
Tsukimichi
Moonlit Fantasy
7
Author
Kei Azumi
Illustrator
Mitsuaki Matsumoto
Hanashi
MEDIA


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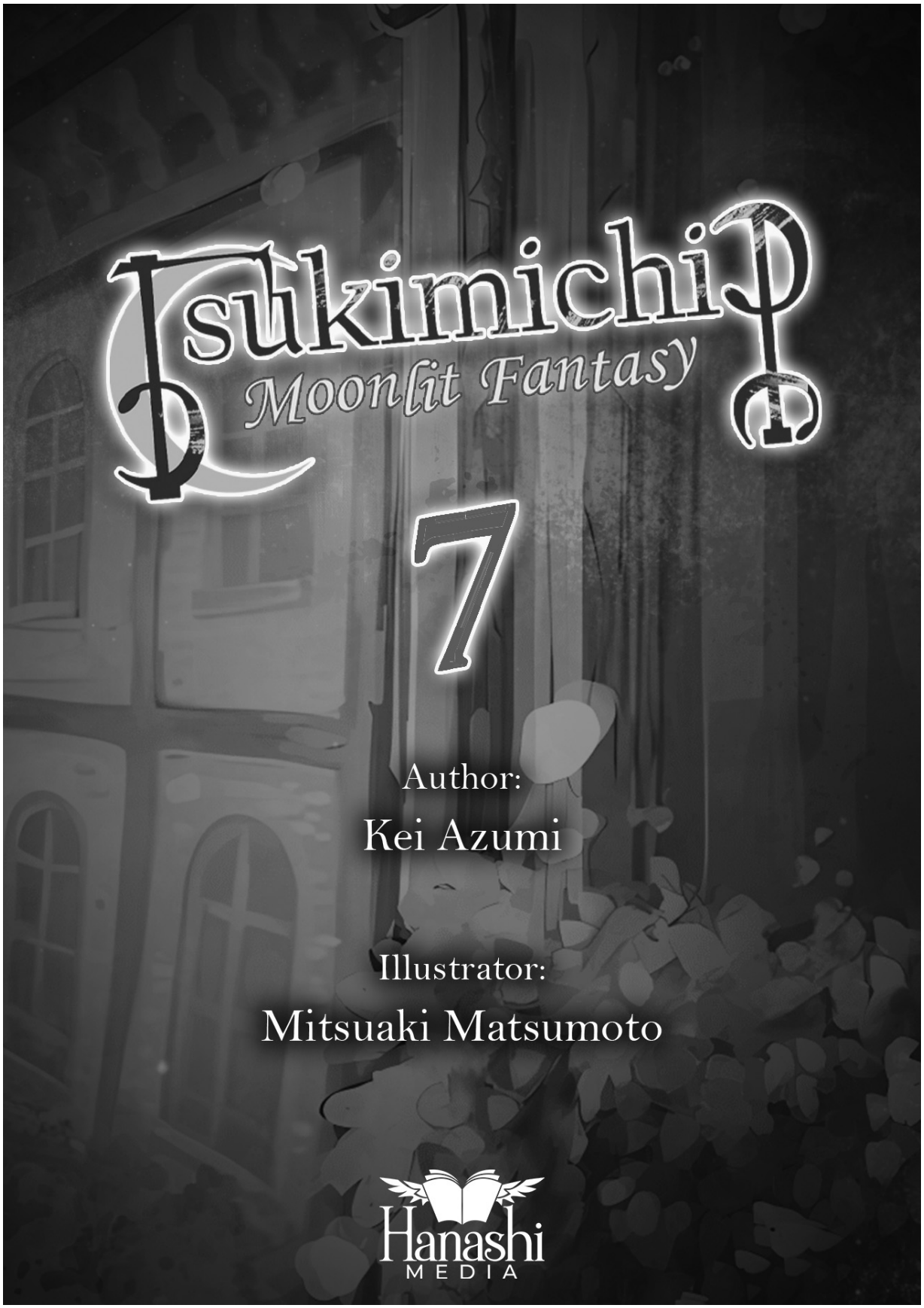
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MAJOR CHARACTERS
MIO
Originally a colossal spider, now reborn in a human form after forming a Contract with Makoto. Fiercely loyal, terrifyingly powerful, and recently obsessed with cooking—though her culinary experiments are often... intense.
LUTO
One of the highest-ranked Greater Dragons, known as the Dragon of Myriad Colors. Eccentric and whimsical, Luto takes the form of a young man and is bizarrely clingy toward Makoto. Surprisingly, he's also the founder of the Adventurer's Guild.
JIN
A student at Rotsgard Academy. A skilled swordsman and one of Makoto's true disciples, Jin is sharp, disciplined, and steadily rising in strength under Makoto's unorthodox tutelage.
ILMGAND
The second son of the prestigious Hopleys family in the Kingdom of Limia. Driven by his ideals of what a proper noble should be, he enrolls in Rotsgard Academy to refine himself in both mind and spirit.
TOMOE
Once known as "Shin," the Dragon of Mirage. After Contracting with Makoto, she takes on a human form. Tomoe is a lover of Japanese culture and serves as its passionate ambassador in the Demiplane.
MAKOTO MISUMI
The protagonist. A high school student unluckily summoned to another world due to his parents' contract with a goddess. Though he's settled into his role as an instructor, his true profession is that of a merchant... albeit one with enough power to shake nations.
SHIKI
Formerly a powerful undead known as a lich. Now in human form thanks to a Contract with Makoto, Shiki assists him as his primary advisor and researcher at Rotsgard Academy. A scholar at heart with a dark past.

