
Tsukimichi
Moonlit Fantasy
6
Author
Kei Azumi
Illustrator
Mitsuaki Matsumoto
Hanashi
MEDIA


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ORIGINAL STORY: **Kei Azumi** | ILLUSTRATION: **Mitsuaki Matsumoto**

TRANSLATION:
ETHAN HOLMS

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR:
CALEB TURNER

EDITOR:
JASMINE THONE

LOGO DESIGN:
SKYLAR RUTAN

COVER LAYOUT:
KIRARI ENT.

PROOFREADING:
BRUCE LAMB

LAYOUT INTERIOR:
WERNER JACINTO

PRODUCTION MGR:
NAHUEL ROBLEDO

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ANDRES CABASCANGO/ ANDRES MATA

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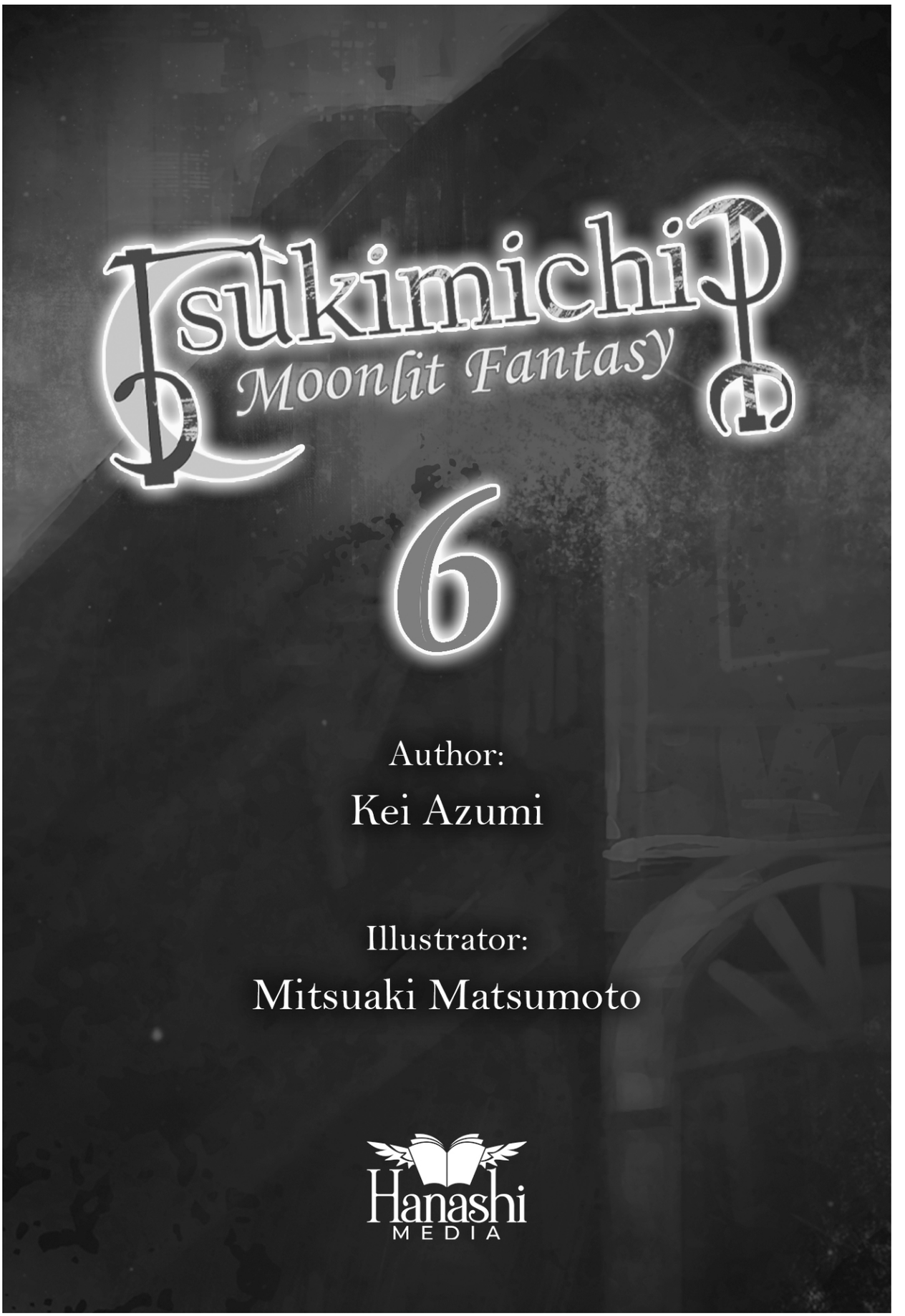
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Author:

Kei Azumi

Illustrator:

Mitsuaki Matsumoto

Hanashi
MEDIA


MAJOR CHARACTERS
SHIFU
A student at the Rotsgard Academy. She is the daughter of the great merchant Rembrandt and the elder sister of Yuno.
YUNO
A student at the Rotsgard Academy. She is the daughter of the great merchant Rembrandt and Shifu's younger sister.
JIN
A student at the Rotsgard Academy. A dedicated boy who takes Makoto's lectures with great enthusiasm.
TOMOE
Originally a dragon known as Shin. She gained a human form after making a Contract with Makoto. She has a deep love for Japanese culture.
SHIKI
Originally an undead monster known as a lich. He assumed human form after making a Contract with Makoto.
MAKOTO MISUMI
The protagonist of this story. An unfortunate high school student summoned to another world due to his parents' circumstances. Currently enjoying his life in this other world.
MIO
Originally a giant spider. She gained a human form after Contracting with Makoto and is deeply devoted to him.

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Side Story: Final Negotiations for the Demiplane Settlement



I, Makoto Misumi, had lost contact with Lime Latte, who had been investigating the abandoned district within Rotsgard Academy on my behalf. Normally, he would have returned to clean the shop before it opened in the morning, but not only had he failed to show up, we'd found evidence of a fight where he'd last been seen the night before.

My servant, the former lich Shiki, had been tracking Rona's movements, but there was no sign of activity from her last night. Rona was a demon woman who had infiltrated the academy under a false identity. I didn't know exactly what her objective was, but of all things, she also happened to be one of my students…

As suspicious as she is, if Rona wasn't involved in this, then what on earth happened?

Aqua and Eris, who had been with Lime, returned without incident. Had Lime gotten close to something dangerous on his own? He hadn't reported anything unusual.

"Lime said he was just going to stop by the Merchant Guild before heading back," Aqua remarked, suggesting something might have happened after they parted ways.

"It's strange that he engaged in a fight without any orders to kill on sight. He normally would have run first then tailed his opponent," Eris added, her tone calm and certain.

Eris, I've never once given a "kill on sight" order…

Indeed, the place where we found signs of the battle and Lime's disappearance was along a road leading away from where he'd separated from Aqua and Eris to head to the Merchant Guild. But Lime wasn't the type to be easily overpowered, even if ambushed. He was skilled enough to escape while fighting and then, like Eris said, tail his attacker and report back to me.

If that didn't happen, then the opponent must have been so powerful that he didn't even get the chance to run. Could someone that skilled have arrived in Rotsgard? It wasn't impossible to think that a merchant could have hired an adventurer of that caliber.

The forest ogre sisters, Shiki, and I were discussing the situation on the shop's upper floor, leaving the dwarves to manage the store. But I couldn't expect them to solely keep running the place once things got busy, so I'd have to send Aqua and Eris back soon. If Lime had been captured or killed, then the two forest ogres would likely meet a similar fate if they ran into the same enemy.

It made sense for Shiki and me to handle this ourselves.

The only reason I could remain calm, even though Lime was in danger, was because Shiki had examined the traces of the battle and reassured me that Lime was "likely" still alive. Of course, I wasn't going to relax and take my time searching. I fully intended to rescue him as quickly as possible. Just because he hadn't died in the fight didn't mean he was safe now. Still, since he had been abducted, I figured his captors must have a purpose, which hopefully gave us a bit of breathing room.

"Raidou-sama, it seems we may have been tricked," Shiki said.

"Rona hasn't made any moves, right?" I asked.

"Indeed. However, the situation aligns with what we've heard before about interference with telepathy and the rings that suppress blessings. There's also a strange flow of power in the area. It's likely that Lime wasn't able to contact us. I suspect this sort of technique can only be wielded by demons."

That again, huh…

"So, there are traces of this technique having been used? Do you think there could be more demons hiding among us, besides Rona, and they've decided to make their move?"

“It’s possible. Someone with Rona’s abilities could pull off something like this no problem.”

I frowned. “Any other clues about where Lime might be?”

“I did detect an unusual magical signature at the scene… It was from Eva, the librarian at the academy.”

Eva? That was unexpected. I glanced around as I processed this.

Eva, the librarian. It wasn’t a time or place she should’ve been wandering around. We were somewhat acquainted, but in all the time I’d known her, she’d only ever shown me two sides: the quiet librarian and Luria’s sister who worked at the Ironclad Inn. She asked the occasional odd question, but it had always seemed to be within the limits of casual curiosity.

“Eva, huh?” I mused aloud. “I didn’t think she was the type who could catch Lime off guard. If she got involved in this by pure curiosity, that would be pretty unfortunate.”

It did feel strange for even a whisper of someone as reserved and bookish as Eva to be involved in this, but I’d known similar people back in high school—the kind of people who always seemed to have their antennae up, and you just knew they’d get caught up in some kind of trouble eventually.

Still… I can’t shake the feeling that it doesn’t add up. Why would Rona act before we’ve even revealed all our cards?

“As expected, it’s not a situation where we can make any firm judgments yet,” Shiki said, nodding thoughtfully. “I, too, find myself assuming it’s the work of demons. Perhaps we should send Aqua and Eris down to the shop and go back to the scene of the fight ourselves?”

“Yeah, let’s check out the academy’s abandoned district,” I agreed. “They say ‘going to the scene a hundred times is worth it.’ We might be able to pick up a trail.”

Lime had disappeared somewhere along the road between the academy and the Merchant Guild. The street, extending from the academy’s unused sections, was always deserted, but Lime had been investigating the academy grounds—specifically the so-called “abandoned district” or, more accurately, a redevelopment zone that was off-limits. That was the area we needed to focus on.

“Before that, let’s start at where he went missing,” I suggested. “We might find something new.”

“Got it. Aqua, Eris, please head back to the shop. If any visitors come by, hear out their queries and let them know we’ll get in touch later,” I instructed.

“Take care!” the two employees responded, bowing as they sent us off. With that, Shiki and I set out to find our missing comrade.

Lime

“You okay, sis?”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, considering you just woke up yourself,” a woman replied. “For now, I’m fine, but who knows how long that will last…”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” I said with a grin. “So, can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I was planning on helping you after that young man knocked you out, but then another group showed up. They seem to have assumed I was with you, and now here I am.” She sighed. “It’s probably morning by now… I’ll have to deal with the fallout of missing work without notice. This is just great!”

“Oh, right. You’re the librarian! Eva, wasn’t it? Well, no point stressing over skipping work once or twice.”

She went silent for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Tch, I messed up… Taken down like this… and without my sword too. I think I might die if anee or the boss finds out.

“Hey,” Eva called out, breaking into my thoughts.

“Huh?”

“How do you know my name? And how do you even know my job?”

I chuckled. “Oh, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself properly. I’m Lime Latte; I work for the Kuzunoha Company. You’re acquainted with Raidou-sama, aren’t you? So, as you can imagine, I’ve seen you around there.”

As I spoke, I scanned my surroundings. It didn’t take long to figure out we were in a cell—an underground one, based on the musty air and lack of ventilation. A sour stench lingered around us, and I could hear the faint movements of small creatures—

probably bugs—scuttling around. And it seemed we were alone; just me and the librarian, Eva, the woman Raidou-sama had asked me to keep an eye on.

Something's off about her…

I still couldn't understand why she had been at that place last night. It wasn't the kind of spot you'd stumble across on a casual evening walk. I could tell she was trying hard to keep a calm face, but she wasn't as composed as she wanted me to believe. According to the information I'd gathered, she hated bugs, yet despite the room's clear infestation, she wasn't showing any signs of disgust.

Is she hiding something? Or is she more involved in this than she's letting on?

I checked myself over—no injuries, no restraints—but most of my weapons were missing. Worst of all, my sword was gone. *Damn it. I need to get that back, no matter what.* At least a few dwarven-crafted items had slipped past our captors' notice.

Maybe they thought they were just for decoration? Not that I blame them—these pieces don't look like much unless you know what you're looking for. Besides, I've concealed my magic power down to the bare minimum.

Among the remaining items was the bangle on my right wrist—a secret weapon crafted by the dwarves. I whispered the activation phrase under my breath. A faint glow flickered around my arm, and in an instant, a sword materialized, its familiar weight settling into my grip.

"What?! What is that?!" Eva gasped, her eyes widening in shock.

"Shh, keep it down," I whispered, glancing toward the door. "Look, I get that you're surprised, but think about our situation. Right now, we should be on the same page—we need to get out of here."

She eyed me warily, her gaze drifting to the sword in my hand. "You're not just a shop clerk, are you? You're some kind of bodyguard, aren't you?"

She was getting closer to the truth, but I just shrugged. *Man, if only she knew. After everything I've seen with anee, I'm nothing special. Hell, I've only just started holding my own against Mondo*

in sparring. I made a mental note: Once we got out of this mess, I'd have to go through some serious retraining.

"Kuzunoha's shop clerks are tougher than you'd think," I said with a grin. "But just to confirm, Eva, you want to get out of here, right?"

She didn't answer immediately, and that set off warning bells in my head.

Why is she hesitating? Could she be involved with the people who locked me up? If they're fighting among themselves, this situation could get a lot more complicated.

"This is the academy's abandoned district," Eva finally said, her voice low. "Whoever set up a base here is part of a serious organization."

"Well now, that's not just idle speculation, is it? You're talking like someone who knows more than they're letting on. What exactly are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying there are collaborators inside the academy," Eva continued calmly. "Even if we escape from here, for someone like me—remember, I'm just a librarian—my situation wouldn't change much."

She's keeping her cool, even though her life might be in danger. I had to admit, she wasn't wrong. If shady people were sneaking around Rotsgard Academy, they'd need someone on the inside helping them out. Figuring out who could wait.

"Fair enough. We might have a lead in a few days," I replied, trying to keep things light.

"And you… you lost to him. That was clear, even to someone with no combat experience. You didn't just not win—you couldn't even escape, could you?"

Ouch, straight to the point.

I'd known I couldn't run, so I'd steeled myself and given it my all… only to lose. It wasn't the kind of power gap you could close with another try. It felt like the same crushing defeat I'd experienced when fighting anee or the boss.

That kid… He looked a little older than the boss, maybe around Shiki-san's age. But with power like that, he should've been famous. And yet, I'd never heard of him before.

"You're right. If that guy shows up again, it's over. But relax—he's not here. I've made sure of that. I wouldn't be making a move

without some chance of success," I said confidently.

I *never* went down without a fight. Even in defeat, I pushed until the very end. That was the principle I lived by—never stop struggling. At the very least, I knew that bastard wasn't anywhere nearby. Now was the time to act.

Thanks to the hit I'd managed to land on him during our fight, he was a marked man. One of the abilities imbued in my sword allowed me to precisely track his location. Wherever he was now, it wasn't close by.

"Even if I believe you, that doesn't change the fact that I'm still in danger. If you really want to help me, get out of here, then deal with the group inside the academy too," she said, her narrowed eyes evaluating me.

Damn, she's sizing me up. The librarian I'd investigated and the woman standing here now weren't the same person. Is this the real her? A noble hiding her identity... or a fallen noble trying to survive? That seems like the most likely answer. In that case, her name might be fake too.

The boss seemed like a magnet for troublesome women, and considering how Tomoe-anee liked to handle people like that, getting rid of her outright wouldn't be the smartest move. And her connection to the boss made things even messier.

"You want me to clean up the mess, huh?" I said, crossing my arms thoughtfully. "Well, I do plan on settling things with those bastards. But what's in it for me if I go that far for you?"

There was no reason for me to work for free. I was part of the Kuzunoha Company now, and if I was going to take on a job, I needed compensation. Otherwise, it could lead to bigger headaches down the road.

"If you really do work for the Kuzunoha Company, I can give your master valuable information. And if you're able to crush this organization's influence within the academy..."

"This organization," huh? OK, so she definitely knows something about these people. We'll probably need to take a peek inside her head—quietly—just me and Shiki. The boss will be furious if he finds out, but there's no other way. Whatever her connection is, she seems scared enough to know exactly who she's dealing with.

Eva had to be linked to the people the boss had asked us to investigate. There was no other way a librarian would know about a shady organization like that. *Eva, huh? I'd better take a closer look at her and her sister, Luria.*

Still, this wasn't the time to be careless and make enemies in the shadows.

"And if I *can* crush their influence?" I asked, playing along.

"I'll promise you a substantial reward," she replied confidently.

Yeah, that smells fishy as hell. That line was one I'd heard far too often in my adventurer days—always a reason to be suspicious.

"All right." I nodded, keeping my voice calm. "We'll talk about compensation later. For now, I'll guarantee your safety. But you're coming with me to meet the boss. Before that, though, you'd better be ready—you're probably going to see some unpleasant things. You prepared for that?"

"No problem."

Good, I thought, *let's finish this up and get back to report to the boss. Damn, it's inconvenient not having telepathy, thanks to that brat shutting it down.*

All right. I've got my spells; I've got my weapon. Taking care of the guys here won't be any issue at all.

Even though the boss told me to prioritize reporting, depending on what I see next, I might not be able to hold myself back. In fact, I probably won't. In that sense, maybe it's a good thing we can't use telepathy right now.

First things first—my sword. Damn it, the nerve of them touching the blade anee gave me… But now wasn't the time to lose my temper. I'd already pinpointed its location. It had been specially tuned for me, so it could do things like transmit its position. Normally, adding that kind of feature to a weapon was either impossible or outrageously expensive, depending on the quality of the blade, but the dwarves had taken care of it overnight. The boss and anee had definitely pulled some strings for me, and those filthy hands dared to touch my lifeblood.

Come to think of it, if the dwarf brothers had a hard time with my gear, I can't even imagine what kind of incredible weapons the boss and anee have…

With a single, clean slash, I cut through the gleaming metal bars that looked so out of place in this musty old dungeon. Nothing special.

It's just that my weapon's too damn good.

Now then, I might have a bit of deadweight, but it's time to strike back.

※※※

What… exactly is going on here?

Shiki and I stood at the supposed scene of the incident, completely baffled. The traces of battle were obvious—too obvious. And they hadn't been there when Shiki had checked earlier.

Residual magic. And this sensation… It's the same as what I've felt from Tomoe and Lancer.

"Raidou-sama. These traces… They go all the way to the abandoned district," Shiki noted, his eyes scanning the ground.

"They weren't here before, right?" I asked, feeling uneasy.

"Indeed. And from these remnants, I can sense the presence of a dragon."

Of course. Dragons always made me think of Tomoe or Lancer. Lancer, AKA Mitsurugi, was the dragon who had been with Sofia, a battle-obsessed woman who had suddenly attacked me.

If it were Tomoe, she'd have told me. So… Lancer? Yeah, Lime wouldn't stand a chance against him.

A rematch with Sofia too? No way. I wasn't up for that—I didn't even want to see her again. Neither of those two had listened to a single word I'd said.

With Shiki here, and considering that I'd seen their cards to some extent, I could probably put up a better fight than last time. But ideally, I'd only take them on if I was certain I could win. I wanted to avoid a fight with an unpredictable outcome.

“These traces are hidden but not well. Like they wanted us to find them,” I muttered, frowning.

“Most likely a trap. But if a dragon is involved, it makes it a lot less likely that demons are behind this. As far as I know, Rona doesn’t have any dragon allies,” Shiki responded calmly.

“It could be Lancer; probably on the demons’ side.”

“Lancer who was with the Dragon Slayer, right? Hmm… then there’s no reason to hesitate, Raidou-sama. Let’s go.”

“Wait, what?!”

No, no, no! We need *to hesitate!* If Shiki started acting like a battle junkie too, my stomach would give out!

“If Lancer and the Dragon Slayer are up ahead, then this is perfect. I cannot allow those who made my master bleed to walk away. They will die repenting for their sins,” Shiki said, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light.

“Sh-Shiki?”

“Heh… Lime, that fool, he’s done something useful for once,” Shiki murmured with a dark chuckle. “Under normal circumstances, I’d summon Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono, but given the urgency of the situation, I’ll overlook it this time. To think that I’d get the chance to deal with the so-called Dragon Slayer and Mitsurugi… Excellent. Truly excellent.”

I’d thought Shiki was the most composed of us. Turns out, he’d just been quietly bottling up his frustration. This was terrifying. His eyes, which had once glowed a calm red, now radiated a chilling madness. His thin smile only made it worse.

“Hey, seriously, those guys are really strong,” I said, trying to get through to him. “Are you listening, Shiki?”

“Of course, Raidou-sama. That simply means we’ll be able to go all out, correct? Worry not. I have no intention of holding back in the slightest. And if, by some chance, I fail to handle them, we’ll simply summon Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono… and our opponents’ despair will be bottomless.”

He’s completely lost it. If we really ended up fighting Sofia again, I might not even need to get involved. Shiki was too far gone. I didn’t think I could rein him in if I tried. And, if I was being honest, I didn’t want to. It felt good knowing he was this angry on my behalf.

All of that to say, I had no choice but to go with Shiki. I could handle things now. I wasn't the same as last time.



A trap, huh…

This could be interesting. Since he'd become my follower, I'd never actually seen Shiki go all out. Most of our training revolved around counterspells—neutralizing magic, not unleashing it—and he hadn't been part of the forest ogres' training. But this time, I'd finally see how he truly fought.

In fact, it wasn't just Shiki—I hadn't even seen Tomoe or Mio go all out.

With no idea what awaited us, Shiki and I headed for the abandoned district.

Shiki was muttering under his breath; his form already cloaked in a violent, ominous aura of magic. He didn't look like someone I could just casually talk to anymore.

"Boss, I apologize for my earlier mistake. It's Lime, I'm back. I'm here with Eva, the librarian from the academy. We've just confirmed the nature of the facility you instructed us to investigate in the abandoned district. I've made sure Eva is safe, and we've disabled the facility and eliminated the enemy."

Huh?

L-Lime?!

I'd all but given up on hearing from him entirely, and here was a telepathic message from him out of nowhere. Thank goodness I'd left my reception channel open just in case.

"Lime, are you okay?! Eva's with you? Uh, wait—wasn't there a dragon there?" I asked, confused.

"A dragon? No, there was no dragon. Just the facility we talked about before. Both of us are in one piece. I'll give you a full report later, but for now, Eva says she has something she wants to discuss with you. We're heading your way. You're where I was attacked, right?"

"Uh, yeah…" I responded, still in disbelief.

Wow, impressive tracking. He's like a professional agent now.

"All right then," Lime replied before abruptly cutting the connection.

Wait, "All right then"? Does that mean they're coming here?!

This was bad.

"Shiki!"

I needed to snap him out of it! *It'll be a disaster if Eva sees him like this!*

"Shiki! Lime's on his way back! It's already over! Hey, come on, snap out of it! Flick off that switch! Ditch the murderous aura! Smile! Just smile!"

"Lime! That man, of all people…!" Shiki growled, still brimming with frustration.

"Can you hear me?! Switch back to normal!!!" I shouted, desperately trying to wrangle him back under control.

"How dare he say 'I'm back' after winding me up this much! Couldn't he wait ten more minutes?! What the hell is wrong with him?!"

"No, no, no! There wasn't any dragon! It was all a misunderstanding!"

When Lime arrived, I had finally managed to calm Shiki down, getting him back into his usual academy mode. It had been one of the toughest missions I'd had in a while…

Rona

Raidou, huh. I don't believe for a second that he's just a merchant. But even so, I didn't feel even the slightest hint of hatred toward demons from him. He's not like that Dragon Slayer, who joins forces with other people for some hidden agenda. No, he's just… normal. Completely ordinary. That boy interacts with demons as if he were talking to hyumans from another country.

Rona, posing as the hyuman woman Karen Fols, lay quietly on the bed in her assigned room. Her eyes were closed, but her mind was actively sorting through the unexpected events of her recent outing.

As a demon general, Rona's main role was the gathering and utilization of information. She also occasionally gave tactical and strategic advice. In terms of individual combat ability, she ranked third among the four demon generals, but she didn't concern herself with that. She believed that as long as each general served the Demon King in their area of expertise, that was enough. So, whether she was feared or despised for her work, Rona remained

unfazed. In fact, she took it as a sign of her commitment to the mission, something she was quietly proud of.

Even among the academy's most skilled instructors, Raidou's power is on another level, Rona mused. *From my perspective, he isn't just exceptional—he's something entirely different.*

If hyumans adopt the combat style he's promoting, it'll become a serious problem. His style shares similarities with ours. If a bigger force were to start using the same techniques, we'd be at a severe disadvantage.

Simply put, we need to eliminate him quickly. But the greater concern is the information he possesses. He even knows my name… and I can only say that about a select few demons. I need to eliminate the source of that information leak, wherever it came from.

His neutrality surprised her—he chose neither the demons' side nor the hyumans'. If that was truly how he thought, then he could be incredibly useful. He seemed easy to handle, a perfect pawn. But Shiki was the real obstacle. Rona's instincts told her he was the one running their information network. He was the dangerous one, the one who knew her name.

The ideal move? Eliminate Shiki—then bring Raidou to our side. That would be the perfect outcome for the demons.

By now, Rona had secretly instructed several of her agents to investigate the Kuzunoha Company and Raidou. In the planning stages of this mission for Rotsgard, they hadn't deemed it dangerous, so the subordinates she'd brought weren't particularly skilled. Now, with a shortage of skilled personnel, she regretted that decision.

Getting caught wouldn't just be futile—it could backfire. So, Rona issued strict orders to her subordinates to remain undetected. This approach risked compromising the quality of intelligence, but right now, gathering intel on her opponent took priority.

Kuzunoha doesn't appear to be making any notable moves within the academy. I'll check their merchandise later, but being a general goods store, I doubt there's anything particularly remarkable about it. When I checked Raidou's guild records, his classification was listed as a "jack-of-all-trades." Judging from the

timing of his registration and his business choices, it doesn't seem like he has any exceptional business acumen.

It's strange… It wouldn't make sense for someone with no talent to be surrounded by only competent individuals. He must have some hidden ability. His combat skills were undeniably impressive—I nearly had to get serious myself. Then, there's his assistant, Shiki—he's probably formidable too. But could mere combat prowess really explain why so many capable people gravitate toward him?

Rona's thoughts spiraled in circles without reaching any firm conclusions, leaving her increasingly frustrated. She couldn't bring herself to believe that they would pose no future threat. She had to act, but without a clear grasp of her opponent—or the extent of their information network—gauging her limits was impossible.

For now, let's just watch them. My main objective is complete, so there's no need to take unnecessary risks. Besides, unless someone from the temple gets involved, there's little chance the hyumans will leave this incident with a positive impression. The atrocities committed against the demi-humans will eventually be blamed on the hyumans, and, considering I'm here, it could even improve the demons' standing.

How ever it turns out, it won't harm our interests. If they ask for help, I can lend a hand personally—no harm in that. It could even lay the groundwork for me to disappear without raising suspicions. Given the circumstances, I'd say I handled this rather well.

Rona slowly opened her eyes. So far, she had managed to respond to the unexpected developments, and the path ahead was becoming clearer. As she reached this conclusion, she noticed night had already fallen.

She chuckled softly, realizing how much time she'd spent lost in thought.

Before long, it was likely that another large-scale conflict would break out between the demons and hyumans. Rona expected that she would also have to participate in that battle, and there was still a lot of work to be done before then. But Raidou's presence had thrown everything off course.

As for Stella Fortress, with Io there, most contingencies are already covered. When it comes to battlefield strategy and combat ability, few are as reliable as he is. Considering the scale of the conflict at this moment, Sofia is still the strongest force on the hyuman side. As long as she's kept under control, the hyumans' attacks will be limited. All that's left is to uncover the true nature and abilities of the Wicked One, and everything will be solid.

This phase is progressing exactly as our king envisioned… Of course, if Raidou turns out to be the Wicked One, then this could be resolved easily, but… that seems a bit too convenient. There are too many uncertainties—like the timing of the battles, the scale of the magic used, and even the limited physical descriptions we've gathered. The only commonality with Raidou is the blue coat-like armor. Ugh, doubting someone just because they wear a blue coat—my instincts aren't what they used to be. And, honestly, when the eyewitness reports from the battlefield only mention red and blue figures, it's hard to trust the reliability of that information. I thought I hadn't fallen victim to the academy's peaceful atmosphere, but maybe I have. Oh well, I'll just rest for the night.

It would be a while yet before Rona realized that the two people giving her so much trouble—Raidou and the Wicked One—were, in fact, the same person.

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Lime's Report

Interim Report on Rotsgard Academy Redevelopment Area Investigation

During the investigation of the specified area, I encountered an unknown individual. Height around five foot seven, slender build, silver hair, and black eyes. Presumably male. His unnervingly perfect face was constantly adorned with a smile. His appearance resembled that of a hyuman, but I suspect otherwise. He possessed overwhelming combat ability.

I attempted to flee but failed, so I sought an opportunity to escape during the fight. However, the individual activated a ringlike device that blocked telepathy. The extent of its other effects are unclear. I was unable to gauge the full extent of his power and was ultimately defeated but managed to land a strike and mark him.

Additional note: During the battle, I heard a woman's scream, which I later confirmed to be from the academy librarian Eva.

After losing consciousness, I awoke to find myself restrained in the basement of a building within the "abandoned district"—the very area I had been investigating. Eva was similarly restrained. After assessing the situation, I decided on escape. I verified her willingness to be protected and brought her along. There is a possibility that Eva is of noble descent, based on her behavior and speech.

Within the building, I confirmed that the target was a medium- to large-scale organization. I discovered the true nature of their experiments, which we had been investigating. As suspected, their methods were inhumane, and none of the subjects were found in recoverable conditions. Most were demi-humans, though I observed a few hyumans as well.

The experiments matched the details in the intelligence provided by the demon Rona—pure hyuman experimentation. The primary focus was drug trials and chimera research, all aimed at enhancing combat ability and magical power. All test subjects had been abductees, both hyuman and demi-human.

After confirming that my earlier mark showed no reaction, I determined that the boy I'd fought previously was absent and proceeded with the mission. Given the target's combat capabilities and the risk they posed, immediate action was necessary. With telepathic communication unavailable, I concluded that the best course of action was the total destruction of the facility, ensuring it could never be restored.

During the operation, there was no sign of the boy nor any sign of reinforcements. The facility was neutralized swiftly. After setting traps and surveillance within the building, I escaped with the librarian.

There has been no movement from any remaining members nor reinforcements. Through testimony from the members, I identified several potential collaborators within the academy, though not all were confirmed. Further investigation is necessary to identify and report all collaborators.

I confirmed that some members of the hostile group were part of the Assassin's Guild. It seemed that some sort of cooperative arrangement had been established through contracts.

That is all.

Additional note: Apologies for any shortcomings in this report—I'm not used to writing these things in a hurry.

—Lime

What's with that last part, Lime? And his signature—it was unusually neat. I should probably get used to writing my own signature too. There was always some contract or delivery form that needed it.

Still, this report feels incomplete. It's a strange mix of formal documentation and personal reflection, like he skimmed over the real details.

Lime would normally never flee an enemy that he could handle on his own. It felt off that he couldn't use his telepathy, and hadn't Eva been with him? Something about this whole thing just didn't add up.

Who was the boy who had whupped Lime like an infant at the start? If it were Lancer, he would've drawn his sword and attacked, something Lime would have mentioned. It was also strange that the boy hadn't appeared again after that. Could it be connected to the same organization? And the fact that Lime returned unharmed—that stood out to me. What was the purpose of that fight?

Hmm, if Lime and Eva had been kidnapped while unconscious…

If it had been me attacking, I would have disarmed them first, then patted them down for other weapons and restrained them to make sure they couldn't resist. So, had Lime's sword been taken? He always said that sword meant more to him than his life, so no way he would have let that slide. Would he have

stopped at just getting it back, especially considering how angry he had been when I told him about Rona's suspicions?

His report hadn't mentioned his sword being taken. It also lacked detailed information about the experiments. All he had written was that none of the subjects were in any state to be saved or had already died.

As he said at the end, he had written the report in a hurry, so it was a pretty rough summary. I thought I should probably call Lime in later and have him fill in the gaps verbally. There was no need to make him rewrite it.

Maybe there were parts he didn't think should be written down in the report. Lime was quite considerate like that. He might have left things out on purpose, to spare me from unnecessary worry.

"Raidou-sama, Eva would like to speak with you," Shiki informed me.

Eva, huh.

I had been quietly reading the report, but I looked up upon hearing Shiki's words. Eva was waiting in the next room. For the time being, I planned to let her stay here until Lime could identify the academy's collaborators and other involved parties. It would weigh on me if she ended up dead on my watch.

Besides, I needed to ask her what she had been doing in that place. According to Lime, she had been with him after their capture, but for someone who had seen him eliminate the targets, she seemed far too calm. For a librarian supposedly buried in books all day, her composure was unnerving.

If she was ready to talk, I should go meet her in person. Having her come here didn't feel right.

Oh, and I couldn't leave Shiki idle. The situation had taken an unexpected turn, but we had made progress. Bringing Rona into this might speed things up.

"Shiki, I'm going to talk to Eva," I said. "Could you head to Rona and ask her to help Lime and the others identify the academy's collaborators starting tomorrow? Fill her in on what's happened so far—use your discretion on how much to share."

"As you wish. I'll be sure to give Rona a good push."

Shiki and Rona really seemed to get along well. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of relationship they'd had in the past.

I watched Shiki as he left, then knocked on the door to the next room. Almost immediately, I heard her say, “Come in.”

Stepping into the room, I found that the familiar librarian looked worn out, though something about her gaze had changed. She no longer looked at me as a casual acquaintance—her eyes held a quiet evaluation, as if weighing my worth. It wasn’t overt, but the tension was there.

“Thanks to Lime, I managed to survive. Thank you, Raidou-sensei. He’s an employee of your trading company, right? He’s quite strong, isn’t he?” she asked, her eyes showing a mixture of relief and curiosity.

I raised my hand slightly, and a speech bubble appeared in front of me, with the text floating in the air: *“He used to be an adventurer before joining us. I was surprised when I heard the report. I’m just glad you’re safe.”*

“And Shiki, as well. Is it some kind of rule that one has to be strong to join your company?” she continued, her tone probing.

She’s still trying to assess us, huh?

“Not at all. It’s just coincidence that you’ve encountered those individuals. Now, you mentioned you had something to discuss with me?”

In reality, nearly everyone who worked with me could fight. But that was best left unsaid.

“Yes. You might have heard this from Lime already, but… it’s about information and compensation.”

“From Lime? Well, he was quite exhausted and is resting now. Information and compensation, you say?”

That was a lie. Lime had already told me about the information and compensation she mentioned. I didn’t mind the compensation—I’d gladly accept it—but what intrigued me more was the information.

“Yes. I made a promise to Lime when he saved me. As for the compensation, that will come after we’ve dealt with the threat that looms over me, which I’ll tell you about now,” she said, her tone becoming more serious.

“Please, go ahead,” I wrote.

“Yes, it’s about the two portraits you showed me before,” she began, her voice steady but her eyes flickering with some hesitation.

What?! My heart skipped a beat.

"I'm sorry. I lied to you. Those portraits of the man and woman you asked me about… I did recognize them."

The portraits of my parents. They were the ones Rinon had drawn for me. I had shown them to a few people at the academy, including Eva and a few other librarians, asking if anyone knew anything, but so far, no one had recognized them.

If what she was saying was true, this would be extremely valuable information for me. Tracing my parents' history was one of the main reasons I'd come to this academy.

"If my memory serves me correctly, the man was a noble who held an important position in his country, and the woman was a high-ranking priestess affiliated with a temple," Eva shared.

My mom and dad?

I had always assumed they were adventurers. This was quite unexpected. Especially the part about my mother being a priestess—it didn't match the image I had of her at all.

"A noble and a priestess? From which country?" I asked.

"I'm not sure if you'll answer this," she replied, "but may I ask what your connection is to these two, Raidou-sensei?"

"They're my benefactors," I answered smoothly. *"But whether I'll ever be able to repay my debt to them, I don't know."*

They were the greatest benefactors of my life, the ones who gave me life itself. But if asked whether I'd ever be able to do something in return for them, I honestly didn't know.

"I see. There were rumors that they had become adventurers right before they disappeared, so perhaps there was some connection after all," she speculated.

"Please tell me everything you know about them."

"The two of them were from a satellite state of Elysion, a now-fallen kingdom. A small nation that was called Kaleneon."

"Were?" I asked, filled with a sudden unease.

"Yes. They were supposed to get married, but they were exiled from their nation before they could, and eventually became adventurers. At some point, they disappeared," she explained, her tone steady, though the weight of her words settled heavily on me.

"Why were they exiled?"

“Unfortunately, there are no detailed records about that. Kaleneon suffered even worse devastation than Elysion during the Great Invasion. The royal lineage was wiped out, and now, even the country’s name is fading from the world’s memory.”

The Great Invasion… That was when the demons, about ten years ago, had gone on a rampage, seizing the opportunity to invade because the Goddess had gone silent. I’d read that it was considered a crushing victory for the demons. For a book in a hyuman academy city to call it a “crushing victory,” it must have been close to total devastation.

A fallen noble from Kaleneon and a priestess. That’s the past my parents lived.

If there were no records left, it would be much more difficult to trace my parents’ steps.

Wait a minute… A nation whose name is being forgotten, where even the royal lineage can no longer be traced…

How does this librarian know about a noble from such a small forgotten place? Could there be something in the academy’s library that mentions it?

“How is it that you know about a noble and priestess of a small fallen country?” I asked.

Had my father and mother left behind some incredible story worthy of legend? Maybe, just as I first suspected, they had achieved something significant and ended up transported to another world.

“There are a few volumes in the library that mention Kaleneon,” Eva answered.

A few volumes? In a library that holds an overwhelming number of books—too many to read in a lifetime—there were only a handful of volumes about it? Well, I knew that Elysion was one of the five great kingdoms destroyed by the demons, but as for the smaller surrounding states, I didn’t even know their names. In fact, Kaleneon was completely new to me.

“A few volumes, huh? As expected of you, Eva-san¬—you know the library’s collection very well.”

“No. While it’s true there are a few books that mention Kaleneon, none of them contain any information about the two people you asked about. My knowledge of them comes from a different source.”

“Another source? May I ask what that is?”

“You’re aware that Luria and I are sisters, but I’ve never told you our family name, have I?” she asked, her voice growing quieter.

“No, you haven’t. But it’s not uncommon for people to not have family names, so I didn’t find it strange that you hadn’t mentioned one.”

“We did have a family name. But now… we’re no longer in a position to use it,” she said with a hint of bitterness.

“That doesn’t sound like a peaceful story.”

“Our parents chose to flee rather than fight in the war against the demons. In the end, Luria and I were the only ones who survived. Even worse, we were branded as cowards—nobles who survived while our nation burned,” she explained, her tone heavy with the weight of that memory.

So, Eva was once a noble… or at least considered herself one.

In this world, nobles were responsible for defending their territories. During peaceful times, they simply collected taxes and managed their lands, building their reputation in high society. If they handled these responsibilities well, no one complained. In fact, they were often praised.

When a threat approached, they had to lead an army to defend their lands. If their territory was burned, a noble was expected to fall with it, going down honorably.

If a lord didn’t act recklessly in peacetime and protected their land during wartime, then they were fulfilling their responsibilities. Even the infamous, foolish nobles of the Kingdom of Limia openly claimed they would defend their lands with their lives. Of course, since they hadn’t had to face the flames of war, their reliability remained to be seen.

So, nobles who have turned their backs on the enemy and fled likely face severe condemnation in this world. I could imagine fleeing from a hopeless battle, but maybe that’s just my peace-loving Japanese mindset. I’d better not share that opinion, though.

“So, you were the daughters of nobles?” I asked.

“Yes. And we shamefully survived,” Eva replied, her voice laced with bitterness. “Even now, when people hear our story, they look at us with contempt and sometimes harass us. It’s only natural—why didn’t we fight bravely and die with honor? I asked

my now late parents the same thing countless times, but they had no answer. Luria and I even thought about taking our own lives—but… It's no use."

I noticed a dark, unsettling glint in Eva's eyes. It felt like a topic best left alone.

"No use?"

"Even if we were to take our own lives, the stigma wouldn't disappear," she replied quietly. "The dead citizens won't come back, and neither will the land that was burned."

That's true. Even if they committed suicide, the disgrace wouldn't be erased. But how does this connect to my parents? Isn't the conversation drifting off course?

"That's why, before I die, I've decided to reclaim it." Eva's voice took on a resolute tone. "The land of Kaleneon—or at the very least, Aensland."

Kaleneon. So, Eva and Luria are from the same country as my parents. Aensland must be their family name. But that's absurd. With no allies, what could two sisters hope to accomplish?

It was hard to imagine this plan ending in anything but their unnecessary deaths. Even if they asked for my help and managed to reclaim the land surrounded by demon territory, it would only be taken back again immediately.

"That's quite an ambitious goal. So, Kaleneon was your homeland, Eva-san. I see—I understand now. Thank you for sharing such valuable information."

"No, there's more. Please listen," she continued, a tense pause lingering between us.

Is she really trying to get me to cooperate with such an impossible plan?

If she had more information to offer, I supposed there was no harm in hearing her out. And so, the tale of Eva, a noble of a fallen nation, continued.



Later on, in the quiet of the night, I found myself alone in my room.

The things Eva told me, Lime's report, and the information and request from the demon general Rona—everything was tangled together in my mind. With the sudden surge of information and the rapid developments, everything felt overwhelming.

From experience, I knew that trying to unravel things in order usually didn't work with these kinds of problems. After all, I was no detective, and to be honest, I'd rather avoid dealing with complex challenges.

One task at a time was fine, but when everything stacked up all at once, my mental processing tended to freeze, and I just wanted to give up. It's one of those flaws I really wished I could fix.

I tried sketching a correlation diagram to sort things out, but it wasn't coming together. *Ugh, what a mess.* Maybe I should've asked Eva to help me sort things out. But then again, she had no connection to the Merchant Guild or Rona. And, besides, I couldn't be sure everything she'd told me was true. In the end, letting her go back to her room to rest had probably been the right choice.

Yeah, that settles it. Thinking this over on my own won't help at all. I might as well wait until Shiki gets back, and we'll talk it

over together, even if it means sacrificing some sleep. In the meantime, I'll gather what I know so far…

Eva is from a small hyuman kingdom called Kaleneon, which was destroyed during the demon race's massive invasion. Surprisingly, it's the same nation my parents come from. My father was a noble holding an important position in Kaleneon, and my mother was a priestess at a temple that worshiped the Goddess. I don't really know what counts as "small" for a nation, but seeing that my father held a prominent role, I suppose he came from a distinguished family. If things had turned out differently, I might've been born into a noble household myself.

