decision. He bound himself to yet another oath.

“Myu, wait for me.”

“Daddy?” Myu tilted her head quizzically. She'd sensed the slight shift in Hajime's demeanor, but she didn't know what it meant. There was no longer any hesitation in Hajime's gaze, only the steadfast resolve he usually showed. The same steadfast resolve Myu had learned to emulate.

“Once everything's settled, I promise to come back to you. We'll all come back to see you again.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. Have I ever broken a promise?”

Myu shook her head. Hajime ruffled her hair.

“When I come back, I'll show you my home. You'll get to see where I was born. I bet you'll be surprised. My hometown's a pretty different place.”

“I want to see the place where you were born, Daddy!”

“Looking forward to it?”

“Yep!” Myu jumped up happily. Hajime's gaze softened as he looked down at her. Now that she knew she'd be able to see him again, there was no reason to be sad. Still beaming, she leaped into Hajime's arms. Hajime lifted her up and hugged her.



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“Don’t do anything dangerous. Be a good girl and wait with Mommy, okay? You’re going to be good and help Mommy around the house, right?”

“I will!”

Hajime smiled at their exchange and silently apologized to Remia with his eyes. *Sorry for deciding all that on my own.*

Remia shook her head, met Hajime’s gaze, then nodded. *It’s fine, don’t worry about it.* If anything, Remia was thankful to Hajime.

Myu noticed Hajime and Remia exchanging silent glances, and suddenly thought of something. She tugged on Hajime’s sleeve to grab his attention.

“Daddy. Is Mommy going to come too?”

“Uh, well that depends... Remia?”

“What is it, dear? You weren’t thinking of leaving only me behind, now were you?”

“Err, not exactly, but... my homeland’s literally in a different world. You sure you wanna come?”

“Come now. How could I stay behind when my husband and daughter are going? Ufufu.” Remia sidled up to Hajime. For a moment, she really looked like his wife.

Kaori and the others hurriedly stepped in, unwilling to let Remia get ahead of them. The solemn atmosphere from earlier was nowhere to be found. Kaori and Remia glared daggers at each other, while Yue quietly walked up to Hajime.

“Are you really going to take them?”

“Are you against it?”

Yue shook her head and gazed gently into Hajime’s eyes.

“If that’s what you’ve decided, then I don’t mind.”

“I see.”

“But what if we get transported right away?” She’d been considering the same thing Hajime had. There was no guarantee the magic that would return them to their own world would be something they could activate at will. It was certainly possible Hajime wouldn’t be able to fulfill his promise. If that really did happen, it would scar Myu forever.

However, Hajime just shrugged and smiled. Once he made his decision, there was no turning back. Yue had known his answer before she’d even asked. She smiled back, noting the determination in Hajime’s gaze.

“I’ll figure something out. One way or another, we’ll come back to see

Myu, then show her Japan too. If the spell takes us back without any time to prepare, then we'll just have to find a way to come back here again. I'll hop between worlds as many times as it takes. That's all there is to it."

"Yeah... That's all there is to it."

The two shared a knowing smile. Yue was glad Hajime had found something else he treasured enough to swear to protect. Hajime, too, was glad he'd begun to change into someone kinder. And like that, the two were once again lost in their own world, flirting without a care for their surroundings.

Kaori and the others stopped fighting with each other to glare pointedly at Hajime and Yue. While the others hesitated to step in though, Myu had no such inhibitions.

She brazenly stepped in between the two of them and begged Hajime for another hug. Even if he'd promised to come back, she still wouldn't see him for some time. She was going to make the most of her last night with him.

Myu and Remia saw Hajime and the others off the next morning.

A day and a half passed since Myu and Remia saw Hajime's group off at Erisen. They'd been traveling through the rust-red desert the entire time.

Brise roared across the dunes, heading toward Ankaji. Their eventual goal was still Haltina, but Kaori had wanted to try to see if her newly-acquired restoration magic could repair the damage done to Ankaji's oasis.

As its name suggested, restoration magic restored things to their original state. Even if healing magic hadn't been able to purify the toxins in the water, restoration magic could bring it back to its original, pure state. Or at least, that was what Kaori hoped.

As Ankaji was more or less on the way, Hajime saw no problem with stopping there for a bit. Besides, they hadn't had a chance to try Ankaji's famous cuisine last time they'd been there either.

Before long, the city's main gate came into view. Unlike last time, it was quite lively. There was a long line of caravans waiting to be admitted into the city. It looked like a proper center of trade.

"That sure is a lot of wagons."

"Yeah... This might take a while."

"That's all food and water they're carrying in, isn't it?"

Kaori was correct. The wagons contained all of the emergency supplies

Ankaji had asked Heiligh for. They'd only just arrived. It seemed Lanzwi had also bought the food stores of every other passing merchant. At least, every passing merchant who hadn't asked for an exorbitant price.

As their immediate water supply had been compromised, Lanzwi knew he'd needed to stockpile large amounts of non-perishable goods. Not only did they not have water to drink, but they also didn't have enough to grow crops. He'd buy whatever food the royal treasury could afford.

Hajime drove Brise past the line of merchants shuffling uncomfortably in the sand and headed for the main gate. He had no intention of waiting out here for hours.

The merchants gazed in awe as a giant black box sped past them. A few of them screamed in surprise, worried a strange new monster had come to attack them. The guards all brandished their weapons, wary at this unknown object speeding its way to the gate.

A senior watchman walked out of the guardhouse to see what the commotion was, and instantly recognized Brise for what it was. He remonstrated his guards and ordered them to lower their weapons. Then, he sent off a messenger to the palace.

Hajime and the others stopped in front of the gate and stepped out of his truck. They were heedless of the stares around them. Like always, the men were first stunned by the girls' beauty, then amazed when Hajime made Brise seemingly vanish into thin air.

"I thought I recognized your strange vehicle! I see you've returned to us, Warriors of Ehit." The senior guardsman breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Kaori. Hajime guessed he'd seen Brise once before when he'd brought Bize in, or perhaps when he'd left for the volcano.