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Side Story: Tomoe, Star Lake, and a Hero

Side Story: Mio, Cooking, and a Hero

[redacted]



Leaving the salon, Sairitsu, envoy of the Lorel Federation, made her way to the VIP room. Raidou, a temporary instructor for the academy and representative of the Kuzunoha Company—real name Makoto Misumi—was waiting for her there. The guards accompanying Sairitsu had been ordered to remain outside.

The room was spacious, its soft black carpet lending an air of refinement. Visiting foreign dignitaries formed groups near the balcony to converse and watch the festivities in the hall below.

Sairitsu returned to her seat, and several hyumans eagerly gathered around to engage with her. As the highest-ranking representative of the Lorel Federation in Rotsgard, such attention was inevitable. She handled their inquiries with practiced ease and an unwavering diplomatic smile.

Amid the chatter, she felt a sharp gaze from the balcony and instinctively turned to meet its source.

Sairitsu's eyes narrowed slightly. This was one of the last people she expected to see there.

The second princess of the Gritonia Empire, Lily Front Gritonia. A major supporter of the hero who had appeared there. Since his

emergence, she had withdrawn from the power struggles of the imperial court, dedicating herself entirely to him.

But the woman I once knew… Sairitsu thought. *I still remember how she used to be, driven by unshakable ambition for the throne and little regard for the Goddess. This sudden transformation doesn't sit right with me. Her security measures have become more stringent than ever, which makes it nearly impossible to gather information on her. It borders on paranoia. While I've made no efforts to interfere with the hero, nor do I plan to, it's curious that she would be interested in me.*

After exchanging pleasantries with the surrounding diplomats, Sairitsu approached Lily. But the princess made no move to acknowledge her, instead watching the hall below, which Raidou had just reentered.

So, you've come, Lorel Federation, thought Lily. *I had hoped to ignore this matter after the priestess's Wisdom Tree proved ineffective, but you've gone and created more work for me. To think you'd make contact with the Kuzunoha Company…*

The warning from that woman Tomoe… It hardly felt like a joke. Even Tomoki is fixated on her. There's no way we can leave the Kuzunoha Company unchecked. The hideous man standing in my line of sight now seems to be their representative, but there's a possibility he's the same person Tomoe referred to as her "master." If that's true, I should be somewhere else with Tomoki and the others. But no—they're running a company so close to home, it's impossible not to take notice! They should've just stayed in Tsige and minded their own business. But now they're even involved with the shady Lorel Federation? Seriously, they're such a nuisance. A nuisance, a nuisance, a nuisance!

Contacting Misumi and his company was one of Lily's main goals for this visit to the academy city. She hadn't forgotten her encounter with Tomoe by Star Lake near the Limia royal capital. That woman had begun to exert an increasingly strong influence over Tomoki, the hero of the Gritonia Empire and Lily's most valuable asset. She'd

been the first person to reject him outright, and to make matters worse, she wielded a sword he couldn't use—despite his ability to handle any weapon (or so he'd thought).

Lily had taken Tomoe's warning seriously. She'd kept her investigation into the Kuzunoha Company minimal and refrained from interfering in any way. Lily had also carefully managed Tomoki's growing fascination with Tomoe, preventing him from taking rash actions. Yet the very presence of Tomoe in the city, when she should have been confined to the frontier, was a source of deep unease for Lily.

"Lily-sama, what do you think of the scene in the hall? Did anyone happen to catch your attention?" Sairitsu inquired, her tone entirely amicable.

"Ah, Kahara-sama…" Lily began, turning to face Sairitsu with the grace and poise befitting an imperial princess.

"There's no need to be so formal," Sairitsu interjected. "Please, feel free to address me by name; after all, you're the princess of an empire actively fighting the demons on the front lines."

"I am but one who has renounced her claim to succession and, as you can see, also a frivolous fool attending festivals at such a time," Lily replied, her tone self-deprecating.

Both women wore polite smiles, yet their eyes betrayed not even a hint of warmth. The other guests on the balcony, feeling the tension in the air, scattered like spiders from a cut web.

"Your dedication to supporting the hero is more than enough. I—no, *we* of the Lorel Federation—are greatly—"

"Let's get to the point, Kahara-sama," Lily interrupted sharply. "You're an important figure in the Lorel Federation. I'm curious about the man you came downstairs to meet."