Anyway, back to Eva—she's the last surviving member of a noble family that abandoned their lands and fled during the war. Apparently, she's holding onto the reckless hope of restoring her family and estate, though her situation is nearly hopeless without any allies. It seems she didn't know my father or mother directly.

There had to be a reason Eva had chosen to pursue an impossible dream instead of simply ending her own life. She was once in such a humiliating and unbearable position that she seriously considered taking her life. Understandably, she was in a highly unstable mental state. The days spent shielding her younger sister, Luria, must have been agonizing for her. Eventually, Eva Aensland began to see the world outside of the small one she shared with her sister as something to distrust and reject entirely.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what she had endured. At the point where she began doubting even the Goddess, an organization reached out to her. Given that Kaleneon was a satellite state of Elysion with many devout followers, Eva's crisis of faith spoke to the extreme psychological strain she had suffered—and that so-called Goddess had been useless even to the hyumans who worshiped Her. To Her, the Great Invasion was nothing more than something that happened while She "took a nap."

This organization… It had been bothering me ever since I'd heard about it. They were apparently a group of people united in their opposition to the Goddess, though their scale remained unknown. It was said to be a strict organization, where even a hint of betrayal was enough to get someone eliminated. It was

also so secretive that most of its members didn't even know each other's faces. But if people were eliminated for showing the slightest sign of disloyalty, wouldn't that foster paranoia among the members? And once again, my thoughts drifted off.

Focus, focus.

What surprised me was that the organization included hyumans, demi-humans, and demons—people of all races. They shared techniques and knowledge, and the organization was said to have considerable influence and power. However, what remained unclear was whether they were related to any of this world's known powers, or if they had ties with all of them. Since they hadn't yet shown their face in the public sphere, they could very well be poised to intervene as a third force in the ongoing war between hyumans and demons.

I see. With an organization like that, it's no wonder Eva would find herself lured by a foolish dream or two.

While she hadn't discussed it with me, Eva must have seen evidence of their power somehow. At the very least, she had seen something that convinced her they could help her reclaim her family's land in demon-controlled territory. Not knowing the exact shape of their organizational power made them feel even more menacing than a national government.

I guess politics is just as twisted in this world as it was back in mine.

Despite the different setting, people's actions seemed fundamentally the same. Considering the history of this world and its long-standing conflicts, it was hard to imagine hyumans and demons allying for any reason other than the classic "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." And in this case, the enemy they shared was the Goddess, right?

After all, it's a group of people who despise Her.

Whether they succeeded in their goal or fell to ruin, I believed they'd inevitably return to hating each other all over again. Eva might have appeared calm, but perhaps she was already teetering on the edge of madness, relying on such a dangerous power.

So that's how it played out this time—after being spotted with Lime, nearly dragged into the chaos, and fearing for her life, she turned to us for protection.

Rona explained that the incident stemmed from inhumane experiments conducted by hyumans, with demi-humans and demons as victims. She claimed she wanted to uncover the truth and rescue any survivors. However, Shiki suggested that the true aim was to manipulate our perspective—exposing us to such horrors would naturally push us to sympathize with the demons. *After all, in war, your perception is shaped by what you see most: If you're only shown one side's suffering or heroism, bias is inevitable.*

It's also possible that the current Demon King might be using Rona's actions to show he's a man of principle, sending his generals to put a stop to hyuman atrocities. Rona certainly seems like a master strategist.

Just then—

Someone was approaching. Although I was immersed in sorting through everything Eva had told me, a strong presence pulled me back to the moment.

Back when I'd been thrown onto the battlefield, I hadn't even noticed the Dragon Slayer was among the enemy until I was already injured. After that experience, I started maintaining a kind of barrier that reacted only to people with a certain level of power.

At this time, my baseline was set to Shiki.

By narrowing the detection parameters, I could expand the range somewhat, and it had become something I could deploy almost unconsciously. In a deserted area like the wilderness, I could tweak it even further for added convenience. But here in the academy city, there were too many people. If I made the barrier too sensitive, I'd be overwhelmed by constant alerts—and worse, I'd risk drawing unnecessary attention.

A clear reminder of how little control I still had over this skill… Pathetic.

Lime burst into the room, failing to knock as he threw open the door. His voice exploded with urgency. "Boss! It's him! That brat who made a fool out of me—he's coming this way!"

Based on what we knew, he was a young man likely connected to the organization operating in the abandoned district. I guessed he'd be around my age—a "young man," though

at five foot seven, he was taller than me, which was a bit enviable.

No, focus. At the very least, he was someone at Shiki's level of skill.

"Lime, you can stand down," I replied. "Actually, could you fetch Shiki for me?"

"No," Lime said, his voice wavering but resolute. "I know I won't be much help, but let me at least—"

"Young Master!"

"Young Master!"

"Whoa?!"

Suddenly, two women appeared in the room—two familiar faces, my attendants, Tomoe and Mio. *Wh-What?* Why were they here in the academy city all of a sudden? And why did they look so alarmed?

The timing… Isn't it a little too perfect? Am I… being monitored or something?

"Tomoe, and even Mio! What's going on?" I asked.

"You're safe. That's a relief, at least," Tomoe replied, her voice tinged with obvious relief.

"Thank goodness," Mio echoed, her expression visibly easing as well.

Could the person approaching be the reason for their reaction? He was already close, but there hadn't been any sign of an attack. No sign of magic being prepared either.

"Is it because of the person heading this way?" I asked.

"Yes. We don't know why he's coming, but he's a troublesome opponent," Tomoe replied gravely.

For Tomoe to call someone "troublesome"—that was a first. No wonder Lime had been outmatched.

Wait, does Tomoe know this person?

"Lime, step back," Mio commanded sharply.

"That's a bit harsh, Mio-neechan," Lime protested.

"Lime, everyone has a role they're suited for. You'd only get in the way here," Mio retorted bluntly. "If that bothers you, then make sure you've grown stronger by the next time. For now, stand down."

"Onee-san…" Lime muttered, clearly struggling to accept her words.

“With these two here, you can rest easy, Lime,” I reassured him. “Besides, we don’t know for sure if this will turn into a fight.”

“Understood, boss. Take care,” he said quietly, biting his lip in frustration. Lime was someone who rarely let his feelings show, so getting dismissed by Tomoe must have stung deeply. With his talent and natural instincts, he was already far beyond me. This would likely push him to become even stronger.

As for the “problematic person”… Was he waiting at the store entrance? Why? After a moment, he started moving again.

Ding-dong!

A sharp sound echoed through the shop. We had an emergency call button installed outside for urgent assistance after hours—of course, if anyone ever used it as a prank, I made sure they got a well-deserved lecture—and our opponent had just pressed it.

…

“Uh… I was expecting him to just barge in, so… What’s going on here?” I wondered aloud.

What should I do? He couldn’t possibly have come just to buy some medicine, right?

“Young Master, don’t let your guard down,” Tomoe cautioned, her eyes still sharp with vigilance. Whoever this person was, they seemed to carry some serious weight.

Well, there was no helping it. I’d have to go see for myself.

“Tomoe, Mio. Come with me,” I said.

They both nodded solemnly. Descending from the second floor to the entrance, I opened the door.

Just as Lime had reported, there stood a silver-haired young man. He looked about my age—maybe a bit older. His height, about five foot seven, was on the smaller side for this world. Once again, it reminded me of my own stature here… What even was I in this world, really? If his apparent age matched his real age, he probably still had plenty of room to grow.

He wore a loose white shirt, paired with what looked like denim pants. The shirt had several buttons undone, exposing the pale, almost unhealthy-looking skin on his chest.

I decided to address him directly. *“May I ask why you’re here so late?”*

“Ah, nice to meet you. I’m the guild master of the Adventurer’s Guild,” he replied smoothly. “I did something rather disrespectful to Lime Latte, and I understand he works with you, so I came to apologize. May I come in?”

“Huh?”

My voice joined Tomoe’s and Mio’s in an unusually perfect harmony of surprise. The “guild master” narrowed his dark eyes, clasping his hands behind his back, and stood there with a bright smile, exuding no hostility whatsoever.

Just when the mountain of information felt unmanageable, here was yet another unexplained piece to add to the pile.



“So that’s the official excuse. But honestly, he was pretty strong. Caught me completely off guard—look, he even managed to get me here,” he said, rolling up his sleeve to reveal a faint cut running from his elbow to his hand. “And that sword of his—it’s got an impressive enchantment. I still can’t remove it. At first, I planned to just give him a light tap, you know? But when another group showed up, things got complicated, and… well, I ended up taking him down. It may not count as much of an apology, but I left a mark on him around noon, just to make him easier to track. I even granted him a temporary blessing to keep him safe—secretly, of course.”

It was the middle of the night, and the so-called guild master now sat in the guest lounge, a strange smile on his face. Mio had served him tea, and the three of us were sitting across from him. Shiki hadn’t returned yet, likely because his discussion with Rona was still ongoing.

Though this stranger claimed to be here to apologize to Lime, he quickly moved on to other topics. And he certainly talked a lot. I couldn’t make heads or tails of what he was saying either; with his cheerful, rapid-fire speech, it was too hard to keep up.

“Oh, right. The real reason I came here…” he started, but then his gaze shifted, and the topic of conversation shifted just as quickly. “Oh, hey, you there in the kimono. I heard this place has rare fruit, right? Could you bring some out as a tea snack? I’ve never tried them before.”

While he looked around my age, his tone and the way he navigated conversations had a subtle almost effeminate quality. Whatever the case, he had a knack for drawing everyone into his pace. Whether it was intentional or not, he kept dropping hints and details—mentioning things like swords and kimonos.

Mio narrowed her eyes in irritation, giving him a sharp glare without even bothering to stand. But this didn't faze him in the slightest.

I let out a quiet sigh. *"Mio, would you mind preparing some for him?"*

"Understood. Please give me a moment," Mio replied, her tone reluctant but composed.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it. And could I get a refill on the tea too? Are there any other flavors? If there are, I'd love to try a different one, miss," he added, grinning at Mio with the same unshakable smile.

A shiver ran down my spine. From the other side of the closed door, near where Mio was standing, a wave of killing intent surged. She wasn't even trying to hide it—she was clearly in a foul mood. I could understand the feeling. Tomoe's eyes twitched every time the "guild master" spoke, her silence heavy with irritation. I wasn't exactly eager to keep chatting with him either. I just wanted to get to the point.

"Well then, guild master. What is your business here?" I wrote, trying to keep my hand steady.

"Oh, don't be so formal, Raidou-kun. Or should I call you Makoto-kun?" he replied smoothly. "You don't need to use written communication, you know? After all, I'm not hyuman."

Wait, what?!

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're getting at," I responded, forcing myself to remain calm.

"Hahaha! How cute, Makoto-kun. Your writing's a little shaky, you know? You're more flustered than I thought. Just speak normally, won't you? I know you can."

I thought I'd answered normally enough, but my unease must have been obvious. *I've still got a lot to learn…*

But… just who is this guy?! Even if he's the head of the Adventurer's Guild, it doesn't make sense for him to know so much about me.

What's more, the Guild was a long-established system in this world. From what I'd read in books at the library, it was said to have originated in Elysion, so it clearly had ties to the Goddess. Did that mean the Goddess knew about me too?!

"Heheh, that look on your face… Could it be that you're worried the Goddess might know about you?" he asked, his grin widening.

He can read my mind?!

"Right on the mark. Don't worry, though; the Goddess hasn't caught on to your current situation," he said, chuckling. "Well, She's got a lot on her plate after all her 'mishaps.' She doesn't have the resources to spare at the moment… and by the looks of things, it'll be a while before she can turn her attention this way."

"Who *are* you?" I asked, my voice low, each word edged with caution.

"Heh! So that's what Makoto-kun's voice sounds like!" he exclaimed with a delighted expression. "I like it. A male voice with just a touch of youthfulness—it's charming. Let's see… You're still in high school, right? Must be tough, suddenly finding yourself in this world as a student."

What is this guy?! How… How does he know everything about me, even details about my original world?

The sight of him, casually smiling at me while rattling off one unsettling fact after another, made my skin crawl. I felt my field of vision narrow, a sign I was losing my cool. He was getting under my skin, and my discomfort was all too apparent. Every time I spoke, he'd respond with that giddy, delighted expression that only worsened the feeling. I couldn't stand it.

"Stop messing around and answer me. Who are you?" I demanded, my voice trembling. *Damn it… I couldn't hide the fear that slipped into my words.*

"Aw, don't be so cold. I'm the guild master—I wouldn't lie to you."

"I don't have any choice but to call you that, do I? I don't even know your name," I shot back.

He knew everything about me, yet I had no clue who he was. Did he know the Goddess as well? At the very least, they seemed acquainted. And it was true, he didn't seem hyuman. Still, how

could the head of the Guild, a central organization in this hyuman-centric world, not be hyuman?

“Oh! My bad!” he said, slapping his forehead. “You’re right—I haven’t introduced myself. That was rude of me, Makoto-kun. Now, let me properly introduce myse—”

“Enough of this farce!” Tomoe interrupted, her voice cold and sharp.

“Interrupting someone’s introduction and calling it a ‘farce’ is rather impolite, don’t you think, blue-haired samurai?” he replied smoothly, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Hmph! Spare me the act. You clearly know my name, so why the pretense?” Tomoe snapped her glare unwavering. “You say you don’t lie, and yet you’ve already claimed to be the guild master. Such an obvious deceit.”

“My, my,” he replied, sighing dramatically. “Did you forget your manners, spending so much time in the Wasteland, Shin?”

“And you,” Tomoe said, “you don’t look anything like your former self… Luto, the Dragon of Myriad Color.”

Huh?

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“Luto? ‘Myriad Color’? Uh… does that mean… this guy’s a dragon?”

That’s what it sounds like, right?

Judging from Tomoe’s tone, it appeared to be true. But even so, I couldn’t sense any hint of a dragon’s aura from him—nothing at all.

“Yes, Young Master,” Tomoe replied calmly. “This one is indeed a Greater Dragon of the highest order. Known as the ‘Myriad Color,’ Luto is a dragon who’s mastered both wisdom and magic, undefeated throughout his lifetime. ‘Myriad Color’ reflects the countless hues he embodies, serving as his other name.”

“Oh, come on,” Luto muttered, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “First, you interrupt my introduction, and now you’re explaining my name in front of me? What a boring samurai you are.”

The highest of the Greater Dragons. An undefeated dragon. This guy?

“Ridiculous,” Tomoe scoffed, her expression severe. “You have no right to speak—not after you openly tried to deceive my young master.”

“Well, well… I’d appreciate it if you didn’t say things that could be so easily misunderstood, especially when you’re the one who’s spent so much time hiding away, barely showing an interest in the world,” he replied with a smirk.

The guild master, or rather, the Greater Dragon Luto, was using a much sharper tone with Tomoe than he’d used with me.

Greater Dragons—beings that most people, even demi-humans, would never see in their lifetime. I’d come to understand from my studies in the library just how rare they were.

They sit at the pinnacle of dragons, immune to time. After they grew old, they could undergo a rebirth, allowing them to exist as a singular being across the ages.

The library books had described it in overly complex terms, but it sounded to me like they were basically rejuvenating themselves.

The names I’d come across in the library were the “Heavenly Sword,” “Waterfall,” “Sand Wave,” “Crimson Lapis,” and “Night Clad.” The Myriad Color was a new one. I also hadn’t seen any mention of Shin, known as the “Invincible.”

Though Greater Dragons rarely involved themselves with hyumans, some lived close to hyuman lands. On rare occasions, they might even lend their strength to hyumans. If they lent aid indirectly, it was referred to as receiving a dragon’s blessing.

These days, it was said that one of the Imperial Knights of the Gritonia Empire bore the blessing of Sand Wave, which allowed him to acquire a unique class.

What does that make me, though?

I’d already encountered three of these ultra-rare dragons. The Invincible, Heavenly Sword, and now Myriad Color. Tomoe,

Lancer, and Luto! Just encountering them had me toeing the line between life and death.

Running into boss-level characters in the middle of town feels like a cruel twist in a bad game. Reality, once again, proving it's harsher than any game I've known.

It seems otherworldly realities aren't any different in that respect.

No guarantee of a happy ending, even if you try your hardest.

But if you don't try, a bad ending is practically assured.

Sigh… There's no light at the end of this tunnel.

"Did you abandon your old dwelling?" Tomoe asked. "I noticed it's become nothing but a ruin."

"Yes, a long time ago. Must have been… a thousand years now? Anyway, can we get back on track? I'd like to speak with Makoto-kun. Thanks to Shin, I think he may have misunderstood a few things, and I'd like to clear them up."

A thousand years? This guy's on a whole different scale. And to think he'd been all smiles with me, yet with Tomoe, he barely lifted the corners of his mouth. What a mood shift.

"What misunderstanding are you talking about? I have plenty of questions left to ask. And besides, I've discarded the name Shin. I am now Tomoe—remember that," she warned.

"Oh, getting feisty just because Makoto-kun is here, huh?" Luto teased. "All right, all right, To-moe, it is."

"It's TO-MO-E! If you mess it up again, I'll knock that head right off your shoulders!"

"My apologies, Makoto-kun," Luto said, looking at me with a sympathetic smile. "This one may be a dragon, but she's a bit of an oddball. I bet she's been nothing but trouble for you."

"Listen here, Luto! In what way am *I* the odd one?!" Tomoe barked with indignation.

Actually, you're both pretty odd, Tomoe.

It was clear Luto was a truly free-spirited dragon. Casually ignoring Tomoe and addressing me like that… If he really was at the pinnacle of dragons, did that make him Tomoe's superior?

"I haven't lied to you, Makoto-kun. I want you to trust me," Luto said earnestly, his gaze fixed on me.

"H-Huh?" I stammered, feeling taken aback.

“If you feel I’m misleading you, that’s a serious misunderstanding. My intentions are much purer than that,” he added.

Just as he finished his statement, a sharp, gleaming blade slid into the space between us, aimed straight at Luto’s face.

Tomoe, you’re using your short sword. If you’re going to draw, at least use your main sword!

“You’ve certainly changed, haven’t you? The Luto I knew was always shouting at us about rules and discipline,” Tomoe sneered, the edge in her voice unmistakable.

Rules? Discipline? Both sound like they couldn’t be further from this guy—er, dragon—in front of me.

“Tomoe, you’ve changed too,” Luto replied with a lazy smile. “You were a dragon who cared about nothing, living a life of total abandon, only waking to sleep again. But don’t you think there are important things you should have learned before picking up something as dull as propriety?”

“Nothing could ever compete with your recklessness,” Tomoe retorted. “It’s always been on my mind. Now tell me—when did you decide to become… a man?”

…?

“Hmm, I guess about three hundred years ago,” Luto answered with a casual shrug. “I spent all that time as a woman, and eventually, it got boring. So, I thought I’d give being a man a try. It’s been pretty comfortable, actually. I’ll never forget the thrill of the first time I took a woman to bed.”

Boring? He got bored… with his gender?

None of this made any sense. And on top of that, as a Greater Dragon, reproduction should have meant absolutely nothing to him. Surely, that whole “taking someone to bed” thing would be meaningless too… Right?

“‘Thought you’d try?’ Do you think you can just change on a whim?” Tomoe scoffed. “And besides, I’ve never heard of a Greater Dragon siring offspring. What would be the point of lying with a woman?”

Exactly, Tomoe. I couldn’t wrap my head around any of this. He was talking about it like it was as simple as buying a new toy.

“I was able to become one—accept it. Besides, I’ve decided to stop reincarnating too. I’ve slowed my aging to a crawl so I can

enjoy this life to the fullest. But, you know, when it comes to pure pleasure, being a woman is definitely better. I was even getting tired of being a man, but then one day my whole world changed!" Luto exclaimed passionately.

Why is he even bringing up pleasure? So that's how it is, huh? Apparently, it feels better as a woman than as a man. Not exactly useful information… If I think about it, why does that even matter? Honestly, he's talking about it like he's some sort of sports enthusiast, and I don't know how to respond.

"I don't care about your shifting values…" Tomoe muttered, clearly exasperated.

Same here, Tomoe. It was hard to find the words to respond, but I completely agreed.

I was absolutely put off.

"There was this one time when I just happened to be with another man, and… how do I even put it? It was like an emotional fulfillment, a spiritual drug. I felt this indescribable euphoria rising from deep within me! Oh, I tried going back to being a woman afterward and had relationships with other women, too, but nothing could compare to that time."

Luto's excitement grew as he rambled on about things I couldn't remotely understand. *Men, women… Can someone please tell me what's even going on here?*

"That ultimate expression of friendship between two men, love in its purest form! I was moved to tears! When it comes to physical union, nothing surpasses two men together!"

Can he please stop with this? My ears are rotting. My brain too.

He looked over at me with a mischievous grin. "By the look of things, Makoto-kun, I'd say you're a bit inexperienced, aren't you? Don't worry, I like that. And if you'd prefer a woman for your first time, I'd be happy to oblige—I can be either one for you! I guarantee you won't regret it!"

What the hell is he talking about?! His pale skin was starting to *go* red, and his manner grew intense. *This makes no sense! These detailed arguments are making me sick! Also, I'm not some "inexperienced" kid!*

Wait. "Inexperienced"? He means… lacking experience, right? Well, that part's actually accurate.

“Absolutely not!” I said, bolting up from the sofa to put some distance between us. Fortunately, he didn’t follow. Instead, Luto leaned back, sinking deep into the sofa as he folded his hands over his stomach.

“Don’t knock it before you try it, Makoto-kun. I can be either a man or a woman at will. Just give it a try, and if it’s really no good, then I’ll give up.”

Does he seriously think that makes it any better? And those eyes sparkling at me… it’s beyond unsettling… I have no intention of rejecting those interested same-sex relationships, none at all. But forcing that on someone who has no interest? Absolutely not!

“Pardon me, but what exactly are you yelling about over here?”

Oh, great. She didn’t need to come back now.

Mio, your timing is both flawless and terrible…

“Oh, the lady in black! Thanks for the tea and fruit,” Luto said, beaming as he looked over the tray Mio was holding.

“What exactly were you trying to do to Young Master?” Mio asked, her voice dangerously calm.

“Hm? Oh, I was just doing a bit of flirting.”

“F-Flirting?!” Mio sputtered, her eyes narrowing.

“Well, he’s single, isn’t he? No harm if I step up, right?”

Um, there’s a fundamental problem here, and it’s called me being straight.

Mio set the tray down to the side. It held tea for each of us and a plate of sliced fruit.

“Hey, putting it down there means I can’t reach it,” Luto pointed out, looking mildly bothered.

“Tomoe, this one seems to be a dragon. Any issues if I… kill him?” Mio asked.

For her to pick up on that right away… She’s right; if I concentrate, I can barely sense it too. But the way she figured it out immediately—Mio’s intuition is impressive.

“Indeed. This concerns Young Master’s virtue, so I’d say this dragon is all harm and no benefit. Go on, Mio. Of course we’ll kill him,” Tomoe whispered maliciously.

“Whoa, seriously? Wait, Makoto-kun agrees too?!” Luto asked.

I could see them both readying themselves for battle, and I moved to follow. This guy had to be taken down, for my sake.

“Luto, I’ll at least hear your last words. Since I won’t be leaving behind a single bone, I’ll carve them onto your grave marker later,” I said, stepping forward.

“Yes, the meat of a Greater Dragon might even be delicious. At the very least, I’ll make good use of it,” Mio added coldly.

“You’re an unprecedented threat,” I said, fixing him with a determined glare. “Sorry, but I’m ending you with all my strength.”

“W-Wait, hold on!” Luto exclaimed, raising both hands in surrender. “No way can I handle all three of you at once! And I didn’t come here to fight, honestly! Please, calm down, everyone. I’m sorry—I went too far, okay? Just let me clear up the misunderstanding. Please!”

He raised his hands higher, signaling his surrender.

How serious is he, really? I’d never encountered anyone like him before, so it was hard to gauge his intentions. And, beyond that, I wasn’t sure I could even trust the earnest expression he was showing now.

“We’ve already heard more than enough about your twisted tastes,” Tomoe replied, her voice dripping with disdain. “No need for any more explanations.”

“Trying to introduce Young Master to your indecent hobbies… There’s no need to clear up any misunderstandings,” Mio added. “Eradication is the only option.”

“No, no, it was just some harmless flirting, really! Look, I’ll drop that subject completely—no more of it today, okay?” he stammered, waving his hands in a placating gesture. “I really want to talk to you about the Adventurer’s Guild and discuss things properly with you, Makoto-kun, given our familiarity with otherworlders.”



“To talk about the Guild?”

Ah, right, he was joking about being the guild master. There’s no way a pervert like him could be running the organization, so it must’ve been a lie. But maybe there’s something I’m missing.

Well, Tomoe, Mio, and I are registered members, after all. And it’s the same organization that Toa and some other acquaintances belong to. If he has something to say about it, I should probably listen.

“Yes, talk about the Guild!” Luto said enthusiastically.

“All right. If you promise to be serious, I’ll listen,” I replied with a wary look.

“Young Master!”

“Young Master!”

“Mio, please bring the tea—even if it’s cold,” I added, glancing her way. “All right, Luto. Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Once again, we all sat down, three against one. Luto’s expression shifted to something more serious as he began to speak about the Adventurer’s Guild.



"First off, let me make this clear: I am the true master of the Adventurer's Guild," Luto said, his face entirely serious. "In fact, I'm the one who created the Guild—about a thousand years ago."

"What?!" I exclaimed, shocked.

"Incredible…" Tomoe murmured, equally surprised. Mio, however, remained unfazed, showing little interest in the revelation.

"An otherworlder, like you, introduced the concept to me," Luto continued. "And with a little ulterior motive, I suggested it to the Goddess and took on the responsibility of running it. She saw the Guild as a simple system to strengthen hyumans and didn't oppose it."

A little ulterior motive. That sounds… a bit suspicious. And an otherworlder, huh. So, it wasn't just me and those two heroes who fell victim to that goddess; there were others before us.

A thousand years ago… That would've been the Heian period in Japan, right? Maybe around the time of Fujiwara no Michinaga? Wait… Something feels odd about that. But what?

"Back then, I was completely absorbed in designing the Guild's structure. I worked closely with that otherworlder who introduced me to the idea—my first husband. He shared so much knowledge with me, and I enjoyed every moment building the system. I suppose my state of mind was a bit like Tomoe's now," he said, glancing over at her. "Learning about his concepts and replicating them was endlessly fascinating."

Ah, that makes sense. I understood, probably because I had the perfect example sitting right next to me.

So, Luto had become obsessed with building the Adventurer's Guild the same way Tomoe got lost in her love for period dramas. That's how an expansive, quasi-independent organization with potential dangers embedded within it came into existence. With the Goddess's support and a Greater Dragon at its helm, hyuman opposition must have been minimal. After all, it was the Goddess.

"My otherworlder husband was renowned as a hero in Elysion, a master swordsman. I was his wife and partner. With the Goddess's backing, it didn't take long for the Guild system to become deeply rooted in hyuman society. Since then, I've continued on as the guild master, changing forms over the generations."

So, he was the first guild master... and he's still the guild master today. That's... quite something.

"Wasn't the first guild master... Luto's husband?" I asked.

It seemed like his husband would've taken the lead, so I wondered why he hadn't become the guild master.

"He was far more interested in wine and women than in anything like running a guild," Luto explained with a casual shrug. "Once he established his reputation as a hero, he barely did any real work. In the end, heroes are more valuable as symbols, not as people who put in real effort—especially in a world coming out of chaos and conflict."

So, heroes aren't needed in times of peace?

Thinking about it, I realized that even the history I learned back on Earth didn't talk much about what happened to heroes after the wars. I could probably find out if I investigated it, but it wasn't something we were taught.

To those who seek power after a war, a hero who draws the admiration of the people would just be an obstacle.

As for Luto... it sounded like he'd been just as free-spirited about relationships even back then. He didn't seem to mind that his husband had been with other women. *Wait... could it be that having multiple partners was the norm back then?*

If I asked, he'd probably give me some completely bizarre answer. I decided to keep quiet and just let him continue.

“A global presence, solving community issues and giving members a card with multiple functions like displaying their levels… Now, Makoto-kun, doesn’t that strike you as strange?” Luto asked, tilting his head with a curious smile.

“Huh?”

“A Guild Card with capabilities beyond most magic tools, complete with concepts like ‘levels.’ These are things from games in your world, aren’t they? Why were you able to accept an organization like that so easily?”

“Well, that’s…” I started.

It was true that I’d found this world very gamelike, but even before that, I’d already been exposed to things like magic, levels, and professions. With those things as a foundation, I’d somehow just accepted the Guild as a natural part of the world. Looking back, I realized how strange that reasoning actually was.

“You just thought, ‘It’s another world,’ didn’t you?” Luto continued, his expression confident. “And so, when you saw something completely out of place, like a skyscraper in the middle of a wooden village, you just nodded along because it was called the ‘Adventurer’s Guild.’”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the funny thing. For some reason, people from other worlds like you, Makoto-kun, accept the Guild’s existence without much question. Even though an organization like that wouldn’t exist in your world at all. I find it fascinating.”

Luto nodded repeatedly, a look of intrigue on his face. “Mhm, mhm…”

“I don’t understand,” Tomoe interjected, her brow furrowed. “From what I’m hearing, you based the Guild’s system on information you gathered from otherworlders, but it doesn’t seem like you wanted to manage the Guild nor does it sound like you had any interest in becoming an adventurer. For something to do just out of boredom, the whole Adventurer’s Guild system is far too elaborate, don’t you think?”

Good point.

Now that she mentioned it, Luto hadn’t once said he wanted to shape the Guild a certain way or become an adventurer himself. It would be overkill to create something so intricate as a pastime.

“No, most of it was simply for fun—a way to pass the time,” Luto replied smoothly. “I’m a perfectionist, you see. Testing each part to see how it would make the Guild work was a highly enjoyable experience in itself.”

He has ridiculous specs like Tomoe. Only a perfectionist would pull something like that off to kill time. I wish I had that kind of drive.

“You also mentioned ‘ulterior motives’ earlier,” Tomoe pressed. “What did you mean by that?”

“Your ears are sharp, aren’t they?” Luto replied with a sly grin. “I’d rather not say, in case it makes Makoto-kun dislike me.”

There’s something shady about this. Despite claiming he didn’t want to discuss it, he looked more than ready to spill the beans. In fact, he appeared eager to see my reaction.

“If you’re going to say it, then spit it out already. And don’t look at Young Master—you’ll corrupt him,” Tomoe ordered.

Tomoe, Luto’s supposed former colleague—or superior, if you looked at it that way—was already treating him like filth.

Good. Keep it up.

“Yes, yes,” Luto sighed, finally relenting. “Well, it’s not that complicated. The Goddess has always adored hyumans. But I, on the other hand, have always valued the world itself. That’s really all there is to it.”

“That makes no sense. Explain it simply. You’ve always spoken in riddles, but they’re not needed here,” Tomoe said.

“Reaching an understanding through contemplation during a conversation is a deeply valuable process, you know,” Luto muttered, a bit sulky. “Fine, fine. The point is, because of the Goddess’s favoritism toward hyumans, it was easy to foresee a future where their population would explode, their arrogance growing with it, upsetting the balance of the world. So, I created the Guild as a form of counterbalance. Though, admittedly, most of it was just a personal hobby.”

“A counterbalance to hyumanity’s growth?” I asked, confused. “But the Guild is designed to promote their growth, isn’t it? It feels more like it’s accelerating the problem than preventing it.”

“That’s just focusing on the trees and missing the forest,” Luto said, waving his hand. “When someone registers with the

Guild, they're issued a card. That card displays their level and rank. Now, those numbers may simply reflect their current state, but hyumans tend to aim higher once they're shown ranks or numbers. They're a desire-driven race—maybe not as much as humanity, but still quite ambitious."

"…"

Sorry for being so "desire-driven," I guess.

"When their level goes up, they become stronger. Of course, even without knowing their numbers, if they're fighting monsters or waging wars, they're improving and motivated to see their stats grow," Luto continued. "To boost that motivation, I made a few tweaks to this world's system. I arranged it so that people who register with the Guild grow faster. They absorb the strength they take from others more efficiently. Put simply, Makoto-kun, you could think of it as a multiplier on experience points."

Having a tangible number was motivating; I couldn't deny that. A big reason people gave up was because they couldn't see the results of their efforts, and that made them lose heart. But what Luto was describing seemed more like supporting hyuman growth than imposing any form of restriction. Where was the "counterbalance" in that?

"Ah, I see," Tomoe said, nodding. "That's the point. Quite a roundabout way to go about it."

Did she get it? Is it a human-dragon thing?

"By doing this, hyumans naturally become more fixated on their levels and ranks," Luto continued, looking pleased with himself. "Levels signify personal strength, and ranks determine the rewards the Guild offers individuals. Naturally, some adventurers achieve high levels and make a name for themselves, which draws in more young people to register with the Guild. Some of those who grew stronger became knights or even kings, building prosperous kingdoms."

It sounded like a good story—one of effort and success. I even thought about raising my rank to unlock more Guild Card features. But since I hadn't leveled up even once, I'd lost interest and started focusing on my business instead.

"You're a straightforward guy, Makoto-kun," Luto said with a half-smile. "It makes me feel a little embarrassed about my

slyness. You have this look on your face that says, ‘Success from hard work is a good thing.’”

“What’s wrong with that? Everyone thinks that way, don’t they?” I asked.

“Heh, well, I’ll keep going then,” he replied, chuckling. “With all this encouragement to pursue fame and ambition, people aspire to rise in rank, seeing adventuring as a low-barrier way to achieve it—all they need are physical skills to start. The more powerful they are, the higher they can rise—and the wealthier they become. Without the Adventurer’s Guild, these people would probably become, at best, jacks-of-all-trades… but more realistically, they’d end up as ruffians or, in the worst case, marauders. The low initial investment is only because they’re risking their lives, but they interpret that risk in a way that suits them.”

“But if the Guild gathers a certain number of those ruffians and employs them as adventurers, it might be harder for the worst among them to act out, potentially improving public order. It feels a bit harsh to just call them ruffians or bandits,” Tomoe remarked thoughtfully.

It sounds like a good thing, but I’m not sure where this conversation is going.

“Well, maybe that’s been one side effect,” Luto conceded. “The Guild does have rules, after all. But the real purpose is to ensure that hyumans who are too focused on the future are naturally… culled.”

Wait, what does he mean, “culled”? That sounds pretty ominous…

“Excessive ambition leads to ruin. Ruffians, jacks-of-all-trades, and even starry-eyed youths—they all strive for success, grow stronger, and eventually, many of them trip on the path. With their levels, ranks, rewards… there are plenty of adventurers who die chasing after Guild requests. Even after a thousand years, this fundamental trend hasn’t changed. Sure, there are a few who’ve reached the top through a stroke of luck or extraordinary talent. They’re the successful ones. Their existence serves as a beacon, attracting even more people to join the Guild. But in any society, there will always be far more

failures than successes, and under the feet of those successful few lie countless corpses and many failed ambitions."

"Sure, there'll be people who fail if they get carried away. But if they learn from their mistakes, won't they develop balance over time? How could 'culling' actually be effective?" I argued. "I mean, the world is still overrun with hyuman nations, isn't it?"

"Because in the adventuring profession, those who get a 'next time' are a small minority," Luto replied. "Many of them die on their first mistake. The continued existence of demi-humans, who oppose hyumans—like the demons—is evidence that culling is effective. Like it or not, numbers are power. Without the Adventurer's Guild, I suspect the world would be far more peaceful, with only hyumans and their subordinate demi-humans left."

"But surely not everyone is consumed by ambition. Don't they know when to quit?"

"Those who can keep their cool to the end, making the right choices, are already among the successful, Makoto-kun—even if they never rise to become kings. If they manage to use the Guild's system wisely, secure enough income for the future, and retire, then that alone is a great success. Believe it or not, hyumans are prone to making a few missteps when they're on the verge of success. Even though new adventurers register daily, the total number barely grows. In fact, while the Goddess has been silent, the numbers have even declined. They dream of riches in the wilderness or dungeons, and one after another, they die chasing those dreams."

Could it be… the Adventurer's Guild, which exists to support adventurers, actually pushes them to take risks that lead to their own demise?

"But I don't want you to misunderstand," Luto continued. "If everyone had the sense to know when to quit and remained humble about their growth and future, then the Guild would have contributed to hyumanity in a positive way, and the world might have found peace in a different sense. Reality just didn't turn out that way. In fact, there were unexpected developments—like other races wanting to join. Simply put, the Adventurer's Guild supports hyuman desires, both good and bad. Fortunately, there's never a shortage of problems in hyuman society, and the

requests keep coming. Even people who don't become adventurers and pursue other paths sometimes need to take risks to achieve their goals. They're willing to pay to buy results without risking their own lives, and that's where the Guild steps in. It works rather well, don't you think? This whole 'culling' effect is only happening because adventurers misuse the system. The Guild is still a glowing lure for those hyumans with a bit of strength to burn, and that's thanks to their own tendencies."

I guess he's saying that power is just power, and the problem is how it's used. As a result, over a thousand long years, countless adventurers had been drawn in by Luto's plans, only to burn out.

"I see. So, the interference with the world's system was actually a way to establish a subtle, informal contract between the adventurers and the world itself," Tomoe concluded, thinking aloud. "Meaning the growth boost only truly kicks in after someone's been an adventurer for a while."

"Tomoe, you're getting pretty sharp these days," Luto praised with a grin. "That's right. I'm also well versed in magic-based Contracts, so I made a few tweaks here and there. Once adventurers get comfortable, their growth starts to accelerate… but that also makes them more likely to die. Fascinating, isn't it?"

"So, leveling up only increases someone's basic strength," Tomoe muttered, visibly processing the information. "Skill, experience, and talent don't directly influence levels. Hmph. It bothers me that I'm losing to someone like Mio, but if that's all leveling up does, then it's not something I need to bother raising through effort. And, strictly speaking, leveling up isn't even essential, is it?"

Luto nodded. "Pretty much. Power varies by race too, so a higher level doesn't guarantee victory. Levels are just rewards sent from the world to the strong. Whether it's a good-hearted person or a monstrous creature, anyone with enough strength can kill another and absorb their power. Still, unexpected events like the Goddess's blessing can always throw things off, so blind faith in levels isn't wise. And, well, people can get discouraged when they hear words like 'talent' or 'intuition,' so I've introduced systems to keep them motivated, like jobs based on their level, unlocked features on Guild Cards with rank advancement, and customization options. I've put in a fair bit of

effort, you know? So far, no one has hit the level cap, though, so they're still right here in my grasp. By the way, the maximum level is set at 65,535. My husband was going on about 'romance' or something, so I decided to go with that."

Romance, huh? Husband... Also, that's literally the kind of number you'd see in a game.

Whether I fully agreed or not, I could mostly understand what Luto was doing and saying. He was still debating with Tomoe, throwing around some incomprehensible technical terms, though I only caught bits and pieces of it.

If one could practice restraint, the Adventurer's Guild served as a genuine support for adventurers. But for those who followed their desires blindly, unless they were exceptionally lucky or talented, the Guild was a guide to the grave. That seemed to be the gist of it. Now that I thought about it—for those impulsive types, the Wasteland was a graveyard.

Strange as it was, what he said made a lot of sense. The Adventurer's Guild appeared to fit seamlessly into this world's culture and had lasted a thousand years—longer than most nations. I couldn't think of any organization in Japan that had existed since the Heian period, so imagining the Guild as a monumental institution wasn't far off.

Although, in terms of sheer longevity, I'd heard of some family-owned construction companies in Japan that had been around forever. *Were they the temple carpenters?*

For job placement, there was a historical counterpart in Japan called the kuchiire-ya, organizations that samurai families used for job brokerage, though they were fundamentally different from the Adventurer's Guild.

A skyscraper in a wooden village, huh? That's oddly fitting.

For instance, the Merchant Guild's communication network, while constantly being improved, couldn't come close to matching the speed of the Adventurer's Guild. I remembered reading that the Merchant Guild had been formed by a merchant inspired by the Adventurer's Guild, aiming to create a mutual aid network for themselves. Nevertheless, with all the influence from cities, governments, and powerful figures, the Merchant Guild felt more like a hyuman-made organization.

On the other hand, the Adventurer's Guild—its information network was unnaturally fast. I suspected they had some kind of magical email system. If it hadn't been for us being in a remote outpost, Tomoe and Mio's arrival would have spread across the world within days.

At the guild in Tsige, Rembrandt had gone out of his way to control the flow of information for us, even though he'd had his hands full with issues involving his wife and daughters. I was genuinely grateful for that. Since then, Tomoe and Mio had worked hard on assignments, even taking on dangerous Wasteland requests, which significantly boosted the branch head's reputation. Because of their importance, the guild had kept its promise to keep our information tightly under wraps.

Still, I was pretty sure that this dragon in front of me knew Tomoe and Mio's levels—and probably mine too. He talked as if he were familiar with information from my world. *Just how many otherworlders has he met over the years…?*

Wait, what?

Aaaaagh!!!

That's it!!! That's the part that didn't add up earlier!

"Luto!" I shouted, my eyes fixed on him.

"Hm? What is it, Makoto-kun? Did you finally decide you wanted a Contract with me? I'm thrilled! In bed, don't hesitate to be as selfish as you like—I'll do anything."

"No, that's not it! It's about your first husband! You said it was a thousand years ago, right?"

"Oh, that? Yeah, that's right. Why?" he replied casually.

"Then how did someone from that far back even know about an Adventurer's Guild? Forget games—there wouldn't have even been stories with that kind of concept back then!"

How did I miss that? I was thinking about the Heian period and Fujiwara no Michinaga and still didn't make the connection!

"Hmm, is that what's bothering you?" Luto asked, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "I could explain, but it might be easier if you just thought of it like an Urashima Taro situation."

"Like Urashima Taro? No way. This is important to me, so give me the details!"

"Luto," Tomoe interjected firmly, "Young Master has made a request. If you're willing, explain it properly from the beginning."

This was a critical moment. One of the possibilities I'd been holding on to might disappear depending on his answer. There was no way I'd just accept a vague explanation about "something like an Urashima Taro situation."

"Hm, if you're that insistent…" Luto sighed, eyeing Tomoe. "Tomoe, since you offered, could you bring out something like a chalkboard? You know what that is, right?"

"Do not insult me," she scoffed. "I assume you mean a board we can write on with some kind of tool? Just a minute."

"Thanks. Now, as long as one of you stays awake to the end, I'll behave. But if you both drop off, I'm afraid I'll have to pounce on Makoto-kun here. It's a promise, okay?" Luto smiled.

What a terrifying thing to say… But he's underestimating the team. We might have a secret weapon here with Mio, our intuition specialist and third genius—

Oh, she was asleep. Of course, that explained why she hadn't said a word in a while. I sighed, watching her sleep peacefully, her breaths soft.