He'd assumed it was Kaori, the "Warrior of Ehit," that used it to travel around. That was more or less correct, so Hajime saw no need to correct the man. It made sense that Kaori was the most well-known figure among their party.

"We have. The truth is, I've discovered magic that might help me purify the oasis, so I came back to try again. I'd like to speak with your duke about it if possible..."

"Can you really purify the oasis!?"

"I-I think so. I'd need to test it to be sure, but..."

"I should have expected as much from one of Ehit's warriors. Sorry for

holding you up. I've already sent a runner to the duke. It'd be best to wait here, so you don't pass each other by. Once he hears you've returned, I'm sure he'll head straight over."

The soldier looked at them all with great respect. *I guess it makes sense, since we saved his city*, Hajime thought to himself. They were being treated like VIPs. Hajime ignored the merchants' curious stares and let the guard lead them into the guardhouse's waiting room.

Fifteen minutes later, Lanzwi burst into the guardhouse, panting heavily. He really had come running. Hajime once again realized just how much this city respected them.

"It... Well, I can't rightly say it's been a long time. Regardless, I'm glad to see that you're doing well, Hajime-dono. We were beginning to grow worried when you didn't return. You and your companions are the saviors of my realm. It would have been quite a shame had you died without letting me thank you properly."

"I'm just a passing adventurer who happened to be here at the right time. And, as you can see, I'm doing perfectly fine. Thanks for your concern, though. At any rate, it's good to see your emergency supplies made it in time."

"Indeed. Thanks to the food being brought in now and the reservoirs Yue-dono made for us, we should be able to last for a while. With this, we'll manage to avoid starving to death at least." Lanzwi smiled tiredly. He'd been working nonstop these past few days to ensure his people had enough food. His exhaustion was clear, but so too were the results of his efforts.

"Duke, how does the oasis look?"

"Warrior of Ehit... I mean, Kaori-dono. The oasis remains unchanged. We've managed to pump in more fresh water from underground and clear away some of the polluted water... but have otherwise made no progress. It will take at least half a year to remove all of the polluted water and replace it with clean water. And it will likely take an entire year, or perhaps even two, to get the toxins out of the soil." Gloom settled over Lanzwi's expression. Kaori then explained that she might be able to purify it herself.

His face lit up like the sun. He grabbed at Kaori's clothes and yelled "Really!?" with unbelievable zeal. She hesitantly backed away from him and nodded. Lanzwi cleared his throat and collected himself, realizing he'd acted

improperly. Then, he implored Kaori to see if she could purify the oasis right away.

As that was what she'd been planning on doing in the first place, Kaori agreed and the party headed to the oasis.

Like before, the oasis was completely deserted. Normally, it was one of Ankaji's most popular destinations, but right now there was no one there. Lanzwi frowned forlornly as he looked at the empty oasis.

Kaori stepped up to the shore and began casting. Though they'd all inherited the ability to use restoration magic, Hajime and Shea had possessed no aptitude for it as usual. In Shea's case, at least, she could sort of use it. She'd been able to internalize the magic to increase her natural regeneration abilities. On top of that, if she concentrated, she could increase her mana and stamina regeneration for some time. She'd turned into something completely superhuman at this point. Her body strengthening abilities had grown, and she'd become much more skilled at manipulating her gravity. Now, with the addition of automatic high-speed regeneration, she was basically a one bunny army.

Kaori had possessed the highest affinity for restoration magic, followed by Tio, and then Yue. Yue was so used to her own self-regeneration skill that she rarely used healing magic. For that reason, her affinity for it was much lower. She was able to heal herself without thinking, so actually having to actively cast recovery spells was hard for her.

On the other hand, Kaori's job was Priest. Restoration and recovery magic were strongly linked, so her affinity for it had been the highest. She could use it more efficiently, and at greater range than either Yue or Tio. Though she unfortunately still needed magic circles and an incantation to cast, so Yue's version was still more useful in combat.

Kaori began her incantation. It was a long one. When she'd first started practicing in Erisen, it had taken her seven minutes to complete one spell. Now, she could finish it in three. The fact that she'd cut the cast time down by more than half in just one week proved she was plenty overpowered herself. Sadly, Yue's strength was beyond even that. It stung Kaori a little, but she'd already resolved not to wallow in her inferiority any longer.

An air of tranquil majesty descended upon the oasis as Kaori's magic set in. Lanzwi and his attendants gulped. They felt as if they were witnessing some holy rite that must not be disturbed. They watched with nervous

excitement as Kaori finished her chant.

“Tetragrammaton.” Eyes still closed, Kaori thrust her pure white staff over the water.

A second later, the tip began to glow with lavender light. The orb of light traveled down her staff, across the surface of the water, and fell into the center of the oasis. The entire oasis began to glow with a faint purple light. Motes of light floated up from the water and vanished into the air. It looked as if the all the world’s evil had been purified and sent up to heaven.

Everyone watched with rapt attention, so captivated that they even forgot to breathe. Finally, the spell ended, and the light faded away. Silence stretched on for some time after the last motes of light vanished into the air.

Hajime, who was supporting a spent Kaori, eventually nodded to Lanzwi. Lanzwi snapped back to reality and ordered his attendants to test the water. They hurriedly cast their appraisal spells. Once they were done, they turned to Lanzwi with looks of disbelief. After a brief pause, they announced the results.

“The poison’s gone.”

“Are you sure?”

The man spoke again, this time with more certainty.

“The oasis is clean! It’s back to normal! It’s been purified!”

They all cried out in joy. All of his attendants dropped what they were holding and hugged each other. Lanzwi took in a deep breath, looked up at the heavens, and closed his eyes.

“All that’s left is to purify the soil now. Duke, have you already thrown away the poisoned crops?”

“No, we’ve only gathered them all in one place. There wasn’t enough time or people to dispose of them. Don’t tell me... you plan on purifying those too?”

“If Yue and Tio are willing to help, I think we can do it. What do you two think?”

“Hmm, not a problem.”

“Very well. It would indeed be a pity to see the food you worked so hard to grow go to waste. Allow us to help.”

Lanzwi bowed deeply to all of them. Not only had they purified his oasis, but they were going to save his soil and his crops as well. Even if it wasn’t a duke’s place to bow his head to others, this was the only way he could think

of to show the depth of his gratitude. That was how much he loved his city and its people.