One down already.

At worst, I could pass it off to Tomoe, who'd been following the earlier complicated talk just fine. And there was a chance Shiki would return soon too.

As we waited for Tomoe to get ready, Luto and I exchanged light conversation, with him complimenting the tea and fruit. Meanwhile, I readied myself for what he'd say about this potential time paradox.



I regretted it.

Barely five minutes in, and I was already drowning in regret. Luto's explanations—both his words and the diagrams he illustrated on the board—were quickly entering a realm I could barely grasp. A steady stream of baffling equations filled the blackboard, each one more confusing and meaningless than the last.

"And so, if people start slipping out of existence from this world, it's typically because of this particular process—" Luto continued, circling parts of what he'd written as he dived even deeper.

Maybe... Maybe Tomoe is still keeping up with him. Please let her be following this.

"Then, if components A and D sync up, the phenomenon of transference between two separate worlds can theoretically be achieved," he went on. "When the gods intentionally seek this outcome, they first initiate a temporal partitioning—"

The lecture just kept going. And going. I was starting to lose track of even the words I did understand. Over the past few minutes, I'd caught words like "people," "gods," and "transference," which still seemed to mean what I thought they meant. Probably...

"—and when that happens, the resulting temporal displacement across worlds makes synchronization nearly impossible," he explained, as though this was a simple, everyday

fact. “Naturally, from this, you can understand that time-travel paradoxes resulting from temporal retracing present a significant risk due to the sheer scale of energy generated. However, such occurrences are almost impossibly rare—”

Wait, what was it I wanted to ask him?

“And for these reasons, the progression of time in this world is entirely different from the progression of time in your original world, Makoto-kun,” he said, gesturing toward me like he’d made a perfectly logical point. “That’s why my first husband happened to be from a generation familiar with games and RPGs, the kind that have become popular in your world recently…”

Luto turned to look, his eyes expectant. I hardly understood a thing he’d said, but I’d managed to stay conscious through it. *Mission complete.*

“So,” I asked, clinging to what little hope I had left, “if I were to try to return to my original world… would I actually have a chance of succeeding?”

“You didn’t understand any of my explanation, did you?” Luto sighed, his shoulders slumping.

“The moment magic and science got tangled together, my chances of understanding evaporated,” I replied, letting out a heavy sigh.

“Huh?” He blinked, genuinely baffled. “But everything I said was purely scientific. Oh, wait—I forgot that your original world only advanced scientifically without incorporating magical concepts, didn’t it?”

What even is science with magic integrated into it? Aren’t those two things contradictory?

“A world where scientific technology includes magic… Does that really exist?” I asked.

“Of course. This world is one where magic and science coexist,” Luto replied matter-of-factly. “But I forgot—you’re from a world where even the ability to project mana outside the body could make someone a target, right? That must make things like warping, time travel, and spaceflight significantly more challenging.”

Challenging? Aren’t those just in the realm of sci-fi?

I remembered my physics instructor once saying that warp technology was impossible because of the massive energy it

would require. But Luto seemed well versed in that kind of thing. With magic, teleportation was already a routine part of life here, achievable through transfer arrays. Now that I thought of it, I actually found it pretty incredible.

"Let's just set aside the whole magic and science thing for now…" I said with a sigh. "Tomoe probably understood enough to break it down for me later."

"Young Master," Tomoe added with a troubled smile, "even I wasn't able to understand everything."

What? Then there was no way I could've understood any of it! I'd thought halfway through that he was doing this to mess with me.

"Shall I start over and explain from the beginning?" Luto offered with a grin.

"No, no, it'd probably be the same," I replied, shaking my head. "I would lose track within a few minutes. I found it quite advanced, so I'd appreciate a straightforward answer to my question."

Luto shrugged. "Well, fair enough. Out of everyone from other worlds, only two people have ever understood this whole talk anyway. So, earlier you asked whether you could successfully transfer back to your original world, right? The answer is that it's as close to impossible as it gets, but still technically possible."

Only two people have ever understood that? It'd probably take me a lifetime to understand even a fraction of it, and yet those two people managed it in fifteen minutes.

I fell silent, and Tomoe didn't say anything either.

"So, that means there's a way?" I queried hopefully.

"Well," Luto said with a perplexed look, "not quite. With your current total mana level, the transference itself is practically guaranteed to succeed. As long as you study up a bit on some techniques you're lacking, it's a sure thing. I'll vouch for it."

Hey, that sounded pretty promising. I'd been practicing archery in the Demiplane lately, and I'd felt my maximum mana capacity increase a few times already. By "lacking technique," he probably meant my ability to control the amount of mana I was using at once. I *had* been studying that here at the academy, but…

"Then why is it still close to impossible?" I asked, trying to wrap my head around it.

“Because pinpointing the exact destination is incredibly difficult,” Luto replied, folding his arms. “And there’s always an element of randomness we can’t eliminate. Sure, if you tried the transfer tens of thousands of times, you’d probably end up in your original world. But even if you got there, there’s no guarantee it would be the same original world you left. In the most optimistic case, the odds of returning to your exact time and place are one in tens of millions.”

I fell silent as that sunk in.

“Which is exactly what I was trying to explain just now,” Luto continued with a smirk. “That said, if you increase the number of transfers you can attempt in a day and carefully control all the conditions, your success rate could improve—though how long it’d take to reach that level, well, I can’t say.”

So, there was a chance. But it was just this side of impossible. I sighed. “I get it. In other words, it’s really difficult. Probably not something I should be focusing on right now.”

“Exactly. For now, I think it’d be best if you just go around and see what this world has to offer,” he replied. “I’ll make sure you can reach me anytime, so feel free to call if you need someone to talk to. Ideally… when you’re alone.”

Today, I learned that genius and eccentricity could coexist. I also learned I probably wouldn’t be contacting him (or her?) alone, if I could help it.

Honestly, I should have just gone with my “pretend to understand” approach from the start and only asked Luto for answers to my questions. I was absolutely exhausted.

A moment of silence fell after Luto’s last words. Then, without warning, he stood up.

“Well, with greetings out of the way, I think it’s about time I took my leave. I’ll see you later, Makoto-kun,” he said, turning toward the door.

Tomoe rose to see him off.

Ah, come to think of it, this might have been a good conversation for Shiki.

He was always interested in finding a way to cross between worlds. I would have to ask Tomoe later if she could pass on what Luto said to Shiki, as much as she could understand.

I draped a blanket over Mio, who was soundly asleep, her breaths soft and steady. Then, careful not to wake her, I quietly left the sitting room.

I'd think about it a bit in my room… about what I wanted to do.

Oh.

Oh no… oh no no no!

"I completely forgot to ask about interference with telepathy!" I groaned, rubbing my forehead. "The whole Guild thing was such a shock that it totally slipped my mind…"

Did he dodge the question on purpose, or did he just not answer because I didn't actually ask?

Damn it…

Looked like I still had a long way to go.

※※※

On the way back from the Kuzunoha Company to the Adventurers' Guild, Luto and Tomoe walked side by side.

"You know, you lot are certainly an amusing bunch," Luto remarked, a smirk forming on his lips. "I suppose it's because you've got a master who's never stood above anyone and retainers who've never been beneath anyone. It's an unusual yet delightful dynamic—a master who sees himself as family with those bound by Contracts, a retainer who acts like some kind of doting old guardian guiding his master, another who blindly obeys with total loyalty, and the last one who eagerly embraced the Contract, standing on her tiptoes just to measure up. Heh, not a single one of you follows the master-servant relationship that usually comes with a binding Contract. Strange… and fascinating."

Luto kept chattering, but unlike when he had spoken with Makoto, there was no warmth in his tone as he spoke about how

“interesting” they all were. His words were clinical, like the observations of a detached researcher reviewing his findings.

Tomoe offered no particular reaction, simply following behind him.

“What’s wrong?” Luto asked, glancing back at her. “If there’s something you’d like to ask, go ahead.”

“So, you noticed,” she replied.

“Of course I did. Here I was, thinking I’d get to talk with Makoto all night, but your insistent gaze was so bothersome I had to come out here. And besides, what was that ‘I didn’t understand everything’ nonsense? Tomoe, you understood all of it, didn’t you? Space is your specialty, after all, so I’d expect you to follow along. If that weren’t the case, I wouldn’t have gone through the entire explanation.”

Tomoe’s voice was heavy, her tone hard as she spoke. “I thought as much. There are a few things I really need to ask.”

“For all the times you’ve called others deceivers and liars… you’re not exactly honest with your own master, are you? Well, as a fellow dragon, why don’t you tell me the truth?”

“Those who come from another world, the original world… do they really only live about a hundred years?” she asked, her voice quiet but firm.

Luto paused before he replied, “Yes… they die, all right. In fact, it’s rare for one to live a full hundred years. They can extend their lives to some degree with magic, but at best, they’ll last maybe two hundred years—and even that… is something I wouldn’t recommend.”

A trace of anguish flickered in Luto’s voice as he finished, his expression momentarily pained.

“I see. It’s… short, so very *short*,” Tomoe murmured, turning over the word in her mouth as if trying to absorb its meaning. A hundred years was a brief flicker in the eyes of a dragon—like a single month from a hyuman’s perspective.

“That’s something we can’t do anything about. I’ve met and parted with maybe a dozen hyumans over the ages. They were all exceptional in their own way, and each farewell was deeply painful.” Luto’s gaze drifted off into the distance, his eyes filled with memories.

“Since I’ve known you for so long, I’ll swallow my pride and admit it,” Tomoe said, her tone uncharacteristically vulnerable. “It’s unbearable, Luto. This dazzling world… if Makoto-sama were to die, it would grow dull and empty once again, wouldn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly,” Luto replied. “When I lost my first companion, I was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the loss. Even the world I thought I cherished above all else seemed worthless for a time.”

“Makoto-sama means everything to me now. I can’t even imagine a world without him in it.”

“I get it. I think he’s remarkable too. Frankly, I never thought I’d see the day you’d form a Contract with a human… I’m a bit envious, honestly.”

“You don’t need to understand. It would only scare Makoto-sama.”

“That’s harsh. I actually agree with you, you know. Makoto-kun is something special. And if I may be blunt, he’s the best you could’ve hoped for. Not to mention, it’s unheard of for three people from another world to appear at once… This world is going to change and soon.”

Luto’s voice took on an excited edge. The idea of this world transforming thanks to the presence of these otherworldly visitors filled him with unmistakable delight, and his expression shifted from a faint smile to one of genuine anticipation.

“Change, huh?” Tomoe had grown pensive. “Luto, how did you first come to know of Makoto-sama? If he’s as exceptional as you say, what did you think of other heroes you’ve seen?”

Tomoe’s words, in contrast to Luto’s, were spoken with careful deliberation, as though weighing each one before releasing it. She hadn’t yet decided whether she should welcome the impending changes with open arms or tread cautiously. Having spent more time among hyumans than ever before, she couldn’t yet bring herself to embrace the coming changes as casually as Luto, who had witnessed such turning points countless times.

“I first came to know of him—well, all of you—when you registered as adventurers in Tsige,” Luto replied. “Two individuals with levels in the four digits, plus a system error unlike anything we’d ever seen. It didn’t take long for us to

discover there was a third otherworlder. I verified the information and locked it down, so outside of Tsige, names like ‘Tomoe’ and ‘Mio’ are completely unknown. And for that, Tomoe, you have my thanks; it’s because of you and Mio that I was able to learn about Makoto-kun’s existence. Consider the information block my token of gratitude. He isn’t hyuman, and yet he is; he doesn’t possess talent, and yet he surpasses it; he doesn’t feel remorse in killing, yet he’s troubled when those close to him are hurt. He’s unusually opaque, ambiguous, his thoughts and judgments aligned with that of an ordinary man, yet he chooses a path wholly different from them. I’ve never been this fascinated by an otherworlder. Truly, he’s… captivating.”

“Luto, why are you so drawn to Makoto-sama?” Tomoe asked, her eyes narrowing slightly. “It doesn’t seem like it’s just because he’s from another world…”

“To repeat what you yourself just said: otherworlders generally only live about a hundred years. But listen carefully now.” Luto’s voice dropped, taking on a serious edge. “We might not be able to have children with hyumans, but… we can with otherworlders.”

“Wh-What?” Tomoe’s eyes widened in shock.

“They may die, yes. But through them, we can preserve an emotional bond—one that lives on through their descendants.”

“That’s impossible. We’re singular beings… made up of aspects that were carved from the world itself. Even if the other party is human, bearing children should be unthinkable…”

“It’s possible,” Luto insisted. “I’ve never fathered a child with a woman, but I did conceive one through a male partner once. That’s why, as both a man and a woman, I want to be loved by Makoto-kun and to love him in return. He’s the most fascinating ‘human’ I’ve ever known, and I want to spend the short time he has in this world by his side. And with his descendants too, in time. I’d even be happy to form a Contract with him. Though, as a guild master, my public position limits how closely I can attach myself to him.”

“I’ve met the Empire’s hero myself. He was also a boy of considerable strength.”

This had been during her investigation on Makoto’s behalf; Tomoe recalled that, in terms of strength alone, he certainly

deserved the title of “hero.”

“Ah, him,” Luto replied with a faint, dispassionate nod. “He’s not bad either. In terms of intrigue, I’d rank them as Makoto-kun, then the Empire, then the Kingdom. The same goes for danger. In terms of heroic qualities, though, the Goddess certainly has an eye for talent. I’d say it’s the Kingdom, then the Empire, then Makoto-kun. It’s not for nothing that She’s a goddess, but I don’t think the Empire’s hero will live long. He’s completely intoxicated by his identity as a hero, or rather, by the idea that he’s someone special. He’ll sacrifice things easily to preserve that image—including himself, no doubt.”

He shifted his gaze, almost thoughtful. “As for the hero of the Kingdom, she keeps everything buried deep within herself. She’s so composed it’s almost dull. That one… She’ll likely rise to be a queen, leading the hyumans. She gathers people to herself naturally, uses them naturally, and has a talent that surpasses all others. Truly a remarkable figure, historically speaking. Given enough time, she may even forge a nation that transcends race—but that’s all. With those two, you can anticipate their actions and their endgame to some extent. But Makoto-kun… He’s unpredictable. That’s what makes him so fascinating.”

Luto’s evaluation of the two heroes was delivered with a calm, almost clinical tone, lacking the passion he’d displayed when discussing Makoto. This only served to underscore the dragon’s true interest—unexpected qualities and surprises from otherworldly visitors. He’d kept himself hidden from both the kingly talent and the hero who shunned sacrifice, only revealing himself first to Makoto—a decision that further attested to Luto’s intrigue with him.

“I’ll have to trust you on the matter of children,” Tomoe said. “So, it’s because you can’t predict him that he’s interesting… Tell me, then—do those two heroes want to return to their original worlds? Just as Makoto-sama may feel that way somewhere in his heart. Do otherworlders all long to go back?”

“Ah, I thought that might be your next question. In the end, everyone wonders the same things, don’t they? The answer is no. Out of all the otherworlders I’ve met, only three have actively tried to return. It’s about one in every three or four.”

“Around 30 percent, then. So, it’s not all of them.”

“Not at all. And as for the two current heroes, neither wishes to go back. The hero of Limia seemed to be brooding a bit recently, but it looks like she’s moved on. She even got rid of some items she brought from her world, which may mean she’s ready to bury her roots here. Typically, even those who initially say they want to return start to prefer living in this world as they build ties here. It may simply be an expression of human adaptability. Oh, as for the three who attempted to return, I don’t know if any of them succeeded. Two of them, though, were ones who could understand my explanations,” Luto added with a wistful smile. “I was reluctant to part with them.”

“What do you think Makoto-sama will do? Do you think, given the possibility, he would pursue a way to return home?”

“My guess is he won’t,” Luto replied, after a moment of contemplation. “But I don’t know him well enough yet to say that with certainty. If I had to be honest… I’m not sure. Still, he seems like the sort of person who wouldn’t abandon you all to chase after such a fragile hope.”

“I agree. His kindness is both a strength and a weakness. But I wouldn’t want him to lose it. It’s not that I can’t bear to be the one being led, or to take a subordinate role. It’s simply that I want Makoto-sama to remain true to himself.”

“Oh, so you do understand,” Luto said, smiling faintly. “Then maybe you should go a little easier on him. Showing him all the things you can do and accomplish, piling expectations on him… It’s too much for him right now. He seemed a bit anxious. He has his own pace, Tomoe, and pushing him to match yours isn’t helping. Among all the otherworlders I’ve met, he’s a truly unusual one. Especially when it comes to his spirit. If he stays as he is, he’ll end up taking that godlike mana of his to the grave with him, unused. But give him the right spark, and he’ll transform.”

They were nearing the Adventurer’s Guild when Luto stopped, turning to look Tomoe directly in the eyes. His gaze held a deep and complicated mixture of anticipation, worry, and even a touch of fear.

“A spark?” Tomoe repeated, her voice filled with curiosity.

“Yes,” Luto confirmed. “Right now, he’s bound by something, that kindness you mentioned among other things. But because of

that, he's still able to hold on to a version of himself that remains connected to his life in the original world. The two other heroes have each made their peace with that world and set themselves on new paths here. Makoto-kun, though… with the right spark, he might confront that part of himself from the original world and deepen his acceptance and understanding of his power. With mana like his, he might even find a third option beyond staying or returning—the kind of choice you seem concerned about."

"A third choice? What could there be other than staying or going back?"

"Traveling between worlds freely. Becoming a transcendent being, capable of crossing worlds at will. As he is now, he already has the mana required to create a portal to another world but not to determine the destination world. I'm very curious to see what kind of spark will awaken that within him. But don't push his growth too hard. I don't know exactly what method you used, but his mana increase has been far from normal—even I can see that. If you keep forcing him at this rate, he'll break. And if it comes to that, I'll have to intervene. Information on how to increase someone's mana capacity is enough to drive hyumans into a frenzy, but I won't tolerate him being used as a test subject for something so trivial." Luto turned to leave, his expression softening. "I'll be around. Let's meet again soon."

"A spark…" Tomoe murmured to herself as he walked away. "If it could prevent a future where Makoto-sama just goes back to his original world, then maybe…"

Tomoe was beginning to realize just how dependent she had become on the time she shared with him. It wasn't exactly *him* she was dependent on, but the life she'd built since making her Contract with him—the time spent with Makoto, Mio, Shiki, and the inhabitants of the Demiplane. She had grown attached to this comfortable existence, these moments filled with meaning.

Everything was enjoyable, each day held something new, and she could lose herself in one pursuit after another. Just as Luto had said, the depth of each day was something she'd never known before. She didn't want to think that this joyous time could end in only a hundred years. If it were like a festival, that might be different; if she waited, it might come around again someday. But the time spent with Makoto was a unique,

unrepeatable journey—one that would never return once it was gone.

The more enjoyable things became, the more the fear of losing them threatened to well up within her. Tomoe never let it show, but that was the core of her anxiety. If this onetime, precious happiness with Makoto could somehow be extended by bearing his child, as Luto had suggested, then maybe… Yet, Tomoe felt that this wasn't quite what she herself wanted. Luto had his own reasons and perspective, and his suggestion came from that, so she decided not to dwell on it too deeply.

If Makoto were to genuinely wish to return home and ask for her help, Tomoe knew she'd aid him with all her strength, Contract or no Contract. The desire to help him was her truest feeling.

Now, Luto had revealed a new option. A choice that might allow Makoto to remain as he was, fulfilling both his wishes and her own.

A spark.

The word echoed in Tomoe's mind as she walked along the quiet, night-shrouded street.

"Tomoe?"

The empty street, devoid of other people, fell silent as she stopped, reacting to a familiar voice calling her name.

"?!"

"Did you just finish seeing off that pervert?" Mio asked matter-of-factly.

"Ah, yes, I did," Tomoe replied, her eyes narrowing. "But… what in the world are you wearing? A blanket? Don't tell me you walked all the way here like that?"

"Yeah. Got a problem with that?"

Tomoe sighed. "It may be nighttime, but you should have more sense. We won't be staying in this town for long, so it's not a major concern, but still—you don't want strange rumors about Young Master circulating, do you?"

"Anyone who sees me will just have to forget," Mio replied firmly. "There's no way I'd discard Young Master's love over a trivial matter like that."

Mio seemed to have mulled over the same thought Tomoe had mentioned about potential rumors concerning Makoto, then

had ultimately decided to stay wrapped in her blanket and deal with any witnesses as necessary. Tomoe's previously serious expression softened into a faint smile.

"You're a troublesome one, you know that?" Tomoe chuckled.

"And I'd say the same for you, Tomoe," Mio replied with a smirk.

"Oh?"

"Even you, Tomoe… if you were ever to lose your senses and do anything to Young Master, I…"

One of the two sets of footsteps came to a halt as Mio stopped a short distance behind Tomoe.

"That would never happen," Tomoe replied with quiet conviction. "But if I were to lose my senses, I'd want you to slap me back into them. Roughly, if need be."

"Very well," Mio said with a nod, "I'd be happy to do so."

"Good," Tomoe replied softly. "Mio… thank you."

Tomoe murmured her words of gratitude without turning around, and though Mio gave no verbal reply, an understanding passed between them.

The two continued on in silence, saying nothing more until they reached the trading company.



The demon general Rona was expert in espionage and magic.

Her reputation didn't disappoint.

In just a few days, Rona, along with Lime, Aqua, Eris, and Shiki, had efficiently gathered intelligence both inside and outside the academy. I couldn't tell exactly how far Rona had gone in demonstrating her espionage skills, but judging by the intensity of the reports, she'd shown quite a bit—particularly in areas where one might hesitate to probe.

At first, only Shiki held any animosity toward Rona. But by the final report, all three of the others had developed not just a sense of animosity but a genuine dislike for her. Part of me was curious to know why, but another part wasn't so sure I wanted to find out.

It's a shame, really. They could've bonded over something as simple as a love for hotpot. *Then again, Shiki's enthusiasm for it borders on obsession, so that's a bit of a concern.*

"I'm not one for rushed work, you know?" Lime muttered, clearly disgruntled.

"I've come to see that incompetence is sometimes more appealing than ruthlessness," Aqua added, her voice full of distaste.

"This unpleasantness calls for a banana," Eris declared, rubbing her temples as though the fruit alone might restore her mood.

“Her competence was as sharp as ever, but her approach… was far too forceful,” Shiki said with a heavy sigh.

There wasn’t a single positive remark among them. If a single banana could make up for what they’d endured over the last few days, I’d gladly supply a whole bunch.

Apparently, Rona’s investigative tactics had involved anything and everything: intimidation, deceit, drugs, seduction… and, if needed, killing. Her style seemed to be whatever it took, with little regard for repercussions. She didn’t even appear to care if anyone found out.

Her more subtle, behind-the-scenes espionage skills, though… I guess she hadn’t used those this time around.

Lime, who had settled in quite well with the people of Tsige, usually gathered information by listening to local gossip or talking to a network of informants he knew well. Naturally, Rona’s blunt, heavy-handed methods rubbed him the wrong way.

Aqua and Eris, both of whom had been learning basic investigative skills from Lime, seemed similarly unimpressed and were intent on respecting their own, more discreet methods. Shiki had used some hypnosis techniques, but he at least took precautions to be minimally invasive. His approach had gained enough acceptance that even the others could tolerate it.

Rona, on the other hand, showed no such consideration; she ignored any risk of lasting effects on hyumans altogether. I doubted she cared about the repercussions on her hyuman targets—she probably saw it as their problem, not hers. It was a tough issue. From her perspective as a demon, efficiency was all that mattered.

Still, she’d managed to identify all the relevant individuals within just a few days, which I appreciated, especially since keeping Eva-san in the trading company indefinitely wasn’t an option. I’d been careful to assign Shiki and the others to watch over her sister, but we couldn’t go on like this forever either.

Unfortunately, Rona’s high-handed methods—killing or incapacitating suspects without consulting us—had left a distinct impression. Thanks to that, a few individuals had disappeared before we’d even had a chance to act. Even though our goal wasn’t total annihilation of the opposing organization, we’d need to move even faster from here on out.

But still. I never thought I'd end up taking a fellow instructor, of all people, into the infamous Kuzunoha Company's underground torture chamber. Truly, this was beyond anything I'd imagined.

It wasn't just any instructor either—it was Bright-sensei, one of the academy's most trusted staff members, someone with whom I shared a certain familiarity. Since I'd joined the academy, he had regularly introduced me to his students as he'd promised, and I'd begun to think that maybe my initial suspicion of him was misplaced and that he was actually a good person. And yet, here we were. Hearing these reports was enough to make me start questioning my faith in people… or maybe, my faith in hyumans.

Bright, a full-time instructor at this elite academy who taught a large number of students, had never struck me as someone involved in any organization. Well, he wouldn't have had to deal with demons or other extremists in his position at the academy. I supposed we'd uncover the truth during the interrogation.

Anyway, in about two weeks, the academy would go on summer vacation.

When I first heard about it, I was surprised. Wasn't this supposed to be a high-end school? But now that I knew from Luto that multiple otherworlders had come here before, the idea of a long break didn't seem quite as strange. Luto had even hinted that otherworlders had influenced the founding of Rotsgard.

Even so, this world still hadn't developed firearms. Did that mean magic was more powerful than guns? I didn't know everything about the previous otherworlders, so this was just speculation, but it was puzzling that the Empire was trying to develop firearms despite magic's advantages.

It was also surprising that, despite the presence of several otherworlders before us, knowledge about their origins or even the existence of other worlds was still mostly unknown. Since the three of us were the first to be summoned by the Goddess, maybe the other visitors had only arrived by accident? Perhaps they all chose to blend in as members of this world rather than reveal themselves as otherworlders. It made me wonder, though. Surely some of them faced discrimination because of their appearance, just like I had. And if humans really did have higher physical abilities than hyumans here, I wouldn't be surprised if some had

suffered persecution for that too. The few people Luto hadn't spoken about in detail might be others like me.

Those who became heroes, those who served kings as knights, those who threw themselves into magic and tried to peer into its deepest mysteries, those who gained renown as adventurers, those destroyed as berserkers, and even those that dedicated their lives to developing bathhouses (I'm guessing that one was Japanese).

It seemed that each of them had made a life for themselves in this world. And yet, as far as I could tell, none of them had ever managed to return home.

At least, I'd never felt the presence of another world back in Japan. Here, however, I sensed faint traces of Japan here. It gave me the uneasy feeling that this might be a one-way trip.

Luto's lecture about the nature of worlds the other day had mostly gone over my head, and even asking Tomoe afterward hadn't helped. Still, I'd gathered that any attempt at transference would be extraordinarily difficult and would require serious resolve. Besides, it was clear that now wasn't the time for anything drastic, not when I had Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, and everyone else in the Demiplane relying on me.

Just because my subordinates were skilled didn't mean I, as their master, could do whatever I pleased. If one person in a family started acting selfishly, discontent would inevitably build somewhere, creating fractures. So, for now, I had to make up for my own shortcomings, however slowly, on my own. Someday, I'd be able to attempt a transfer back to Japan—not recklessly, not irresponsibly, but when I was truly ready.

Of course, getting in a solid hit on that Goddess remained my top goal. But for now, I needed to focus on expanding Kuzunoha's reach, growing the population in the Demiplane, and keeping tabs on the Empire. Now that I knew, I couldn't ignore that they were developing firearms—and if they had dangerous reasons for it, I'd have to put a stop to it.

My highest priority right now was to put an end to the Goddess's forced summoning. Fortunately, Shiki seemed willing to help devise some countermeasures, so I had hope that time might work in our favor on that front. It frustrated me, though, that there was so little I could do myself.

More than anything, I needed to figure out how to approach things with more confidence. I couldn't shake the feeling of inadequacy compared to everyone around me.

Having talented people by my side was something I was truly grateful for. But I didn't possess the virtue of a legendary hero—and I didn't have much confidence either.

Just having the power to fight isn't enough, is it?

I knew where I needed to start. As the one responsible for the trading company and the Demiplane, I needed to develop my judgment and sense of caution to protect and maintain the organization. Fortunately, as long as I moved carefully and kept a steady course, Kuzunoha should continue to grow. Still, I was aware that, as a merchant managing a full-fledged business, I lacked some of the instincts I should have had by now. I hadn't really experienced the struggles that come with doing business.

I didn't approach things with the mindset of maximizing gains. Even if there was potential for a greater profit further down the line, it was essential to eliminate risky problems while they were still small.

Take this situation, for example. Tomoe would probably leave Bright-sensei alone for now, hoping to use him to catch a bigger fish. But in this case, I planned to detain him immediately after summer vacation began to extract any information he might have. Eva-san and Luria's safety was on the line, after all.

In terms of developing judgment and caution, I felt that my negotiation with Rona after the incident had gone well—by my standards, at least.

Although "after the incident" might imply that things were fully resolved, they weren't quite there yet. Still, Rona had said she was leaving the academy now that her task was complete. I supposed that meant her mission was over. Karen Fols, her alias at the academy, would be gone, meaning one fewer student in my class, but that was fine. Over the summer, she'd be marked as "formally withdrawn." Karen had been "deceased" to begin with, so Rona intended to have her declared dead. But thinking of the remaining students, I'd asked her to remove any mention of "death" in the records. Rona didn't seem particularly attached to that detail and agreed to submit the paperwork as I'd requested.

It would be a bit excessive to have to tell students that a classmate died in some mysterious accident over the summer break.

Then again, maybe that sort of thing isn't so rare in this world?

"That's fine; I don't have any issues with that. In the records of the Kingdom of Husk, though, she'll be marked as deceased. Otherwise, people might start asking questions. But since I'm here, could we chat a bit?"

Though her words implied it was no big deal, it was obvious she was doing me a favor. A little conversation couldn't hurt, and her charm and drug tricks wouldn't work on me anyway, so I nodded in agreement.

"These past few days, I've been working with your intel agents, you know?" she began. "They're a polished group, I'll give them that. They're skilled, but they're not putting their abilities to full use. Prioritizing morals is usually an admirable trait, a valuable perspective, but the purpose of espionage is to collect information and achieve objectives discreetly. In that world, morals and ethics often become obstacles. In the future, if it benefits the trading company, be prepared to allow them to use any methods necessary—even the ruthless ones."

"Thank you for the advice," I replied politely, though her words made me feel like the trading company was becoming a full-blown underground operation, clearing obstacles at any cost. Espionage wasn't exactly my thing. I just wanted information gathering.

"One more thing," Rona continued. "It seems true that you don't discriminate against other races. Neither your shop staff nor your intelligence agents have hang-ups about working with other races… A fact I still find almost impossible to believe. You're the finest hyuman I've ever encountered. I've never once held any fondness for hyumans, but I find myself genuinely liking you. If you wanted, I might even consider arranging an audience with the Demon King himself for you."

"To think I'd have the honor of meeting the illustrious Demon King! I'd certainly like that one day," I replied with a faint smile.

Rona's eyes narrowed slightly. "Then, let me offer you a piece of personal advice, stepping away from my official position. Those two dark-skinned demi-humans and your subordinate

Shiki—they're dangerous to you. Cut ties with them as soon as possible."

"Aqua, Eris, and Shiki? They've all served me well."

"Cut ties"? What kind of advice is this? I couldn't tell if she was trying to give genuine counsel or just sow seeds of suspicion among my people.

"You probably don't know this, but those two girls are members of a violent demi-human race known as forest ogres," Rona explained. "Their combat skills are so fearsome that some within the Demon King's army suggested recruiting them. But as it turns out, their kind can't bear being under anyone's command. Talks fell apart spectacularly. Most likely, they slipped into Tsige and sought out the Kuzunoha Company on their own. Trust me—one day, they'll betray you. And as for Shiki, well, while I can see that he's a loyal retainer in your eyes, he's currently under possession."

"Under possession? By a forest ogre?"

Ah, so that's it. She must've pieced together enough to figure out Shiki's true nature, though she'd ended up misunderstanding a few crucial details.

"I'm not sure of its name," she went on, "but he's possessed by a lich who sides with neither hyumans nor demons. Typically, liches can't perform possession, but this one's an exception. He latches onto individuals at whim, performing all manner of sadistic experiments under the guise of 'research.' Among the demons, he's known as Larva. Honestly, it didn't make sense that even the mighty information network of the Kuzunoha Company would know so much about me… but it would make perfect sense if Larva were involved. I've encountered him a few times, both as an ally and as an enemy. If there's one thing I can say for certain, it's that he's utterly untrustworthy. The only reason he's obeying you now is because it serves his interests. Anyone he possesses, or even those around them, always suffer in the end. Sometimes, he'll leave massacres in his wake… Raidou, I admire your open-minded attitude toward other races, as do many of us demons. But, please, be cautious around them. And if you ever find yourself needing assistance, even if it requires the strength of demons, reach out. You can use this—there's a special telepathy

incantation on it that'll put you directly in touch with me. I promise I'll help you personally, should the need arise."

She handed me a piece of paper, the text on it already translated neatly into a language I could easily decipher. It held an unusual telepathy chant written in careful script.

When I first saw it, I nearly let out a gasp of surprise, but I managed to keep my composure, quietly tucking the paper away. Rona smiled with satisfaction as she left the room. I doubted I'd see her again in the academy city, but she'd assured me she'd handle everything with Bright-sensei.

This incantation… Could it be the one Tomoe was investigating? If I ask Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki to take a closer look, they might be able to tell me more.

Rona had planted seeds of doubt about the forest ogres and Shiki, all while trying to make me more receptive to the demons. *If that was her intent, she's a dangerous and cunning person.*

Since she'd misunderstood Shiki's nature, I wasn't at risk of buying into her claims this time. But in other situations, her words could easily sound convincing. She'd mixed elements of truth about the forest ogres and Shiki into a story that served her purposes. I'd have to remain cautious in any future dealings with her.

Anyway, unlike the full-time instructors, I wasn't bound to the academy during summer vacation. As I thought about how to spend the upcoming break, I busied myself with an inventory check of the store.

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Nighttime.

I was in the basement of the store, a space that we had added after buying the building. Here, I faced a man who had become almost unrecognizable.

He was tied to a chair, his body covered in wounds, glaring at me with an intensity that betrayed not a trace of the approachable, kind aura he'd exuded at the academy.

"It seems my subordinates were a bit heavy-handed. My apologies."

I didn't mean that one bit. He had, after all, done plenty to deserve it. I assumed he'd accepted his fate long before now.

"I underestimated you," he muttered, his voice a hoarse rasp.

"I'm not much on my own, but I'm fortunate to be surrounded by a lot of capable people," I wrote, shrugging in what I hoped looked like modesty.

He narrowed his eyes, studying me. "You investigated everything about us so quickly… and then detained me. I take it you know exactly who I am?"

"Of course."

"Others like me are everywhere," he said, as if that would still sway me.

"Yes, I hear a few have disappeared recently," I replied smoothly.

"If you do anything to me, you won't get away with it," he warned, his eyes betraying a faint flicker of hope that negotiation was still on the table.

Hard to believe he still thinks there's room for that.

"Is that so? I don't see any signs of incoming attacks, and the Assassin's Guild has been unusually quiet." Based on the unanimous assessment from my team, it seemed clear he'd been discarded by his own people. His organization was secretive, and betrayal wasn't something they tolerated.

Considering Bright-sensei's situation, I doubted he'd be receiving any sort of favorable reaction from them—certainly not a rescue attempt.

His face twisted in surprise. "You even know about my connections with them?"

Know about them? Lime, Shiki, and Rona heard it all straight from your own mouth. Of course, he doesn't remember that, does he?

Memories of everything he'd been through up until now had been erased. But, seeing as this was likely the end for him, maybe reminding him would be the least I could do.

“Yes. Bright-sensei, you told us yourself, quite willingly. With a little persuasion, of course.”

“Wh-What?” His eyes widened in shock.

“If you’d like, I could even help you remember every detail of what’s happened to you since you got here. Although…”

“What?”

“First, I’d like to ask you something. Why didn’t you just stick to your comfortable role as an academy instructor? You’re only hyuman; there was no need to risk angering the Goddess.”

“Because in this world, the Goddess is the only god that exists,” he replied quietly, his voice tinged with bitterness.

“Indeed.”

“She helps people on a whim, only to abandon them just as easily. If you look at history, the conflicts she’s caused are countless.”

“Indeed.”

“And that judgment of hers is hardly something everyone can accept,” he continued, his voice low and intense. “Many times, she’s forced her will upon us, with decisions that seem nothing more than whimsy. Not only demi-humans but even we hyumans, supposedly her favored race, are not universally blessed. It’s inevitable that some of us would rise against her.”

“You’re saying you don’t approve of the Goddess?”

Surprisingly, I might have something in common with people like him.

“Exactly. It’s only natural for those who believe that the Goddess has no right to rule over this world to gather and stand together. We don’t need that kind of god; we hyumans are strong enough to forge our own path without her. Don’t you agree, Raidou?”

“I see,” I wrote, but honestly, I didn’t see his point at all.

This line of thinking didn’t justify experimenting on demi-humans. If they didn’t like the Goddess, they should’ve trained to challenge her directly.

“The students who attend the academy live their lives grounded in faith in the Goddess, rarely questioning it. They revere her as a god and accept her position above them as a matter of course. Don’t you find that revolting, Raidou?”

“I see.”

“Don’t you feel outrage, Raidou, at the thought of all those people, victims buried and erased from history, who had to swallow their resentment and hatred, forced to resign themselves simply because their oppressor was a god?”

“So, because you hate the Goddess, you also hurt demi-humans?”

“Their sacrifices are the foundation for a future without gods!” he declared, his face twisted with fervor.

“That’s quite enough. I’ll help you remember everything you’ve endured so far. And goodbye, Bright-sensei. This is the end for you,” I wrote.

Even without Rona’s input, we’d already decided on Bright-sensei’s fate.

His eyes widened, and he started shouting, thrashing his legs so violently that his chair toppled over. His words devolved into incomprehensible rambling, a man on the edge of sanity. I watched him for a moment, then gave him my parting words.

Bright-sensei might have been abandoned, but leaving him alone wasn’t an option. We would see this through.

This was the conclusion reached by Shiki, Lime, and the others in the Kuzunoha Company involved in the matter—myself included. Lime, Aqua, and Eris would handle the final measures, and by tomorrow, he’d be gone from here for good.

Despite our shared enmity toward the Goddess, none of Bright’s words had resonated with me. Was it because I had power?

What if I had no power, and no one around me?

Pointless to think about it.

Time for sleep.

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With summer just around the corner, the academy was filled with a buzz of excitement. Many students would soon be returning

home, but those who stayed would enjoy free time without classes.

What are you going to do over summer vacation?

That question was a common refrain, whether here at this otherworldly academy or in modern Japan. The long break was a chance to spend time with friends, travel, help out at home, or focus on self-improvement. For students, the importance of how to spend a long break was a universal concern.

Nobles' and merchants' children often returned to their families to make appearances in society or meet important clients, so many of them would head home. Naturally, the aristocratic and upper-class dorms were bustling during this season.

Yet, amid the lively chaos, two students walked down the hallway with remarkable calm. While other students and staff hurried around them, these two made their way gracefully toward the library.

"So many people are heading home for the vacation. There's such a rush. Thankfully, we're in the clear this year," one of them remarked casually.

"Papa was practically in tears," her sister replied with a wry smile. "'Why won't you come home right away?' he kept asking."

The two sisters chatting were none other than Shifu and Yuno Rembrandt, daughters of Tsige's renowned merchant family, who had recently resumed their studies at Rotsgard Academy. Unlike most students, they weren't planning to head straight home after the term ended.

As they walked down the hallway, making small talk, other students moved aside for them. The other students' faces were taut with apprehension, like startled prey animals trying to avoid drawing the attention of terrifying predators.

The Rembrandt sisters might have looked beautiful, not particularly intimidating, but there was a reason for the fear they inspired.

Before taking their hiatus from school, the sisters had been the worst kind of students. They would attend lectures only when it suited them, destroy opponents they disliked in practical exercises, and frequently flaunt their family's wealth and influence to get their way. Their grades had been uniformly

excellent, which only made their ruthless nature stand out more. Anyone who caught their eye never knew what might happen to them.

After all, rumor had it that their father had even bought a noble title from the Aion Kingdom just to secure a place for his daughters in the most prestigious noble dorm. It wasn't surprising that the sisters were seen as untouchable, even immune to common sense.

Yet, since their return to the academy, they seemed like entirely different people, as though their bodies had been possessed. They approached their studies with genuine dedication, were warmly received by their instructors, and this left most students thoroughly perplexed. However, many students suspected this was just a facade, fearing the sisters might revert to their old ways at any moment. As a result, the hallways they walked were often unusually empty.

Their benefactor—and instructor—was Raidou. The sisters constantly thought about ways to repay their debt to him and, without his knowledge, had recently completed a small act of gratitude.

A few days earlier, they had been growing increasingly exasperated by the endless procession of students confessing their feelings to Raidou. Initially, they'd reluctantly told themselves that if Raidou didn't mind, then it couldn't be helped. After all, surely a man enjoys being confessed to by young women, they'd reasoned, gritting their teeth. But as they spent more time with Raidou, sharing meals and casual conversations, they started to understand the trouble these constant confessions were causing him—and his real feelings about them. Eventually, the two sisters exchanged a glance and made a silent pact to take action.

They approached a few of the students who had already confessed to Raidou and left with bruised hearts, whispering to them in low, menacing voices:

"If you're truly considering marrying Raidou-sama, then you'll need to get along with us as well. You are prepared for that, aren't you? And, of course, we won't tolerate a single act of infidelity."

“If you’re aiming to marry Raidou-sama, you’d best be cautious. If your family isn’t up to our standards, Papa might just ruin them and make you all his servants. So, at the very least, make sure your family is a match for ours, all right?”

Their words had a profound effect. After all, this wasn’t the gentle, refined Shifu or the cheerful Yuno of recent days. No, this was the formidable duo cloaked in their former, terrifying reputations.

Although this warning didn’t become common gossip, it spread quickly among the female students who’d considered confessing to Raidou. Confessing to him, once a harmless gesture, was now seen as a risky move with unforeseen consequences.

The number of confessions dropped swiftly. Raidou’s look of relief didn’t go unnoticed by the sisters, who beamed with innocent pride over their success. As for Raidou himself, he chalked it up to the passing nature of school rumors, entirely unaware of the sisters’ involvement.

And now, here were Shifu and Yuno in the library, once again on Raidou-related business.

Navigating confidently through the vast space, they made their way to the designated meeting spot, where a group was already gathered around a table.

“Oh, are we the last ones here? Sorry about that; we’re still new here,” Shifu apologized with a polite smile.

“We’ll make sure to get here sooner next time, senpai,” Yuno added.

This apologetic attitude was something no one would have expected from them before their return, but the group, now familiar with the sisters’ new demeanors, stood to welcome them without much fuss.

“No worries; we all just got here,” Jin replied, waving off their apology. He was at the head of a group of seven students, all of whom were Raidou’s students on scholarships and had no plans to return home during the summer vacation.