Hajime and the others graciously accepted his thanks and began to walk toward the agricultural district.

Just then, Hajime suddenly stopped and turned around. He cast about with Farsight, and spotted a group of people swaggering toward them. It looked like they wanted a fight. They were dressed in different uniforms than that of Ankaji's soldiers. From what Hajime could tell, they were the templar knights who protected this city's church.

They surrounded Hajime and his companions, forming a half-circle around them. A middle-aged man dressed in ostentatious white robes stepped out from between their ranks.

Sensing the hostility in the knights' gaze, Lanzwi quickly interposed himself between Hajime and the knights.

"Lord Zengen... please step aside. Those people are dangerous."

"What is the meaning of this, Bishop Forbin? And what do you mean, they're dangerous? These good people have saved my dukedom twice over now. They're heroes. I will not allow anyone to speak ill of them."

Bishop Forbin scoffed at Lanzwi's words.

"Hmph, heroes? Watch your tongue, Duke. The Holy Church has declared them heretics. Defend them at your own peril."

"Heretics... you say? Preposterous, I've heard no such thing!" Lanzwi sucked in a sharp breath. Like most other people, he was a devout follower of Ehit. He knew what it meant to be branded a heretic, which was precisely why he couldn't believe that the saviors of his city were among their ranks.

"Of course you haven't. The decision was made just this morning. To think the heretics would choose to return now... Hehehe, such perfect timing, wouldn't you say? It's as if Ehit himself delivered them into my arms.

Clearly this is a sign. He wants me to be the one to purge these nonbelievers. If I bring the pope their heads, I'm sure to be promoted..." His last words were spoken so softly that Lanzwi didn't catch them. Still, it seemed that Hajime being a heretic was a fact. Lanzwi turned to his saviors. However, Hajime didn't seem the least bit surprised. He shrugged his shoulders, as if he'd expected this all along. He met Lanzwi's gaze and silently asked with his eyes, "What will you do?"

Lanzwi furrowed his brow, but before he could say anything, Forbin

continued with a sneer.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some heretics to purge. I’ve heard you’re quite powerful, but I wonder how you’ll fare against one hundred templar knights? Now then, Duke Zengen, kindly get out of my way. Surely you won’t do anything as foolish as stand against the Holy Church, will you?”

Lanzwi closed his eyes. Based on Hajime’s personality, and his strange powers, Lanzwi could easily guess why the Holy Church had branded him a heretic. They couldn’t afford to let someone as strong as him live, unless he was under their control.

However, when he thought of how powerful Hajime and his comrades were, Lanzwi thought it suicide to stand against them. The humans would be wiped out fighting Hajime long before the demons could even get to them. Had the pope grown mad? This whole declaration reeked of political maneuvering of some sort.

Regardless of the reason though, Hajime was Ankaji’s savior. He and his comrades had healed his people, given them water, destroyed the monster lurking in the oasis, and now had come back to purify their land.

Only a few seconds ago, he’d been racking his brains trying to think of how he’d thank them. Lanzwi opened his eyes and smiled at Forbin. This was a good opportunity to make his allegiances clear. He looked sharply into the eyes of the bishop, who’d begun to get annoyed that Lanzwi was ignoring him, and solemnly shook his head.

“I refuse.”

“What did you just say?” Forbin was so surprised his eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

It amused Lanzwi how certain the bishop had been that no one would dare refuse the authority of the Holy Church. He repeated himself, his words backed by an unshakable will.

“I said, I refuse. These adventurers saved my people. I won’t let anyone raise a hand against them, not even the Holy Church.”

“Y-Y-Y-You godless bastard! Have you lost your mind!? Do you understand what it means to oppose the Holy Church!? You’ll be branded a heretic too, you know!?” Forbin’s surprise had transformed into rage. The templar knights all looked at each other in confusion.

“Bishop Forbin. Do the archbishops and the pope really not know what

these adventurers have done for us? Without them, the oasis' poison would have destroyed this city. And from what I've heard, they saved the town of Ur and even rescued the hero's party. How could such great people be branded heretics? I cannot imagine the Holy Church's decision is a sane one. I, Lanzwi Feuward Zengen, implore the Holy Church to reconsider their decision. Perhaps the news that they have saved this city will convince the clergy."

"S-Silence! Our decision is final! This is the will of Ehit! Disobey him at your own peril! Duke, if you insist on protecting these heretics, then I will brand you, no all of Ankaji, heretics as well! Are you sure you want to do this!?" There was a glint of madness in Forbin's eyes. It was hard to imagine he was really a man of god. Lanzwi watched him coldly. Hajime walked up to him and asked a question with a worried expression on his face,

"Hey, are you sure about this? You'll make an enemy out of Heiligh and the Holy Church if you do this. Shouldn't you do what's best for your people?"

Instead of answering, Lanzwi looked down at his attendants. Hajime followed his gaze. They looked up at the two of them, closed their eyes, and, after a brief moment of consideration, made their decision. Their eyes glimmered with resolve.

"We won't go down that easy!"

Seeing their reaction, Forbin reddened with anger and screeched a final warning.

"Are you sure about this!? You'll die here, you stubborn fools! And not just you, but your people, too! I'll turn this city into a sea of blood. I shall rain Ehit's divine wrath down on you wretched heretics!"

"None of my subjects are so craven that they'd turn their back on the heroes who saved them. You claim you'll bring down divine wrath? The god I believe in would reward such loyalty. Perhaps it is your faith that is heretical, sir bishop."

Forbin was so furious that he stopped yelling and a cold finality settled over his face. He raised a hand, ordering his knights to attack.

Before they could charge though, something whistled through the air and clanged against one of the templar knights' helmets. The knight looked down and saw a pebble. It hadn't so much as dented his armor, so he tilted his head on confusion. Before he could ponder on what it meant, more stones rained

down upon the knights. They clanged loudly against the men's gleaming breastplates.

They looked up and saw the people of Ankaji had surrounded them. It seemed they hurried over when the light flowed from the oasis. They'd arrived in time to see the entire exchange between Forbin and Lanzwi. Not only had Kaori healed their sick and tended to them, but Hajime and the others had braved the volcano's depths to bring back enough stillstone. Moreover, their beloved lord had sided with Hajime and the others. Plus, the bishop looked clearly deranged, so they made their allegiances clear, and began hurling stones at the knights.

"Desist, citizens of Ankaji! These people have been branded heretics and enemies of god! Ehit himself wishes for their deaths!" Forbin desperately tried to convince the people. He thought they hadn't heard the declaration claiming Hajime was a heretic, and hoped that informing them would be enough to calm their wrath.

The people did indeed stop and exchange confused glances with one another.

Lanzwi turned and addressed his people.

"My beloved citizens of Ankaji. Listen to me! These adventurers just now purified our oasis! It is thanks to them that the symbol of our great city is clean once more! They even promised to purify our soil and our crops! It is because of them that Ankaji is here today, and it is because of them that our great city will be restored to its former splendor! However, it is not for me to tell you what to do. Let your hearts decide whether our city's saviors deserve our scorn, or our protection. I, at least, choose to stand with them!" Forbin sneered. He was certain the people wouldn't trust Lanzwi's word over the Holy Church's. However, his expression froze a second later.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! For the citizens had resumed throwing stones.

"Wh-What..." Forbin was at a loss for words. The citizens pressed forward, hurling insults along with stones.

"Fuck you! They saved our lives, we won't let you kill them!"

"The Holy Church didn't do a damn thing to save us, but now you want to kill the people who did!? You're no holy man!"

"They're no heretics! You're the real heretic!"

"This has to be some kind of mistake!"

“Protect Kaori-sama!”

“Defend our lord!”

“Kaori-sama, I give my life for you!”

“Dear adventurers, run now, while you still have the chance!”

“Hey, someone get Bize. Tell him to bring Kaori-sama’s honor guard!”

It seemed even the citizens were taking Hajime and the others’ side. They too hadn’t forgotten who’d saved their lives. Their gratitude toward their saviors outweighed even their piety. No, that wasn’t quite true. Rather, the nature of their faith had changed. They simply couldn’t believe their god, the ultimate object of their worship, would want to harm his own warrior, or the people that traveled with her.

In other words, their faith in god remained unshaken, but their faith in Forbin had all but dissolved. *Though I wonder if anyone really trusted a bishop like that to begin with...* The crowd of citizens continued to grow as word spread. Their individual strength was weak, but they already far outnumbered the knights. Forbin and his templars winced at the people’s ferocity and took a step back.

“Bishop, this is the will of Ankaji. Will you please ask the Holy Church to reconsider their decision?”

“Tch... Don’t think you can get away with this!” Forbin ground his teeth in frustration. He shot one last hateful look at Hajime before turning on his heel and stalking away. The templar knights hurriedly followed after him. Forbin disappeared inside the church, looking for something to vent his frustrations on.

“Are you sure? I know it’s a bit late to be asking this now, but you could have just not taken sides.” Hajime looked at Lanzwi, a troubled expression on his face. Kaori and the others were worried as well. None of them wanted Ankaji to be destroyed because of them.

Contrary to Hajime’s expectations though, Lanzwi’s reply was unconcerned.

“I said it before, didn’t I? This is Ankaji’s will. Every man, woman, and child living within these walls owes you their life. That’s a debt they won’t soon forget. If I’d let the bishop kill you... I guarantee the people would have killed me next. The last thing I want happening here is a coup d’etat.

“We could have taken guys like those easily...” Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly and Lanzwi smiled knowingly.

“I suppose so, which means you five are even scarier than the Holy Church. It’s true that you’re our heroes, but I also really didn’t want to make you guys my enemy. You guys use magic I’ve never even heard of, can slaughter monsters that would trample over my entire army, and you even conquered a labyrinth in the span of a few days. I can tell you care nothing for the authority of the Holy Church, and I’m sure a hundred knights would be nothing to you. I’ve already heard how you demolished a monster army tens of thousands strong, and saved the hero party from enemies who’d nearly killed them. You truly are a frightening bunch. I imagine this is the most important decision I have made in the many years since I inherited the position of duke from my father.”

Hajime wouldn’t have blamed Lanzwi even if he had given them up to the bishop. Still, after weighing the two options, Lanzwi had chosen to side with him instead. Even if it had been for the sake of his country, he’d chosen to rebel against the Holy Church. That certainly was an important decision.

Hajime smiled awkwardly. He’d been expecting this confrontation for ages, but he hadn’t expected that other people would resolve it pretty much without him.

I guess this is a result of not choosing a lonely path, too. Aiko-sensei really did have a point, Hajime thought to himself as he watched Kaori and the others converse happily with the citizens.

Three days after the showdown with the bishop.

Kaori, Yue, and Tio had finished purifying the soil and crops. The whole party was gathered atop a small hill overlooking the now-sparkling oasis.

Now that it had returned to its original grandeur, the oasis was filled with smiling people. People lay sprawled along the water’s edge, and children played in the water. Men fished along the pier, and lovers sailed across the water in tiny rowboats. There were all sorts of people visiting the oasis, but they all had one thing in common. Smiles.

Hajime and the others were leaving Ankaji today. Originally, the plan had been to purify the city, try some of their specialty food and buy the fruits they were known for, and leave. In the end though, at the insistence the Lanzwi and the people of Ankaji, they’d ended up staying two extra days in the city.

The people were so grateful that if Hajime had not told Lanzwi to keep his departure a secret, they would have actually come out to hold a farewell

parade for him. He told only the duke and his family of his departure, and the party had stopped for one last look at the famed oasis.

“Hey, you guys are gonna stand out if you stay dressed like that, so hurry up and put something on.” Hajime turned to face the gate as he said that.

“Oh? Already tired of seeing so much skin?”

“Huh, is that really true, Hajime-kun?”

“Look at Master’s eyes, Yue, Kaori. He has not had his fill just yet, but he doesn’t want us to stand out.”

“Yeah, I guess I can’t wear something like this to the front gate~” Shea twirled around, showing off her belly dancer’s outfit. She was wearing a choli top and harem pants. With how provocative the outfit was, it was a given that it’d attract attention.