The reason for gathering here today, of course, was to discuss Raidou’s lectures.

“Yes, it’s good to have you here,” Shifu added gracefully. “If it’s about Raidou-sensei’s lectures, then naturally, we’re eager to hear about it as well.”

Yuno nodded in agreement; both sisters felt that any preparation for Raidou's classes would be worthwhile. His lectures had been challenging, to say the least.

Abelia chimed in, "I'm pretty sure the two of you will be included in the 'fun lecture' next time," as she motioned for them to sit. She had been the one to propose today's gathering after sensing something from Raidou and Shiki, and everyone else had agreed. "After all, you two have already regained your strength since your training in Tsige. Quite impressive, really."

Fun lecture…? Shifu and Yuno's smiles faltered slightly, a mix of excitement and barely concealed dread evident on their faces.

"AKA torture," Abelia continued with a smirk, handing over a stack of papers. "Here, these are the reports we submitted to Sensei. None of us scored even half points. That lizardman, the one we called the 'Blue Lizard,' wasn't even trying. So, you know… the grades speak for themselves."

"He was incredibly strong, right? Even with five of us, we couldn't lay a finger on him," another student commented.

"That lizard… He's top level in everything," Jin added. "Strength-wise, he overpowers us, and his magic casting is lightning fast. He dodges arrows like he can predict where they'll go."

Daena, a male student specializing in close combat and status-inflicting spells, sighed as he raised his hands in surrender. He was also the only married student in the group.

"Plus, his unique movement—he even used his tail—and his weapon skills make him a nightmare to fight against. Nearly all our attacks missed. Right now, the only way we might stand a chance is if Jin, Daena, and I coordinate our attacks perfectly…"

The analysis continued, led quietly by Mithra, a swordsman specializing in defense and support magic. Jin was also a swordsman, but Mithra's style made his sword more like a shield —specifically, a spiked shield. Where Jin could be described as a sharp blade, Mithra's style was grounded in defensive, stabilizing techniques.

"I'd say he's using a mix of water and wind elements," noted Izumo, the sole dedicated mage in the group. "I've never heard of a lizardman wielding two elements, but he clearly used both water and wind spells in our fight. He doesn't seem to use any

healing or support spells—though that could just be because we haven't pressured him enough to make him need them."

Izumo, a mage specialized in wind magic, had started to see the value in handling multiple elements since taking Raidou's classes. Despite the lectures being mage-oriented, Raidou's teachings resonated with those who viewed magic as a secondary skill. Part of the appeal lay in Raidou's approach, which was unlike anything the mages at the academy were accustomed to. The main reason, however, was that Raidou, even though a mage, expected his students to develop agility almost on par with warriors. Izumo had taken countless classes at the academy, but it was only in Raidou's that he was told to practice dodging attacks while casting. Typically, a mage relied on barriers for protection while finishing a spell, but Raidou advocated training to dodge, shield, or counter while casting.

It was challenging, but Raidou had a way of demonstrating these techniques himself, adjusting his level just enough so that even Izumo could start to grasp them. The experience was a humbling blow to Izumo's pride, but he clung to Raidou's lessons with newfound determination.

Jin, Abelia, Daena, Mithra, and Izumo—each of them had begun to grow in their own ways under Raidou's guidance.

"Water and wind. That means I'll probably need to join the fight as a source of firepower," Abelia mused.

"With three of us on the front line, I guess I'll stick to the bow," Daena added thoughtfully.

Jin nodded. "That's what we thought at first too. But if you're mid or backline, you'll each have to dodge Blue Lizard attacks on your own. So maybe we should have Daena or Mithra drop back to support the mage."

Their battle analysis and strategy discussions went on, becoming so animated that a few instructors paused nearby, smiling warmly at the sight. *Just as expected from the scholarship students,* they thought.

After what felt like countless rounds of strategizing, the seven finally reached a conclusion.

"Well, that about covers it," Jin summarized. "Let's go over the basics one more time. No matter what, avoid getting wiped

out. Figure out a way to land hits—both with weapons and magic. Let's give it everything we've got."

"Got it!" the others replied in unison.

Satisfied with the thoroughness of their preparations, each of them wore a look of determination, confident they'd readied themselves for the infamous "fun lecture" that lay ahead.

"Right, then. It took us a while, but we've got one more topic to cover. Listen up—it's about summer vacation…"

The meeting continued until the late afternoon. The seven students were resolute in their plans for the break.



Finally, the academy had entered summer vacation.

With such a significant portion of the city's population being students, you'd think the economic activity around town would dip, but that wasn't quite the case—especially in the central city of Rotsgard. In fact, tourism from neighboring cities increased, and many students from surrounding areas flocked in to attend summer courses which were noncredit classes offered voluntarily by some of the instructors.

Of course, the students from other towns weren't usually as advanced as the academy's own, so the instructors designed the classes accordingly. Interestingly, only part-time instructors taught these summer courses. For them, it was a chance to earn some extra money. Full-time faculty, on the other hand, were either tied up with administrative work over the break or enjoying their own extended holiday. Not one of them conducted classes during the break—it seemed like a long-standing tradition.

"Even if it's a bargain compared to regular tuition… it's amazing that some people would willingly come back to school over summer vacation. I didn't go near school unless I had to for club activities," I mused.

"There are many who want to get a leg up or catch up, however they can," Shiki replied, his tone appreciative. "And for us, it means more customers for the shop."

“Even the Rembrandt sisters didn’t go home for the break. Just before summer started, I got this demanding letter from Rembrandt asking me to bring them back to Tsige.”

“Strangely enough, a second letter arrived that very day from his wife, immediately retracting his request and asking us to ignore his pleas. Apparently, the girls already told their father they wouldn’t be coming home, leaving him in tears.”

“And so, naturally, he sent me a letter, asking if I could somehow bring them back.” I laughed. *Really gives you that classic “parent-child” vibe, doesn’t it?*

There was a moment of quiet, the warm kind that lingers in the stillness of a summer day.

“Ah, it’s summer,” I sighed.

“Indeed, it is,” Shiki agreed.

Here we were, in the academy library, going through our research materials. My routine lately consisted of mornings spent reading here, afternoons checking on the store, and evenings in the Demiplane, where I’d listen to reports and dedicate time to training. There was a period when I couldn’t shake a sense of inadequacy, feeling like nothing I did was good enough.

These days, I felt a renewed sense of purpose, a small shift forward each day. Watching Jin, Abelia, and the other students show such dedication had a positive impact on me. Seeing others make progress, however small, served as a reminder to keep pushing myself too. For now, I was content with letting that motivation carry me forward, even if tangible results hadn’t revealed themselves just yet.

“Oh, by the way,” I said, remembering something, “the other day in class, it looked like Jin wanted to say something. Did you hear anything about that, Shiki?”

“No, nothing specific,” Shiki replied thoughtfully. “He seemed too focused and under pressure to speak up. But he did appear to be struggling with some decision.”

For the final lecture before summer vacation, I decided to conduct a mock battle as the “fun lecture” for the second half of class.

“Shifu, Yuno, take this chance to review everything we’ve covered in class under real combat conditions,” I instructed, adding the sisters to the group that usually participated in these

sessions. They seemed to have expected this, as the students quickly fell into formation without hesitation.

Seeing them so organized, I simply nodded and summoned the Blue Lizard himself, a misty lizardfolk. Given that there were more participants this time, I called up two of them.

“Allow me to introduce the Blue Lizard Zwei,” I announced, feeling that starting the fight without an introduction would be a bit impolite.

At that moment, the entire group froze. Some of them even started trembling. *Had they really planned on facing a single opponent with all seven of them? Despite their training and improved skills, it seemed they still hadn’t shed their very hyuman way of thinking.*

Predictably, Jin was the first to break the silence with a shout, “W-Wait, there’s two of them now?!”

“Of course. What training value would there be in all seven of you ganging up on a single opponent? That said, I’ll let you decide: would you prefer a seven-on-two match, or split into two groups of four-on-one and three-on-one?”



The students' eyes practically screamed, "What's the point of this choice?!"

Unbelievable. They're supposed to be professionals in group combat! Surely a seven-on-two battle would be more challenging, but it would also provide ample opportunities to learn about teamwork and coordination.

"Uh… Raidou-sensei?" Abelia ventured hesitantly, "Just as a reference, these two are… about equal in strength, right?"

"Of course. The Blue Lizard is skilled in technique, while Zwei specializes in raw strength. They're both exceptional fighters. And, for the record, they excel in group combat."

It's common sense. Why would I summon two creatures with wildly different strengths?

"Um… Sensei, just wondering if handling two of them at once is… uh, no problem for you?"

"No problem at all. One or a hundred, it's all the same to me."

It wasn't a summoning—just a matter of opening a gate, so it didn't matter if I brought through one creature or the entire lot; the effort on my part was the same.

After some consideration, the students chose to split into two groups, each facing a single opponent. The teams formed about as I'd expected:

Jin, Yuno, Abelia, and Izumo in one group.

Daena, Mithra, and Shifu in the other.

Neither team managed to win in the end, though it was a much closer fight than last time. We wrapped up the lecture on that note.

Afterward, Jin mentioned wanting to talk to me about something, but as he tried to get his words out, he looked completely exhausted and finally muttered, "I… I'll tell you next time," before staggering away.

Considering he hadn't followed up since, it probably wasn't that urgent. Maybe he just wanted me to treat him to lunch? If that was it, I could understand his hesitation. After all that running around, he probably would have had trouble keeping it down.

"I still remember how even the refined Shifu ended up flat on her back. With the skill they've built, it seems they could progress to the next level with just a change in approach. Why do you

think they're still getting so overwhelmed?" Shiki continued reading as he voiced his thoughts, seeming fully capable of keeping up a conversation without interrupting his study.

Must be handy to think about two things at once.

"Probably just a matter of familiarity," I replied. "With the time they have until the next round, I think they'll prepare better and take a step forward. Besides, they're all sharp—they're probably being extra cautious."

"Stage two, then. I imagine they'll start to panic when they realize how much stronger and faster the opponents have become."

"Yeah, I can see it now. If they take the second stage too lightly, the Blue Lizard might hold back, but Zwei's strikes could end with them getting launched—or worse, incapacitated in one hit."

The library was mostly empty as Shiki and I discussed the students' progress. The misty lizardfolk seemed to enjoy the battles in their own way, so it doubled as practice for them in how to hold back—whether they'd actually need to in the future was another story. If the students' growth lagged too much, it might frustrate the lizardfolk, so I could only hope Jin and the others would step up their game.

"Raidou-sama."

Hmm, someone's coming. Talk about timing. Sensing the familiar presence approaching, I shifted to writing our conversation.

We waited, each absorbed in a book, until they reached us.

"Excuse me, Raidou-sensei, may we have a moment of your time?"

Jin? Wonder what he needs.

Approaching us were the very students we'd been discussing. Sure enough, Shifu and Yuno were with them; no signs of heading home yet. Poor Rembrandt was likely heartbroken. I knew his wife had written to retract his request, but it wouldn't hurt for the girls to visit home at least once.

"Of course."

"I, um… have a favor to ask," Jin began, his tone more formal than usual. It felt a bit odd, but I was impressed he could adjust his manners so smoothly.

“Let’s hear it,” I wrote.

“Actually, during summer vacation… we’d like to ask if you could train us whenever you have time. We know you aren’t holding lectures for the visiting students, and we’re prepared to compensate you fairly for each session.”

…

Quite the dedication for a long break. My own plan for this vacation was mostly to work on developing myself for my future goals. But here they were, offering to pay for extra training sessions. *That’s rare… like a high schooler in the modern world saving up for private summer tutoring classes.*

“Is this everyone’s request? Does no one want to go home? Especially you, Shifu, and Yuno—you must have received requests from your family to return,” I wrote.

I couldn’t exactly tell Rembrandt that his daughters were skipping a visit home just to attend extra lectures with me. I’d never hear the end of it. My dad had been just as clingy with my sisters, constantly fighting the idea of them living on their own.

With every display of fatherly devotion, mom would always scold him.

Maybe the Rembrandts have a similar dynamic?

“Please, Sensei,” Shifu added earnestly. “Since I’m planning to go back to Tsige someday, I can’t afford to be weak. At our current skill level, I doubt we could even keep up in that city. A few more months away from home won’t cause any problems.”

Wait a minute. Being successful in Tsige doesn’t need to depend on physical strength; the Rembrandt family is a merchant family. Your power comes from wealth, not brawn. And Yuno—don’t nod along so eagerly!

Well, their determination was clear. Somehow, I had the feeling that if I didn’t find a way to send them home, Rembrandt’s disappointed letter would soon find its way to me. Since we were essentially partners, it didn’t feel right to disregard his wishes.

“Shiki, what do you think? Any openings in the schedule?” I asked.

“Once a week, I think I could manage.” Shiki replied.

You traitor.

I had half a mind to use him as an excuse to decline gracefully, but now I was cornered, seven pairs of hopeful eyes

on me. *Well, there goes my quiet summer.*

"Fine, but only once a week. And Shifu, Yuno, you'll go home during the second half of the break. That's nonnegotiable," I wrote.

"What?! My sister and I have to miss the later sessions?" Yuno protested.

"Raidou-sensei! Can't we come all through the break, just like the others?" Shifu chimed in.

"No. Your father specifically requested it. Besides, you're still recovering, so let him have some peace of mind and go home for at least a little while."

Despite two sets of sulking eyes directed my way, most of the students thanked me, relieved.

Oh, well. We'll keep things basic with training drills and a bit of Blue Lizard summoning. I left the planning to Shiki, figuring that if I paced things right, I could still have a productive summer.

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While Raidou was being persuaded by his students to hold extra lectures over the break, one woman worked quietly within the academy's library. In a restricted section, closed off to general access, was Eva, the head librarian.

Since being assured that the academy was safe, she had swiftly resumed her duties. Despite the long holiday, scholars, researchers, lecturers, and even regular patrons continued to visit the library. Due to her recent absence, her colleagues had been burdened with extra duties, and Eva had willingly offered to cover their shifts to let them rest. As a result, her own summer vacation had all but disappeared. Yet, she didn't mind; she found purpose in her work as a librarian, and there was a task she was determined to accomplish over the break.

At the moment, Eva was in search of a particular academic paper—one she thought Raidou might appreciate. With her noble background and keen intellect, she excelled in her role as a

librarian. Paying attention to Raidou's visits, she had memorized the books he'd checked out, observing his reading patterns and discerning topics that seemed to pique his interest. His reading habits covered a surprisingly broad spectrum, yet Eva had identified several consistent themes. She truly was a remarkable librarian.

"Hmm, not this instructor's work… or that research," she muttered to herself as she scanned the rows of dusty tomes.

Significant research papers were often relocated based on importance, though most remained in their designated sections. The library contained an overwhelming number of documents, including nearly all research ever produced at the academy, as well as findings from outside research institutions. Even Eva, a specialist, found herself buried in dust trying to locate this particular piece. It was certainly not one of the well-known papers.

"Raidou-san did save my life, after all. And when I offered to compensate him, he politely declined and only asked for book recommendations," Eva murmured with a smile. "Well, I'll find something that'll catch his eye!"

The generous reward she'd offered was no small thing—the Aensland family's fortune, tied to their lost territory. Yet, when she had made the proposal, Raidou had looked slightly uncomfortable and instead requested knowledge, something practical rather than speculative wealth that might not even exist anymore.

"He may read just about everything, but he's particularly drawn to studies on magic—specifically, the applications of magical power and summoning. He also seems interested in information about Kaleneon and the surrounding geography. But, first, I have to find that paper," Eva murmured to herself.

The paper she sought was the life's work of an unnamed professor, a study that ultimately ended in frustration and abandonment. It wasn't well-known or highly regarded, just an obscure, unremarkable piece. But Eva had a strong feeling that this very paper held something Raidou was looking for. She had also compiled a list of other books she suspected he'd find interesting; those would be easier to gather. Yet, for now, her biggest challenge was this overlooked, nameless research paper.

“I have to repay my debt and stay on good terms with him,” she mused. “He and the Kuzunoha Company are my only support now.”

Eva saw Kuzunoha as highly appealing: a remarkably powerful yet independent trading company. They had kept their word, wiping out a parasitic organization entrenched in the academy, even if it had meant dealing with someone as well-regarded as the mild-mannered Bright-sensei. And, perhaps most important to Eva, they’d protected Luria completely. Kuzunoha’s strength was undeniable.

The company was still small, perhaps not yet able to handle significant ventures, but… what about in the future? Eva, the ambitious librarian with dreams of restoring her family’s land, hadn’t given up on those aspirations. She was determined to maintain a positive relationship with Raidou, a powerful and reliable ally with a solid character, a smoothly expanding business, and an eye for skilled talent. His looks, while unconventional, didn’t concern her; people’s faces lost their importance with familiarity, and judging by appearance alone was foolish. If even the Goddess couldn’t touch someone, what value did superficial beauty truly hold? This perspective was one she and Luria had developed over time.

Perhaps those who had been distanced from the Goddess’s favor, or who had lost faith in her, were the same ones who seemed less fixated on appearance, regardless of their race. The cultural shifts brought on by the Goddess’s silence had encouraged diversity in values across this world. And this strange shift in perceptions could work to Raidou’s, or rather Misumi Makoto’s, advantage in the days to come.

Ahead lay Rotsgard’s Academy Foundation Festival and a growing, uneasy atmosphere of impending war. The academy’s summer vacation carried on peacefully, like the calm before the storm. For the three who had arrived from another world, their second autumn here was fast approaching.



It was hell.

Jin could hardly process the reality unfolding before him. He fully understood that he and his classmates were the ones who'd asked Raidou, the temporary lecturer, for special training over the summer. With the upcoming academy festival, he knew this break was their last opportunity to hone their skills. He didn't regret the decision at all.

Now, in their second summer session, they'd finally achieved what had felt impossible: they'd defeated their longtime adversary, the infamous Blue Lizard. Despite being wiped out four times in a row, they managed a narrow victory on their fifth attempt, with two of their team members still standing. A hard-earned win, to be sure.

Those two casualties in their final bout had come from a more aggressive, daring approach, and while their bodies felt like lead from exhaustion, the victory made the fatigue almost pleasant. They were ready, or so they thought, for the next step.

Then, Shiki, Raidou-sensei's assistant, approached the kneeling lizardman and began healing him. Afterward, he turned to Jin, Yuno, Abelia, and Izumo, restoring their energy with a potion and a spell. Their physical fatigue and depleted magic reserves were now almost completely restored, a testament to Shiki's extraordinary healing capabilities. Only their mental exhaustion lingered.

“Well, there’s not much time left,” Shiki said calmly, “so continue your sparring with the Blue Lizard in his second stage until sunset. I’ll check in with the other group.”

Without a single word of congratulations, Shiki moved straight to the next instruction. Jin glanced toward the lizardman, who appeared unchanged, yet Shiki’s words rang ominously in his ears. *Second stage… What does that even mean?*

Then, just as Jin was readying himself, something caught his eye. In an instant, the Blue Lizard moved, already mid swing, his sword slicing upward from below.

Jin’s incomplete stance barely allowed him to intercept the blow, but he hadn’t been prepared for the sheer force behind it. It was faster—much faster than anything before—and shockingly heavy. Normally, he could brace himself against such a strike, but caught off guard, his footing slipped, and the ground seemed to disappear beneath him.

“No… No way! Gah—AAAH!”

He felt himself lift off the ground, his eyes wide in disbelief. Before he could react, the lizardman’s tail struck, sending him hurtling back toward Abelia and Izumo, with a force easily more than double what they’d experienced before.

The power and speed were entirely different. Though the lizardman’s techniques remained the same, the amplified force and swifter strikes sharpened his movements to a near deadly edge. If they couldn’t adapt to these basic changes, their entire strategy would collapse.

“Jin, move! There’s an ice arrow coming your way!” Abelia called out. “Izumo, put up a barrier! Yuno, over here!”

“Got it!”

“OK!”

Abelia barely had a moment to process the shock of Jin being flung toward them. Yet, she knew that freezing up now would leave them wide open. She noted the glow leaking from Blue Lizard’s shielded hand and swiftly gave her orders. They even had a contingency plan for switching command if Jin was too injured to lead. But…

“Wait… something’s off! This isn’t the usual Arrow spell, is it? The magic… it’s spreading through the area… Is this… Karen’s spell?!”

“Karen?! If it’s an ice spell, then… Could it be that?!”

“Everyone, scatter—”

Yuno’s warning went unheeded. In a flash, all four of them were encased in a massive block of ice, frozen solid in place. A single shattering blow would mean the end, but the lizardman didn’t move. He understood this was training, not real combat. Letting a bit of his red tongue slip from his mouth, he planted his dulled, oversized sword into the ground and settled onto a nearby rock, exposing his shimmering blue scales to the sunset. There was an air of satisfaction about it, as though he relished the students’ progress.

Meanwhile…

In the second battle group, Jin’s sword-wielding rival, Mithra, fought alongside Daena, who continued to draw the lizardman’s attention with hit-and-run tactics. Aligned with their frontline positioning, Shifu coordinated her fire magic from a distance, targeting the lizardman without drawing his spell attacks toward her. Their enemy, the Blue Lizard Zwei, relied on heavy, power-based attacks, which fortunately suited Mithra and Daena’s strengths better than the first Blue Lizard.

Though not flawless, the two could deflect and dodge most of Zwei’s attacks. His narrower range of tactics allowed for a steadier front line. While Shifu had to evade spells even stronger than those from the first lizard, the stable front line provided her with the calm she needed to strike back effectively.

Just as Jin’s team had claimed their hard-won victory, Shifu’s group, too, was on the brink of their own.

“All right, I’ve got a clear shot! Shifu, finish this bastard off!” Daena shouted.

That remark, however, was a mistake.

Zwei’s movements halted abruptly. Just for a moment, in that split second, before Shifu could complete her incantation, the lizardman unleashed a perfectly calculated strike aimed at Mithra.

What…? Mithra’s instincts screamed that something was different, his well-honed skills sensing a chilling menace that hadn’t been there before.

“Gah!” Mithra grimaced as a paralyzing jolt of pain shot through his arms, the sheer power of Zwei’s strike causing him to

lose his grip on his sword. The blade clattered to the ground, leaving him defenseless as the lizardman launched another sweeping attack.

“Damn it, not on my watch!” Daena yelled, determined to intervene and keep Mithra from being taken down. He understood that without both of them on the front line, their defense would collapse. His reaction was spot-on. He prepared a series of precise moves: throwing a spare dagger to make the lizardman raise his shield, then targeting his sword arm. It was a solid plan.

Unfortunately, Zwei wasn’t falling for it. The flash of the thrown dagger was effortlessly swatted aside by the lizard’s tail, failing to draw out the shield. Then, before Daena could land his attack, Zwei’s shield came down with brutal speed, completely filling his vision.

“Gahhh!!!” Daena’s light frame and agility, usually his greatest asset, were no match against the crushing shield bash. He was swatted out of the air like an insect, crumpling to the ground with a groan.

Mithra, too, took the full force of the lizardman’s horizontal slash to his chest, sending him flying back several yards, and he tumbled across the dirt in a series of painful bounces. Under normal circumstances, he would’ve been able to break his fall, or at least respond quickly, but now both he and Daena lay motionless, taken down in mere seconds.

“No way!” Shifu gasped in disbelief.

Still, she held out hope—if she could just land her spell, they might scrape through. Yet Zwei dodged her magic with ease and charged toward her. Tears welled in her eyes as the lizardman closed the distance. She had no time to help the others or redirect her magic, and abandoning her attack would mean wasting everything they’d built up. Even faced with unexpected chaos, Shifu had managed to complete her incantation and make a valiant last stand.

If only… not the face, please… She braced herself, using her staff to absorb the impending blow as she prayed.

Her wish was granted, in a sense; she was struck squarely in the chest, her consciousness fading as she slumped to the ground. Their party had been entirely wiped out.

“Fuuuuu…”

The enraged Zwei stood victorious, leaving the unfortunate second team without their hard-earned triumph.

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“Hm. So, Jin and his team managed to defeat the Blue Lizard this time. Well done. Congratulations,” Raidou praised.

“Thank you, sir!” Jin and his group replied in unison, brimming with pride.

The remaining three hung their heads, faces downcast and silent. Their frustration was evident—they’d been outdone, left behind, unable to reach the same heights as their peers. Words escaped them as they stood there, stewing in their disappointment.

“The rest of the time will be spent on review and foundational training,” Raidou directed. *“Shiki, keep an eye on them.”*

“As you wish. The four of you, this way,” Shiki said, gesturing for the victors to follow him. Raidou, or rather Makoto, watched them walk off for a moment before turning back to the three somber students.

“Now, as for you three, I apologize. I realize the sudden strength spike in your opponent during the latter half must’ve thrown you off; that was my oversight,” he wrote, bowing his head in a gesture of genuine apology.

The three looked up, startled. The sight of Raidou bowing took them by surprise, momentarily breaking through their gloom.

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize, really,” Shifu replied, her curiosity winning over her frustration. “But could you explain why the lizardman suddenly became so strong?”

“I’d like to know, too,” Mithra chimed in. “Why wasn’t it that strong from the start?”

“Wait… Were we just being toyed with?” Daena asked, brows furrowed in frustration.

Raidou took a deep breath, seeming to weigh his words before he answered, his gaze serious.

“I hadn’t planned to discuss this yet, but since it affected you so much, I think it’s only fair to explain. Consider it part of my apology. I’ll leave it to you to decide whether to share this with Jin’s group. The truth is, these Blue Lizards you’ve been sparring with are, at full power, stronger than most Lesser Dragons.”

“Wha—?!”

“I’ve weakened them repeatedly to match your skill levels and given them intentionally worn-out equipment,” Raidou explained. *“The two you fought today weren’t even using a tenth of their true strength.”*

“A… A tenth?!” Shifu stammered.

“Then… Was that final attack their real strength?” Mithra asked, wide-eyed.

Ignoring the students’ shocked expressions, Raidou continued his explanation. Over in the distance, Shiki was likely filling Jin and his group in on the concept of the second stage in simpler terms. For Shifu, Mithra, and Daena, however, this revelation was entirely unexpected.

“No, that wasn’t their full strength either,” Raidou replied, shaking his head. *“The second stage you encountered today was prepared specifically because I thought you might actually defeat the first stage.”*

“Wait… so that wasn’t even their full power,” Shifu muttered. “But then… why did you unleash the second stage before we’d even beaten the first?”

“That was my error, and I apologize deeply,” Raidou wrote with a bow. *“Zwei, come here.”*

At Raidou’s call, the smaller of the two lizardmen trotted over, stopping before him and lowering his head respectfully. There was an almost regal grace in the gesture, one that held the students’ gaze.

“The truth is…” Raidou wrote, turning back to the three with a solemn expression, *“Calling this one ‘Blue Lizard Zwei’ was misleading on my part. You see, Zwei here… well, she’s female.”*

“What?” they gasped in unison.

“So, it seems calling her things like ‘bastard’ or ‘brute’ struck a nerve,” Raidou continued, rubbing the back of his neck. *“From now on, please call her ‘Zwei-san.’ I didn’t mean to offend her, and I apologize for the lack of sensitivity on my part.”*

An awkward silence settled over them.

“Anyway, don’t let this discourage you from challenging her again sometime,” Raidou encouraged, about to wrap up, when Shifu suddenly cut in.

“Raidou-sensei,” she said firmly, surprising him.

“Yes, Shifu?”

“There’s still time left. Please let us challenge Zwei-san again.”

“But it’s already quite late… If you start now, it’ll end up being very late—”

“Please!” all three of them chorused, their voices carrying an unexpected force.

Raidou glanced instinctively at the lizardwoman. She looked back at him, nodding with what might have been a gentle, encouraging smile—a bit of femininity he realized he might’ve overlooked.

Guess I’ll end up joining these three late at Ironclad, he thought, resigned. *It’s going to be all sweet scents and chatter by the time we get there. But since I started this whole mess by misjudging Zwei, I suppose I owe them.*

The night was beginning to settle in earnest, shadows thickening as Raidou contacted Shiki, asking him to take the other four students ahead to Ironclad, while he stayed to oversee this unexpected rematch.

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“Sensei, thank you for the meal! We’ll be visiting the library again, so please continue to guide us!”

“Thank you so much!”

“Take care on your way back,” Raidou replied.

“Make sure to head straight back, everyone,” Shiki added.

The students bowed politely, an unusual sight in a city where the student body usually held sway. But tonight, they made an exception for Raidou, their instructor. With a final nod, the seven disappeared together down the night streets, heading back to their dorms.

Since all the dorms were in the same direction, Raidou let down his guard but set a minimal field around them as a precaution, allowing him to relax with a faint sense of protectiveness that reminded him of looking out for his junior teammates back in his club days. Maybe it was a bit overprotective, but he couldn’t help seeing a little of them in his students.

“Well then, let’s head back too, Shiki.”

“Yes, Young Master. Lime and the others are at the Merchant Guild’s dinner tonight, along with some neighboring shop employees, so their return time is uncertain. Shall we head straight to the Demiplane?”

Raidou paused, considering Shiki’s proposal instead of immediately agreeing. The truth was, ever since Eva had given him a particular academic paper, his training had become more focused and enjoyable, and with that new motivation, he found himself savoring each session. Usually, he’d have agreed to head to the Demiplane right away, and Shiki had assumed he would do just that. But Raidou’s hesitation caught him off guard.

“You know… No, tonight, let’s head back to the shop. Oh, Shiki, by the way—did you say anything specific to Jin and the others before I joined up with them?”

“Uh!” Shiki’s reaction was unmistakable, even without an answer. Raidou didn’t need one to realize that Shiki had indeed shared some words of advice with the students.

“They looked ready for anything, that’s for sure. Especially Jin. He even mentioned visiting the library again, but I’m guessing he’s planning to head somewhere else. It’s odd to hear that kind of comment from him; he’s usually more direct. So, what did you tell them?”

Shiki hesitated briefly before responding. “They were, well, quite disheartened after facing the misty lizardfolks’ second

stage. I might have given a bit of unsolicited advice. Since they seem to have enough resources for a teleportation spell, I suggested they focus on leveling up. In fact, Rotsgard's students are generally encouraged to increase their levels. But since attending your class, they haven't had many opportunities to gain levels."

"True," Raidou agreed with a wry smile. "I didn't include dungeon crawling or field work in the curriculum. To level up, they'd need to face monsters. Looks like they've fallen behind on leveling while focusing so hard on my lessons."

Raidou chuckled, realizing that his method—prioritizing skill over level—might have set his students on a different path than the academy's typical approach. Rotsgard students were required to register with the Adventurer's Guild, though most did so on their own for the convenience. Recently, he'd discovered that his students were given Guild Cards for quick access and communication, something he hadn't initially noticed since he'd only skimmed the student handbooks.

"With the boost from the Demiplane's resources, their abilities have grown, but leveling up would add another layer to their skill set," Shiki noted.

Raidou glanced over at Shiki with a knowing look. "But I get the feeling you're aiming to help them build confidence more than raw strength, right? I'm sure they'll be surprised by their own abilities when they take on monsters somewhere new."

"You've seen through it, as always, Young Master," Shiki replied, impressed.

Raidou shrugged, smiling faintly. "It's only because I recognize the signs. They're on a path I've walked myself, after all."

"In my estimation, they could all probably reach around Level 70 if they put in a solid three days of work, but that might be overly optimistic."

"No, that sounds reasonable. They'll probably want another go at the misty lizardfolk if they feel a boost in their levels. Especially since it's the last training session the sisters will be able to attend. By the way, Shiki, I can't help but notice that you're starting to act a bit like Tomoe."

“She’s been providing me with materials to study your world. It’s all rather fascinating.”

Raidou laughed, amused by the thought of his students and their earnest dedication. Predicting the movements of others was still a challenge in broader society, but when it came to his students, he had a good sense of their motivations and attitudes—perhaps drawn from his own memories of club activities and personal training.

“They should be ready for the location I recommended. Tomorrow, we’ll finally be free to go our separate ways for a bit.” Shiki’s tone was bright, reflecting the sense of relief he felt in parting from his recent student-chaperone duties.

“Just in case something goes awry, though… maybe we could send Eris to watch over them. I’m sure she’d be thrilled, especially if we throw in a little bonus for her.”

“As you wish.”

Always looking out for them first, Shiki thought to himself, recognizing the same fondness and protective streak in his lord. But rather than voice his thought, he simply nodded in agreement.

Abelia

It was too easy. Far too free of obstacles.

An overwhelming sense of omnipotence, the kind I used to feel in the village where I was born and raised, coursed through me. They had called me a prodigy. Whether it was with a sword, a bow, magic, or even bare-handed combat—no one in the village could beat me. After I obtained my Guild Card and started leveling up, I went hunting nearly every day. Soon enough, even people from neighboring villages had no hope of defeating me.

This thrill of being able to do anything is unstoppable.

Until I was invited here to Rotsgard as a scholarship student, I had always been the best. That confidence, however, was quickly shattered once I arrived. There was always someone stronger out there. In reality, I was just a slightly gifted student with potential, nothing more.

What I meant to say was that it had been a long time since I had last felt this thrill.

At present, our party—a seven-member group—had come to a forest some distance from Rotsgard to level up. Normally, it would have been unthinkable to neglect leveling up, but ever since I started taking Raidou-sensei's lectures, my level had barely increased. I was certain it was the same for Jin, who led us and determined our basic strategies, as well as for the Rembrandt sisters, who had recently joined us in attending the lectures. Raidou-sensei's lectures didn't include level-up training, and honestly, pushing past the mid-forties in level had become increasingly tough.

The main reason, I thought, was Raidou-sensei himself. His classes were a strange sort, the kind that somehow made you stronger without needing to level up. Not that I'd ever admit it out loud. Grueling to the point of absurdity, yes, but it was clear that I was stronger now than I had been a few months ago.

He taught us to consider the purpose behind each attack and defense, to develop a habit of analyzing. During both class and the "fun lecture" with the Blue Lizard, I hadn't fully understood his words or his guidance. But now, here in the middle of a hunt, it was all beginning to make sense.

The monsters' movements seemed so sluggish. While we were carefully planning each move, coordinating with each other, the monsters barely reacted at all. It was a terrifyingly relaxed battle. And it wasn't as if our speed had drastically improved.

This was the first time I had experienced something like this.

Even when an enemy suddenly veered off course, we had already anticipated such a move and handled it smoothly. If we had been up against other hyumans or demi-humans, it might have been a different story. But these were the very same monsters we used to struggle to surround and take down—now they hardly felt like a challenge, all thanks to Raidou-sensei's training.

I was sure everyone else felt this unease too. With a mix of bewilderment, we cut through the monsters at an unbelievable pace, ending our leveling session for the day with barely a scratch.

“This… This is incredible,” Izumo murmured, leaning back at the base we had set up to spend the night.

Izumo, usually a reserved wind user, spoke with uncharacteristic excitement, barely able to contain himself. Then again, calling him a mere wind user might not be accurate anymore—he could now wield three different elemental attributes at a battle-ready level.

Everyone, myself included, nodded at Izumo’s words. Our levels, which had been tough to increase, had risen by eight in a single day. And oddly enough, there was no misalignment between our newfound strength and our awareness of it, something that often happened with rapid level-ups. We could wield the power we gained as if it had always been ours. *It’s strange.*

“This must be the result of Raidou-sensei and Shiki-san’s lessons,” Mithra remarked.

Mithra usually took on the role of intercepting attacks or blocking them—a position that often left him with plenty of bruises and injuries. After a full day of level-up training, he would typically be battered and too worn out to even speak. Yet today, he didn’t bear a single serious wound. It wasn’t that he hadn’t taken any hits, but the medicine Shiki-san had given him healed his injuries almost instantly.

While Mithra and Shifu could have provided sufficient recovery with their own techniques, sparing their mana for healing meant they could focus it more on offense, making it far easier to defeat the monsters. *It’s like a completely different world.*

Yes, Shiki-san. He’s truly amazing. He’s guiding us to the next level. Without him, we’d probably have been left broken by Raidou-sensei’s lessons. I consider myself pretty determined, but that teacher has a knack for hitting you with comments that are almost impossible to recover from. I heard he’s about the same age as us, but who knows if that’s true? It’s Shiki-san who manages to keep Raidou-sensei’s intense training within the limits of what I can endure.

To be honest, I really like Shiki-san. He’s my ideal type. Kind and understanding, with a gentle strength. And that serene smile fits his beautiful features perfectly. He’s effortlessly knowledgeable without a hint of arrogance. According to Raidou-sensei,

admiration can easily cloud judgment, but negative people shouldn't undermine it with unnecessary criticism. Besides, whatever fixation Raidou-sensei has on the Rembrandt sisters is far more… Anyway, I'll let that go.

I wondered if Shiki-san was married. At the very least, there was no way he didn't have someone special. I wouldn't have minded being his second or even third choice… Though at this time, I admired him so much that I couldn't imagine standing by his side.

"Thinking through our fights really changes everything," one of the others said.

"It felt like I'd gotten so much faster!"

"Diving in headfirst always earned me a harsh scolding from Blue Lizard."

"Definitely!"

As the night progressed, it was hard to calm my excited mind enough to actually get some rest.

The battles on the following day went without any issues. We had moved deeper into the forest, farther than we'd ever been, and even when we encountered monsters we'd never fought before, we handled them smoothly. Having two skilled mages who could handle almost every elemental type was likely one of the reasons. For now, I could only use magic with modest power, not quite enough to call it offensive firepower, but I was determined to work on it seriously once we returned to the academy. Broadening your tactical options—that was another piece of advice from Raidou-sensei, and I hadn't realized how much it would improve our advantage in battle. I could imagine that Izumo and Shifu were thinking the exact same thing.

I'd initially been hesitant to connect as friends with Shifu, given the notorious reputation surrounding the Rembrandt family. But we'd worked together seamlessly in situations where we'd had to trust each other with our lives, not to mention the few times we'd gone out for meals or talked, like last night. Now, at least from my side, I didn't feel much of a barrier between us. The same went for Yuno. I didn't know what the Rembrandt sisters might have been like in the past, but now they were reliable party members.

“Hm?” I murmured, squinting at the trees. Had I just seen a small, brown-skinned figure perched on that branch? *Maybe it’s just my imagination.*

“Abelia, what’s up?” Jin’s voice broke through my thoughts, his eyes steady and attentive as he glanced my way. He always noticed the smallest reactions, especially out here.

Jin himself seemed to be changing; he’d been known for charging in recklessly, dealing with enemies before they even had the chance to react. Now, he moved with a calm awareness, staying attuned to the entire battlefield even as he led the vanguard. Reaching that stance so naturally, without overthinking, showed a natural talent that made me quietly envious.

It’s frustrating, but he’s a scholarship student for a reason. I still haven’t fully developed that level of awareness. That’s something for me to work on.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied, shrugging. “I thought I saw the branches moving strangely, but it doesn’t seem to be an issue.”

Jin nodded, his gaze shifting to the path ahead. “Got it. Looks like we’ll make it to the lakeshore by the end of the day. Let’s set up camp there tonight,” he said, his tone steady as he planned out our evening.

We all agreed with Jin’s plan. Deep in the forest, there lay a small lake. The water there fetched a high price due to its unique quality. The location was deep within a monster-infested forest, and transporting the water itself was a hassle, especially with containers taking up so much space. The lake area was also rumored to have rare medicinal herbs, which could be easier to sell if we decided to go that route.

“Oh, that’s right!” I said suddenly, a thought sparking in my mind. I turned to Jin with a slight grin. “Hey, Jin. Since we’ve come all this way, why don’t we gather some of those lakeshore herbs as souvenirs for Sensei and Shiki-san?”

Not a bad idea, if I say so myself. Since we’d made it this far, it only seemed right to bring back something to thank those who’d helped us.

“Good call! Water’s a hassle, so let’s just bring back some herbs,” Daena agreed with a nod. His unnecessary movements had greatly decreased, allowing him to overcome his old flaw of

running out of stamina before evening. Now he moved lightly and effortlessly across the battlefield, his energy boundless. That grueling “fun lecture” had improved our skills, adding real strength to our abilities. It wasn’t just torture, after all.

I’m so glad we put our trust in Shiki-san!

“All right, let’s keep moving! I leveled up a lot, so I’m overflowing with power!” Yuno exclaimed, her voice brimming with excitement as she ran alongside Jin, her spear at the ready. Through the training, she had developed a style of switching between spear and bow during battle—a surprising level of skill for a noble merchant family’s daughter. Daena and Mithra followed a little behind, while I brought up the rear, ensuring a path for Izumo and Shifu.

Even though my endurance had improved since starting Raidou-sensei’s classes, sprinting through a forest was still a tall order for a mage. *Maybe someday it’ll be possible, but for now, sticking to easier paths to keep up with the party is the best I can manage.* Still, considering how quickly we were moving, everyone was doing remarkably well.

With a little smile at the enthusiasm of our vanguard, I finally arrived at the lakeshore where the others were waiting ahead of me.

—And there it was. A dragon.

It wasn’t a joke. There was an actual dragon at the lake.

This must have been the one using the lake as its watering hole. We hadn’t been told anything about a dragon being here.

Oh no. My calmness began to evaporate, leaving me with only mounting anxiety. *No, stop. Don’t panic. Think. Form a plan. Attack or defend? Or flee? My first priority should be assessing my own options. Stay calm, stay calm…*

Ahead of us, at a fair distance, was a crescent-shaped lake. We stood at the bottom curve, while the dragon was closer to the middle, where the land jutted out into the water. It had been drinking but now stopped—and stared directly at us.

Its body was half-upright, almost like a lizard, yet unmistakably not one. A single sharp horn jutted straight out from its forehead. Its skin was gray, covered in scales, and it was around twelve or fifteen feet long.

“J-Jin…” Mithra’s voice came out hoarse. I understood how he felt. But he’d made it this far almost entirely unscathed, so I trusted he was thinking things through.

“Abelia, got any intel on that thing?” Jin asked, slowly drawing his sword, preparing for combat. He had likely judged that avoiding a fight entirely was no longer an option. I nodded solemnly in response to his question.

Right now, my greatest asset in this party might just be my knowledge.

“Yes, it’s a type of low-ranking Lesser Dragon,” I said, thinking back to what I’d learned. “I can’t remember the exact name, but I do recall that it’s solitary and vulnerable to ice. Ideally, it should be dealt with from a distance, using concentrated attacks. For combat, a party of at least ten with levels above ninety is considered the safe minimum.”

“What’s our current level?” Jin asked, glancing around.

“I’m at seventy-five,” Jin added.

“Same here,” I replied.

“I’m seventy-four,” said Daena.

“Same here, seventy-four,” Shifu confirmed.

“I’m seventy-seven,” Yuno chimed in.

“Seventy-seven as well,” Mithra said.

“I’m seventy-three,” Izumo added, looking uneasy.

Our number and levels were far from enough. In other words, escaping was our best option. However, the unfortunate reality was that we’d already been locked onto as the dragon’s prey. If we had spotted it before it noticed us, fleeing might have been realistic. Worse, its weakness was ice, but wind would have been ideal, followed by fire or earth. If we could unleash powerful magic, we might still stand a chance.

“I’ll cover the rear,” Jin said firmly, his gaze unwavering. “Izumo, use wind support to boost everyone’s movement speed, even if just a bit.”

Jin’s words urged us to flee. It was the correct decision, perhaps… but that would mean leaving Jin…

“GYYEAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

My thoughts cut off.

The dragon, which had been slowly turning to face us, opened its mouth, and in that instant, an earsplitting roar tore

through the air. The sheer volume erased all distance, as if it had been bellowed directly into my ear. More than a sound, it felt like a shock wave slamming into my entire body.

An intimidating roar! Nearly every type of dragon uses this paralyzing cry to lock down their prey. Of course—how could I forget about this? I hadn't recalled such crucial information at this critical moment!

Regret bubbled up, flooding my mind, but my body wouldn't respond at all. I was completely frozen. It was the first time I'd been struck by this roar, and the effect was staggering.

The dragon surged forward on two legs, covering the ground with shocking speed given its size. The terror of its bellow still held me captive. In fact, as the ground trembled beneath its massive form, I felt the vibrations reinforce my paralysis, locking me in place even tighter.

Even if it was extremely low ranked, this was clearly not an opponent we could handle! *Someone—anyone—if you can move, run!*

I scanned our party with what little movement my paralyzed body allowed, but everyone was trembling, their faces twisted with strain. *Jin, isn't this the moment you're supposed to let out a battle cry and inspire us all to move?! Are we just going to stand here and wait to be eaten?!*

My frustrated thoughts went unanswered as the dragon rapidly closed the distance. One brief lapse. Just a single moment of carelessness. *To end like this…?!*

"—Obu—Zeiruno—Juna."

Chanting?

Where? Above?! In the tree branches?!

There, sitting casually on a branch, was a small figure in an unfamiliar white hood, holding some kind of yellow fruit. *Are they… eating?*

There's a dragon here, and they're eating? My mind spiraled into confusion. I tried to recall Raidou-sensei's teachings, but my thoughts refused to settle. Frustrating as it was, remaining calm in any situation was still beyond me.

That's an odd hood, I thought, catching sight of the decorations on the hood. *Are those… cat ears?*

The absurdity of my own thoughts struck me just before countless tendrils erupted from the forest, surging toward the lake—no, toward the dragon. Caught off guard, the dragon hesitated for a split second, but before it could react, the tendrils wrapped around its entire body, immobilizing it.

Are those summoned tendrils? No, they look like… trees? It was as if the branches and roots of the trees had twisted and grown, ensnaring the dragon. Vines and even grass joined in the binding. Upon closer inspection, I noticed the tendrils were not only brown but also dark green. I had never seen or heard of magic like this before.

My voice wouldn't come out. Was this also an effect of the dragon's roar? The thought of being unable to chant spells was terrifying. If all dragons could do this, it sent a chill down my spine.

Thump.

A light sound echoed as the figure who had seemingly saved us landed between Izumo and Shifu. How could they have jumped down so easily from that height? Were they a demi-human, perhaps?

The figure's face was mostly hidden by the deep hood, showing only glimpses of tanned skin. *And they're definitely small.*

The small person patted Izumo's stomach and shook their head. "Bean sprout. Too skinny to save."

"?!" Izumo's eyes widened, stunned by the words.

Then, shockingly, the figure reached out and grabbed Shifu's ample chest with both hands. *Oh my.*

"Hmph. The era of big boobs won't last forever," the figure said, their tone dismissive.

"?!#$!&?" Shifu's expression turned to utter panic. As someone with a more modest chest, I couldn't help but feel a slight sense of satisfaction at the figure's audacity.

Wait, what am I even thinking right now?



So, is it my turn next?

It seemed my assumption was correct, as the small, childlike figure adorably tottered over to me, only to stop and kick me in the shin.

"Not short at all!" the kid declared with a huff.

"Ow!" I gasped. *That hurt! And how do you know what I was thinking?!*

Without pausing, the child moved on, offering words to each person in the group as they made their way toward the dragon.

For Yuno, after glance of comparison between her and Shifu, the child simply said, "Keep at it."

To Daena, the child remarked, "Stay strong, Pik●min."[1]

Mithra received: "The path of constant hits is for masochists, kid. You still have time to turn back."

When the child reached Jin, they muttered, "Last time, you gave me the wrong change," and stuffed a handful of coins into his shirt pocket.

What does any of this mean?

"Well then, that should do it. Remember, a field trip isn't over until you get back," the child said, turning back to us with a cheerful grin. They raised the hand not holding the fruit and pointed a finger at us, as if delivering some sage wisdom.

"And by the way, bananas don't count as snacks. I've still got two left. Ufufu."

I had no idea what they were talking about, but somehow, the tension was fading.

Meanwhile, the dragon was thrashing, its two legs struggling in a futile attempt to free itself from the countless tendrils binding it. I couldn't tell how many trees were part of the restraint, but it had to be a powerful spell to keep such a massive creature locked down.

Could this kid really be the caster?

As if struck by an idea, the cat-ear-hooded figure tossed the peel of the yellow fruit they'd finished eating right in front of the dragon's feet.

Predictably, the peel was mercilessly crushed underfoot. The kid stomped the ground, visibly disappointed. *Wait, what? What was even the point of that?*

Unable to speak, I had never felt more frustrated. *If only I could say one thing— Just one quick comment!*

"We have spoken!" the child announced, pointing dramatically at the dragon's upper body. They seemed to have momentarily set aside their disappointment. Their other hand rested confidently on their hip as they struck a triumphant pose. Whether it was because of their power or sheer bravado, they had a kind of ease facing down a dragon that left me envious.

Ah, I want to be that strong someday.

"Angering Princess Komoe by the water's edge is dangerous," the child said, their tone calm.

Princess Komoe? Is this person serving someone from some royal family?

"Because, well, this is what happens— Fake," they added with a mischievous smile.

At some point, a magic circle had appeared at the feet of the hooded figure. In their hand was a short, slender wand twirling between their fingers.

Is that their casting tool? It's small, like a writing utensil, and doesn't look especially powerful…

The magic circle began to replicate across the lake's surface. Countless identical circles floated above the water, glowing faintly as they expanded. And then—

The dragon was thrown toward the lake. The tendrils binding it released, leaving the creature suspended midair, right above the glimmering lake, surrounded by the countless magical circles. It opened its mouth wide, as though preparing to roar once again.

Which will come first, I wondered, my mind racing to keep up, *its plunge into the lake or a second roar?* But neither happened.

Instead, from every circle, icy lances erupted in unison, skewering the dragon midair. The surreal sight was almost absurd.

"Too bad," the child said, a faint smile tugging at their lips. "The real challenge of camping begins once you dodge all that. Better luck next time, lizard."

The child's tone remained indifferent, their words still a mystery. The dragon's form disintegrated into dust. Before we

knew it, the child in the white cat-eared hood had vanished as well.

The atmosphere around us took on a strange, almost playful tone, as though the whole scene had been some bizarre joke.

This summer is going to be unforgettable. I was still unable to move but now utterly certain of it.



Our poetic saying about clear autumn weather certainly applied in this world too; the skies were crisp and soared above us.

The sky felt as high as it had during autumns back in Japan. Maybe I was feeling nostalgic, because I'd been here almost a year now. And being back at a school probably intensified that feeling. *Even though my role is different now, being in school again makes it all the more familiar.*

Rotsgard didn't resume regular classes right after the month-and-a-bit of summer break. Technically, the academy had reopened, and more students returned by the day, but with the school's founding festival coming up, standard classes were on hold.

A festival in the autumn? It's not like the academy is celebrating the harvest or anything, but if the academy was founded in the autumn, I guess that makes sense.

After a month off, students got another almost-month of "preparation," which was practically an extended break. Students tasked with festival preparation stayed busy, but for those attending my lectures, it meant more downtime. I had reluctantly held classes over the summer break, but when they asked me to do the same during the preparation period, I turned them down. I had a few things of my own I wanted to do, after all.

The Rotsgard Academy Foundation Festival was quite different from the autumn cultural festivals I was used to back home. It lasted a full week, with a wide variety of events. Only a

select few students were chosen to put it on, handpicked from each class and grade, with the highest honors going to the top graduate-year students and their assistants. Just being chosen to help out was considered an honor. The first half of the week was dedicated to presentations and demonstrations of various studies, while the second half featured practical skill competitions.

People traveled from far and wide for the event, filling up every inn in town and those in surrounding cities. Temporary lodgings were even set up on the outskirts of town to accommodate the crowd… which was overwhelming considering it was just a school festival. Or maybe it was me who was out of touch. After all, lots of dignitaries were invited, including a fair number from countries at war on the front lines, like the Kingdom of Limia and the Gritonia Empire. They came not only to evaluate the next generation of talent but also to engage in diplomatic talks that would affect future alliances.

I guess this really is the pinnacle of higher education for hyumans.

Jin and Abelia were fired up as well. They weren't in their final year or close to graduating. They'd be back at the academy next year, so this wasn't their last academy festival. Still, they seemed dedicated to training daily in preparation for their competitions. When I heard this was also a major opportunity for scouting and early recruitment, I felt a mix of emotions.

The students in their final year must be approaching it with real determination. Back in high school, I hardly thought about employment in concrete terms—it's an experience I can't quite relate to.

"Raidou-sama, regarding the inventory of goods for the academy festival period…"

I looked up from the Merchant Guild documents I'd been reviewing while glancing out the window. It was Shiki. As always, his frame was slim. Over the summer, he had spent a considerable amount of time in the Demiplane, which meant enjoying a more lavish diet than usual. Despite maintaining my training regimen, I'd ended up putting on weight during that time. But Shiki? Not a single change.

I mean, if that's a Contract perk, I'd like to get in on it too. He eats those overly sweet hotpots that probably exceed three thousand calories per meal, and he's even experimenting with dishes involving mayonnaise. No matter how you look at it, his diet is far more excessive than mine. It's just not fair.

I guess muscle weighed more than fat. I resigned myself to that with a hint of self-pity.

"Hey, Makoto-kun. About the academy festival—I'll make sure to avoid any bothersome spots, but why don't we go check out a few things together?"

It was Luto, a young man with silver hair. *Actually… is he a young man?* He looked about my age, but even I wasn't entirely sure if "young man" or "boy" fit me better. *Let's just go with "young man" for now.* In any case, he was actually a dragon, like Tomoe—and supposedly the most powerful one.

He was also the head and founder of the Adventurer's Guild, one of this world's many mysteries. To put it briefly, he was a genius and a pervert. I'd first met him before summer break, when he told me all sorts of shocking things. Since then, he'd been visiting the guild and constantly inviting me to meals. However, I still hadn't let him into the Demiplane.

I just don't fully trust him. And judging by the fact that neither Tomoe nor Shiki have taken him there either, it's probably not just me. I've told my three followers they're welcome to bring anyone they deem trustworthy to the Demiplane, though.

We had finished most of the critical tasks: enhancements to prevent interference with telepathy, countermeasures against the Goddess's forced summons—pretty much all the urgent issues were covered. Both Tomoe and Mio had been diligently strengthening themselves, and Shiki's progress had been especially impressive.

Maybe that's why I'm feeling a little more confident these days.

Incidentally, when I showed them the results of my training at the end of the break, they all stared at me like I'd grown another head. I hadn't done anything that strange… Their reactions were definitely exaggerated.

"We'll finalize the guild inventory once tonight's restock list arrives," I replied to Shiki, keeping my tone calm. "For now, spread out the items a bit to make the shelves look fuller." Then,

turning to Luto, I added, “Luto, I’ll go along with you if it’s an event where walking around with a celebrity like you won’t cause a scene. So please don’t show up every day. As you can see, I’m busy.”

“All right, we’ll proceed as you wish,” Shiki replied. “Also, regarding the training of the new recruits, would it be all right if I consult with Beren to increase the number of trainees? There are quite a few applicants, and we’re having trouble narrowing it down to the original plan.”

Luto seemed to nod in agreement, flashing a smile before settling onto the sofa with a book. I thought I’d told him to leave… but Luto never seemed to take a hint.

When I’d tried asking about my parents or about Kaleneon, he’d given some nonsensical answer about “building a bathhouse at the time.” After pressing him further, he admitted to knowing about my parents but only vaguely. He knew a little about them leaving that country, and apparently, that was around the time their relationship with the Goddess became more complicated. In the end, he suggested that if I needed more details, he’d tell me “as a bedtime story.” That’s when I showed him the door. Yet somehow, he still hadn’t given up, and honestly, that was a little terrifying.

One time, he showed up as a woman, looking breathtakingly beautiful. She appeared to be in her twenties, but there was a certain charm about her that I found unsettlingly alluring.

Does that mean I actually like older women? Maybe that’s why Tomoe and Mio have the appearances they do… I’d always thought I didn’t have much of an age preference, but now I am not so sure.

“Oh, right. Sure, I’ll leave it to you,” I said to Shiki. “Will some of them be able to start before things get busy around here?”

“Yes, likely a few of them will be ready. However, being demi-humans, they need to master the common language before progressing, so it’s hard to give a precise number just yet,” Shiki explained.

The common language. I’d given up on learning it due to the tricky pronunciation. *If I ever come face-to-face with the Goddess, maybe I’ll negotiate for it. I’d rather just talk normally with people.*

Luto, listening, suddenly chimed in. “Oh, so you’re bringing on more people? Hiring more demi-humans, huh? Makoto-kun,

you're awfully kind to them. Or… is it just that you dislike hyumans?"

"Luto," I replied, flatly. "I don't play favorites based on race. Let me be clear. Go. Home. Now."

"Oh dear, am I truly in the way? Guess I'll have to do some work for the guild then," Luto said with an exaggerated sigh, finally getting up.

If you have work, go do it quietly! The guild members are probably struggling without their master around. It's not like he has just a bit of work to do either.

I sighed, exasperated, as I watched the guild master's back disappear. Here I was doing my best as a merchant; a genius like him should be pulling his weight too. I'd only recently started getting the hang of things, and I was still leagues behind Shiki, so there was plenty to work on. My knowledge of goods, while not as refined as the forest ogre sisters', was also on my to-do list.

"No matter how many times we tell him, that man insists on calling you Makoto-sama instead of Raidou-sama," Shiki remarked, shaking his head.

"It's intentional," I replied dryly. "If someone else is around, he calls me Raidou-dono. Responding only makes him enjoy it more."

"I've come to understand that," Shiki said thoughtfully. "As much as I'd like to learn from him, Luto isn't exactly friendly to anyone but you, Raidou-sama. It's his one flaw."

Out of my followers, Shiki seemed to respect Luto the most—probably because of his vast knowledge. He even tolerated Luto's random interruptions while we were busy preparing for the academy festival, so that was saying something.

"Well then," I replied, glancing out the window. "Even if we try to plan things out in advance, it looks like we'll have to rely on makeshift solutions anyway. How about heading over to Ironclad, Shiki?"

"Ironclad? Ah, you mean the temporary lodgings on the outskirts. Earth-element users are probably making a fortune building out there this month."

In this world, they leveled the land and set up camp-style lodgings, building structures to serve as temporary inns with magic. Once the festival was over, they'd clear out the essential

furniture and items and return the buildings back to the earth. Pretty convenient. You needed earth-aligned mages with a certain level of skill, but in this town, that wasn't hard to find.

"Right? You'd think Shifu Rembrandt would be making some extra cash there," I mused.

With her blessing from an earth spirit, Shifu could efficiently construct temporary inns and earn a decent income. I'd sent her home for the latter half of summer break, but she'd gained quite a bit of skill before that, so that should be well within her abilities. She'd started out purely attack-focused, wielding both earth and fire, but now, she was getting the hang of some support magic too. Even her minimal healing skills were shaping up into something usable.

Yet, despite that, she and Jin kept tagging along with the others to pester me daily for more lessons. They probably saw this as an extended vacation, but for me, it was the critical prep time before the festival, when the shop got busy. I kept turning them down, but it was like they wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Ah, I see," Shiki murmured in realization. "It's just about time for Jin and the others to show up here. So, you're suggesting Ironclad for lunch—and for a bit of a retreat, I assume? I'll gladly join you."

"Thanks for understanding," I replied with a smile. "Let's just give Eris a quick reminder not to get too carried away, then head out."

When Jin and his group got reckless over the break, I had Eris tail them as a precaution, which proved to be a smart move. Later, when they discovered her identity, she became a figure of awe and respect to them. Even after finding out that she was a demi-human, their attitude didn't change much. Ignoring Aqua's reprimands, Eris had let their admiration go to her head. I sent her back to the Demiplane for a week, which helped tone down her ego a bit, but still—it was Eris.

It's probably best to keep her in check.

Jin even asked me, with a serious expression, what level he'd need to be to qualify for a job at the Kuzunoha Company. Nothing good ever came of these conversations. Honestly, whether you were Level 1 or 100, the pay didn't change.

Maybe it's time I start taking salaries more seriously, I thought. *I'm beginning to understand how other companies operate, so maybe after the festival, I'll sit down and work out the details. For now, I'll give them a bonus to show some appreciation during this busy time. They'd probably prefer goods over money, anyway. The residents of the Demiplane always seem to be happier with that.*

Speaking of Ironclad, lately, Eva-san had been stopping by there often after finishing her work at the academy. Ever since the incident, we've been seeing each other more frequently. Even before Shiki and I became regulars, the place had a steady stream of customers, but now, with our suggestions for the menu, it seemed to be thriving even more.

It makes me happy, even if it's none of my business.

Mostly, I'd just suggested ingredients and seasonings similar to the ones I used to eat back home, trying to keep the place from going overboard with sweets. Shiki, meanwhile, had been passionately pitching ideas for hot pot dishes.

The kombu-dashi tofu hot pot didn't catch on, and I was probably the only one who ordered it, so it ended up a bit of a failure. Still, the owner of Ironclad kept it on the menu just for me, which I really appreciated.

Heading downstairs, I gave Eris a gentle reminder to keep her attitude in check. She jumped like a startled cat and nodded eagerly.

"I'll do my best. Really, really do my best!" she exclaimed, practically bouncing with enthusiasm.

"I know you've been doing a great job. Just make sure you treat the students like proper customers, okay? We'll be heading out for a while," I wrote.

"Have a safe trip!" Her voice joined the quiet chuckles of the other shop staff as Shiki and I gave a nod and slipped out the back door.

It was still a bit early for dusk, but when I glanced up at the sky, I could already feel the approach of night.

"Like a trapdoor dropping under you," I murmured, letting out a small laugh. "Today's been bringing back memories of the other world."

"Raidou-sama?" Shiki asked, looking at me with concern.

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s go,” I replied with a smile, hoping to reassure him.

Did I look sad for a moment there?

The academy festival was about a week away. I’d probably be seeing the biggest crowds since my arrival in this world, with people coming in from all sorts of nations.

I’ll focus on what I want to do, I reminded myself. Maybe it was thanks to the strength I’d gained over the break, but I felt a bit more confident now. The thought of so many people pouring into town didn’t overwhelm me like it might have before.

Even if I were thrown onto a battlefield right now, I think I’d handle it better than before. I’d gotten stronger, or at least I felt that way, and that made things a lot easier.

According to Tomoe and the others, though, I still lacked both self-awareness and confidence. *Maybe they have a point.*

As we stepped onto the main street, the bustling noise of the town grew louder. Everyone seemed excited for the festival, laughter and chatter filling the air. With a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation for what lay ahead, I started walking toward Ironclad.



“From the temple?”

The academy city was becoming livelier by the day as the grand event known as the Academy Festival drew near. Initially, I had assumed it was just a large-scale cultural festival, but it was beginning to seem like something of a whole different magnitude.

When you considered that the entire city transformed into one big celebration, it was bound to be an event far larger than anything I’d experienced before. I thought it was appropriate to slightly overestimate it, but even that seemed to fall short.

Amid all the preparations, I received a message from Lime, who was manning the store today. It appeared that someone from the temple, specifically from a religion that worships a goddess, had come by. Since around the beginning of summer vacation, Lime had become capable of conversing with me. He was so natural in his interactions that it took me a while to notice the change. However, this didn’t mean he could speak with hyumans yet. When I called Tomoe over to find out how this transformation had occurred, it turned out she had performed some rather unsettling procedures—what I would describe as borderline hyuman experimentation.

Even Komoe-chan, Tomoe’s clone, had been involved. Lime’s boldness surprised me, given how calmly he carried on afterward. I made sure to give Tomoe a firm lecture, instructing her to clear any potentially harmful experiments through me first. True, it didn’t directly affect me, and everything remained within Tomoe’s abilities. There was no impact on the Demiplane either. It was within her discretion, but still…

Ah, right. Someone had come from the temple.

I left my room, and anticipating the possibility of being overheard, switched to written communication to send Lime my reply. Since a face-to-face meeting seemed more appropriate, I decided to go greet the visitor myself. Upon entering the store, I heard a few disappointed sighs from some of the customers present.

Sorry I'm not Shiki.

"Thank you for responding to my sudden visit. I'm the deputy priest from the temple," the man introduced himself, displaying a necklace as a form of identification. He was slender, almost feminine in appearance, with none of the brawny physique one might expect. As he revealed the necklace, his collarbone was momentarily visible, and it was clear he didn't engage in physical training. It seemed unlikely he would participate in battles as a priest skilled in various forms of magic and healing.

"No, please don't worry about me. If it's a matter for a priest, my own issues are of little importance. I hope you can forgive my difficulty with speech in this way," I wrote.

The man inclined his head, his expression shifting to one of curiosity. "Deputy priest, actually… Is that a curse, perhaps?"

"I suspect it may be a type of curse-related ailment," I explained calmly, pretending to mask embarrassment. *"It's a bit embarrassing, but part of the reason I stock so many medicinal items for trade is for personal reasons as well."*

He nodded thoughtfully, clearly noting my speech limitation. "A cursed ailment, huh? Unfortunate… So, am I right in understanding that you're the proprietor of this shop? According to the Merchant Guild records, you're Raidou, correct?"

"Yes. Although I often leave the store in the hands of trusted individuals, I, Raidou, am indeed the owner. May I ask the reason for your visit today?"

"Indeed. It's about some of the medicine you sell here. Word has spread, even to the temple, that their effects are quite potent. While the low prices would typically be welcomed, some people have started to feel uneasy, wondering if they're truly safe to use."

He continued in a sympathetic tone, his gaze softening as though showing pity for me. The temple, along with the town's

pharmacies and magic potion shops, also sold various medicinal products.

Now, is this a case of competitor complaints stirring the temple into action, or is the temple itself trying to cause trouble? Either way, I felt relieved that it likely had nothing to do with the Goddess. If it did, they certainly wouldn't have sent just one person.

Is he indirectly asking for a bribe? Perhaps the claim of coming from the temple is just a cover, and this is some kind of scam…

Still, wouldn't they bring more people if that were the case? Since I didn't know the deputy priest's exact position, it was hard to determine if he was in need of money. But impersonating the temple would require a fair amount of boldness, and it didn't seem plausible that they'd go to such lengths just to pocket some small change from me.

If that's the case…

"I never imagined that the medicine from my store had reached the ears of those at the temple. I'm sorry you had to come all this way."

"Think nothing of it," he replied, waving a hand dismissively. "As for your shop, these rumors must be an annoyance."

"If possible, I'd be most grateful if those rumors could be dispelled."

Seems like he's definitely after a bribe. I suppose I'll slip him a few gold coins to keep things quiet.

The deputy priest hesitated, as if struggling to find the right words, or perhaps reluctant to speak. *What a hassle.*

"That's precisely why the temple has a proposal. How about entrusting your antidotes and healing potions to the temple for distribution?"

Huh? My mind went blank for a moment. *What is he talking about? Is he suggesting I sell my potions wholesale to the temple and stop selling them directly?*

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I wrote, barely keeping my composure.

"Tch. I told them this would never work. Those greedy old men… How much more do they need to line their pockets before they're satisfied?" he muttered under his breath, his words laced with venom and accompanied by a quiet click of his tongue. At

least he seemed aware that his demand was unreasonable—that was a bit reassuring.

"Forget what I just said. Regarding the dispelling of these rumors, the temple is willing to help. But there is one condition," he continued, his voice now firm.

"I'm listening," I replied, keeping my expression neutral.

"We would like you to disclose the recipe for your antidotes and healing potions. It would be used solely for verification by the temple, and we pledge not to leak it to other shops."

So, they want me to reveal the recipe? Admittedly, if they replicated it exactly, they could verify its safety more easily. He claimed it wouldn't be shared with other stores, but he hadn't said anything about not selling it at the temple. Should I press him on that point? Or would it be better to play along for now?

"Revealing the recipe would mean that the temple could produce similar products, correct?" I asked, choosing my words carefully.

"I would ask for your understanding in this matter. I'm offering a sound and practical solution, after all. Do you have any objections? Ah, with the academy festival approaching, the temple is rather busy, so I will need your answer now."

It seems he thinks I'm easy to manipulate. Fine, let's see where this goes for now.

The temple already had ties to those involved in the hyuman experimentation case from before summer vacation. I also hadn't forgotten that the suspicious death of a bishop had been officially labeled as a mere illness. During the break, the Rembrandt sisters had encountered a minor incident in Tsige that involved the temple's name. I couldn't investigate further at the time due to Mio, but maybe I could pry some useful information out of this man.

"I have no objections whatsoever. In fact, if the temple could help distribute this medicine, it would reach even more people, which is truly wonderful. As a fledgling merchant, my distribution network is limited and expansion has been difficult. I would be delighted to share the recipe."

"Wha—?!" The deputy priest's eyes widened in surprise. "Are you sure you're really fine with it?"

“Yes,” I replied calmly. *“Please let me know a convenient time for you. I’ll send one of our alchemists to explain the process. Will my presence be necessary as well?”*

“Ah, that would be most helpful. Then, if it’s not too sudden, could you and the alchemist—Raidou, yes?—come to the temple tomorrow at noon? Just mention at reception that you have an appointment with Deputy Priest Sinai, and they’ll let you in.”

“Understood. Tomorrow at noon, then. And I’ll be sure to mention Deputy Priest Sinai,” I confirmed with a polite bow.

“Good. I appreciate it,” he said, a hint of relief in his tone. With that, he turned and left the store, though he still looked somewhat suspicious about how smoothly the conversation had gone.

I bowed, watching as he left.

Sinai, huh? I’ll remember that name. I’d expected someone like the local priests, but he was surprisingly arrogant. I wonder if the temple wields more power here than I thought.

As for sharing the recipe—honestly, there was no issue on my end.

The potions we sold at the Kuzunoha Company might look like ordinary concoctions on paper, but they had several tricky aspects. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that while the recipe might appear straightforward when written out, there were some serious hurdles involved in their creation.

First, the ingredients included plants that could only be found in the Wasteland. In Tsige, herbs gathered by adventurers were sold at a fairly high price. For us, accessing certain parts of the Wasteland wasn’t much different from walking into our backyard, so the cost of materials for Kuzunoha was essentially zero. But for anyone else, those costs would add up quickly. While it was technically possible to substitute with some local herbs, it would still require effort in both sourcing and preparation.

Then there was the actual skill involved in the mixing process. Shiki and the arachs were capable of handling it effortlessly, but the difficulty was quite high. As a point of comparison, Toa’s alchemist—currently at the top level in Tsige—managed only a 50 percent success rate, even with ten attempts. Granted, he didn’t specialize in potion-making, but even if the academy brought in an expert in alchemy, I expected they’d only

manage around an 80 percent success rate. A 20 percent failure rate was no small loss.

In other words, while the temple could produce similar potions if they could obtain the materials and use skilled alchemists, they'd have to charge a significant price.

So, it probably won't pose much of a threat. I'll confidently share what I know. Let's keep playing the good-natured sheep and cooperate with Sinai. It's a rare chance to enter the temple, so maybe I'll take the opportunity to look around.

"Is it really okay to make that kind of promise?"

I turned abruptly toward the voice. It belonged to a familiar woman—Eva.

She really startled me.

The suddenness of her voice was a shock to my system. Apparently, the academy's library would be closed during the festival due to the high volume of visitors, which made it impossible to manage thefts and other incidents. So, Eva had been finishing work earlier than usual.

You really shouldn't sneak up on me like that.

So today was one of her half-days. She'd been visiting the shop frequently since the summer break started. I was glad she'd taken a liking to our energy drinks, and the research paper she'd handed over had personally helped me grow stronger.

"Of course. I don't say things I'm not okay with, regardless of how much you overheard," I wrote with a smile, maintaining a confident air.

Eva's lips curled into a teasing smile. "Oh my, that's intimidating. I almost pity the temple for tangling with the Kuzunoha Company."

"By the way, that was definitely the temple's deputy priest, wasn't it? For a moment, I thought he was here for a bribe, but his demands were unexpectedly… unconventional."

"Ufufu. The academy festival is right around the corner. A whole lot of high-ranking figures from the temple will be visiting, so he's probably trying to score some points. Many of those assigned to this temple are on the fast track for promotions. In other words, there are plenty with strong ambitions."

I see. So, he's trying to curry favor with his superiors who are coming to visit. My shop's reputation was just a convenient tool.

Well, it really wasn't a big deal after all.

Still, even if the Goddess wasn't involved, there was the matter of the bishop's death, which was Rona's doing. I couldn't say I was completely uninvolved, so maybe I was being overly cautious. *I'll ask Lime to investigate, just to be safe, and then try to relax a little.*

Even the temple folks are getting jittery? The scale of the Rotsgard Academy Foundation Festival was something to behold. Jin and the others were quietly training and had even reached Level 90 in preparation. They could surpass Level 100 if they wanted, but due to outdated academy rules governing various festival competitions, participants over Level 100 were barred from entering. It seemed the rule was established long ago because of a student who surpassed Level 100, and though that person was long gone, the rule lingered.

The mock battles with the misty lizardfolk had progressed to the fourth stage, and I was confident they'd perform admirably whether they entered the martial arts tournament or the magical competition. In the team battles, they'd undoubtedly draw the attention of everyone in the audience.

Speaking of which, Rembrandt did plead with me to withdraw his daughters from the competition.

"Research presentations, classes, singing, or dance performances? All of that is fine… welcome, even. But under no circumstances do I want them competing in combat tournaments. Raidou-dono, is there any reason for a merchant's daughters to be involved in such things? There is none!" His impassioned words came back to me vividly. He had cornered me during the latter half of summer break when I'd visited Tsige to meet up with the sisters.

As with the letter he'd sent me earlier, his wife had quietly appeared from the sidelines, smiled, and led him away with a reassuring "Don't worry about it." She was a truly charming woman. I could see why Rembrandt had no interest in keeping mistresses.

It finally made sense; he (and likely his wife) had enrolled their daughters in Rotsgard to teach them etiquette, build connections, and acquire skills useful for high society. Since I taught combat techniques in the academy city, I naturally

attracted such students, but the academy offered an array of classes on etiquette, pure academics, and lessons geared toward high society. I had often wondered why the Rembrandt sisters were attending this academy.

"Scoring points, huh. The temple must have its hands full as well," I wrote absently, still processing my thoughts.

"Yes. Unless they possess some unique talent, those in the temple must fight for advancement through bloodline and factional competition. If they lose, their future is essentially over," Eva explained, her tone light but carrying a hint of cynicism.

"Which means they get sent off to places like Tsige or the Wasteland, I take it," I wrote, recalling how priests in those regions often spent their days drunk.

"For someone here, such a demotion would be rare unless they made a truly foolish mistake. But rising again from that point would be impossible. Their ultimate goal is to climb all the way to the Grand Temple in Limia. To me, it doesn't really matter who belongs to which temple."

"Sounds like you're saying they're all equally worthless."

"Exactly. Currently, my 'god candidate' is you, Raidou-san."

"God candidate… Please, I'd prefer to be considered a good neighbor at best," I responded, trying to gauge whether she was joking or partially serious. *What a terrifying thing to say.*

It seems Eva still hasn't given up hope of reclaiming Kaleneon. The only saving grace is that Kaleneon is a significant distance away. Even if the hyumans were to capture Stella Fortress, there's still a long road ahead. Perhaps she understands that retaking a small spot wouldn't change much, which is why she isn't making reckless moves right now.

Her ties with that organization had also been cleanly severed. Thankfully, their secretive nature meant limited connections, making it easier to break free. I expected to be dealing with assassins and other troublesome affairs for a while, but nothing of the sort had happened. The fact that she was a lower-tier member likely worked in her favor.

Now she seems to find some kind of hope or solace in the Kuzunoha Company, dropping by frequently. She isn't much of a nuisance—in fact, she often brings along interesting book recommendations.

“By the way, Raidou-san, about the academy festival… Would you like to go together?” Eva asked, her voice light.

“Thank you for the kind invitation, but I’m afraid I already have other commitments. My apologies,” I replied politely.

“Ah, so your schedule’s already packed. That’s a shame. I thought watching the tournaments with your commentary would make it even more thrilling.”

“I’m sorry.”

I seemed to be getting a lot of festival invitations from various people—Luto, the Rembrandt sisters, Eva, even random female students. I’d turned them all down, mainly because I’d prefer to explore the festival with my followers and enjoy it together. Still, I felt a little bad about it.

Jin, on the other hand, had earnestly asked me to watch the tournament. I was planning to make an appearance anyway—it was a major event, and it seemed important to him. Maybe he wanted to show me the results of his hard work. If so, that was rather endearing.

Both Tomoe and Mio appeared excited at the mention of a festival. While I wasn’t sure if they’d behave themselves, it was happening in the city I lived in, so I doubted they’d cause any major chaos.

As I watched Eva finish her shopping and leave, I counted the days remaining until the academy festival on my fingers, then made my way back to my room.



"Good, it's not all gaudy gold after all," I muttered to myself, relieved.

When I thought of the Goddess, I remembered blindingly bright rooms and unbridled arrogance. Arriving in the temple district for the first time, I was relieved to find that the building in question, while imposing, wasn't made of solid gold. If it had been, I'd have wanted to leave immediately.

That lurid shine is more than enough for her space alone.

Shiki turned to me, concern in his eyes. "Raidou-sama? Is something wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking it's… ordinary? Or maybe *majestic* is a better word, for a temple dedicated to a goddess," I mused, still staring.

"Considering you *have* spoken with the Goddess, Raidou-sama, I can see why you'd connect it to her personality. To me, regardless of their size, they all look more or less the same."

He had a point. I had never thought to match shrines or temples to the personalities of their deities nor had I ever paid much attention to architectural styles. Apparently, there were people who found joy in examining guardian dog statues or how purification fountains were constructed. I couldn't imagine anything more boring.

So, is it only because I've had direct contact with a deity that I have these thoughts? The temples dedicated to spirits that I'd seen in passing back home, if that was even the right term for them, all looked the same to me and left no particular impression.

“Unique personality, huh. The Goddess was supposed to be the one true god, noble, pure, and the virtuous mother who cherishes all of hyumanity, right?” I asked, recalling the description.

“That’s more or less the correct interpretation,” Shiki explained with a strange air of detachment. “She’s also revered as a brave war deity and the patron of arts and sciences. She is believed to be all-powerful, so any praise would be fitting.”

It sounds ridiculous… But what Shiki said about the Goddess did match my research in the library. However, whenever she was depicted as a war deity or in more severe terms, it almost always involved cruel outcomes for demi-humans or monsters.

It was a level of “perfect deity” that bordered on absurdity. Such a portrayal might be acceptable for a purely mythical figure, but for someone who actually existed and took action, contradictions were bound to surface.

Omniscient and omnipotent, and thus, doing nothing? Yeah, right.

To me, the whole concept was inherently contradictory. Referring to her as “that black thing” felt more fitting.

“Thinking of this as the temple of an all-powerful, one-and-only god, yeah, it does make me feel a bit solemn,” I muttered. “Now that more people are gathering, I suppose I should switch back to written communication.”

“If we linger here staring, it might look suspicious. Shall we go inside?” Shiki gestured toward the entrance.

Following Shiki’s lead, I stepped inside the temple, surprised as a cool breeze swept over my face. Air conditioning? Had they really gone to such lengths in this world? While late summer days here could be oppressively hot, the only way to achieve air conditioning was through magic.

Using magic meant using manpower. Even though this open entry space allowed temperature control within designated zones, it required a fair number of staff and wasn’t exactly precise. The temperature depended largely on the senses of the magic users or the people occupying the space.

Back at home, the women outnumbered the men: me and dad versus my mom and two sisters. And the living room never

felt particularly cool, even in the heat of summer… I had always wondered if women tended to feel colder.

So, given how comfortable I felt, I wondered if the caster here was male. Even when magic replaced technology-based air conditioning, temperature control still seemed to favor the most vocal individuals.

A woman dressed in white approached us.

“I am Shiki from the Kuzunoha Company, and this is my master, Raidou,” Shiki introduced us. “We have an appointment with Deputy Priest Sinai.”

“With Sinai-sama… Ah, yes, we’ve been expecting you. This way, please,” the young woman replied. She looked so young that I briefly wondered if she was a student working part-time as a shrine maiden. Adjusting her pace to ours, she guided us through the temple. The building had appeared massive from the outside, and the interior was equally impressive. Despite the sheer size, a distinctive aroma permeated the air.

This probably isn’t magic. More likely a copious amount of incense.

I’d encountered scented salons at the academy, but this smell was on a whole different level.

As we walked, we passed numerous people dressed in white. Interestingly, every person’s clothes seemed slightly different. I’d assumed the uniforms would be more… well, uniform, like some kind of long-sleeved and ankle-length robe. But perhaps color was the only thing they had in common.

I gestured for Shiki to come closer and whispered into his ear. The woman was walking ahead of us, and it would have been a hassle to try and draw a speech bubble for her. Shiki took the hint and relayed my question to her.

“Excuse me,” he said politely. “It seems that everyone here is quite particular about their attire. I was surprised to see how elaborately designed and unique the clothing is.”

“Oh, really?” The woman gave a friendly smile. “Ah, yes, the Kuzunoha Company… You came from Tsige, correct? No wonder you’re surprised. Here, outside of ceremonial and formal attire, there are no strict guidelines beyond the color for everyday wear. Everyone’s free to add their own touch. The idea is that serving

while wearing clothing that suits the individual makes for better service than sticking to a uniform."

Huh. I guess it makes sense… While a uniform might emphasize differences in material, I doubted anyone here worried about that. Still, it was strange seeing everyone dressed differently.

Serving in clothing that suits you… It seemed innocent enough, but something about it rubbed me the wrong way.

I was the one who'd asked, though. I gave Shiki a small nod to signal that I'd heard enough. Shiki nodded back, smoothly transitioning to small talk with our guide.

It appeared our destination was underground, but I hadn't expected there to be a basement level. The thought made me uneasy, probably because it reminded me of underground facilities in stores. The scent in the air had changed too. I'd been wary of the incense at first, but I hadn't noticed any harmful effects. Maybe they used different scents depending on the floor or room.

"Deputy Priest Sinai is waiting for you here," the young woman said, stopping in front of a relatively large door. "I'll take my leave now."

"Thank you," Shiki replied.

"Thank you," I wrote.

She whispered something softly by the door, and there was a brief exchange before the door opened. Turning to us, she said that Sinai was ready to see us now. She gave a bow and left, never dropping her warm and pleasant manner.

Even during our walk here, I hadn't noticed any strange looks from the staff. They must have been well-trained. I had expected to face some harsh scrutiny, so the lack of it left me feeling slightly off-balance.

"We're from the Kuzunoha Company," Shiki announced. "Please excuse our intrusion."

"Enter," came the curt response.

I followed Shiki in silence. Once the initial greetings were handled, I would step forward as necessary—speaking wasn't an option for me, after all.

Inside the room were Sinai and two… no, about five other people. The space felt roughly the size of an eight-mat room,

around thirteen meters squared or maybe a little bigger, but the underground dimness amplified that sense of confinement.

"Thank you for coming, Raidou-dono. And this must be your alchemist, Shiki, if I recall correctly?" Sinai greeted, his voice steady and welcoming.

"Yes, Sinai-sama," I wrote. *"This is Shiki, my most trusted employee and one of my closest aides."*

"We are grateful for your willingness to share your techniques with the temple today," Sinai said. "After reporting your offer to my superiors, they've arranged for a word of acknowledgment. Although you haven't been here long, the bishop who oversees our faith in this region has graced us with their presence."

The bishop. So, this must be the successor to the one who was assassinated.

Judging by where Sinai stood, the other four seemed to be subordinates. That would make this one the bishop, then.

Long hair. Their face was obscured by what appeared to be a hood, but was it a woman? I reminded myself that it wasn't surprising for a high-ranking individual in a goddess-worshipping faith to be female. Still, beneath that loose, nonrevealing robe, it could very well be a long-haired man. Maybe I'd get a better sense once they spoke.

I couldn't ignore the fact that Sinai hadn't let me finish my introductions earlier. Had he reported that this offer was my own voluntary gesture? It certainly seemed as though his visit was on someone's orders…

"It is a great honor," I wrote, lowering myself to one knee and bowing my head. Shiki did the same, but he was probably just copying me; I made a mental note to check later if that was actually the appropriate response.

"Though you have but a small shop, I have heard of the exceptional potions you handle," the bishop began. Their voice was low and husky, rich and mature, but it seemed to belong to a woman. It conjured an image of someone who enjoyed tobacco or liquor. "And now you are willing to reveal some of their secrets. For that faith, we are grateful. The temple will dispel any malicious rumors about your business."

"I appreciate your kind consideration," I replied.

“I also understand that you have been afflicted by a curse that took your speech. We will do our best to find a solution. I cannot guarantee success, but please rest assured that we will make every effort.”

Considerate… but unsolicited. Should I be worried?

“Bishop-sama, it’s time,” one of her subordinates interjected politely.

“Ah, is that so? Well then, Raidou, I hope we meet again. I leave the rest to you, Sinai,” she said, giving a final nod before turning away.

“Yes, bishop-sama.” Sinai spoke softly, approaching the bishop as she prepared to leave. “Thank you for taking the time to be here.”

The bishop offered me a final nod and exited the room. Sinai bowed deeply, nearly a full ninety degrees.

Oops, forgot to bow!

“I am not impressed, Raidou-dono. One must show the utmost respect to the bishop. Even if she’s only recently assumed her position, any form of disrespect is intolerable,” Sinai chided.

“I’m just a country bumpkin,” I wrote. *“Please forgive my lack of manners.”*

“Very well. Now, regarding today’s demonstration of your shop’s potion-making techniques, you are prepared, I trust?”

“Of course.”

With that, Shiki stepped forward, carrying the materials and tools we would need for the demonstration. Since potion-making didn’t require any large equipment, we’d been able to carry everything with us.

“I see. Your alchemist is fully prepared,” Sinai nodded with a hint of a smile. “That simplifies things. To be candid, I possess no expertise in alchemy. While your alchemist demonstrates the process, I would like to converse with you—nothing more than casual small talk.”