It was apparently traditional in Ankaji, though. Lanzwi had gifted it to the girls, and the first time they’d worn them Hajime could hardly keep his eyes off them. Outfits like these hit all of his buttons. For the first time, he’d been captivated not just by Yue, but by Shea and Tio and Kaori too.

It really was the first time that had happened ever. Having finally tasted success, the other girls wore the dress for an entire day. Naturally, Yue kept it on as well, and successfully seduced him multiple times.

In the end, they’d worn the dresses during their entire stay. One of Hajime’s fetishes had finally been revealed. He was both happy and a little troubled by the fact that they’d continued wearing them for so long, but he really needed them to change by the time they reached the gate.

Two days after they left Ankaji.

On the road, they encountered a band of brigands attacking a merchant convoy near Horaud. There, they reunited with someone they hadn’t expected to see...

Epilogue

Yuka Sonobe barged into the palace's mess hall. She seemed rather irritated. She glared into the soldier's quarters, her slanted eyes giving her a demonic appearance. The off-duty units winced as her gaze passed over them.

"Not here either, huh? Jeez... Why do they always vanish at the most important times?" She scratched her chestnut-colored hair, her frustration plain for all to see. The soldiers jumped a little as she stomped back out.

"They're not in the training grounds, not in the barracks, not in the mess hall... Did they go to the town?" Yuka marched off to the castle's main gate as she muttered to herself. Her loud footsteps echoed across the hallway.

"Yukacchi!" Nana Miyazaki dashed up to her.

"I couldn't find them. You?"

"No one in the mess hall. I just checked with Tamai-kun and Taeko, they didn't find them either. They're off checking other rooms right now... but I don't think they're in the palace."

"Makes sense. I just talked to Aikawa-kun, and he hasn't seen them either. Sheesh, where are they loitering around? This is important. And they call themselves Ai-chansensei's bodyguards!" Nana cradled her head in her hands and screamed.

The two of them, or rather the entirety of the Ai-chansensei escort squad, were searching for David and his knights.

Aiko hadn't shown up for three days straight. According to the pope, she'd headed up to the main cathedral in order to get Hajime's heretic announcement rescinded. He'd claimed she'd have to stay there for a while, and that they wouldn't see her for a few days.

However, according to Shizuku, Aiko had something important she'd wanted to tell them the night of her disappearance. So naturally, they were suspicious. They'd asked to be allowed into the main cathedral as well, but Ishtar had told them friends of heretics wouldn't be allowed, so they'd been cooling their heels for the past few days.

Still, after three days of no contact, the students had gotten fed up. The elevator to the cathedral remained dormant, and none of the priests were giving the students straightforward answers. Tired of waiting, Yuka had tried to seek out David and the others and demand an explanation.

However, though he and his knights had been around yesterday, they were nowhere to be found today. Yuka couldn't find any trace of them no matter where she searched. The only plausible explanation was that they'd gone into town, but she found it hard to believe they'd go fool around in the city with Aiko missing.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." She ground her teeth and looked around warily. It was as if some kind of formless evil was creeping up on her and taking her friends one by one.

Just as the fear was starting to take over, someone called out to her.

"Yuka? Nana?" It was Shizuku. She glanced about the hall, as if she were searching for someone.

"I wanted to ask if you've seen David and the others... though judging by your expressions that's a no."

"Yeah. Looks like you didn't find the captain either."

Shizuku looked down sadly. It hadn't been just Aiko who'd vanished that night. Captain Meld and Princess Liliana had as well. Even Shizuku's maid, Nia, was nowhere to be found. A number of the other servants and knights had gone missing too, all friends of the students.

"Hey Yukacchi, Shizukucchi... Are we going to be alright?"

"....."

Nana looked scared. Unfortunately, neither Yuka or Shizuku could reassure her.

They didn't know what was happening either, and that vague unease had them on edge.

If only he was here... If only that guy was here... Yuka and Shizuku's thoughts turned to the same direction. They looked out at the western sky, a single man on their minds. He was ruthless, not always the nicest person to be around, and unbelievably blunt, but he was also the one person they knew they could trust.

A number of figures stood in a wide, dimly-lit room. They look liked wraiths due to the darkness of their surroundings. They were all completely

still, with not even one so much as twitching.

Further inside the room, a short distance away from the others, stood two other figures. Unlike the rest, these two seemed human. Not sane, perhaps, but at least human.

There was a crazed look in their eyes.

“The preparations are finally complete. I’m getting excited. The moment I’ve been waiting for is almost here. I’m truly glad I was called to this world! I know now that this is what happiness truly is!” Loud laughter rang out through the room. Though the voice spoke of happiness, its tone dripped with malice. The speaker was clearly mad.

The figure standing next to the person who spoke stared on with cold eyes. It was obvious they didn’t see the other as their comrade, but like the other figure, they too were grinning cruelly.

Around the same time, something was happening in the kingdom on the southern tip of the continent.

A massive army of monsters stood lined up in formation. There were easily ten thousand strong. Waves of power rolled off of them. Each of the gathered monsters was as strong as the ones lying at the bottom of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. They were a force that could trample anything that got in their way.

Surprisingly, there were a few people mounted on horses among them. It was clear this gathering was no unorganized mob.

A single, massive monster descended from the heavens and landed in front of them. Its gleaming white scales looked majestic in the sunlight. There was a humanoid figure riding on its back. His red hair fluttered in the wind, and the men down below cheered on his arrival.

“The demon king has received a divine revelation! He has given our armies a single command... Destroy the heretics.” Though the man’s voice sounded dignified, there was a tinge of insanity to it as well.

The army burst into cheers once more.

“It is time we show them the strength of our faith. Let’s teach those fools strutting about the Northern Continent who the true rulers of this land are!” The monsters stamped the ground so hard the earth shook.

Interestingly, the figures hidden in the dim room spoke the same time the demon riding the white dragon did.

“Now then, let us begin. In order to achieve happiness, we must carve our own story into the annals of history! Let me hear your war cries! It’s time we fight, for the sake of our lord!”