Unexpected but manageable. I’d assumed I’d be helping with explanations.

“Absolutely. I’m at your service,” I replied, inclining my head politely.

“Please, take this seat,” Sinai added, gesturing to a chair opposite him. “Alchemist, if you would, please proceed with the

demonstration at the prepared table with the others."

"As you wish. This way, everyone," Shiki announced, moving toward the large table where he carefully laid out the tools and ingredients. He began explaining each material in precise detail. Judging by his pace, the entire process might take about an hour.

After a glance at my busy subordinate, I took my seat across from Sinai. The small round table between us was empty—not even a cup of tea. *Not exactly hospitable, considering I'm cooperating out of goodwill.*

"Now, Raidou-dono. This is the first time we've had the opportunity to speak at length," Sinai said, his tone formal but not unfriendly. "As I mentioned before, I am Sinai, the deputy priest. I hope we can work together well."

"Raidou of the Kuzunoha Company, affiliated with the Merchant Guild," I replied with a respectful nod. *"It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Sinai-sama. I hope that by fostering this connection, I may be of some service to the temple as well."*

"Hahaha, what a genuine response—or perhaps not entirely. But considering the relationship between merchants and servants of the gods, such exchanges are expected for a first meeting. You look quite young; how long has it been since you started your business?"

"It hasn't even been three years. I'm still a fledgling merchant."

Technically not a lie. Whether it's three days or two years, it's still less than three years.

"And yet, you already have shops in two different cities? You must have remarkable fortune or a powerful patron backing you," he said, his voice betraying his curiosity.

"Not a patron per se, but I have received significant support from the Rembrandt Company in Tsige," I explained.

"Rembrandt… Ah, that name." Suddenly, Sinai seemed lost in thought. I didn't get the impression that he knew Rembrandt personally but that he knew quite a bit about him.

"Are you familiar?" I asked. *"He is my benefactor—he not only offered me a place when I had no connections but also taught me the fundamentals of business."*

"Ah, did he? It seems our impressions of Rembrandt-san differ somewhat. If he were more cooperative, our efforts in that

region, and expanding into the Wasteland beyond, might have progressed more smoothly."

That made sense to me. Ever since the incident involving his wife and daughters, Rembrandt had largely avoided the temple. He probably sought the Goddess's help initially, but when that failed, he pursued other means. Expecting him to return to his former faith would be unreasonable since it was his own guild request that ultimately resolved his crisis.

"I come from the Wasteland and have limited knowledge of the temple's teachings or Rembrandt's relationship with it," I wrote. *"However, he was always kind and sincere to me, and for that, I'm deeply grateful."*

"Perhaps that's how it appears from your perspective. Anyway, that certainly explains why his two daughters have been relying on you at the academy."

Wait, have these guys been investigating me? They seem to know about my role as a temporary instructor and even about my connection to certain students. I wouldn't be surprised if they already knew that I'm from the Wasteland.

"Indeed, he has asked me to keep an eye on his daughters," I confirmed, trying to keep my response focused on my role as their instructor.

"Oh, so he's a doting father? Perhaps I've misjudged him. My subordinates described him as a miser with little faith. I suppose it's a reminder that perspectives can be misleading." Sinai scratched his head, and the gesture looked almost self-deprecating. There was a touch of arrogance in his manner, yet he still came across as sincere.

He has the air of an elite—a bit like Eva suggested when she was describing the ambitious temple staff in the academy city.

While Shiki performed two rounds of potion-making demonstrations, Sinai peppered me with questions. In return, he got a detailed account of my background—or rather, "Raidou's" background.

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While the two of them packed up the potion-making equipment, Sinai and two others moved into an adjacent room. The woman who had earlier reminded the bishop that “it’s time” closed the door behind them. Inside, the bishop and several other hyumans were awaiting their arrival.

“Have they left?” the bishop asked in the same husky, sultry tone Makoto had heard.

“Yes, they’ve just departed the temple,” Sinai replied. “We’re watching where they go as a precaution.”

“I see. What a waste of effort,” the bishop said dismissively.

Sinai blinked. “Pardon?”

“I said it was a waste,” the bishop repeated, annoyed. “You may think you can use the Kuzunoha Company, but you must consider the possibility that they are far more dangerous than they appear. From now on, act with caution and do not proceed without my explicit approval.”

“What do you mean?” Sinai persisted. The meeting had seemed fine to him; both the discussion and their demeanor suggested that they could become valuable allies.

“Explain it to him,” the bishop sighed, propping her elbow on the armrest and resting her chin in her hand, a casual, almost languid gesture that contrasted sharply with her title. Her previously captivating voice now carried a distinct note of fatigue and exasperation.

At her command, one of the waiting subordinates stepped forward and began to speak.

“We conducted an extensive investigation into their thoughts, magic, and any external influences. While we gathered some insight on Shiki, we found nothing on his master, Raidou.”

“What do you mean?” Sinai asked again “Are you saying that the thought-seizing and magic analysis both failed?”

“To begin with, regarding Shiki, we detected a magical capacity exceeding that of several court-level archmages combined. We were unable to read his thoughts, possibly due to protective measures. As for Raidou, we could neither read his thoughts nor measure his magic capacity.”

The report was nearly a declaration of total ignorance. A wave of disbelief washed over Sinai. A magician of such overwhelming strength serving as an employee in a minor shop? It was almost laughable. Furthermore, the temple's pride—thought-seizing and magic measurement—had failed completely. This was a nightmare.

"That's impossible!" Sinai spluttered. "Are you saying Raidou has even more magical power than Shiki?"

"Who knows?" the bishop shot back, her tone cold and contemplative. "Normally, one would assume that if Raidou relies on Shiki, he might be weaker. But there's also the possibility that Raidou is the stronger one, hiding in plain sight. What we know for certain is that Shiki is an extraordinary mage, serving as a temporary instructor at the academy, *and* he's Raidou's right-hand man. As for Raidou's magic… it's not simply immeasurable—it's like there's nothing there at all, as if everything around him is completely obscured. No magical presence whatsoever."

The investigator who had led the study nodded gravely in agreement. Sinai's bewilderment only deepened with each revelation.

"So, they've been concealing their magic and thoughts all along?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Precisely. These are people who can hide such things effortlessly. Do you really think tailing their subordinates would be effective? That's why I said it was pointless. Even their potion-making was suspicious. What happened with that? Can you give me a report?" This last question was directed past Sinai, to the two who had observed the potion-making demonstration.

"To be honest… the method was impeccable," one of them replied. "Every step was methodical, the explanations were clear, and none of the ingredients were unobtainable."

"Is that so? Interesting. So, you believe you can replicate it?" the bishop asked, her interest piqued.

"Likely so. Shiki revealed the entire process without any apparent concealment. However—"

The man hesitated, but the bishop made no effort to prompt him, simply waiting for him to find his words.

"Regarding the cost, I believe it will far exceed the prices of Kuzunoha Company," he finally said.

“Is it the success rate?” the bishop inquired, her expression unreadable.

“That’s part of it. While the Kuzunoha Company reportedly has nearly flawless success rates, our own skills would likely cap out at around 50 percent. They also used two types of herbs sourced from the Wasteland. Although they were kind enough to offer local substitutes and demonstrated their use, the results were identical to the potions we had obtained beforehand—there was no deception.”

“How considerate of them. And? You seem to have another reason to explain. Speak!”

“It’s the cost of materials,” he said, swallowing nervously.

“The cost of materials? You mean the raw ingredients?”

“Yes, and there’s also the expense of hiring skilled alchemists to improve success rates. In this case, however, that isn’t the primary issue. To acquire the materials Shiki brought through markets or similar channels, the cost alone would far exceed the selling price of Kuzunoha’s finished potions. Whether we source directly from the Wasteland or use the substitutes they mentioned, we’d need to commission adventurers, including hazard pay. Just obtaining the raw materials would cost as much as several dozen of Kuzunoha’s finished products. For the temple to produce and sell these potions, we would need to mark the price up a hundredfold just to break even. If they were to expand into other regions, it could even damage the temple’s credibility.”

“A hundred times the price? Absurd. Kuzunoha Company sells at such low prices, do they not?” Sinai interjected incredulously.

“They personally gather all their materials and bypass the market entirely. They expressed confidence in their distribution capabilities. As unbelievable as it sounds, they must be making a profit at those prices since it’s sold as a commercial product,” the man explained.

“Unbelievable…” Sinai muttered. At such a price point, their products were no different from other expensive potions, leaving little room to impress or astonish others.

“So, it seems Raidou is not just an innocent merchant but something far more dangerous,” the bishop said. “While you

think you can use him, there may come a day when a knife is at our throats. It was wise for me to be present today."

"Bishop-sama…" Sinai murmured, his expression conflicted.

"Your instincts weren't entirely off, Sinai. But for now, cease any direct interference. Also, refrain from sharing information with other factions. Depending on how we handle them, they could become a powerful asset. The eccentric hyuman who hires demi-humans, hmm? Let our people know, but be subtle—if they hear the name Kuzunoha Company, they should stick out an ear, even if just slightly. At least until the other bishops and the people from Limia leave the city, make sure no one senses our interest in them. Oh, and don't worry about pricing for now. Make a hundred of those healing potions. Even if we don't compete directly here, they may prove useful elsewhere—in cities with allies or on the front lines of a war. There are plenty of ways to use them depending on the location."

"Yes, bishop-sama," came the solemn responses as everyone present, including the deputy priest, nodded at the bishop's command.

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I focused in on my hearing.

Voices, not exactly subdued, reached my ears.

It was past nightfall, and customers were few and far between at the shop. Fortunately, most of our stock tended to sell out quickly each day. The only ones who might have come by were the late-shift women from the nearby brothel on the backstreet, here to pick up their favorite energy drinks. By now, they had become regulars, and we always reserved a dozen or so bottles just for them. We also handled the odd weapon repair, but those transactions usually happened in broad daylight. Apologies to walk-in customers, but once darkness falls, all you'll find here is cold medicine and energy drinks.

Hurry up and become popular, will you?

To put it simply, this was a convenient time for slacking off.

Peeking in from the side entrance, I saw exactly what I'd expected—our tiny forest ogre and the talkative young eldwar engrossed in conversation with someone.

Really? Chatting this loudly with a customer? There's not even a hint of regret on that one's face!

Aqua, who had been watching Eris and the others with a mix of exasperation, turned away from the sales counter and noticed me and Shiki. Her eyes widened for a moment before she quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

Not great that she didn't stop the slackers, but at least she wasn't slacking herself. I'll let it slide. Not guilty.

I gestured for her to come over. "We're back," I told her. "Seems like you're all having quite the time."

"Is it always like this when we're away, Aqua?" Shiki added. His voice was lower than usual, and not just because he was speaking softly.

"W-Welcome back…" Aqua stammered.

"And the customers are… Oh, it's Jin and the others. Those guys really have too much time on their hands," I noted, shaking my head.

Shiki narrowed his eyes. "They're slacking off, aren't they? Perhaps they need some 'motivation' to get back on track… though that might mean missing the academy festival."

Whoa, that's a bit harsh! Let's not go that far. Besides, the bigger issue is our employees getting carried away with idle chitchat.

Aqua, for her part, seemed relatively uninvolved in the conversation. Or was it just coincidence? Judging by the way her gaze darted around, I had my doubts.

"Shiki, that's overkill. And, Aqua, since when has it been like this?" I asked, fixing her with my gaze.

"U-Um, since just a little while ago—"

"If you answer honestly, I'll let you sample a new banana menu item as a reward for working so diligently," I offered, my tone light and teasing.

Aqua's eyes sparkled at the mention of the reward. "About two hours ago," she admitted. "We ran out of fruit early today,

and the stock of healing and antidote potions was also gone by then, so we had some free time…”

So, right after we left. Really? This behavior explained why they were getting so much praise for their customer service and skills—they were riding high on compliments and becoming complacent. To those unaware, it might seem endearing, but from a business standpoint, it could damage the shop’s reputation. *You troublesome employees and meddlesome regulars…*

Aqua’s confession was almost too perfect. *Those gleaming eyes… She really wants that treat.*

Eris and the young eldwar, it’s a shame. Punishment will be in order for both of you. You still haven’t noticed anything, have you?

I motioned for Aqua to take over at the counter temporarily, a reward-dreaming puppy practically in tow as I led her to the kitchen. I say kitchen, but it was a modest space with only the basics—more than sufficient for simple preparations.

“Shiki, is it chilled?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s right here,” Shiki replied, retrieving a bottle of white liquid, a bunch of bananas, and a small jar of amber-colored syrup from the cooling storage unit.

Shiki is nothing if not reliable—he must’ve guessed what we’d be making from the mention of a new menu item. Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, and Komoe-chan had all sampled bananas before, and Komoe-chan had taken a particular liking to fruit.

Aqua’s eyes were practically glowing as she watched, her attention focused entirely on my movements. I could almost feel her intense gaze on my hands.

Not that it’s anything fancy—just cutting and mashing the bananas before mixing them.

The amber-colored substance was syrup, derived from local trees and commonly found in this region—not a product of the Demiplane. It had a unique flavor, almost like maple syrup, and was used at least as much for flavor as sweetness. I mixed in a small amount.

The white liquid was milk—this one from Demiplane. It was thick and rich. Technically, it was cow’s milk, but it was so creamy and flavorful that initially, I had wondered if it was safe to drink. However, finding no ill effects after my first taste, I now

counted it as a favorite. Everyone else seemed to take to it as well, and it had quickly become accepted within the Demiplane.

If farm-fresh milk tasted like this in Japan, I wonder what they were selling back there…

Anyway, what we ended up with was banana milk.

I poured the pale yellow-white mixture into three glasses. Shiki nodded appreciatively, while Aqua watched with bated breath.

“Here you go,” I said, offering the glasses to Shiki and Aqua. Then I lifted mine and took a sip.

The creamy sweetness of the banana blended perfectly with the subtle aroma of the syrup, while the chilled, rich milk provided the same decadent smoothness as heavy cream. It was thick enough to qualify as a dessert drink—a personal favorite of mine when I indulged. Once he saw me drink, Shiki followed suit, his smile radiating pure joy.

This sweet-toothed prince…

Aqua, meanwhile, took one cautious sip, and her entire body shivered. If I had to describe it, she looked like she’d been struck by lightning. *Not that I’ve actually seen that happen.*

After that, instead of downing it in one go, she drank slowly, savoring each sip with a mix of apprehension and delight. A small smile blossomed on her face.

“Ah… I want to drown in it…” Aqua murmured, her eyes half-lidded, mouth slightly open, and cheeks flushed with bliss. *“Delicious” doesn’t even cover it.*

Is she imagining a banana milk bath? No thanks. Even with that dreamy expression, I couldn’t bring myself to agree.

“It’s excellent,” Shiki said with a satisfied nod.

“I’m glad you liked it. Now then, I suppose it’s time for a little scolding. Hm? What’s the matter, Aqua?” I asked.

Her eyes were fixed on the glass I had only taken a single sip from.

She wants it.

“Aqua, you can have this too. But first, come along,” I said, gesturing for her to follow.

“Yes!” she replied eagerly, clutching the glass like a puppy with a bone as we made our way back to the shop floor.

“Whoa! So, Eris-san can even beat the Blue Lizard?!”



“Of course. If you couldn’t manage at least that much, you wouldn’t be fit to work here. This place is safe even late at night because I’m here,” Eris boasted, a proud smile on her face.

“That’s amazing! And you even showed us how you chant while moving the other day, like a scout jumping around. How do you manage to recite spells like that?” one of the students asked, eyes wide with admiration.

“That’s just the basics. First, you pick a chant language that suits you—something specialized, like an ancient language, instead of the common language. Then, you break the chant into segments so you can complete it quickly while moving,” Eris explained confidently.

“Hmm, so chanting in the common language limits you to the midlevel, huh?” the student mused. “But if I can master segmented chanting, it could become my trump card…”

“Tricks like that should be kept hidden,” Eris said seriously. “Young Master taught you, didn’t he? A trump card should only be revealed when you intend to kill. By the way, showing it to Makoto-sama and Shiki-sama is fine—they’re in a league of their own and can’t be killed that easily.”

“Still, I can’t help but admire you for beating that Blue Lizard. Where did you even fight such a beautifully scaled lizardman?”

“Oh, they live deep in the Wasteland. These days, Makoto-sama uses them for training bouts,” Eris replied. The pride in her voice was clear.

“The Wasteland, huh? Fascinating. They’re high-tier monsters with both water and wind attributes, right?”

“Of course, since they’re mist—” Eris suddenly caught herself, eyes wide.

“—!!!” I silently cursed.

Eris really could be an airhead. She needed to take a page from Mondo’s book and show some restraint.

She’d been baited into revealing too much. Though she hadn’t mentioned the Demiplane outright, she was treading dangerously close. Even kids could spread dangerous information, so carelessness wasn’t an option.

Aqua and I watched from the sales counter, but thankfully Shiki stepped in just in time to avert disaster. He picked up Eris

by the back of her distinctive hood, like a cat being lifted by the scruff. Even though Eris was fairly light, lifting her with one hand wasn't as easy as it looked.

Today's lesson: Shiki can be scary when angry.

The eldwar, meanwhile, was talking weapons with several students. Thankfully, nothing problematic came up on his end—content-wise, at least.

I'll leave his scolding to his craftsman mentor and the village elder. They're far stricter than I could ever be—I feel sorry for him already.

"Eris, you've certainly become quite the expert, haven't you?" Shiki's voice was calm, but menacing. "When exactly did you deem yourself qualified to teach others? I believe we need to have a little… chat."

"Sh-Shiki-sama?! A-And… Ma— Young Master?!" Eris stammered, her eyes darting around nervously. *Did she really just cut herself off from calling me "Makoto" out loud?* Her unease was palpable.

"Eris, what happened to all that effort you were supposed to be putting in?" I asked, sighing.

"You… You betrayed me, Aqua…?! W-Wait, what are you drinking?!" Eris exclaimed, still dangling in Shiki's grasp but now sniffing at the air like a dog catching a scent.

"Banana milk. A reward," Aqua replied, calmly sipping from her glass.

"I knew I smelled bananas! Aqua, I thought we were friends! To think our bond could be broken by food—it's tragic! From now on, we're sworn enemies," Eris declared dramatically, her eyes wide.

"I'll give you half later—if, of course, Young Master forgives you," Aqua replied nonchalantly, as if discussing the weather.

"Aqua, we are still comrades who've faced death together! Young Master, I've had a change of heart. I swear! My loyalty is unshakable now, and I'll never be arrogant again. Please, grant me mercy this one time!" Eris pleaded desperately.

Shiki let out a heavy sigh.

Is loyalty something you can just switch on and off? What flimsy dedication.

“You know, it was only a few days ago that you swore undying loyalty to me. What happened to that?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Eris fell silent, looking like a child caught in a lie.

“Shall we head back to camp, then? Would you like to see Komoe-chan?” I suggested.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary!!! I’ve had enough of my princess fix for now. I’m fine, really. I pledge loyalty even after death! That settles it!” Eris babbled, frantically trying to placate me.

“Even after death, huh? That’s a bold promise. Planning to become undead?”

“Yes, I’ll provide refreshing coolness during summer,” Eris responded with such seriousness that it made my head hurt.

What a headache… Eris had a unique talent for exhausting me, despite my resistance to mental fatigue. I considered calling Mondo over to handle the scolding. But for now, Shiki would take over, as I was at a loss.

“Shiki, she’s all yours. I’m going back. Oh, and Jin and the rest of you—if you’re here to cheat off someone else’s efforts, don’t bother coming to any more lectures. It’s frankly ridiculous.”

Honestly…

The temple had already been a gauntlet of strange glances, unwanted interference, and a shadowy escort, courtesy of Sinai’s orders on my return. And now this? I sighed. I’d been masking my magical presence using Realm, focusing more on concealing my aura than sensing my surroundings. I only realized the extent of our situation upon entering the shop because Shiki pointed it out.

“Well then, Eris and everyone else, since you all seem to have plenty of free time, I think it’s time for some training. And yes, it will be strict.”

Before I even finished speaking, several presences in the store disappeared. The atmosphere shifted instantly, and I didn’t need to turn around to know they’d scattered.

Poor Aqua. She’d have to wait to share her banana milk, if she even got any, until Shiki was done with his discipline. *Then again, even if she finishes it herself, I can’t blame her—she really seemed to love it.*

What should I do? Maybe head back to the Demiplane.

Hm?

"Is that going out for delivery?" I asked, noticing the eldwar, one of our clerks, packing goods into a bag and getting ready to head out.

"Yes. I was asked to have all this delivered by the end of today, so I'm on my way," he replied.

Maybe I should visit a few loyal clients myself for a change.

"I'll take care of it," I said, stepping forward.

"Huh?!"

"Just this once. You can focus on your other tasks."

Taking over the eldwar's delivery was partly a chance to engage with clients and partly a gesture of support—especially since he was due for a stern elder's lecture back in the Demiplane.

I knew the destinations well and moved through the bustling streets at a relaxed pace, making each stop. The sight of the shop owner personally delivering goods confused some clients, leading to unexpected conversations. With no plans for the evening, I didn't mind.

By the time I finished the final delivery, darkness had fallen.

"And yet, the waves of people along the street never seem to fade…" I murmured, bemused as I made my way home. That's when I felt it—multiple gazes and a growing sense of killing intent. Both from within the crowd and from shadows among buildings—they were everywhere.

This place… Near the back of Ironclad's territory—not ideal for trouble. I didn't notice any of this earlier today. Suspicious. With Rembrandt arriving at Rotsgard soon, it's best to eliminate nuisances quickly.

I steered myself toward a quieter, rarely used street at the edge of the slums. Shifting my Realm from masking my magical presence to scanning my surroundings, I noticed one of the hostile presences felt weak and untrained. A student? What was a student doing here? Even wandering here accidentally would be unlikely. The tension and killing intent swelled.

No choice. I teleported directly next to the individual and addressed him through written communication.

A boy.

I couldn't recall being followed by a student. Was this a petty revenge plot for rejecting an ill-advised confession?

"Wha— Raidou?!" the kid exclaimed, startled.

Ah, so he knows my name. But he doesn't seem like anyone I've seen in class…

"You know who I am? Well, never mind. Things are about to get noisy. Stay quiet," I wrote.

"You— Did you—" he started, but the time for words had run out.

The next instant, more than ten presences converged upon me. Some leaped from walls, others lunged from above, while others charged directly at ground level. Among them, one stood out as familiar.

Ah, so it's that one from before.

Their black attire would have made them formidable in the night—if not for my Realm. Narrowing my focus, I counted… Fourteen. The nearest one was still at least twenty feet away.

No incantation needed. I locked onto all targets at once—except that one.

With my left hand, I prepared an enhanced Bridt spell, setting it to target multiple enemies. With my right, I created a barrier around the academy student.

"Stay still. This will be over soon," I wrote, hoping to keep the boy calm.

"Who do you think you are, ordering me around?!" the student spat back, then struck from inside the barrier I'd just put up.

Great. A rebellious one.

No matter. It didn't change what needed to be done. I activated Bridt. Light arrows shot forth from my hand, splitting into thirteen beams that pierced the attackers. A few had tried to put up barriers, but they shattered like thin ice.

"Hii…" the student shrieked within the barrier.

Well, if that scares him into staying quiet, it's a win.

That one familiar-looking attacker didn't retreat. Instead, eyes wild with rage, he brandished his favorite sword and lunged forward. He was quick but predictable.

"Tch!"

“I spared you last time because I was busy. Is this your idea of revenge?” I wrote, addressing him with calm detachment. *“Proud assassin with your precious sword?”*

He was the assassin who had tried to disrupt the academy exam I’d taken.

“Raidouuuu! I never leave a job unfinished!” he screamed, his voice cracking with unhinged fervor.

“That’s a rather intense gaze for just a job,” I noted. His eyes were burning with madness.

Despite being blocked by an invisible barrier, he didn’t retreat but kept pressing with his sword.

He’s about 20 percent stronger than last time but twice as reckless. His sword… looks like it’s been repaired.

“Bright-sensei isn’t even around anymore. Talk about persistence—or maybe just obsession…” I muttered to myself, words only I would understand here. Our investigations had already linked his employer to Bright-sensei. I’d assumed it was a resolved matter.

“You can kill over a dozen people without so much as a flicker of emotion, and you dare comment on my *gaze*?!” he roared, pressing harder against the barrier.

The assassin’s voice was raw with desperation and fury.

“No matter how fine a weapon you wield, forged from whatever exalted materials, it won’t change who you are. Your misguided pride is pitiful.”

“Heh, heheh! It’s made of the scale of the Greater Dragon Mitsurugi! This blade, crafted from its supreme reverse scale, is my pride! There is no assassination blade more formidable in existence!!!”

“An assassination blade, is it? Even his reverse scale was used for something so trivial. Well, considering the twisted personality of Lancer, maybe becoming a tool of death was a fitting end.” I recalled my recent battle with Lancer. Whatever happened, someone must have ripped out his scale. I loved the irony of that.

“What’s so funny?! Die, die, DIE!!!” the assassin screamed, launching a frenzy of stabs and thrusts that struck only empty space before me. Spittle frothed at the corners of his mouth. He must have used some kind of drug.

So pathetic. Given another chance at life and this is what he chose?

"You're just suffering needlessly. Let's end this," I communicated, making it look like I was going to repeat my previous technique.

"Like I'd fall for the same trick again!" he yelled, retreating quickly and positioning himself at a mid-range distance—perhaps confident he had options from there. He sprang off the alley walls, ricocheting like an acrobat. As he readied himself to strike, he caught sight of me and froze in shock.

Whatever maneuver he intended was spent in a fleeting second—one or two at most. I already had the bow drawn; my aim locked.

"Impossible…" he murmured, realizing too late that he was directly in my line of fire.

A split second later, the assassin wielding the slender sword forged from the Greater Dragon's scale disappeared from this world.

I suppose that finally closes the chapter on the Bright-sensei incident. With him gone, any threat to Eva-san and Luria should be drastically reduced. Targeting me was a fortunate misstep.

"H… ah…" A strangled sound broke my train of thought.

Ah, the student. I had forgotten about him.

With Shiki still busy disciplining Eris and the others, I'd have to handle this quickly, even if it meant taking shortcuts.

I released the barrier surrounding the boy, who remained nearly immobile with fear, his legs unsteady. Stepping closer, I placed my palms gently on either side of his head.

"Y-You… You're… I-I'm Il… Ilm…" he stammered.

"Forget." I channeled a spell into his mind, just as Shiki had taught me, infusing magic that would blur his recent memories for several hours.

His eyes rolled back, and he slumped to the ground.

Looks like it worked. A minor incident, but one more worry lifted. Time to head back to the Demiplane.



“Welcome back, Young Master. I was just about to reach out to you. Perfect timing,” Tomoe greeted me with her usual composed demeanor.

“Tomoe. It’s rare to find you in the Demiplane before dinner. How’s the investigation going?”

After completing the missions I’d assigned to her, Tomoe had been focusing on bringing seasonal change to the Demiplane’s climate—flying around the world from morning until night. It was for this purpose that I granted her request of a world map, a rare item she eagerly wanted for guidance during her travels.

Despite her daily flights and relentless work, she managed to keep progress steady on all of the Demiplane’s projects, including recreating traditional Japanese cuisine. I found myself regularly astounded by her exceptional diligence and capability. In appreciation, I purchased the map. It had been an expensive buy—honestly, pricier than a house—but I felt it necessary.

“About that. I’ve identified a highly promising candidate location,” Tomoe continued, her tone serious. “Taking action can wait until after the upcoming festival, but I wanted your approval.”

The academy festival. When I mentioned it, both Mio and Tomoe were immediately on board. In the end, we all agreed to turn the entire week into a holiday for the Demiplane.

“Even if it’s called a holiday, I doubt most of them will change their routines much,” Ema remarked with a rueful smile. The people of The Demiplane were truly hardworking. I’d suggested

they use it for family bonding, but who knew how that would turn out.

"A promising candidate, huh? And what does 'taking action' involve? If it's just me going there, creating a gate, and coming right back, I can do it now," I offered. Leaving a gate behind hadn't posed any issues thus far; there had been no intruders, and even if someone troublesome did appear, I could always handle it upon my return.

"Young Master, you really have gained your strength through your own effort, and I understand why you're confident. Confidence is good, but overconfidence is dangerous. Even a step ahead can lead into darkness."

"I'm not being conceited, Tomoe. But you and the others have acknowledged my strength. That does give me confidence. What's so dangerous about this place?"

I don't think it's overconfidence, really. Besides, unless the Goddess suddenly decides to launch a full-scale assault, the Demiplane's defensive measures are solid.

"The location is deep within demon territory," Tomoe pointed out. "Even if the hyumans were to make progress in the war, it would still take them several years to reach that area."

What?

"Also, there's a demon fortress constructed on the ruins of an old hyuman city nearby. Leaving any trace of a gate to the Demiplane near a stronghold of those with far deeper knowledge of magical forces than hyumans would be… unwise."

She was absolutely right. *Why did Tomoe have to pick such a dangerous spot?* If it had just been an extension of the Wasteland, it would have been straightforward.

This has to be bad luck. Again? Really? Is a little good fortune too much to ask?

"Young Master?" Tomoe's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Just to clarify, what kind of actions are you planning to take? And don't tell me you contacted that demon fortress without my permission," I demanded, frustration creeping into my voice.

"I wouldn't presume to act recklessly. My aim is to ensure our safety, nothing more. I haven't approached the fortress itself. Instead, I've conducted simultaneous field investigations and an analysis based on data we gathered, resulting in some reasonably

accurate predictions.” Tomoe unfurled a vibrant map for emphasis. It wasn’t colored in the modern sense but was richly hued, with areas shaded according to her climatic research. Had she really used that pricey world map for this? No—it was a copy she’d made herself.

Looking at the map, I nodded. “So, here’s the spot. According to your estimates, the climate alignment with Japan’s seasons is about 95 percent accurate? Impressive.”

The map displayed tropical, subtropical, temperate, and polar climates, with predictions for temperature distributions, and comparisons to Japan’s seasonal changes. The sheer amount of information was remarkable and clearly conveyed. It felt like peering into the notes of a meticulous scholar.

The similarities and differences with Japan’s climate patterns on the map were striking, and each time I looked at it, a sense of wonder and curiosity surfaced. Despite the disparities, it reminded me of an ancient depiction of Japan—like something sketched centuries ago, with distorted scales and numerous oddities.

For instance, the area I recognized as Kyushu was exaggerated, fanning out broadly with its lower end unfinished, and there were drawings symbolizing the wilderness. Tsige was located atop what seemed to be the Kanmon Straits, and the golden road we’d traveled felt like an amalgamation of the Sanyo Expressway, the Shin-Meishin Expressway, and parts of the Chuo Expressway.

To the west lay the Kingdom of Limia, and to the east, the Gritonia Empire; and from northern Kanto onwards, it was demon territory. Beyond the ruined great nation of Elysion, there was little detail. The region corresponding to Hokkaido was entirely absent—either undiscovered or nonexistent. Given the uncanny similarities to Japan, I suspected it simply hadn’t been charted.

The Seto Inland Sea was represented by a mountain range separating what would have been Chugoku and Shikoku. While there was no nearby lake, Rotsgard roughly matched the location of Lake Biwa’s shores. Since I often used teleportation from Tsige, I had little grasp of actual distances, but the regional layout mirrored Japan’s geography closely enough to make

memorization easy. Two oceans were confirmed—equivalent to the Pacific and Japan Seas—but beyond their borders, the map was blank. Was there nothing else, or did the world stretch further? If this parallel extended beyond Japan's similarity, there had to be other landmasses. Perhaps someone like Luto would know more.

As I reflected on the map's familiar yet alien geography, Tomoe's voice pulled me back to the present. "It's a place we absolutely need to secure. May I proceed?" Her tone was eager—perhaps too eager.

"'May you proceed?'" I echoed incredulously. "You're talking about a demon-controlled area, right? It's not exactly safe."

"That won't be an issue. As soon as I have permission, I'll take care of the cleanup immediately."

Cleanup? She's ready for battle…

"It's a fortress, you know. How exactly do you plan on handling that?" I asked, trying to grasp her strategy.

"By crushing it head-on," she replied matter-of-factly, as if discussing a casual stroll.

Is she seriously proposing an assault? While her confidence was undeniable, this wasn't a decision to be made lightly. The idea of attacking a fortress was anything but trivial.

"I need time to think it over," I said cautiously.

"I understand. I will await a favorable decision," Tomoe conceded, a hint of disappointment in her expression. I trusted her capabilities—that wasn't the problem. Nevertheless, assaulting a fortress carried too many implications. It risked war with the demons and would affect our standing in this world.

This choice can't be made lightly.

"For now, why don't you enjoy the academy festival and work leisurely on producing more Japanese ingredients?" I suggested.

"I think I'll take you up on that. Thanks to what you taught me recently, I've gained a fair grasp of koji, and I'm sure I'll make more progress. If all goes well, I might have a report about producing sake for the company soon. Until then…"

"Sounds good. See you at dinner."

Understanding koji, huh.

I barely had half a grasp on it myself. Even so, my brief explanation had seemed to spark genuine interest in Tomoe and Shiki. I'd been embarrassed when they'd praised me—my explanation had been rather rudimentary. I'd only covered the basics of fermentation: tiny invisible organisms that consumed starches and sugars to produce alcohol and umami. I also mentioned that some related organisms turned alcohol into vinegar, so it was wise to separate sake and vinegar production. Just random tidbits, really.

Yet Tomoe and Shiki listened intently until the end, even expressing surprise that koji wasn't a magical catalyst or medicine.

Sometimes, I want to ask what parts of my memories they're interpreting… It must be hard to accurately extract information from fragments of memory, especially when my own knowledge is limited. Still, they were capable of turning even the simplest information into actionable insights.

Shiki, for instance, was already contemplating whether similar microorganisms existed in this world's brewing processes and how they might be utilized. He'd become quite adept at experimenting with soil and food studies—whether that was a good or bad development was another matter entirely.

After parting ways with Tomoe, I headed to visit Mondo in the forest ogres' quarters. Speaking of which, Mondo had recently asked about relocating the forest ogres entirely to the Demiplane. Apparently, one of the elders, Nilgistori, managed to convince the council after observing the rapid growth of young forest ogres living here on a trial basis. Perhaps their interest was more influenced by the enticing ingredients and equipment these youths brought home as souvenirs.

Now that we'd found a solution to their punishment of turning people partially into trees via Tree Execution, I no longer feared them as I once did. If they wished for it, I saw no reason to refuse their request.

The remaining concern was what to do with the forests and meadows they managed in the Wasteland. While the details were still pending, full relocation was essentially a done deal.

"Y-Young Master?!"

Sensing my approach, a forest ogre hurried over to me, trying to keep his expression professional, but he was obviously surprised.

His reaction made sense; it wasn't often that I came here alone. But I hadn't seen the need to bring Tomoe along, Mio was humming while cooking, Shiki was in a meeting with Ema that I didn't want to interrupt, and Komoe-chan was napping, so here I was.

"Long time no see. Is Mondo around?" I asked, offering a casual wave.

"Y-Yes! I will fetch him at once!"

"No need. I'll go see him myself—I'm the one with business here."

"Then please allow me to lead you to the captain. This way!" He steadied himself, exuding both nervousness and determination as he guided me to Mondo's location. I had to admit, the change in their demeanor from when I'd first met them was remarkable. It seemed Tomoe's… training program had worked wonders.

"Compared to the other races, your residential area feels a bit smaller. Will you be moving when everyone's ready to relocate?" I queried. These quarters looked more like a collection of temporary lodgings than a true village.

"Is it true that we'll be given permission to relocate, Young Master?!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with anticipation.

"It's not finalized, but it's pretty much a done deal. Your elders seem eager, and once you all have more practice with controlling the Tree Execution, it should work out well. You've done a great job, and we all recognize that."

"Th-Thank you! We will continue to dedicate ourselves to our duties and training!" he said, bowing deeply. His sincerity was almost overwhelming.

Eris could learn a thing or two from him. Despite her abrasive personality, she managed to excel through rigorous training. In contrast, Aqua seemed to have mellowed out, channeling her seriousness in a positive direction, but Eris… She hadn't changed much, at least not in that regard.

I should ask Mondo for advice on dealing with her. She's a good employee at Kuzunoha and our clients love her; there's no point in

replacing her unless she does something truly irredeemable. Maybe that's too lenient, but so be it.

To my surprise, Mondo was already waiting outside his house, despite me not having given advance notice of my visit.

"Forest ogres are sharp," I mused, lifting a hand in greeting. He responded with a respectful bow, and I felt a twinge of guilt about not having shared the banana milk with them last time. Perhaps tonight, after dinner, I could make it up to them.

Mondo and I discussed relocation plans, work opportunities in Rotsgard, and even new menu ideas for Kuzunoha. For the most part, it was an incredibly productive conversation.

Then came the part about Eris…

"My preferred methods are the Fist of Reflection and the Kick of Discipline," Mondo stated with absolute seriousness.

I stared at him, caught between the urge to laugh and the weight of my growing headache. What was I even supposed to do with that?



It's noisy.

I thought I heard a commotion. What was going on? I had barely gotten any sleep last night preparing the store for the academy festival. I sorely needed more rest but here I was wide awake—

Ugh!

Shit! What time is it?

I shot up in a panic and glanced out the window. Bright light streamed through the gap in the curtains. It was far too intense to be the early morning sun.

I've always hated mornings like these—where sleep vanished in an instant, replaced by a flood of anxiety.

Nothing's changed; it's exactly like those awful mornings back in Japan!

I hurriedly dressed and checked myself in the mirror—a new habit of mine. Before coming to this world, I would've only run a quick hand through my bed hair while washing my face. Everything changed when the Rembrandt sisters took it upon themselves to coordinate my appearance, from dressing to grooming. "This is our show of gratitude for everything you've done," they'd said, then they'd spent half a day dragging me around to pick out outfits, hairstyles, and even cologne. Ever since then, people looked at me differently.

It seems so obvious in hindsight, but I ignored it for years. That was pure laziness on my part. With the sisters' guidance, I learned to maintain a respectable appearance. *It's especially important since I work in customer service and better for my confidence too.*

Once I finished getting ready, I headed downstairs.

I hesitated to step into the store, choosing instead to quietly observe. There it was—an overwhelming crowd of customers filling the shop. *Oh no, I've really done it this time…*

Shiki noticed me and broke away from his duties to approach.

"Good morning, Raidou-sama," he greeted with a polite bow.

"Morning, Shiki. Sorry! I completely overslept…" I said, scratching the back of my head.

"It's understandable. We were preparing until dawn yesterday," he replied, a soft kindness in his eyes. "Besides, everything is running smoothly."

His kindness stung. Together, we had reorganized shelves, added more displays, hung promotional posters, and even written chalkboard messages for the storefront. It didn't feel right to just wave it off because he was still awake.

What exactly did he mean by "running smoothly"? The store was a madhouse. If the eldwar was the only one managing inside, then Lime and the others had to be outside. *Does that mean there's a line out there? So, the noise that woke me up was from that… Great. Now I feel even worse.*

"Are Lime and the others outside?" I asked, glancing toward the door.

"Yes, they're managing the queue. We're taking measures to ensure our customers don't disrupt nearby shops," Shiki explained in his usual calm, professional tone.

"Thanks for handling that. So, it's close to noon now?" I asked, feeling guilt from the hours I had missed.

"Just about."

"How's business?"

We had prepared ample stock for the festival crowd. Our shop carried all sorts of items, though medicine was our primary focus. Medicine wasn't usually something that sold out during festivals, but it was an opportunity to boost our inventory and get our staff engaged.

Inns, eateries, and evening venues may be doing even better than us too.

"We're nearly sold out for the day!" Shiki exclaimed. "A lot of curious customers have stopped by, and even our slower-moving

items are selling well. It's tough to keep up."

"What?! With just minor discounts?"

"Yes. The line was long before we even opened."

There was a line before opening? I wish I could have seen that…

"Why's that?" I asked, puzzled.

"It appears that some people have been spreading word of our healing ointments' effectiveness," Shiki replied. "As a result, many who wouldn't normally do business in the academy city have stopped by for the festival or asked others to bring products back for them. Even adventurers, who rarely come here without a pressing reason, have been spotted in large numbers today."

Word of mouth, huh? So, there are people out there who have used our medicine even in remote areas.

Although I had a system where Tsige served as a hub and the forest ogres operated like old-school traveling medicine sellers from Toyama,[2] I never expected much from word of mouth in areas we couldn't visit regularly.

So, this means that other merchants and passersby must have tried our products, liked them, and spread the word! How humbling.

"Do you think we should review our stock?" I asked.

"No need," Shiki assured me, calm and confident. "Originally, it was just the arachs handling the production, but now we have the gorgons helping as well. They're quite skilled at pharmaceuticals. Thanks to them, our production has increased significantly, so as long as we can return to the Demiplane, we won't face any stock shortages."

The number of Wasteland dwellers who wished to live in the Demiplane had surprised me. Recently, I'd conducted interviews with a few of them, and several species decided to move there, including the gorgons.

"I see. That makes sense."

"However," Shiki added, his expression turning more serious, "if we sell too much, it may raise suspicions. It would be best to only increase yesterday's planned supply by about 20 percent."

He has a point. We don't want to draw undue attention with excessive stock. It's a sensitive time, after all.

“All right. We’ll go with that plan. But at that rate, some customers might leave empty-handed.”

I’d love to sell to everyone who comes all this way… It’s a shame.

“There will undoubtedly be some disappointment,” Shiki admitted. “But to mitigate dissatisfaction, we’ve taken a few measures.”

“What kind of measures?” I hadn’t anticipated a shortage scenario. We had only aimed to match the movement of similar stores, as informed by the Merchant Guild’s data.

“We’ve sent Lime to the end of the queue to stop more people from joining it. For those who won’t receive today’s stock, we’re having an eldwar inform them of the shortage and provide vouchers for tomorrow’s purchase. For customers who can’t come back tomorrow, we’re offering gift certificates issued by the Merchant Guild. They’ll be valid for use in many establishments across the city, including restaurants.”

Gift certificates… That rang a bell. I remembered receiving one before. You could use it yourself or gift it to a valued client.

“Gift certificates, huh,” I mused aloud.

“Yes,” Shiki confirmed. “Additionally, starting tomorrow, we plan to check the items customers need before opening. We’ll compare requests with our inventory and inform those who can’t purchase them so they won’t have to wait in line. I took this initiative on my own—was that inappropriate?”

“No, thank you. Did we have that many gift certificates on hand, though?”

“I felt that directly handing out money would be inappropriate, but I remembered the gift certificates distributed by the guild. Since they’re already trusted, it wouldn’t raise suspicions. So, I visited the guild and purchased more.”

“Good call—an essential expense, really. Even if I’d woken up on time, I doubt I’d have been capable of such a quick decision.”

“I’m sorry, Young Master,” Shiki said, bowing. “There were a few incidents that nearly prompted me to wake you. However, when I came into your room, I found Mio-dono… Well, she was watching you sleep.”

What? That’s terrifying! Mio was already back here?

“I-I see. And then?” I managed to ask, forcing composure.

“When she asked why I was waking you up, I explained the situation. Then she asked why you were still asleep.” He chose his words carefully, as he often did when discussing Mio. I noticed he had switched from calling me Raidou to “Young Master,” a mark of his formality and deference whenever Mio came up.

“Go on,” I urged.

“I mentioned that you were working on getting the store ready until dawn and were understandably exhausted. Then she wondered why I would even consider waking you for such a trivial matter. She said it was ‘completely unacceptable,’” he continued, hesitantly.

Mio… It’s fine, really. Shiki was right to wake me up. You should have let him do it… What a high-spec anti-alarm system she was.

“Sorry, Shiki. That must have been exhausting,” I said with genuine remorse.

“No, not at all,” Shiki replied, shaking his head slightly. “After reconsidering, I realized I could handle these matters myself.”

Shiki says it’s something he can handle, so I’m pretty sure he managed things far better than I would have in my groggy, half-asleep state. Watching him lately brought words like steward or retainer to mind. I really couldn’t thank him enough.

“So, where’s Mio now?” I asked, glancing around.

“She said she was going out for a stroll. Tomoe-dono is accompanying her.”

“Is that… okay?” I asked, a hint of worry creeping into my voice.

Leaving just those two to wander around the city…

“Fortunately, Luto-dono happened to arrive as well. The three of them were planning to go on a food tour together. They assured me they would be back in time for dinner at Ironclad.”

Somewhat reassuring… but also nerve-wracking. I could only place a small sliver of hope in Luto’s long-lived wisdom and his grasp of hyuman norms.

“Well, even if I asked those two to help out in the store, I can’t just throw them into this kind of chaos,” I said, resigning myself to the situation.

“Indeed,” Shiki agreed, a faint smile touching his lips. Aqua and Eris were dazzling customers with their exceptional service,

moving so fast they seemed to multiply. The eldwar was assisting them, on top of his usual duties.

"Wait, wasn't the eldwar supposed to be selling weapons? I recall giving him permission for that."

"Ah, yes," Shiki confirmed, amused. "Those are already sold out."

"That fast? I'm pretty sure I said he could sell up to ten per day…"

"That's right; all ten have already been sold."

Impressive… Maybe I should let him continue selling in the future. Even if the weapons aren't particularly remarkable, they might cause waves in some circles.

"They are highly valued for their practical enchantments, especially by those in the trade," Shiki explained, his eyes brightening as he spoke. "And it was fortunate that the first customer happened to be a demi-human with appraisal skills."

A stamp of approval on the enchantments? That's incredibly lucky. I had allowed basic explanations of the weapons' abilities but avoided guaranteeing specifics. For a festival novelty, they were quite expensive, and I figured only those with a discerning eye would make the purchase.

"A sword that won't rust if wiped down lightly after battle," I recalled, "and one that readily accepts elemental imbuements."

"Yes. The durability of the weapons themselves isn't anything extraordinary, but they're sturdy enough. As long as they aren't bent out of shape or subjected to extreme abuse, they should serve their owners for a long time."

"The elders and seasoned craftsmen were pretty unimpressed, though," I said with a wry smile. When the younger craftsman presented it, they all wore grim expressions. *Honestly, if I hadn't been there, he might have been shouted down.*

"They were lamenting about 'the youth these days,' as usual," Shiki remarked, smiling. "Though they were diligent enough to make several types of seasonal armor for you, Young Master. In a way, even those requests seem rather trivial compared to the essence of true armor."

Yeah, wearing a long coat all year round would look pretty bad.

I was genuinely grateful to the eldwar for indulging my whims. It probably wasn't fair to get labeled as "the youth these days" when making these requests. I preferred to think their lament was aimed at the enchantments that made maintenance easier, not my specific orders. Besides, appearance-related concerns had little to do with the core essence of armor.

"I'm being spoiled, no question," I admitted. "So, the weapons sold out completely, huh? Oh, about that incident you mentioned earlier—was it related to the line of customers?"

"No."

That's unusual. He had been so forthcoming up until now, aside from the situation with Mio. My curiosity was piqued.

"Has it been resolved?" I asked a bit more seriously.

"Yes," he confirmed. "It happened right after we opened. Some customers took issue with the fact that, apart from Lime and myself, all of our employees were demi-humans. They questioned whether we were employing 'inferior species' and whether the products were even trustworthy. We've managed to stamp out such prejudice during our regular operations but not for first-time visitors."

"Racism."

"Yes. Lime and I handled it smoothly enough, but it left a sour taste for everyone involved. If it's possible, perhaps you could offer a few words of encouragement to the staff later. Things have settled down inside for now, but there might still be some friction outside where Lime is managing the crowd."

"Can we pull the eldwar back inside?"

"That would be difficult. We can't have both Lime and me away from the shop floor. Lime has been engaging customers while delegating tasks to the dwarves. It's a practical approach, given the circumstances. As for inside, Aqua and Eris are handling customer service excellently."

"I see. Why is it that hyumans, who don't have any notable qualities themselves, feel justified in looking down on demi-humans?" I sighed in frustration. *Don't they find it pathetic?*

Is receiving the Goddess's favor really that impressive? She's been a sleeping goddess for more than a decade, barely lifting a finger. I just don't get it.

Shiki could only offer a wry smile.

The store was still bustling with activity, leaving me with little room to step in. I felt out of place.

Okay, I promise myself—I won't oversleep tomorrow.

"It seems we're beginning to run out of daily goods and food items," Shiki noted. "I'll go back to customer service and explain the situation. Young Master, if you could adjust the inventory after closing tonight, that would be helpful. I'll assist you."

I know joining customer service now without understanding the situation would be reckless. My tardiness didn't provoke the most inspiring start for the festival's first day, but what's done is done.

I decided I would greet Lime and the eldwar outside, check the line, and then get a head start on tomorrow's stock. Tonight, I had reservations at Ironclad with Tomoe and Mio, so at least there was that to look forward to.

After handling inventory…

Oh, right. I need to take Shiki with me to the academy.

There were a few places I needed to make courtesy calls. After staying here this long, I'd built up a fair number of relationships. Even if today's research exhibits weren't particularly aligned with my interests, duty called.

"Let's get moving!" I said, determined. Glancing at the notepad in my left hand, I reviewed my schedule for the day. With the resolve to make up for my earlier blunder, I exited the store through the back entrance.

Huh? There's someone here.

A wave of familiarity hit me as I noticed a figure near the alley behind the row of rear store entrances. The aura he exuded wasn't strange, but it was nostalgic. He had slightly tanned skin and dark hair—a face reminiscent of a middle eastern ethnicity. The thick mustache under his nose matched the image I had of someone from an oil-rich nation. Maybe it stood out more because most people here had Caucasian features. Seeing someone with a facial structure somewhat like mine (not that I'd ever say it aloud without expecting a reprimand) made me feel an odd sense of connection.

Nevertheless, it didn't concern me. He wasn't a familiar face, and he seemed more interested in watching the street than

anything else. He kept stepping out to the main road and then back again.

Not a customer, I guess?

“Kuzu-ha?”

Kuzunoha. He’s missing the “no.”

To reach Lime and the eldwar, I had to walk past him. *Hopefully, I can get by with a quick nod and a polite pass.* I lowered my head slightly as I walked by, uncertain if the gesture would be understood.

Fortunately, he stepped aside, making room for me to pass.

Just as I was walking past him, he spoke up. “No mistake. Kuzunoha. Why… How could the sacred characters of our Lorel lineage appear here…?”

Lorel? My attention was momentarily drawn to the name of the distant nation, but my pressing duties left me no time to stop. My eyes went wide as I took in the line. They’d said it was long, but this was next level. I hurriedly greeted Lime and the eldwar, apologizing and offering my gratitude before diving headfirst into our tasks for the day.



"Sake! We're running out of sake!!!" Tomoe exclaimed, her voice loud and emphatic.

"Tomoe, you're too noisy," Mio said, irritation seeping through her otherwise calm demeanor.

"Relax. It's going as planned, right? There's no need to panic…" I tried to reassure them, although I secretly agreed with Tomoe that hot tofu could reach even greater heights with a dash of ponzu sauce. But that required soy sauce, and without the ability to replicate traditional Japanese fermented foods, it just wasn't possible yet. Still, it was delicious enough when seasoned with the fragrant salts commonly used here.

Speaking of which, there's even kelp salt around… Maybe I should suggest that next. If we can recreate something close to kelp, it's worth a shot.

Time had flown by as we bustled around, and now it was already evening.

Despite the busy festival season, Ironclad graciously honored our reservation and even let us have a private room—a luxurious privilege. Seeing the long line of customers outside as we walked in left me with a twinge of guilt. Tonight's gathering included Tomoe and Mio from the Demiplane, and we were celebrating with all the staff who had worked so hard in the store. We should've done this yesterday, but my poor planning got in the way.

At least I'm the only one here who might end up with a hangover, so I don't have to worry about anyone else not coping tomorrow.

Tomoe and Mio had requested hot pot dishes as close to Japanese-style as possible, so we started with a few choices. There was hot tofu, which wasn't popular at Ironclad, and a salted chicken hot pot that also didn't have much of a following. For the chicken hot pot, I'd requested they use water infused with kelp to get it as close to mizutaki as possible.

It's been so long since I last had it that my memory's fuzzy, but it feels right.

Meanwhile, Shiki and the employee team, familiar with the place, had ordered their own food and were already enjoying themselves. Several empty pots sat to the side, evidence of their enthusiasm. Shiki was contemplating a cream-based hot pot, a jar of mayonnaise in hand. *No way am I touching that.*

"Young Master, this is delicious. Truly delicious," Tomoe declared, savoring each bite of the hot tofu and mizutaki. "Neither is exactly like the original, but the essence comes through clearly. Still—I can't forgive myself for failing to procure proper sake!"

Tomoe continued to speak passionately as she ladled herself a drink, her sleeves rolled up. The amber liquid she poured into her mug wasn't something that should be served that way… *Even if we manage to make sake soon, will its alcohol content satisfy her?*

"So, this is nabe…" Mio said thoughtfully, sampling a bit of everything. "It seems like a dish with endless variations. Fish, meat, vegetables, seasonings, and most importantly, the base soup… I love challenges like this!"

Mio's eyes lingered on the hot tofu and mizutaki combo, even as she sampled other things. The mizutaki had turned out fairly well, but there was one thing missing—something that could replace shungiku, a bitter green vegetable, which I hadn't found yet. Maybe there was something similar in the Demiplane. But since it was a niche ingredient mostly useful for hot pots, I hadn't mentioned it before.



“Just you wait! I shall recreate the bold, masculine sake of Hyogo Nada and the refined, feminine sake of Kyoto Fushimi!” Tomoe declared with fiery determination.

Wow. Tomoe’s standards are sky-high. If that’s her goal, the journey ahead is going to be a long one. If she’s talking about masculine and feminine sake, then she’ll need to experiment with every aspect—rice, water, everything. It seems excessive. And really, Tomoe’s all about the dry flavors, isn’t she?

Living in this world had given me a newfound appreciation for the vastness of the internet. It was such a convenient tool for research—back on Earth, I’d taken it for granted.

“Young Master,” Shiki called out, holding a jar. “I have a theory that cream and mayonnaise might have unexpected compatibility. Do you recall any such dishes?”

I shuddered involuntarily. “Shiki, sorry, but aside from their color, I can’t see any real commonality between those two. Please don’t start any terrifying culinary experiments before we’ve even had a drink,” I pleaded.

Even just imagining the combined flavors made my appetite plummet. If only he’d steer that creativity toward something like a soy milk hot pot…

Then a cheerful voice resounded through our private room as Luria burst through the door. “Thank you for waiting! I’ve brought the additional ingredients and another pot!” She ducked beneath the noren curtain that served as a partition, giving me a glimpse of the scene beyond.

It was pure chaos—customers packed in like sardines. Incredible. Hot pot wasn’t exactly fast food, so I wondered if those waiting would ever get their turn.

Shiki, ever the considerate one, spoke up. “It’s bustling, Luria. You’re putting in a lot of effort, but can you keep it up for a whole week? Pushing yourself too hard is bad for your health. I’ll have a supply of nutritional drinks sent over by tomorrow.” I made a mental note to follow his example.

“I’m fine, Shiki-san! We’re prepared for the festival rush!” Luria replied, her voice bright and confident. “Plus, my sister’s helping out!”

Wait, what? Eva, the librarian? Helping Luria in this madness? That doesn’t seem possible…

“Eva can handle customer service too? How versatile.” I couldn’t keep my surprise to myself.

“Eh?! Oh, um… Actually, my sister is helping with dishwashing and chopping vegetables in the kitchen,” Luria explained, looking a bit flustered.

Ah. So, she got relegated to the kitchen, huh? I knew something like that would happen. Even there, she’s stuck washing dishes and cutting veggies. So predictable, given her clumsiness with the customers. Good thing I didn’t ask more directly.

“She comes every year because she wants to help out at the place that’s taken care of her, but… well, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Even at home, my sister always handles the dishwashing, so that’s where she’s best put to work here too,” Luria explained fondly.

“Just hearing that makes her sound like a wonderful sister,” Shiki commented.

“Shiki-san, she really is a good sister,” Luria insisted earnestly. “Ah, excuse me, I need to get back. Call me if you need anything else!”

I’m guessing Luria can handle customer service with that incredible multitasking skill, just like Aqua and Eris. Some people seem almost superhuman in their efficiency. Could it be that customer service is actually an advanced combat ability?

Maybe I’ve had a bit too much to drink.

Tomoe’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “No, no, I had Luto guide me around today, and it’s been an incredibly enjoyable festival.” She took a sip of her drink. “I even saw a few high-ranking officials from major nations gathered for certain events, and there were aristocrats and wealthy merchants squabbling in the streets with their entourages. Quite the spectacle.”

“Indeed,” Mio agreed. “Tsige always has stalls, but the variety here was extraordinary. There were so many cooking methods I’d never seen before. I’m looking forward to tomorrow. Oh, and, Young Master, did you know that in Lorel, some people have a custom of eating fish raw?”

Tomoe and Mio were both talking about the festival, but their perspectives couldn’t have been more different.

“In the restricted academy section, students were engaged in charming training exercises,” Tomoe continued. “Apparently, later events will include competitions in martial arts and magic. I’d love to watch with you, Young Master, and see how your students fare.”

“I intend to broaden my culinary horizons during this festival!” Mio declared, her enthusiasm clear. “With Luto around, I don’t even have to wait in long lines, it’s very convenient.”

I promised to watch Jin’s match, so it should be fine to bring Tomoe and Mio along. Luto had expressed interest as well, but given his status, he’d likely end up treated as a guest of honor, making it impossible for him to sit with us.

Even so, Luto seemed to have been a great help throughout the day. I doubt he managed to go completely without causing a stir, but in a festival this large, small disputes were practically routine. As long as he didn’t get into serious trouble with influential figures like Tomoe mentioned, I was content.

“It’s a festival that only comes around once a year, so I hope you two enjoy it to the fullest,” I said, smiling. “Let’s all go watch the matches together.”

My followers voiced their agreement enthusiastically. Judging from today’s experience, it seemed Shiki and I could take turns enjoying the festival without issue. Most of our stock sold out by midday, anyway, so if someone was on hand for customer requests, everything should be fine. Communication was easy to maintain.

Tomorrow, I had plans to attend a presentation with the Rembrandt sisters, accompanied by Rembrandt-san himself. *No way can I afford to oversleep.* Time to lay off the alcohol and focus on the hotpot.

Everyone around me seemed in high spirits. Tomoe and Lime were drinking and laughing boisterously. Mio faced the hotpot with the intensity of a true warrior, her cheeks flushed. The two forest ogre girls and Shiki had produced a collection of empty pots, each leaving a white ring on the table. The eldwar was relentless, cooking meat with minimal broth and washing it down with beer.

Everyone’s enjoying themselves more than usual. It’s good to let loose occasionally.

All right, time for me to dive into those limited menu items!

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“To leave the country at a time when another attack on Stella is imminent is beyond foolish,” the older man growled, his voice low and strained.

“If the Empire hadn’t sent that princess, there would have been no need for us to come… but we cannot afford to leave her intentions unchecked,” replied the younger man, his tone calmer but laced with tension.

“I’m well aware! The root of the problem lies with the Empire’s hero and Princess Lily. There’s even been evidence of unauthorized entries into Limia. We *cannot* allow them to disrupt us from within during wartime. Being undermined by fellow hyumans… What a nuisance.”

“They say Tomoki Iwahashi, the hero from the Empire, is a hero like Hibiki-dono, but his thinking is markedly different. Rather than trust, maintaining a relationship of mutual exploitation is best. Mishandle it, and they could become our next enemy.”

“I know that! That’s why you and I are here—to keep an eye on their movements and counter any threat they pose. Curse the Empire, what are they plotting?”

Their conversation took place in one of the most heavily guarded rooms within an ivory tower of Rotsgard, which stood at the center of the academy city that gathered the most talented students. This specific section of the tower was reserved for receiving dignitaries, and security was exceptionally tight. Here, the king of Limia and its second prince, Belda—the older of the two princes—were deep in discussion. It was a testament to the intricate power dynamics within Limia that he served as the king’s aide despite his title.

The king's rage seeped through his words, though he managed to maintain a semblance of composure befitting his position. He was a king, after all. He was meant to be in the capital, preparing for the impending assault on Stella Fortress—a critical stronghold that hyumanity had long struggled to reclaim from the demon race. The Rotsgard Academy Foundation Festival was meant to be a venue for discovering and securing talented individuals who would support Limia's future. In the current wartime context, however, it was not an event that warranted the king's presence.

Yet, he was here.

The reason? The Imperial Princess Lily.

Lily, whom Hibiki had warned about following the battle at Stella Fortress, was a figure of growing concern. Despite her title, she had relinquished her claim to the throne and gradually withdrawn from public life, seemingly fading from prominence. Even before Hibiki's warning, Limia had been monitoring her activities. However, with her renunciation from the line of succession, the priority of that surveillance had diminished.

The situation changed when reports began surfacing about the Empire's hero and the increasingly ominous presence of Princess Lily, who supported him. The princess's recent ambiguous movements raised more questions than answers, once again capturing Limia's attention. One particularly troubling report noted her presence near a lake within Limia's borders, an area created by the Wicked One—a powerful and mysterious individual. An unauthorized entry by a foreign princess, particularly one allied with Limia, was a breach that could not go unchecked. To make matters even more pressing, the princess had separated from the hero and traveled alone to attend the academy festival in Rotsgard, citing a diplomatic visit and a quest for talent as her purpose. Limia's leaders, however, deemed this explanation a convenient facade.

This led to another critical issue: determining who among Limia's ranks was best suited to confront the cunning princess of the Empire. Political power in Limia was heavily influenced by hereditary succession, with high-ranking ministers often appointed based on lineage rather than merit. This had resulted in a notable number of inept officials—an issue the king himself

was eager to rectify. However, such a substantial reform could not be undertaken lightly, especially not during a protracted war against the demons.

The lack of competent and trusted individuals to confront Princess Lily posed a serious challenge for the king. Those he did trust were already overburdened with responsibilities. Moreover, factors such as the emergence of Hibiki as a prominent figure on the battlefield, the king's own proactive disposition—uncharacteristic of Limia's previous monarchs—and the existence of a secret teleportation technique that drastically shortened travel between the capital and Rotsgard (from a week to a day and a half) all influenced his decision to attend the festival. Though he intended to return swiftly if conflict arose, his choice to leave the capital was a calculated risk.

The attendance of Limia's king—ruler of one of the most powerful hyuman nations—at the Rotsgard Academy Foundation Festival had a significant side effect: This year's festival saw an unprecedented gathering of prominent figures. While public attendance would peak in the later stages, the early days of the festival had effectively become a stage for international diplomacy.

"We have yet to speak with Princess Lily, so the Empire's true intentions remain unclear. Your Majesty, it is nearly time for your next engagement," the prince reminded him.

"Ah, yes. The Lorel Federation," the king replied with a hint of exasperation. "Perhaps they'll surprise me with some inspired diplomacy and dig one of their famous onsen bathhouses here in Limia for us."

"Heh, as appealing as that sounds, I doubt it's something that can be exported easily. Incidentally, it seems our hero is quite familiar with onsen bathhouses as well. My elder brother has been pondering ways to visit Lorel."

"That fool. My apologies—you've had to endure much due to his whims."

"Not at all. His unique ideas and boldness are admirable. I am confident that he possesses the qualities needed to succeed you, Your Majesty."

The prince's difficult expression briefly softened. Diplomatic affairs often weighed heavily on him, hardening his demeanor,

but discussions of family brought him rare moments of peace.

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. Both men immediately straightened, their expressions shifting back to the stern masks of duty. A voice announced visitors requesting permission to enter.

“Come in,” the king commanded, his tone heavy with authority.

Following the expected formalities and courtesies, the king gestured for the visitors—several men and women—to take their seats on the sofas in the reception area.

“Relax. Given the setting, there’s no need to stand on ceremony. Now, tell me what it is you seek from Limia,” the king said, leaning back slightly but maintaining a commanding presence.

While Limia and the Lorel Federation were officially considered equals among the four great nations, in truth, Limia’s power far surpassed Lorel’s. Limia and Gritonia had grown even stronger with their respective heroes, leaving the two lesser nations further behind.

As a result, Lorel was often treated with condescension.

The leading representative of the Lorel delegation met the king’s gaze without flinching. “I will speak plainly. We ask that the priestess be returned to her homeland.”

“Oh? The priestess, you say? She’s currently by the side of Hero Hibiki, who has descended upon Limia. She accompanies her willingly in battle. Does your nation not hold that the priestess’s will is inviolate and must not be obstructed by any force?” The king was weary of repeating the same arguments. The issue of the priestess had been discussed countless times before.

“We are deeply grateful for your assistance in rescuing the priestess who visited your country. We are preparing a suitable expression of thanks for Hero Hibiki-dono as well. Should she wish it, we are willing to share any knowledge of Lorel’s technology,” the envoy stated smoothly.

As if. The king silently swallowed his true thoughts, showing no change in his expression. *They have no intention of revealing anything in detail.*

“Hmm, I have already relayed that to Hibiki-dono. As I mentioned before, the hero sought the strength of your nation’s Priestess Chiya, and she willingly agreed. The debt of gratitude is already settled; you need not concern yourselves further.”

“For a nation considered one of the twin pillars of the hyuman race to abduct a significant figure from another country and then involve her in such perilous battles… This has the potential to become a serious diplomatic issue,” the Lorel envoy countered, his tone sharpening.

“This is absurd,” the king replied with cold composure. “I will not allow you to twist the facts and misrepresent the priestess’s current role. She was not abducted; she chose of her own free will to accompany the hero and lend her strength. Limia, like Gritonia, stands at the forefront of the war against the demon race, and such a position naturally entails great danger. The priestess is fully aware of this and has chosen to support the hero on the front lines. Your nation, meanwhile, offers support from the rear. Should this not be a source of pride for you? The demon race is a common enemy to all hyumans, is it not?”

By contrasting the roles of frontline and backline support, the king of Limia had skillfully forced his opponent into a corner.

“But surely you understand how vital the priestess is to us! How can you justify putting her life in constant jeopardy?” The female envoy, who had remained silent until now, stood abruptly, her voice edged with emotion that bordered on disrespect. The prince turned, intending to intervene, but the king silenced him with a glance.

“Becoming emotional will not advance this discussion. Consider the situation carefully. At present, the hero’s actions are under the scrutiny of the entire world. If your nation were to disregard the priestess’s wishes, forcibly removing her from the hero’s side and taking her back to your homeland, how do you think that would be perceived? Surely you can imagine the consequences. If you’re adamant, send an envoy. We will return the priestess immediately. However, we will offer no support or defense on the matter. If your concerns remain, dispatch your own elite guards to accompany her. We will ensure they are stationed at her side. But as long as the priestess desires to stay with the hero, your duty is to provide support, not obstruction.”

“Is Limia taking hostages now?” came a low, bitter murmur from the Lorel team.

“Enough!” interjected the king. “Let us forget those words just now.”

“Thank you,” the Lorel representative replied after a brief pause. “Your point is well taken. However, I must emphasize that the priestess is an irreplaceable figure for our people. The current state of affairs strains relations between our nations. We sincerely hope for some form of progress during her stay in the academy city.”

“I will keep that in mind,” responded the king. “We too hope that this matter will lead to a positive outcome.”

The central figure from Lorel rose to his feet, signaling the end of their meeting. His companions followed suit, their expressions revealing a simmering intensity that bordered on hatred. It was evident just how deeply the priestess was revered in their country.

Without a backward glance, the delegation exited the room. Once they had fully departed, the prince spoke, indignant.

“Their insolent attitude and insults warrant a formal protest against the Federation!”

“There’s no need,” the king replied with a wave of his hand. “Their grievances are not entirely incomprehensible. If Hibiki-dono had ventured to the Empire and not returned, we would harbor similar feelings.”

“That may be true…”

“Furthermore, now is not the time to escalate tensions with other nations. Our position must be secure before we can effectively counter the Empire’s maneuvers. Priestess Chiya has chosen of her own free will to remain with Hibiki-dono. It will take time, but we must strive for their understanding. In certain circumstances, having the priestess and Hibiki-dono visit Lorel together may be a worthwhile consideration.”

The king sighed deeply.

If only actions driven purely by ideals could be universally upheld and validated… the world might not be in such turmoil.

He knew the thought was naive but couldn’t help entertaining it. The kingdom’s hero possessed a quality that reignited such idealistic hopes in others. Perhaps such a vision

could be realized, a vision that might either serve as a deadly poison capable of ruining the kingdom or as the catalyst to finally reform the deeply entrenched rot within Limia's monarchy.

Much like the war with the demon race, the path of the great nation of Limia was beginning to shift in unpredictable ways. The king sensed it in his bones.

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"Isn't this great? Isn't it?! I like you, Luria! Will you marry me? Come here!" Tomoe's boisterous declaration echoed through the room as she pulled Luria in close.

"T-T-T-Tomoe?! Please, stop— Ahh, don't squeeze me!" Luria yelped, squirming in vain.

"Yo! Tomoe-nee, you're killing her!" someone cheered from a corner.

"Huh? You got a problem with banana mayo?" a slurred voice shot back.

"Eris, more milk! We need more milk!" another insisted.

"Oil! We're out of oil! Luria-chan, one more of those burning, smooth drinks!" someone else yelled.

"Yes, oil! Aromatic oil might be the missing key to perfecting this hot pot!" another exclaimed passionately.

"Hmm… finely chopped fatty bits for the noodles to finish… Zzz…" came a mumble, followed by immediate snoring.

From the entrance to the private room, I stood there—sober—taking in the scene before me.

Was it just the festive spirit, or had something else triggered this chaos? Whatever it was, the truth was clear: Everyone, including my usually resilient retainers, was thoroughly drunk, except for me.

Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki are normally strong drinkers, the kind who could down barrels without blinking… Why tonight? There

hadn't been anything out of the ordinary with the drinks, at least as far as I knew. It was a mystery.

It was already late, and Ironclad was nearly out of stock. The remaining patrons were either idly nursing their drinks or, unfortunately, starting to pester the waitresses. That was when my inebriated Kuzunoha Company companions burst out of the private room, immediately quelling the disturbance.

Tomoe led the charge, scattering the troublemakers with ease. That should have been the end of it. But no—then they started to stir up their own brand of chaos with the other patrons.

Great. Just great. A complete disaster.

At least no furniture had been broken… yet.

Then, just as I feared…

"Raidou-san, this is getting out of hand," Ironclad's proprietor called, his voice a mix of exasperation and resignation.

Yeah… I knew this was coming. I'd had a few drinks, but compared to the others, I was practically a monk at this point.

"I'm sorry. They don't usually get this bad," I wrote.

"Raidou-san, I won't go so far as to ban you from here—not you. But, please, can you take them home? I can't close up with things like this, and the other customers can't leave."

"Of course. Thank you for everything," I replied with a bow.

Since calculating the actual cost… or damage would be impossible right now, I handed over a rather generous—no, very generous—amount of money.

"Raidou-san, you always pay in cash, which is a big help. I'll get your change right away," the proprietor said, turning to head to the back.

"No, please keep it. I'd feel terrible next time I come by if you didn't," I insisted, shaking my head slightly.

Although it wasn't entirely our fault, I could see that a few tables and chairs had been damaged. *This whole scene… It's just chaos.*

"Hmm, if you say so, but we owe you a lot as well. I know! How about we give you priority service next time you come by?"

"Thank you. I'll take you up on that offer. And thanks again for tonight."

“Haha, no, thank you! The festival’s still going strong, so keep buying, selling, drinking, and eating! You’re always welcome here!”

His words were comforting, but I couldn’t linger. I called over the least drunk among our group and started rounding everyone up.

With some effort, I managed to haul Mio and Shiki—both much larger than me—out of the inn. The crisp night air felt harsh upon my skin, a stark contrast to the warmth we’d just left behind. At least Tomoe was still able to walk, albeit with Lime supporting her. Or… perhaps they were just leaning on each other.

Will everyone be able to wake up on time tomorrow? Please, let me not be the only one up and ready.

With a slight unease lingering in my chest, the first day of the academy festival ended.



“Thank you for playing bodyguard like this.”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, if I’d have come alone to a place like this, I wouldn’t have had a clue how to behave. I appreciate you inviting me.”

In truth, I was mostly trailing half a step behind him, looking like an accessory.

I had no idea about proper etiquette in a dance hall—or whatever this venue was called, since I’d never actually been to one.

It was the second day of the academy festival. Having wrapped up business at the shop more efficiently than on the first day, I met up with Rembrandt, as promised, and joined him at the academy. Today, we’d be attending what was apparently a long evaluation event. Lasting nearly half a day, it included a buffet-style dinner and assessed students’ etiquette and conduct. As guests, we were expected to mingle, observe any students we were connected to, and converse freely while waiting for the opening remarks. The atmosphere was markedly different from my usual surroundings, and I felt it acutely.

Rembrandt was already exchanging greetings with fellow merchants and being approached by various attendees. For the students, however, their behavior and interactions were graded based on their lessons.

So, it’s basically a half-day test in social skills. Honestly, I feel kind of sorry for them.

“With both Lisa and me here, I have to rely on Morris to manage the company’s operations back in Tsige,” Rembrandt

continued. “There might be unexpected issues, so it’s a relief to have you around.”

“I’m glad to see your wife has fully recovered. Hopefully, next year Morris can join us as well,” I replied, offering a genuine smile.

Our official reason for coming here together was Morris’s absence, which meant I was ostensibly accompanying Rembrandt for his safety. But in reality, I suspected there was more to it. For one thing, his daughters had likely insisted I come along. There also seemed to be an opportunity for him to introduce me to potential business contacts, which only dawned on me after arriving.

If true protection were the aim, hiring a bodyguard would have sufficed. The fact that Lady Rembrandt would arrive later for “other reasons” also struck me as odd. Throughout the evening, Rembrandt had been introducing me and the Kuzunoha Company to whomever he spoke with, whether it was someone he greeted or someone who approached him. Even I, often oblivious to social subtleties, could grasp his intentions.

While waiting on Lady Rembrandt to arrive, I tried my best—awkwardly but sincerely—to greet the different merchants and a few nobles from different regions. Their initial reactions ranged from wide-eyed shock to outright disdain, as if I were nothing more than a slave for Rembrandt. However, after he explained my position, most of them at least shook my hand.

I’m aware of how out of place I am here. If I can manage a handshake and an introduction, that’s a success.

There wasn’t a single demi-human in sight—just hyumans, all decked out in opulent attire. The women, adorned in vibrantly colored dresses, added a dazzling beauty to the scene. Not one of them was overshadowed by their outfit. I, on the other hand, felt entirely defeated by my clothing; it only accentuated the averageness of my looks.

Once Rembrandt finished his rounds and reunited with his wife, I planned to quietly observe his daughters from the sidelines.

“Darling, I’m sorry for being late,” came a familiar, melodic voice.

Ah, Lady Rembrandt was here. *She is truly beautiful…* I'd thought the same when we met in Tsige last summer as well. It made sense that Rembrandt-san had never considered taking a mistress. If her appearance alone could leave such an impression, I was convinced there must be many exceptional qualities hidden beneath the surface. When people reached their thirties or beyond, their inner character often seeped through to their outward demeanor, regardless of gender.

Her figure was impeccable, making it hard to believe she was the mother of two high-school-aged daughters. Her face, too, looked youthful compared to her actual age. There was something almost invincible about the way hyumans, or at least the rich ones, managed to retain their youthful looks.

Having seen a fair number of hyumans now, I could better estimate her age during this second meeting. When I'd first seen her recovering from the ghoul-like state brought on by her curse, I'd even mistaken her for the eldest daughter.

"Ah, Lisa. You chose a blue dress today. It suits you well." Rembrandt complimented her warmly.

"Sorry for the inconvenience. I hope the long journey hasn't left you too fatigued," I wrote.

I should've complimented the dress too, shouldn't I? Instead, I've offered an unremarkable greeting. Too late now.

"Thank you," Lady Rembrandt said with a smile. "I thought it was a shame to leave it unworn after bringing it along. This is my first chance since buying it."

Lady Rembrandt turned gracefully to show off her dress to her husband, the deep blue fabric fitting her figure with a tailored elegance. It was the kind of dress that truly shone at a party like this, although the occasion probably didn't come too often.

Now that I think about it… During her time bedridden by the curse, she wouldn't have been able to attend social events, let alone host any. Good thing I remembered before I said something careless.

"Raidou-sama, I apologize for making you play bodyguard for my husband. And thank you for looking after our daughters at school; it seems like we're always asking you for favors," she said, her tone warm with genuine gratitude.

“Your daughters are both incredibly capable, so there really hasn’t been much for me to do. If anything, I should be apologizing for any trouble my company has caused during our time in Tsige,” I replied sincerely.

“I’ll take over keeping an eye on my husband, so please, Raidou-sama, see to Shifu and Yuno. They’ll be thrilled. Oh, and those energy drink you gave us—what a godsend. I felt like a different person once I got here, no travel fatigue at all. Thank you so much.”

“I’m glad to hear they worked. Ah, it looks like the event is about to begin,” I wrote, noticing the subtle shift in the room as people began to settle.

“Oh, you’re right. It seems I really took my time getting here. How embarrassing,” she remarked, a self-deprecating humor in her voice.

“It’s not that formal, so there’s nothing to worry about,” Rembrandt added reassuringly before turning to me. “Raidou-dono, we’ll be heading to our seats now.”

“Of course. Enjoy yourselves, and please call on me again when you’re ready to leave. I’ll be at the guest seating area,” I responded with a slight bow.

The seating in the hall was organized by role, with guests, family, and students each having their own sections. Since I wasn’t a relative of any of the students, my place was different from theirs. I had no intention of lingering between the couple, so it all worked out fine.

I watched as Rembrandt and his wife moved away, arms gently intertwined. *They really are a loving couple.*

I took a sip of a drink offered by a passing server and started to make my way to the wall, preferring to observe from the sidelines. Along the way, I nodded politely to a few people Rembrandt had introduced earlier, exchanging brief acknowledgments as they passed. They seemed just as focused on making their rounds as before.

Dedication like that deserves some respect.

My main goal for the trading company was to spread the use of medicines. So far, this sort of lobbying, networking, or relationship-building—whatever you wanted to call it—hadn’t

been a focus. I'd thought it was unnecessary, but perhaps I had been wrong.

Doing business in a new place takes more than just checking in with the guild—one should forge individual ties with local merchants, nobles, and other influential people.

When I thought about the connections I had built, the list was short: Rembrandt and… maybe that deputy priest, though I wasn't sure if that truly counted as a connection yet.

I had attended only a handful of meetings hosted by the Merchant Guild and had skipped out on most of their social gatherings.

Yeah… I've really been slacking.

On the non-hyuman side of things, I had spoken with two Greater Dragons, a calamity-level spider, and even a god—though that was more of a "onetime" conversation. Pretty impressive when I thought about it. On the flip side, I'd also made enemies with another Greater Dragon and, well… a goddess (probably?). So, on a scale, that left me with one allied dragon and one spider—not sure if that was a net positive…

Maybe it was time to put more effort into building connections with hyumans too. The two heroes and their entourages seemed like promising starting points. Seeing as they were from Japan like me, there was a chance we could find some common ground.

I wonder if any prominent guests from Limia or Gritonia are here today.

The academy festival was known to be a globally recognized event, so it wouldn't have been surprising if heroes decided to show up. Not that this was some kind of university festival with celebrities dropping in or anything. Even though large-scale conflicts had quieted down recently, the demon war was still far from over.

I glanced upward, my mind wandering. The second-floor balcony housed visiting dignitaries invited by the academy. They might come down, if necessary, but for the most part, they stayed up there, engaging in diplomatic discussions. Coming down would have been a headache for their guards. Among those mingling and dancing below, there might even have been some

hoping to catch the eye of someone from the balcony and secure a “happily ever after” for themselves.

Oh. My eyes caught sight of the Rembrandt sisters. And… was that Abelia too?

Makeup and dresses really did work like magic. Seeing these three now compared to their usual selves, always bustling about, was a stark contrast. The transformation was stunning.

I watched from a distance as they made their rounds introducing themselves. Even from where I stood, it was clear they exuded a mature charm far beyond their years. Shifu wore a deep-crimson dress, Yuno was clad in a soft pastel-blue gown, and Abelia had donned a shimmering emerald-green ensemble. Each dress had a distinct design. Shifu’s extended to her shoulders and flowed down to her feet, giving her a more reserved, refined appearance. Yuno, on the other hand, boldly bared her shoulders, and from this distance, it seemed her dress barely reached her knees. Quite daring. Abelia’s gown featured a halter neckline that accentuated her figure elegantly. All three of them engaged in their surroundings with smiles that perfectly complemented the elegance of their attire.

They handle situations like this with such poise. The students here are impressive.

Abelia, for instance, was apparently a scholarship student from an ordinary family. She must have acquired her social skills after coming here. I couldn’t reconcile this polished persona with the image of her trading barbs and commanding battles alongside Jin.

Good thing I’m just watching from a distance.

If the three of them suddenly approached me, I’d probably end up blushing and acting awkward. I imagined Rembrandt proudly watching over his daughters from nearby and glaring daggers at any guy trying to flirt with them… if any bold enough souls were present, that is. I couldn’t imagine it, but given that this academy had students who had married or proposed to teachers out of convenience, it wasn’t entirely impossible.

Oh, they noticed me. Thankfully, they didn’t come over, likely due to the distance and formal setting. They didn’t wave either—probably some etiquette thing. Instead, all three flashed coordinated smiles my way. Unsure of the proper response, I

raised my hand slightly above shoulder level and gave them a smile in return. It probably looked awkward.

Yeah, I should really work on this sort of thing.

Time passed as I continued watching the Rembrandt sisters and Abelia, my thoughts drifting aimlessly, until the background music shifted. The gentle, unobtrusive melodies that filled the hall gave way to something with more rhythm and flow. *Ah, dance music.*

Without any electronic equipment, it meant there was a live orchestra. *Live music… Quite the luxury.*

Sure enough, dancing began. Not that it had anything to do with me, since I couldn't dance. Honestly, I was more interested in finding some actual food, not just snacks to go with drinks. Watching people dance was nice and all, but I couldn't tell good form from bad, anyway.

Flowers are pretty, but I'd rather have dumplings. Aesthetics don't fill the stomach.

Wait… What if someone invites me to dance? I'd have to figure out how to politely decline. Though the odds were slim, the thought alone made me uneasy.

Maybe I should move to a quieter spot.

As I leaned against the wall, sipping a lightly sparkling sweet drink, I glanced up at the second-floor balcony. Several people around me seemed to be taking a similar break, so I didn't look out of place. At least, I didn't think so.

My right hand started to tingle with restless energy as a strangely dense group of people was approaching.

Could they be coming to see me? No… I didn't have any acquaintances who'd attract this much attention.

No way… Is that Luto? I didn't have any plans with him today! Besides, I am not ready to deal with him right now!

I felt a pang of panic and considered slipping away when I heard a voice.

"Are you Raidou-sama? May I have a moment of your time?"

Who…?

The speaker was an unfamiliar woman with a gentle demeanor, surrounded by an imposing contingent of guards.



One… two… three…

Three demons. I had no idea which country this woman was from or what her status was, but if her entourage included demons, that was asking for trouble.

I studied the restrained-looking armed guards. Suddenly, I was reminded of the time I'd met the demon general Rona in this very city; she had used magic to disguise herself as a hyuman. These three must have been using a similar spell to blend in. I wasn't sure if it altered visual perception or worked on a deeper level of recognition—Rona had never explained. Either way, it didn't work on me; I could see them perfectly.

The stark difference in their appearance is a dead giveaway. Their skin tone alone makes it obvious.

"It seems this spot will allow us to avoid prying eyes," the woman said calmly.

I didn't reply.

The woman herself didn't seem to realize that she had demons among her guards. If she was aware, she'd have to be either extremely reckless or downright foolish bringing them to a prominent international event like this.

Like walking into a campfire drenched in gasoline.

It was hard to gauge her age or status—appearances weren't always a reliable indicator here. All I knew was that she was important, judging by the aura of those around her.

The faint strains of music from the main hall barely reached this salon-like corner of the building. It was an empty space, with only me, the woman, and the guards.

“You may step outside for now,” she instructed her guards, gesturing to the entrance of the room. “If anyone tries to enter, kindly ask them to refrain. Station yourselves over there.”

Her skin was too pale to be healthy, and her limbs looked thin and fragile. If asked to describe her, I’d have to say she looked like someone with deteriorating health. There was also a strange sense of familiarity about her. I was sure I’d never met her before, but…

“I must apologize,” I wrote. *“I’ve been trying to place you, but I don’t recall seeing you before. Have we met?”*

If an instructor caused a commotion at a public event, it would be a problem, so I had followed her this far to keep things peaceful. But while she seemed to know me, I couldn’t place her at all, and that was unsettling.

Does she only know me as Raidou of the Kuzunoha Company? Or is there another reason she’d be familiar with me? Whatever the case, she clearly had a reason to clear the room and speak privately.

“Written communication… Oh, no, we’re meeting for the first time, Raidou-sama,” she answered with a smile. “I invited you because I find you intriguing. I apologize for how it must look that I brought my guards along, but my position requires it. I hope you understand.”

Seems like more of my information has leaked out than I thought. If it’s just business-related that’s fine, but…

“Before we get into the matter that interests you, may I ask for your name and position? It feels odd to be sitting across from someone without knowing their name.”