Eight thousand meters above sea level, a giant steel spire rose up from the Divine Mountain’s peak. A weak groan echoed in one of the tower’s prison cells. Blood dripped from Aiko Hatayama’s fingers and she stared at the ground, her brow furrowed in concentration.

She had drawn a magic circle with her own blood, and tried chanting dozens of different spells, but no matter how hard she tried, no matter which spell she chose, her flow of mana was interrupted by the shackles on her wrists.

She slumped her shoulders and looked down at her hands. There were dozens of small cuts on them, one for each attempt.

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s futile before you get it?”

“Ah...” Aiko shivered as she heard a mechanical voice next to her. She looked up and saw a nun wearing a hood low over her eyes. The nun was carrying a tray of food.

Aiko noticed the nun had left the door open behind her when she’d entered, and made a mad dash for freedom.

“I believe I already told you it was futile.”

“Agh!”

The nun punched Aiko in the stomach as she tried to escape. The attack had come so fast Aiko hadn’t even been able to see it. She gasped in pain and crashed into the wall behind her.

“L-Let me out of here. What do you plan on doing to my students?” The nun didn’t react to Aiko’s words. She placed the tray of food in the room, her movements robotic, and walked out of the room.

“Wait! Please wait! At least tell me whether or not my students are safe!” The nun slowly closed the door, her expression unchanged. Just before she shut it completely, she stopped.

“This is all the will of my lord. There is nothing you, who have been removed from the game board, need to know.” With an air of finality, the nun shut the door.

Aiko struggled to her knees and cursed her own powerlessness. Something terrible could happen to her students, and she wouldn’t know it.

Even though she was their teacher, there was nothing she could do to help.

Her thoughts turned to the boy who'd overturned one hopeless situation after another back in Ur. She looked up at the moon through the small skylight covered with bars, and murmured his name.

“Nagumo-kun...”

The nun heard Aiko's whisper as she walked away. She walked out to a nearby terrace and looked down at the ground below.

“Come if you dare, you anomaly. It will mean your end if you do.”

The monster of the abyss continued onward to a place of betrayals, madness, and divinity.

It was as if he was guided by fate itself.

Extra Chapter: Sunny with a Chance of Thunderstorms

Four days after Hajime and the others had conquered the Sunken Ruins of Melusine and returned to Erisen, the party was still resting in Remia and Myu's house.

Remia's house was pretty big by Erisen's standards, but it was still just a house. True, there were enough rooms for everyone, but the bathroom, laundry room, and other locations weren't huge or anything. The bathroom only had a single shower, which was enchanted to take in seawater from the ocean and convert it to freshwater. There was only enough space for two people to bathe at once.

Today, Tio and Shea were taking a shower together. Yue and Kaori had already finished theirs. Though they were always at each other's throats, they always tended to group up for things like that. Tio found their relationship rather interesting.

"Hm? What's this?" Shea stopped undressing and turned to where Tio was looking, her rabbit ears tilting forward inquisitively.

Tio stooped down between the clothes basket and picked up what seemed to be a notebook.

"What's that?"

"I'm not sure. I found it in the corner there... Perhaps it belongs to Remia?" Tio looked the notebook over. It was bound in high-quality leather. Such bindings were commonplace in human cities, but Tio didn't think dragons would have something like it around.

"Was it a gift from someone? Remia-san's really pretty, so maybe an admirer gave it to her."

"Hmm... That does seem plausible. I suppose we should return— Ah!?" Tio nodded and idly opened the notebook. When she saw what was written in its pages though, she froze.

"Tio-san? What's the matt— Aaaaaaaaaah!?" Shea came over and took

a peek at the contents over Tio's shoulder. She was also shocked.

This was what was written in the notebook they'd thought belonged to Remia:

Yue's Diary.

They stared at those two words in silence. Yue had never mentioned to anyone that she was keeping a diary, and no one had ever seen her writing.

After all, Yue didn't speak much. That wasn't to say she didn't join in conversations, or play pranks, but she definitely spoke less than the others. If they read her diary, they would finally have a window into her enigmatic mind.

Tio and Shea gulped nervously. Then, they exchanged glances.

"I know a person's diary is not something others should rifle through simply to satisfy their own curiosity..."

"Yeah, you're right. It's the most tactless thing you could do."

The two of them nodded. They both agreed it was rude to read Yue's diary.

"But let's read it anyway!" "However, this time my curiosity is too great!" Still, they also had no tact.

Shea, who was buck naked, and Tio, who was half-undressed, squatted over the diary and flipped through the pages.

"Hmm... It seems Yue found this notebook at the end of the Great Orcus Labyrinth."

"Yeah. It looks like she wanted to start her own diary after reading Oscar-san's record of his adventures. This way she'd have a written record of all her travels with Hajime-san."

"However, it appears she's too embarrassed to tell Master. If even he is unaware of this, it stands to reason that we wouldn't know."

The two discussed Yue's reason for starting a diary. The next few pages were filled with accounts of the special training she'd done with Hajime, her night life with Hajime, her conversations with Hajime, the food she ate with Hajime, watching Hajime transmute things, surprising Hajime with sex, making Hajime's clothes, Hajime's sleeping habits, spending time with Hajime in the bath, Hajime's fetishes, Hajime's weak points, Hajime's...

"She's way too clingy!" Over 90% of it was about Hajime. It basically detailed their month-long honeymoon. In just a few pages, Shea and Tio were throwing up. Naturally, they threw up sugar and rainbows, not vomit.

“Ugh, I feel like this is just rubbing their relationship in my face. Is all the stuff after they leave like this too? Just accounts of how much she flirted with Hajime-san?”

“W-Well, it might be... Wait, Shea, look, they’re finally about to leave Orcus’ house. Start from the part that says ‘Our adventure starts here.’”

“Oooh, that means Reisen Gorge is next! That’s where they met me! Ehehe, I wonder what Yue-san wrote about me?” Shea urged Tio to turn the page, a mixture of trepidation and excitement on her face.

“No need to be so impatient,” Tio said with a smile, and turned the page.

—O Month. X Day.

We found a worthless rabbit in the wild. I can’t imagine anything more worthless than her.

“Stop treating me like I’m some kind of animal! And quit calling me worthless!” Shea slapped the diary’s pages. Tio calmed her down and continued reading.

—O Month. X Day.

I’m in charge of training the worthless rabbit now. She’s totally in love with Hajime. I can understand why, since he looked really cool when he talked down the elders at Verbergen. Still, I don’t like the tricks she uses to get close to him. I’m gonna trap her in ice again today...

—O Month. X Day.

I haven’t been able to spend much time with Hajime these past few days. It’s all this worthless rabbit’s fault. I think I’ll trap her in ice. I am Yue, a woman who never goes easy on crafty rabbits, even if it is just training. Actually, this fog is pretty thick. Maybe I can kidnap Hajime without anyone noticing?

“Ugh, I definitely remember being frozen in ice every day... And can you stop calling me worthless and crafty all the time?”

“Shea, shouldn’t you be more worried about the last thing she wrote? She was planning on kidnapping our master.”

Tio shuddered as she read the account of Shea’s ten days of hellish training. She turned the page, and continued reading.

—O Month. X Day.

This worthless rabbit’s surprisingly tough. She always starts crying at the littlest thing, but she still hasn’t given up. The fire in her pale blue eyes still burns bright. I can’t help but admire her a little. That kind of pisses me off.

Well, I guess I'll just trap her in ice again. Also, I'm running out of Hajimenium. I'm starting to suffer from withdrawal symptoms. I'm going to ride him all night once this rabbit's training is done. I am Yue, a woman who never lets her prey escape.

“Yue-san... I never knew that was what you thought about me... Ehehe!”

“Shea, you're looking at the wrong thing again. Our poor master is about to be hunted down. What even is this Hajimenium!?”

Shea was blushing, but Tio grew even more worried as she read on. And so, she flipped another page.

—O Month. X Day. Hajime was delicious.

“She hunted him down! She really did it! When did she have time for that!? Poor Master... You were assaulted in the thick fog...”

Tio began to pity Hajime, and fear Yue. She turned the page again.

—O Month. X Day.

I lost to Shea. I actually lost. I lost to a worthless rabbit. How? What on earth is she? This doesn't make any sense. She's crazy. She threw entire trees at me, and she actually knocked down my magic with her hammer, and every time she jumped the earth shook and... This can't be happening...

“Yue's totally lost it! I've never seen her write like this, or talk like this! Is this really the same Yue!?”

“W-Was it really that much of a shock to lose to me, Yue-san?”

Tio looked shaken. Shea, too, was frozen in shock. She couldn't believe that one glancing blow she'd basically landed by sheer luck had depressed Yue that badly. She wondered how much more of a shock it must have been when Shea had confessed.

Frankly, she was scared to keep reading. Still, Tio flipped the page.

—O Month. X Day.

We left the sea of trees and headed for the Reisen Gorge. In just half a month, we've already obtained a new comrade. It's the bunny girl sleeping next to me right now. She's sleeping so peacefully. Honestly, it's like she doesn't have a care in the world. She must have suffered a lot to make it this far. How is it she can still make such a happy face? Come to think of it, even when she'd begged us for help, she still looked just fine. She's always like that. Even in the most desperate situations, she's always full of energy, serious, and earnest. This girl is strong. Her spirit is unbreakable, even more than mine, really. I think that's why I let her confess to Hajime, and let her

come with us. She's still inexperienced, but depending on how this labyrinth goes...

“.....” Tio silently turned the page. There were tears in Shea’s eyes.

—O Month X Day.

I hate Miledi.

“What happened to the serious tone from earlier!?”

“I mean, she was *really* annoying!”

—O Month. X Day.

Shea worked really hard. She’s definitely one of us now. I’m too embarrassed to say this to her face, so I’ll write it down here. She’s like the little sister I wish I always had. And my best friend, too. I’ll protect Shea’s future from here on out. I won’t let anyone take anything important from her.

“Yue...san...”

“What a discovery. Yue is as fond of you as she is of Master.” A waterfall of tears ran down both sides of Shea’s face. They dripped to the floor in a steady rivulet. She’d never realized Yue cared that much about her.

Obviously she’d known Yue treasured her, but not to such an extent. She wanted to run out and give Yue a giant hug. Though she was still naked, so she couldn’t do that.

Tio gently patted Shea’s head. After Shea had calmed down, Tio turned the page once more.

—O Month. X Day.

We found a wild deadbeat dragon. I never knew dragons were this pathetic. She’s a hopeless pervert. I can’t believe I looked up to your species once.

“Bwah!?”

“Tio-san!? Get a hold of yourself! It’s not as bad as it sounds!”

Normally Tio enjoyed being insulted, but bringing down the prestige of her entire race just hurt, especially since this came right after Yue wrote all those nice things about Shea. Tio wanted to run out and prostrate herself before Yue to apologize for ruining her image of dragonmen.

—O Month. X Day.

The world knows about Hajime’s strength now. The people from the Holy Church didn’t look happy at all. Our journey’s going to get a lot rougher from here on. It’s possible the Holy Church will declare him a heretic. Oh, and we can’t forget that Hajime kissed his teacher. Teacher-student relationships

sound... fascinating. I will become Yue-sensei, the teacher who hunts students after school.

“No, don’t!” “You can’t!” The entries had grown comedic again.
—O Month. X Day.

This dragon’s even more perverted than I thought. She’s beyond saving. Of that, I’m certain. But still, I can tell she’s trying to get to know us. I like that part of her. And the more I talk to her, the more I realize that she’s actually really smart. Though it’s kind of creepy how she sometimes looks at us all like she’s our mom. I don’t think that’s part of her weird fetish. It seems like she’s remembering something really important to her when she looks at us. Like me, she lost her country and her comrades... I’ll need to ask her for that story sometime. What did she feel when she watched her country burn? How is she planning on living from here on out? I’m sure she’d tell me if I ask, but I’ll wait a little bit. I haven’t opened up to her enough to ask that kind of question. She’s been open with us this whole time, so I have to do the same before I go any further. Also, is it just me, or does she actually like being punished by Hajime? I-I am Yue! I may not be able to change pain into pleasure, but nothing anyone does to me can kill me! I can take it, Hajime!