“You’re right, of course.” She gave a small nod. “I’m Sairitsu, one of the caretakers of the Priestess and an Attendant Maiden within the Lorel Federation. I wonder, Raidou-sama, how much do you know about our federation?”

Priestess… Attendant Maiden…

If I recalled correctly, those were figures held in high esteem within Lorel. The Priestess served as a spiritual pillar, while the Attendant Maidens were her prospective successors, or something like that. The term “Attendant Maiden” made me think of the child attendants in traditional brothels from my old world, but it seemed like their role here was much loftier—aiming not for

courtesans, but for something more akin to emperors. *Quite the difference.*

As for the Lorel Federation…

"I must admit that I've never visited and don't know much," I wrote. *"But from what I understand, it's formed by three united countries, and the Priestess is a woman of great power capable of communicating with multiple high-ranking spirits. This grants her a significant voice in political matters in Lorel. Her proximity to spirits means that the people often hold greater reverence for spirits than for the Goddess herself. I've also heard that Lorel has developed a unique culture and is known for its advanced technology."*

Although their culture leaned more toward revering spirits, it still tied back into the broader faith in the Goddess, so I hadn't delved too deeply into studying it. *High technology, a symbolic Priestess… That's about the gist of my impression.*

"I'm impressed," Sairitsu remarked, her eyes widening slightly. "You know us well. Are you considering establishing a branch of your business in our country?"

"Of course, if it's permitted, I would love to someday," I replied politely. *"My business is still in its early stages, but I believe in dreaming big."*

"Well then, please don't hesitate to contact me when that time comes. I would be more than happy to assist," Sairitsu said, her smile gracious and unwavering.

"Thank you very much."

Our conversation paused. She maintained that soft, friendly smile, but her eyes now seemed to be scrutinizing every inch of me. It felt like she was assessing each of my movements and words, quietly probing for whatever information she could gather.

The Lorel Federation. It was one of the four great powers, and the only one that was a union of multiple smaller powers, under the guidance of the Priestess. Geographically, it lay south of the Golden Road we'd traversed, separated by a rugged mountain range. *Thinking of it as somewhere like Shikoku isn't entirely off base.*

They supposedly had a unique culture, but their society was rather insular, with little information leaking beyond their

borders. This only made their technologies and the presence of the Priestess more prominent. Culture, priestesses, advanced technology—when I listed it out, I couldn't help but feel it bore some resemblance to Japan.

Being a federation of three nations meant it was a multicultural state with a wide mix of ethnicities and appearances. People didn't seem particularly concerned about diversity in skin or hair color either. Despite the limited information available, it was certainly a country I was eager to visit someday.

Yet that wasn't the issue at hand. Why had she taken an interest in me? Was it me personally, or was it my store? I needed to know.

"Life is full of mysteries, wouldn't you agree?" she said, breaking the silence. Her smile remained, concealing whatever thoughts lay beneath.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"For someone who claims never to have visited the Lorel Federation, it's curious that you would be using something we have kept hidden and passed down to only a select few."

Something hidden? Something I used? My mind immediately jumped to the high technology that the eldwar worked with. Was it connected?

"Your Kuzunoha Company bears a sign, correct? The one with two characters carved into wood?"

Oh. The kanji.

"Those characters are what we call the Sage's Script. In all of the four great powers—no, in this entire world—only a select few within Lorel possess knowledge of those symbols. How is it that they are used for your store's name, Raidou-sama?"

The Sage's Script? That's just kanji… It's my native language.

"That was one of the scripts I've used since childhood," I explained. *"Strange, isn't it? I've traveled from the Wasteland, you see. Perhaps someone familiar with those characters ventured into the Wasteland from your country and passed them along. I don't know all of the symbols perfectly nor have I ever heard them referred to as the 'Sage's Script' before."*

Maybe some other person from my world passed on kanji in a strange way, and it spread here. Still, I had the convenient cover

story of the Wasteland. So far, simply claiming to come from that region had smoothed over many complications. In a way, it was like my secret trump card.

"An interesting suggestion," Sairitsu said with an amused smile. "But that's impossible. Everyone with knowledge of the Sage's Script who travels beyond our borders is carefully documented. No one fitting that description has ever journeyed to the Wasteland."

What?! This is the first time someone has actually challenged me on that point. And records? In a world this lax about most things, they're confident enough to track this? Impressive, if true.

Time for the next approach.

"Yet the fact remains that I know and use these characters. This suggests that someone, somehow, did reach the Wasteland. Facts must take precedence; if it exists, someone must have shared it."

"Indeed. Facts must be acknowledged," she conceded. "As you say, it's possible that the Sage's Script was carried to the Wasteland. However, I hold another theory."

This should be interesting.

"I'd be happy to hear it."

"The Sage's Script, as you would imagine, was once used by Sages. So, if one were truly a Sage, it would not be odd for them to already possess such knowledge."

So… "Sage" might mean something like "wise man" or even "person of great knowledge." I forced a polite smile and shook my head.

"That is far too generous an assessment. I am no Sage. I am a mere merchant, nothing more—a common trader."

"Raidou-sama." Her tone had lost some of its warmth. "Sage does not refer to scholars of extraordinary wisdom. Rather, it denotes those with knowledge and skills beyond what should be possible in this world. It is a title we bestow out of respect for those from… elsewhere."

Wait… What?

"I don't understand."

"Sages, as we call them, are not of this world. They are outsiders, individuals from distant lands unlike our own. And my

theory, Raidou-sama, is that you might be one of them. Does that resonate with you?"

Sages… So, they mean otherworlders. Another layer of complication. They had wrapped it up in such a lofty, almost sacred term. Of course, I couldn't have known this from books alone—Lorel's insular nature had hidden this from me.

So, kanji is considered "Sage's Script," huh? When I first carved the store's sign, I thought it might make for an interesting talking point if a hero ever happened to come by. I never considered it a big deal—just something to set us apart. I certainly didn't expect that kanji already existed here, let alone that it was a closely guarded secret. At the end of the day, they were just letters. With a shared language and numerical system already in widespread use, it hardly seemed worthy of such reverence.

So… she suspects I'm one of these "Sages." And she's right, of course. But the question remained: Should I admit it or feign ignorance? Until I understood what she wanted, playing dumb seemed like the safer option.

"Oh my, no response?" Sairitsu's voice cut through my thoughts. "You see, there's another reason I suspect you may be a Sage. Your name, for example. I know I introduced myself as Sairitsu, but let me show you how it is actually written."

She spoke gently, taking her time as if sensing my hesitation. Rising from her seat, she walked to my side and traced characters on the table with her delicate finger. Though there was no ink, her movements clearly etched the kanji for "彩律."

It looks like a name you'd expect more in China than Japan.

"And my family name is written like this, though it's read as Kahara." She clarified, "Sairitsu Kahara is my full name. In Lorel, Sages are deeply revered, and over time, many citizens have adopted names that echo those of the Sages. Naming ceremonies often involve parents visiting the shrine dedicated to the spirits—what we call the Yashiro—where priests propose names suitable for the child. Then, the parents choose from these options. The Sage's Script that is used to compose the names is never disclosed; instead, only the sounds are conveyed in the common tongue."

Kahara… meaning "flower" and "plain." Kahara Sairitsu, huh?

The way her family name came first reminded me of Japanese customs, though Sairitsu sounded a bit feminine. Apparently, the kanji weren't widely used, so naming was left to shrine priests who acted as guardians of that knowledge. Despite serving both spirits and the Goddess, these priests were burdened with the task of studying kanji. That must have been difficult.

"There are even times when the names of the Sages themselves are bestowed directly. This shows the deep respect and fondness we have for them. Raidou-sama… your name, too, bears a certain resonance. It's quite similar to our country's naming conventions, don't you think?"

I said nothing.

"There is also the matter of your appearance," she continued. "Our records describe the Sages as a separate species from hyumans, although they resemble us greatly. It has been noted that Sages often prioritize knowledge over physical beauty, and thus, many do not possess remarkable appearances."

Is that really how it is?

I kept a straight face but was reeling inside. Was Lorel truly aware of contact with people from another world? Is that why they were so insular, to protect these secrets? If their technological prowess came from ideas passed down by otherworlders, it would explain a lot. And differentiating between hyuman and human like that… makes it sound plausible. Not that it had anything to do with looks.

"Is it really fine to discuss such an important matter with someone like me?" I asked, feigning surprise. *"I'm no Sage."*

"Raidou-sama, I fear you misunderstand us. We seek to protect Sages so that they do not suffer unjust treatment in this world," Sairitsu explained.

Protect? Luto had mentioned that most people from my world who came here did so by accident. She seems to know quite a lot.

"While things may be calm now, trouble will come to your doorstep eventually. Lorel will be ready to welcome you, and to do all we can to support you."

"I'm afraid I see no reason for such protection. However, if I do meet any Sages, I'll make sure to inform them of your offer."

“It appears I haven’t earned your trust yet. Very well, let us leave it at that for now.” She made a move to leave but then paused, glancing back at me. “Ah, before I go, might I ask you one more question?”

“If it’s something I can answer.”

“The two heroes chosen by the Goddess—do you think they might also be Sages?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t offer an opinion. I don’t know them personally,” I answered truthfully.

Sairitsu offered a gracious smile and rose from her seat. With a slight bow, she turned to leave. But as she reached the door, she paused once more.

“Oh, one more thing,” she said, catching me off guard again. “Your shop’s sign is quite lovely. The character for ‘kuzu,’ medicine, and ‘ha,’ leaf. You must have a particular affinity for medicine.”

“Kuzu is just the name of a plant. It isn’t inherently linked to medicine,” I replied. *“But spreading remedies is a passion of mine.”*

“Indeed, you’re well versed in the Sage’s Script. I hope we meet again before I leave,” she said, before finally departing.

Why does it feel like I lost here?

With her gone, there was no reason to linger. *It’s only the second day of the festival, and things are already tense.*

Lorel’s secrecy… Could it have more to do with their hidden interactions? The king of Limia and a Gritonian princess being here only made things more complicated.

I shook off the unease and headed back to the dance hall. *The festival was just getting started.*



The Demiplane. The City of Mist.

Its exact location remained shrouded in mystery, unknown to any but its dwellers. Even for its master, Makoto Misumi, its precise nature was unclear. The Demiplane was an expansive world accessible only through the gates conjured by Makoto or his trusted followers. Currently, a few diverse species who had relocated from the Wasteland resided there, living in their individual settlements. At the heart of the Demiplane, a central city was under construction.

Despite the Demiplane's vast expanse, its population was still under a thousand. There were several reasons for this: potential settlers failing to meet Makoto's criteria, not passing the scrutiny of his followers, or simply declining the invitation to relocate. Makoto had decided it was fine to increase the number of the Demiplane's residents and had sent emissaries out to recruit, primarily targeting the Wasteland. However, very few cases reached the stage where relocation proposals made it to him. There had been a few matches, but no successful relocations thus far, leaving the Demiplane with a chronic labor shortage.

Recently, seeing how busy Makoto had become with his work in the academy city, the first settlers of the Demiplane—the highland orcs—led by their leader, Ema, took it upon themselves to filter proposals. With the prior consent of potential settlers, she handled the initial stages of negotiation and only escalated cases to Makoto once concrete terms were in sight. Ema, an exceptionally capable secretary who managed a variety of

reports and the overall situation in the Demiplane, felt guilty about burdening Makoto with each potential relocation case individually. Thus, she aimed to bring forth potential settlers for final negotiations only when Makoto had time.

That time had come today. Due to the summer break—an unfamiliar concept to Ema—Makoto found himself spending more time in the Demiplane, even dedicating entire days to personal training. Recognizing the opportunity, Ema informed Makoto of the prospective settlers and arranged for their final meetings. The cases had already passed scrutiny from Makoto's followers, Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki. All that remained was Makoto's approval. Three such cases awaited final review.

Though they might not seem like much, especially given how long it had been since the last report, it wasn't for lack of interest. The Demiplane itself attracted a great deal of attention, but for various reasons, most negotiations broke down before completion.

The Demiplane had been deliberately luring adventurers to its borders—a strategy devised by Makoto and approved by Tomoe. However, this approach had led to the exclusion of many species living near the Wasteland's entrance as candidates for relocation.

The reasoning was simple: Frequent conflicts with hyumans led to strong animosity with the beasts, demi-humans, and non-hyumans living in that region. Ema believed that introducing adventurers into the Demiplane, even in isolated areas, would pose a potential threat if those species harbored deep-seated hatred for hyumans. It was better to eliminate such risks before they could arise. While initial outreach had been attempted with them, every negotiation ended in failure.

What about the more remote areas of the Wasteland? Although they required greater manpower to explore, these regions tended to house species with less animosity toward hyumans. This was largely because any hyuman capable of reaching those areas were powerful individuals, and the species living there often accepted the "law of the strong" as a matter of course.

As a result, recruitment typically began with species from these more distant regions. The forest ogres living in the forest

near Tsige were a rare exception. Though they had gone through grueling training that even the formidable misty lizardfolk feared and were not yet fully relocated, their case was unusual.

At this stage, Makoto's followers—Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki—began their own evaluations. Typically, they assessed the species' way of life, dietary needs, sociability, and unique abilities. Each follower had different selection criteria: Mio relied on intuition, Tomoe had a penchant for eccentricities, and Shiki focused primarily on abilities and practicality. In other words, a candidate had to earn Mio's vague approval, possess "peculiar" traits that caught Tomoe's attention, or demonstrate a minimum level of capability to gain Shiki's endorsement. Selection was strict and heavily dependent on which follower handled the case, making it a challenging process.

Once a species passed this stage, the offer to relocate was presented. Even if a species was approved, they could still refuse. Makoto was adamant about not forcing anyone, which made it difficult for any case to reach the final negotiations. Everyone involved in the process understood that not just any species would do; they needed those who could coexist harmoniously with the existing residents. Any issues arising post relocation would defeat the purpose of integration.

The three cases Ema now handled seemed promising based on her experience. While there were minor issues to consider, she believed all three might ultimately be approved for relocation. Ema herself had not participated in their evaluations, relying solely on written reports, but the documents suggested great potential. Should the relocations succeed, it would mean more work—something Ema would welcome with joy. More companions meant a livelier Demiplane. While there had been some minor changes with children born among existing residents, the addition of new species would bring transformations of a far greater scale.

"Excuse me," Ema said as she entered.

"Oh, Ema. Good morning," said Makoto cheerfully. "The interviews are today, right? Are we starting now?"

"Good morning. Yes, all three representatives of their species are here. If you're ready, we can begin right away." She appreciated Makoto's effort to keep the conversation formal. She

had once asked him to carry himself more like the lord he was and he had since found a balance—his speech had become slightly more formal yet still retained its friendly tone. It wasn't perfect, but to Ema, it was a step in the right direction.

"Oh, so they came here instead of us going to them? Isn't that kind of—"

"Makoto-sama," Ema interrupted, gentle but firm. "While we may have extended the invitation, their relocation is also their wish. It's only natural that the representatives come here."

To Ema, Makoto was not only the savior of her highland orc people but also a near-divine figure who had given them access to a vast and abundant world. Although she understood his humble nature, she sometimes found his deferential attitude frustrating. She had expressed before that he could afford to be more authoritative, but Makoto's ingrained modesty was difficult to overcome. She knew it wasn't something that would change overnight.

"Ema, that look is a little intense. Got it. So, they're already here. Did Tomoe call them over?"

"No, Komoe-sama handled it as part of her gate-making practice."

"Komoe-chan? She's already taken over on that? Poor Shiki—he just mastered it himself, and now this," Makoto remarked, half amused and half exasperated.

"Komoe-sama is quite talented, as you know. Now then, shall we head to the meeting room?"

"Sure. There are three cases today, right? May I see the files?"

"Yes, here you go," Ema said, passing over a bundle of documents she'd been carrying. She opened the door and led Makoto down the hallway toward the interview room, walking slightly ahead and to his left.

They walked silently, with only the faint sound of paper rustling as Makoto flipped through the documents. Though the Demiplane was a peaceful realm, the area near Makoto's quarters was kept under strict security. On days like this, when his movements were known in advance, any presence that might disturb him was kept away. Makoto himself seemed largely unconcerned, merely noting that things felt "quieter than usual."

“Oh, I see. So, this time we’re looking at a pretty sizable group, huh? If everyone moves, we’ll have… over a thousand people? No, probably not quite that many. Still, it’s impressive that they’re managing to maintain such a large community deep in the region, even farther out than Tomoe’s old mountain,” Makoto remarked with genuine interest as he reviewed the documents.

“Indeed. While it may be deeper into the Wasteland, there are sections that are surprisingly abundant,” Ema explained. “The third group you’ll be meeting today lives in such a place. However, as you can imagine, resources there are fiercely contested, and even those are dwindling. That’s why they’re the most eager for relocation.”

Makoto nodded thoughtfully. “Ah, like an oasis in the desert, then. So, they’ve been defending their village purely through strength.”

“In essence, yes. The first group you’ll be meeting today has unique environmental needs due to their abilities. The second group naturally deters external threats due to their species’ traits. Both possess high combat capabilities and, as far as we’ve observed, sufficient social compatibility.”

“True. But they’ve also agreed to live on flatlands. Interesting. This could be fun.”

“This is the room, Makoto-sama. Ideally, I would have arranged a more formal audience setting, but you specifically requested a table discussion. Please be mindful of your words.”

As they approached a room that was flanked by two misty lizardfolk standing guard, Ema noticed how their already disciplined demeanor grew even more focused upon sensing Makoto’s presence. Within the Demiplane, few were granted such direct involvement with their leader. These two, selected as both escorts and gatekeepers for the occasion, seemed on edge, which pleased Ema. Incidentally, Makoto’s residence (which he was beginning to suspect might be a castle, though he resisted the idea) contained a grand hall for formal audiences. Ema suggested its use, but Makoto quickly insisted on a simpler arrangement with a table.

Ema sighed. “Forget I said anything,” she muttered.

Inside, the room was furnished with a table and chairs, crafted with exquisite detail from fine wood by the elder dwarves. Thanks to the open windows, the air was fresh, avoiding the musty smell common to unused spaces. Seeing two chairs prepared on the opposite side of the table, Makoto guessed that each group's representatives would arrive in pairs.

"Please take a seat," Ema instructed. "I'll bring them in." After confirming that Makoto was settled, she exited the room.

As Makoto waited for Ema and the representatives, he flipped through the documents on the first group he was to meet. Naturally, he used his Realm to monitor his surroundings, fully aware of where Ema was headed and that two guests were waiting in the adjacent room. He planned to set aside the documents and stand to greet them once they entered, despite Ema's earlier request for him to remain seated and wait.

The first group are called wingedfolk, Makoto thought. *So, they can fly, huh? Looks like they've been living in some pretty high-altitude areas. Bird wings or insect wings, maybe? Oh, here it is—bird or bat wings. Interesting, so they're the same species but born with one or the other. It seems random, not a blend of the two. And they have a hierarchical society? Hmm, that might be a problem. We don't really go by ranks or classes here.*

Makoto felt a pang of concern as he read further, but his impression wasn't entirely accurate. The wingedfolk were born with either bird or bat wings based on their innate power, which then determined their roles within their community. Despite having a population of about three hundred—substantial by Wasteland standards—they distributed work and authority based on individual capability, including significant responsibilities and accompanying risks for those of greater strength. It was more about capability-based assignments than the oppressive social hierarchy Makoto feared, such as the stratified system of commoners and slaves.

Well, there's no point in worrying until I meet them. If things turn out too extreme, we'll have to part ways with apologies, Makoto concluded. He stood, waiting for the door to open as he sensed three figures approaching.

When it did, Ema entered, looking slightly exasperated, flanked by two wingedfolk with folded wings on their backs, each

around hyuman height and with dusky skin reminiscent of the forest ogres. The two visitors seemed momentarily taken aback by Makoto, who greeted them first.

“Welcome to the Demiplane. I’m Makoto. I guess you could say I’m the lord of this place,” he said with a friendly smile as they approached the table. Ema released a quiet sigh—she had likely hoped he would offer a more imposing welcome, one befitting a ruler. The wingedfolk themselves appeared equally bewildered; they had undergone intense screening with Shiki, whose solemn and commanding presence was well-known. Meeting the man who stood above Shiki and finding him so casual was a shock.

“Ah… please, have a seat,” Makoto added, realizing they were frozen in place. He gestured for them to sit down after he did.

Both of them have white bat wings… So, these must be the highest-ranking members of their kind, Makoto thought, observing the two wingedfolk with a somewhat vague understanding of their hierarchy. In reality, the wingedfolk had a complex system where not only the type of wings but also their color—white or black—played a role. The hierarchy went from white bat wings at the top, followed by white bird wings, then black bat wings, and finally black bird wings.

“Thank you for inviting us to relocate to such a splendid land. My name is Kakkun, leader of the wingedfolk,” the man said, his voice calm and dignified. He gestured toward his companion. “This is my assistant, Shona.”

“Greetings, Makoto-sama. It is an honor to meet you,” she added gracefully.

They sat down across from Makoto. Kakkun, the leader, exuded a commanding presence, while Shona, the assistant, maintained a polite composure. Ema, still maintaining a stern demeanor, took a seat next to Makoto last.

“I understand that you wish to relocate to the Demiplane,” Makoto began, his tone friendly but direct. “With that in mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions, if that’s all right.”

“Of course,” Kakkun replied without hesitation.

“Great. I’ll hear any questions you may have afterward,” Makoto said, moving smoothly into the conversation.

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After their meeting, as they stepped away, Kakkun turned to Shona with a curious expression. “He seemed to understand us pretty well… but is that man really the ruler of this place? His demeanor was weirdly relaxed for someone in his position.”

“You’re right,” Shona agreed, her tone cautious. “Everything has gone surprisingly smoothly. Remember, Ema mentioned that we would go through a combat evaluation at a later date. Until then, we must remain vigilant and carefully observe this land.”

“I know, Shona. But it feels odd… I thought they might be interested in our power, but it seemed more like we were being evaluated on our behavior and values as a community. When Makoto-sama said we had his approval and then Ema added the combat test as a formality, I swear he muttered that it wasn’t necessary. The conditions they’ve offered for us to live here seem… unusually generous. If this is all genuine, it would mean I’ve been needlessly paranoid,” Kakkun said, shaking his head.

“It’s certainly an extraordinary opportunity,” Shona admitted. “A land like this, without having to fight for it… From what I’ve seen, Makoto-sama doesn’t harbor any malicious intent. But your cautiousness is understandable and prudent. Now, let’s go explore that place they’ve prepared for us.”

When they stepped out of the room, waiting for the orc guide Ema had arranged, the wingedfolk’s chieftain and his assistant continued sharing their impressions of their meeting with Makoto.

The meeting had been a straightforward success. So much so that it left them feeling almost bewildered. Despite raising every concern and question they could imagine, Makoto’s answers pleasantly defied their expectations. Most surprising was the extent to which he was willing to grant them autonomy. The wingedfolk had anticipated significant concessions as part of their relocation terms. They were prepared for sacrifices such as paying tributes to existing residents, offering a substantial

portion of their adult community as a labor force, or enduring arduous tasks few would accept willingly. Essentially, they were ready for arrangements bordering on subjugation, given the value the Demiplane represented to them.

To the wingedfolk, the Demiplane was an unparalleled opportunity. The land promised a life of abundance, with access to goods, trade, and unprecedented educational and training opportunities for those willing to engage. Everything Makoto affirmed left Kakkun and Shona speechless. They had initially doubted even a tenth of what Ema had outlined would come to fruition, but Makoto's assurances confirmed everything.

"Still… To have no distinction of status among the established people and to work based on your abilities alone…" Kakkun mused aloud, his voice filled with both curiosity and doubt.

"We'll see more as we keep exploring. There's always information you can gather just from the atmosphere of a place," Shona advised.

"You're right. Seeing it firsthand will make all the difference."

Although they remained skeptical, both Kakkun and Shona would find themselves more astonished the more they learned about the Demiplane.

The three hundred wingedfolk received approval to relocate, with their move scheduled for five days later.

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"All right, you can take off your blindfolds now," Makoto instructed.

At his words, the two women seated across from him shivered. Ema, too, trembled slightly but quickly regained her composure under Makoto's reassuring gaze, lowering her head in embarrassment at her lapse in control.

"As we explained, our eyes present a unique problem," one of the women began, her tone tense.

“Regardless of our intentions, they can have an effect,” the other added.

The two women wore blindfolds with intricate patterns that covered their eyes. While the wingedfolk Makoto had just met were slender, these two had more voluptuous figures, reminiscent of the nymphs from Greek mythology, draped in flowing robes. The revealing nature of their attire made Makoto flush slightly and murmur, “That’s not clothing; it’s just cloth.”

They were gorgons—though for Makoto, it was easier to associate them with the Medusa of legend. Their distinct ability to petrify anyone they gazed upon was both a strength and a curse, keeping their race from extinction but forcing them to isolate themselves in the Wasteland. Outwardly, they appeared nearly indistinguishable from hyumans, except for their hair, which moved subtly, perhaps in response to their emotions. This hair was more than ornamental—it was a powerful and versatile weapon, capable of impressive transformations if necessary.

The gorgons were born unable to control their petrification ability; it was perpetually active. Though it had no effect on others of their kind, it was unforgivingly lethal to those outside their species. To mitigate this, they wore specialized blindfolds. Their self-isolation in the Wasteland was a deliberate choice to avoid harming others—a testament to their compassionate nature, Makoto thought.

Their interest in relocating to the Demiplane stemmed from a hope that they might find ways to better control their powers and a solution to this issue unique to their species. As a female-only race, gorgons required male partners from other species for reproduction. Although they could bear children from many different races, all offspring were born as gorgons. The fact that their species hadn’t gone extinct despite such a precarious circumstance spoke volumes about their resilience—a realization that Makoto was surprised to realize he understood.

“Don’t worry about me,” Makoto said with a smile. “It didn’t work on Tomoe, right? So, I’ll be fine. Besides, I’m here to protect Ema too. Go ahead.”

“But, Makoto-sama, we can barely sense any magical presence from you…” one of the gorgons admitted, a hint of worry in her voice.

“It seems impossible that you’d come away unharmed,” added the other, equally apprehensive.

Makoto was currently focused on a particular training regimen, which often involved suppressing his magical aura. This situation was no exception, and thus, their doubts were not unwarranted.

“Rest assured, both of you,” Ema interjected, her voice firm. “If Tomoe-sama’s power had no effect on Makoto-sama, it’s inconceivable that your abilities will work on him. I’m protected as well. Please take off your blindfolds—it’s his request.”

Nodding, the gorgons each placed their hands on their blindfolds. Their hair rippled slightly as if reacting to their anticipation, but Makoto remained unfazed. Ema, though she assured them of her composure, seemed tense.

“All right then…” said one of the gorgons, her voice hesitant.

With a synchronized motion, the two women removed their blindfolds. In front of them stood a hyuman-looking man and an orc woman, neither of whom turned to stone despite their gaze.

“Hmm, your eyes really do hold powerful effects,” Makoto remarked thoughtfully. “Would you call them mystic eyes? It must be quite inconvenient to have to keep them covered like that.”

He spoke as though it were an ordinary conversation, putting the gorgons at ease. Ema let out a quiet breath of relief, her reaction entirely understandable given the potential risk. The gorgons stared wide-eyed, processing what they were seeing—or rather, what wasn’t happening.

“Yes… That’s right,” one of the gorgons replied, her tone a mix of disbelief and gratitude. “Food, for instance, turns to stone when we look at it. While we can absorb energy and nutrients in other ways, eating normally is far more enjoyable. Also, like I said during our last discussion, engaging with other species—even for the sake of reproduction—becomes… complicated. Not to mention, wearing these coverings takes away our sight, and that makes day-to-day life quite restrictive.”

“Ah, that sounds challenging,” Makoto agreed, genuine sympathy in his voice. “I’ve heard of certain hyuman practices that seem similarly restrictive, though…”

Ema cast Makoto a quick glance, unimpressed but amused nonetheless. She hoped he would move on before veering too far into territory that might turn awkward. Thankfully, he did.

“Don’t look at me like that, Ema,” Makoto said with a light sigh. “Anyway, gorgon-san, I’m afraid I can’t exactly arrange life partners for everyone, so finding partners would need to be handled through your own efforts and relationships. Does that sound acceptable?”

“Yes, Makoto-sama. That would be more than acceptable. In fact, we’re grateful for even that much consideration,” one of the gorgons affirmed. “However, while you and your companions seem immune, I worry about other residents interacting with us.”

“Ah, but your current blindfolds work well enough, right, Ema?” Makoto turned to her to confirm.

“Yes, that’s correct. There are no issues with them as they are now.”

“Good. So, if we can craft glasses or contact lenses that replicate the same effect, I think we can resolve that issue. Regarding the rest—you’ve already agreed to contribute to knowledge sharing, participate in combat training, help build the city, and take on general tasks—my only stipulation remains regarding reproduction. As long as that’s handled properly and everything is consensual, and we can safely assess the impact of your eyes in the Demiplane, I would be delighted to welcome your relocation.”

The two gorgons stood up, their gazes were so intense it was as if they were trying to pierce through Makoto with their eyes. The disbelief in their expressions was evident; they had clearly convinced themselves they would be rejected.

“Then it’s decided that the gorgons will relocate, yes?” Makoto asked to confirm.

“Absolutely! We’re so grateful, truly,” one of them replied, her voice trembling with joy.

“But… is this really all right? Even though we can turn things to stone, we’re unable to change them back,” the other added hesitantly, a trace of fear and doubt still lingering in her tone.

“Oh, right. The petrification…” Makoto said aloud, as if only just remembering. “I think that won’t be a problem. I can probably reverse it.”

“Eh?” the gorgons both exclaimed in surprise.

Makoto placed his hand on the stone table. When they had removed their blindfolds earlier, the table had instantly turned to stone. Originally, it was a beautifully crafted wooden table, now dulled to a cold, gray slab. He channeled some magic into it.

“Let’s see… This should do it. And then…”

With Makoto’s words, the stone slowly returned to its original, warm wooden form. However, within moments, it turned to stone again—inevitably, as it was exposed to the gorgons’ eyes.

“Oh, whoops! That’s right, it needs a resistance to petrification as well… All right, let’s try this again!”

Concentrating once more, Makoto imbued the table with another flow of magic. The gorgons watched in rapt attention, their earlier skepticism giving way to stunned silence. Beside him, Ema observed calmly, having long since grown accustomed to Makoto’s feats and surprises. The table remained wood, showing no signs of reverting to stone.

“I can’t believe it…”

“To think we would have had to wear this blindfold forever… and now…”

“A little while ago, I worked on curing a pretty troublesome status ailment,” Makoto explained, scratching his cheek bashfully under their awestruck gazes. “As a byproduct, I gained some versatility with curing different afflictions.”

The two gorgons gazed at him, full of awe and newfound hope. The ailment Makoto referenced was indeed a grueling experience—a curse that transformed the afflicted into a tree, a far more complex and perilous transformation than even the gorgons’ petrification. It had taken months and the combined intellect of everyone in the Demiplane to resolve.

“Makoto-sama, please, we’re begging you—let us stay in this world under your protection,” one of them pleaded.

“We’ll obey your every command,” the other added with desperate sincerity.

“No need to frame it as ‘protection.’ After talking with you, it doesn’t seem like you have any issues with socializing. Just… please try to avoid messy love triangles or affairs, All right?” Makoto said with a sheepish grin. “I understand that integrating

fathers into your community isn't something you're used to. You can take time to adjust. In the worst-case scenario… well, if a lost hyuman accidentally stumbles in, that could work as a temporary solution. But, you know, no strings attached, onetime things, all right?"

The conversation between Makoto and the gorgons continued warmly, and by the end, their relocation was officially confirmed.

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The two gorgons reflected on their encounter with Makoto as they returned to their waiting room, a place furnished comfortably to host guests. They were still awed by how Makoto and even Tomoe had been completely unaffected by their petrifying gaze.

"That was amazing. I was already surprised by Tomoe-sama, but I can't believe Makoto-sama was unfazed too," one of them said, her voice carrying traces of astonishment and relief.

"And he said he'd do everything he could to make our lives easier with our abilities… It feels like a dream," the other added, her tone almost reverent.

"For so long, we've only worn clothing made of fabrics woven from our own hair… but now, maybe we'll be able to wear normal clothes. That's incredible! I can't believe how exciting this is."

After Makoto had kindly apologized for the necessity, the gorgons had redonned their specialized blindfolds to avoid any accidents, but even now, they were enthusiastically chatting about their future. Though their hair could sense their surroundings, the thought of being able to fully see and experience the world freely was almost too much to comprehend.

"It was manageable with our hair sensing everything when our sight was blocked, but… being able to see again is something

else entirely. If we can wear proper clothes, then maybe we can enjoy fashion too."

"Combat training sounds fun too, doesn't it? I can't wait to move here. I want to bring everyone over as soon as possible."

Their smiles were radiant as they spoke, dreaming of their new lives in the Demiplane. However, unbeknownst to the gorgons—and even to Makoto—a potential issue loomed on the horizon. The gorgons, who had previously had no opportunity to consider physical appearance when choosing mates, would soon be surrounded by a plethora of different species, including potential romantic interests.

Makoto's casual remarks about "free love" and "negotiated relationships" might lead to some unintended consequences, depending on how they were interpreted. And if any misunderstandings or incidents arose, well… it would likely be seen as Makoto's own doing. After all, he seemed to have forgotten that as a resident of the Demiplane, he, too, fell under that "freedom of choice" clause.

The gorgon tribe—nearly two hundred strong. Approved. Relocation in ten days.

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"We're really good at collecting nectar!"

"And we can all communicate with each other!"

To an outsider, it might have seemed that Makoto and Ema were having a private chat, just the two of them. However, upon closer inspection, it was clear that two small cushions had been placed atop the table, and the individuals they were speaking to were perched upon them. More accurately, they were restlessly switching from sitting, to standing, to fluttering about.

They're exactly what I pictured. Or should I say exactly who *I pictured?* Makoto thought, his eyes lingering on their movements. *The more I look, the more they remind me of fairies.*

Their final interviewees were tiny, spritely beings—playful, brimming with energy, and perhaps a bit mischievous. The crown on the head of their leader appeared more like a child's toy than regal headwear, bringing a smile to Makoto's face. Although he knew he should treat it with respect, as a symbol of their royalty, he couldn't help the warm amusement swelling within him. And since it wasn't due to any magical charm or compulsion, there was no way to suppress it.

"Ah, so all of you fairies are seeking refuge because your forest home has been discovered by outsiders?" Makoto asked, trying to maintain his composure.

"We're not fairies! We're al-elemera! Far superior to those winged pests!"

Makoto sighed. To him, they looked indistinguishable from the fairies of myth, and the difficulty of remembering their name only compounded his tendency to refer to them as such.

In truth, even if the al-elemera stood alongside the fairies they so despised, Makoto doubted he'd be able to discern any significant differences.

"We're like a middle ground between fairies and spirits! We can even command and manipulate lower-ranked spirits!"

They flitted about, diving onto their cushions and zipping directly in front of Makoto's nose, filling the room with a cheerful din. Ema, for her part, appeared to be exerting considerable self-restraint. Her clenched fists trembled ever so slightly.

"Why, oh why, did Mio-sama approve them… In front of Makoto-sama, no less…" she muttered under her breath. If this hadn't been a formal meeting, but rather an everyday occurrence, perhaps her exasperation wouldn't have reached such a boiling point.

"Hm. There may be a lot of them, but they're small, so it doesn't seem like they'd pose any real problems. Plus, if they can all communicate with each other, they'll be able to tell us right away if anything happens. They'll even help with the exploration, right?" Makoto said with a thoughtful nod.

"Leave it to us! We're the brave al-elemera!" one of the tiny beings declared enthusiastically, his chest puffed out.

"Then, let's prepare for your reloca—" Makoto began.

“I must object, Makoto-sama!!!” Ema’s sharp voice rang throughout the room.

“Eek!” the brave al-elemera squeaked, diving under the table.

“Whoa?!” Makoto flinched but quickly regained his composure, still blinking in surprise.

“These… These reckless, childish beings!” Ema fumed, her face flushed with anger. “If we let such a completely unrestrained race into the Demiplane, it would be a disaster! Perhaps it would be better to let their forest be ravaged entirely so they might learn some humility!”

“E-Ema,” Makoto said, his voice gentle yet hesitant, as he tried to calm her down.

“This is a formal interview!” Ema continued, eyes blazing. “And it concerns the very future of their race! Yet look at them—their supposed king, no less—behaving in this manner!!!” She gestured sharply toward the quivering al-elemera under the table.

Makoto sighed and looked up at the ceiling, as if seeking guidance from above. She wasn’t wrong—compared to the previous two races they had interviewed, the al-elemeras’ conduct was woefully inadequate. He had been lenient with them, thinking of them as children, but the reality was that these were fully mature beings. This was a serious matter, and Ema’s anger was justified. She viewed them as a legitimate race deserving of respect, and their behavior had crossed too many lines to ignore.

“Calm down, Ema. Please, stop!” Makoto pleaded, raising his hands in a placating gesture.

“No, I refuse, Makoto-sama!” Ema snapped, her voice firm and unyielding. “You’re being far too soft on these creatures! Al-elemera? A hybrid between fairies and spirits? If that’s the case, then let them prove it by defeating the swarm of Lizhu that’s coming at you! Maybe then we’ll let them come back!”

Makoto could only watch in dismay as Ema’s frustration reached its boiling point. He couldn’t ever recall seeing her lose her composure before. Desperate to calm her, he tried speaking soothingly while signaling for the guards to escort the al-elemera representatives from the room.

The fairies, however, flitted about wildly, avoiding Ema's attempts to corral them. Her arms flailed as she tried to catch the darting creatures, her fury manifesting in every exaggerated motion. It was a rare and almost comical sight that left even the guards staring in surprise.

"I'll stuff them in a birdcage and toss them back into the forest! Where did you fly off to, you winged pests?!" Ema shouted, her frustration reaching new heights.

"Ema, I understand!" Makoto exclaimed, stepping closer and trying desperately to regain control of the situation. "I'll send them home for now. Just… calm down!!!"

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"What's with that orc?! It clearly has no idea how strong we are!" one of the al-elemera fumed, his small wings buzzing with indignation.

"We're not afraid of the Lizhu either, but we only considered relocating to avoid our friends getting hurt in battle!" another chimed in, crossing his tiny arms with a huff.

"In that case, let's drive off the Lizhu and make that woman apologize!"

"That's brilliant, king! But what about moving?"

"Well, the flowers here produce the most delicious nectar. I'd rather live here than in the old forest! As king, I must share this nectar with everyone!" the al-elemera king stated proudly, puffing out his chest.

"Then we'll go home and prepare for war!" the others cheered, wings flapping excitedly.

"Yes! We'll show Makoto-sama just how strong we are!"

The al-elemera, about three hundred in number, were put on hold.

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That evening, Makoto was relaxing with his followers, enjoying a moment of after-dinner camaraderie as they discussed the day's interviews.

"So, you'll be adding two new races?" Ema confirmed, sipping her tea. "As for the gorgons, I'll consult with the eldwar to create both glasses and contact lenses tailored for them."

"You're handling the gorgons, then," Shiki remarked with a thoughtful nod. "In that case, I'll take on the wingedfolk. I'll devise a training regimen and assess the differences in capabilities and aptitudes among the four groups."

"Thanks, both of you," Makoto said warmly.

"However, Mio, could you refrain from approving such peculiar races next time? Are you listening, Mio?!" Tomoe scolded, her eyes narrowing.

Oblivious—perhaps willfully so—Mio approached Makoto, a small bowl filled with vibrant vegetable sticks in her hands. She held it out to him with a smile.

"Young Master, Young Master, try this!" she said eagerly.

"Vegetable sticks? Wait, is that… mayonnaise? Did you make this yourself, Mio?" Makoto asked, astonished.

"Yeah, I worked really hard on it!" Mio replied, beaming.

"Wow! Well, I'll give it a try then… Mmm, this is nostalgic! It's a really close match! And the vegetables taste even better here. Fantastic work, Mio!" Makoto exclaimed, savoring each bite.

"Ehehehe," Mio giggled, basking in his praise, clearly ignoring Tomoe's previous reprimand.

"Oh? So, this is mayonnaise, is it? Mio-dono, may I also try some?" asked Shiki.

"Young Master enjoyed it, so I suppose it's fine. Enjoy it, Shiki," Mio replied graciously.

"Thank you. Hmm… the acidity, the richness, the umami… What a complex flavor. It pairs excellently with vegetables.

Perhaps I can use this for a hot pot…” Shiki mused, savoring the taste.

He continued sampling different varieties while silently brainstorming culinary applications.

“Hmph, it’s good, I’ll admit that. But it’s nothing compared to the miso I’m working on!” Tomoe grumbled, taking a bite of cucumber.

“Well, it’s precisely because your miso isn’t ready yet that I’ve been recreating these flavors! Hurry up and let me make miso soup, Tomoe! And soy sauce too!” Mio shot back in frustration.

“It’s almost ready, I swear! Mmm, though I must admit, this isn’t bad…” Tomoe conceded, crunching fondly into another cucumber stick. Makoto chuckled quietly to himself, certain that Tomoe would soon become a fan of morokyu, cucumber with miso.

“Tomoe, you know, mayonnaise has some pretty devoted fans. I’d be careful about making careless remarks…” Makoto said with a grin, biting into a celery stick as he watched the playful exchange between his attendants.

With new residents on the horizon, the Demiplane was about to enter its second year.

Back Matter

Author: Azumi Kei

Azumi Kei, born in Aichi Prefecture, began publishing *“Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Douchuu”* online in 2012. The series quickly gained popularity and won the Readers’ Choice Award in the 5th AlphaPolis Fantasy Novel Grand Prize. In May 2013, after undergoing revisions, Azumi Kei made their publishing debut with *“Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Douchuu.”*

Illustrations by Mitsuaki Matsumoto

http://transparnaut.web.fc2.com

This book is an edited and published version of works originally posted on the online novel platform “Shōsetsuka ni Narō” (**http://syosetu.com/)**

Footers

[←1]

Pikmin are small, plant-like creatures from Nintendo's Pikmin series. In the game, players control Captain Olimar (or other characters in later games) who commands Pikmin to solve puzzles, battle enemies, and gather resources on an alien planet. Each type of Pikmin has unique abilities: red Pikmin are fire-resistant, yellow Pikmin can resist electricity, and blue Pikmin can survive in water. The game combines strategy and adventure, requiring players to carefully manage their Pikmin to complete tasks while protecting them from danger. The series is beloved for its charm and tactical gameplay.

[←2]

The Toyama medicine sellers were itinerant merchants from Japan's Edo period known for traveling across the country to distribute traditional medicines. They pioneered a unique "credit sales" system, leaving medicines with households and collecting payment only for what was used on their return visits. Renowned for their trust-building and adaptability, they became symbols of innovative trade and dedicated service.

Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of Tsukimichi Moonlit Fantasy Volume 6! We hope you've enjoyed Makoto’s continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

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