“Please don’t! If he actually beat you until you nearly died, then he’d be a psycho!”

“.....” Tio just stared at the pages silently. She scratched her cheek awkwardly, not sure of what to say. She was happy Yue thought so highly of her, but didn’t know how to express her thoughts in words.

“Tio-san, let’s keep reading.” Tio looked up to see Shea staring right at her. She’d read the pages too. But she didn’t say anything else, instead choosing to just gaze gently at Tio.

Now that I think about it, Shea is no different. She’d lost her homeland and most of her family as well, but Tio understood now that Yue had her own reasons for not asking more of either of them.

She was going to wait until she could share with them before delving deeper.

“You’re right, let’s keep going.” Tio had also begun to cry as well.
—O Month. X Day.

I want a kid.

“Seriously!?”

“She even underlined it!”

She probably didn't like that Myu never called her Mommy. They could see the marks the pen had left on the page. She'd pushed down on it really hard. Her frustration was evident from her handwriting.

—O Month. X Day.

Myu's so cute. I want a kid. I want a kid. Specifically, Hajime's kid. I really want one. Like, really want one. I love Hajime, and I want his kid. I want a kid, I want a kid, I want...

“Sh-She spent a whole five pages writing that...”

“Sh-She's actually insane. Only a madman would write something like this! Yue-san, I never knew you were a yandere!”

Tio's hands trembled. Cold sweat poured down Shea's back, and her rabbit ears were pressed firmly against her head.

—O Month. X Day.

A wild Kaori appeared. I thought she was spineless, but she's surprisingly determined. I like her spirit, so I guess I'll crush her head on. Also, I still want Hajime's kid. I am Yue. I won't hold back against any love rival, no matter how weak.

“Are we all just wild animals to Yue-san?”

“I'm more worried about her obsession with having Master's child. How badly does she want one? We're in the middle of conquering all the labyrinths... Now's not the time for her to be getting pregnant! I hope Yue understands that as well... but the more I read of this diary the more scared I get that I'll read an entry that says ‘I got pregnant.’”

“I-I get what you mean. Yue-san does do it an awful lot with Hajime-san.”

“Resisting her is futile.”

Even the monster of the abyss had no chance of beating her. Yue the vampire princess was at her most dangerous when she was seducing someone. Nothing could stand against her when she was on the prowl.

Trembling in fear, Shea and Tio continued reading through the diary.

“Shea. Tio.”

“Ah!?”

Suddenly, they heard a voice behind them, which made them stiffen in terror. They turned around, their heads creaking like a badly-oiled door.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Yue-san!? How long have you been there!?”

“Th-This isn't what it looks like, Yue! We didn't mean for this to happen!”

Yue's merciless gaze bore into the two of them.

"Did you read it?" They couldn't answer her. All they could do was sit there, trembling in fear.

Yue silently held out her hand. It seemed she wanted her diary back. Tio held it out to her reverently, as if it were some holy artifact. Yue took it and put it in her pocket. Then, both Shea and Tio prostrated themselves at Yue's feet.

"We're so sorry!" They simultaneously exclaimed.

She made them raise their heads and shrugged.

"It's partly my fault for leaving it here. Don't worry about it." They hadn't expected her to forgive them, so they felt even more guilty. They tried to apologize again, but Yue interrupted them.

"Anyway, did you two finish taking your shower?"

"Huh? O-Oh, not yet."

"W-We... were about to go in when we spotted this..."

For some reason, Yue's question scared them. They had an ominous premonition about what was to come. "I see..." Yue replied, and her golden hair began to flutter.

"I am Yue. I won't hold back, even against my best friend or the woman I look up to."

The two of them bolted. Shea tackled the bathroom wall, grabbing a bath towel to wrap around herself along the way. Tio hurriedly deployed a barrier behind her, then restored Remia's wall with her newly acquired magic. The two were in perfect sync.

They knew they'd need to run until Yue's wrath finally subsided.

Unfortunately, before they could even go a few paces, dark clouds rolled in, and thunder dragons filled the sky.

Shea and Tio's screams were loud enough that all Erisen could hear them.

Yue opened her notebook and pulled out a miniature pen from her pocket.
—O Month. X Day.

Today's weather, sunny with a chance of thunderstorms. All in all, a good day.

She snapped her notebook shut, nodded in satisfaction, and went out to retrieve the companions she'd burnt to a crisp.



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Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing Arifureta volume 5.
It's everyone's favorite chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome here.

A lot happened in this volume. Hajime cleared two labyrinths, Tio made some big decisions, Kaori found her resolve again, and they parted ways with Myu.

It's nice that the cast keeps growing, but I'm beginning to worry that I'm not giving each of the characters enough time and development. I hope I was able to properly give voice to everyone's feelings this volume... Oh, by the way, there's actually a certain someone I modeled Remia after. Can you tell who? I imagine most of you might have figured it out from the way she speaks.

As you may have guessed, she's based off my favorite character from Aria.

If you're still wondering who that is, I recommend googling "Araara ufufu" to find out. She'll surely bring warmth and comfort to your life too.

Kind of funny that I ended up using Arifureta's afterword to plug a different series entirely, huh? Personally though, I'd just be glad if more people experienced the things I love... Well, I'll get back to plugging Arifureta now.

The first volume of the Arifureta manga, illustrated by RoGa-sensei, came out at the same time as this volume. It's being published by an imprint of Overlap too, and I've gotta say it looks amazing. Like, seriously, it's so good!

You all should check it out! Now then, I'm running out of space, but I'd like to give everyone my thanks.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Takayaki-sensei for his wonderful illustrations. I'd also like to thank my editor for listening to me ramble every day. Also my proofreader, for catching my numerous and egregious typos, and the rest of the publishing staff who made this volume possible. Lastly, I'd like to thank the illustrator for the manga, RoGa-sensei. You're amazing.

Lastly, I'd like to thank all of my readers. The ones from Narou, too. It's

only because of you that all of this is possible.

Let's meet again in the next afterward.

Ryo Shirakome

<https://mp4directs.com>

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by Ryo Shirakome

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