Lily's face was half-concealed behind a feathered fan, and while her eyes conveyed a gentle smile, it was obvious that Sairitsu's words had caused her some discomfort.

Sairitsu shifted her gaze toward the hall, her eyes landing unerringly on Makoto.

"That man…" Sairitsu chuckled lightly. "Oh, that was a personal matter of mine. One of my subordinates mentioned a shop in this city that deals in effective medicines and peculiar fruit. She told me that the shopkeeper was so unique I'd recognize him at a glance. I thought she was joking. Even from a distance, Raidou was unmistakable. Before I realized it, I'd gone over to speak with him impulsively, disregarding my position. I may have inconvenienced him."

"Oh my, you're right," Lily agreed. "Even from here, he stands out. That must be Raidou-dono."

Her eyes now fixed on Makoto, Lily's expression shifted, drawing Sairitsu's interest.

"Lily-sama, do you have business with him too?"

"Yes. It might be just a rumor, but I've heard that most of the staff at his shop are demi-humans and that he also serves as a temporary instructor at the academy. He seems to be quite the subject of intrigue. Naturally, I would very much like the opportunity to speak with him."

"He's a temporary instructor and has close ties with demi-humans as well?" Sairitsu replied with an expression of genuine surprise.

So, she's not very familiar with Raidou? Lily wondered, intrigued. *Was her earlier bravado just an act? As far as I know, the Kuzunoha Company has only established roots in Tsige and Rotsgard so far. Given her position, if the company had deeper connections in Lorel, she should have known at least that much. So, could it be that Lorel's ties with Kuzunoha aren't particularly strong?*

With this thought, Lily decided to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"By the way, about the medicine you mentioned earlier… If it's as effective as the rumors claim, I might bring some back as a souvenir."

"Oh, that sounds like an excellent idea. If you'd like, I'd be happy to prepare some for you, Lily-sama," Sairitsu offered with

practiced grace.

"Oh, no, that would be far too—"

"Please, Lily-sama." Sairitsu cut her off. "Unlike you, I have no official duties to attend to. Besides, I would rather not see a princess queuing in line."

Sairitsu's intentions were not lost on Lily, who analyzed her actions carefully. *She doesn't want me to interact with Raidou, does she? All right, I'll concede this point. I still have more questions for her though.*

"Very well. I'll gratefully accept your kindness," Lily replied with a gracious smile.

"Leave it to me," Sairitsu said warmly. "I'll make sure it's delivered within a few days."

"I'll be looking forward to it… By the way," Lily added, her voice soft but purposeful, "may I impose on your generosity a little further? There's something I've been eager to ask you. This is just between us, but several new technologies are currently under development in the Empire. They were proposed by the hero himself, and I'm personally very keen on seeing them realized. However, I must confess, progress has been rather slow. That's why I was hoping to seek the wisdom of someone as renowned as yourself, Kahara-sama."

"Technologies proposed by the hero, you say? That is certainly intriguing. Nevertheless, when it comes to development, many such matters are state secrets. I may not be able to answer questions that involve sensitive information. Still, if there's anything I can discuss, I'd be happy to share."

What are you trying to learn? For someone who's infiltrated Lorel with a substantial number of spies, you're certainly bold.

"Of course, I completely understand," Lily offered. "Lorel is well known for developing unique technologies. In fact, my nation has recently taken an interest in black powder. I was hoping you could share some insights on how black powder is managed and utilized in your country."

"Black powder? This is the first I've heard of your nation taking an interest in that material. If that's the case, I'll share what I know," Sairitsu answered, though her eyes briefly flickered in thought.

Black powder. How unexpected. While it does have some dangerous applications, it's nowhere near as potent as magic. Its reputation for being unnecessarily hazardous overshadows its utility. Still, why would they…? I'll only provide harmless, surface-level information. It's likely already within their knowledge anyway. I should also instruct domestic officials to heighten their vigilance.

"Thank you. I greatly appreciate it," Lily replied with a poised smile.

Naturally, they'll be wary when they learn of Gritonia's interest in black powder. But heightened vigilance sometimes reveals the very information you're trying to protect. Don't underestimate our spies. My girls are willing to give their all, even if they've been bewitched by Tomoki's eyes…

As the two women exchanged remarks about the uses and value of black powder, their veiled battle of wits continued, each masking their true intentions with pleasant smiles.

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"Rembrandt, so this is where you've been!"

A large man in ceremonial attire approached the Rembrandt couple, his booming voice matching his imposing frame. There wasn't a hint of restraint in his demeanor.

"Well, well, if it isn't the general. Had I known you would be attending, I would have made sure to greet you properly. But I

thought the Ryuji family was scheduled to come to Rotsgard?" Rembrandt queried.

"Indeed, I wasn't originally planning to come. However, I've been assigned to the operation at Stella Fortress. This place happened to be on the way, and since it coincided with the academy festival, I decided to stop by and give my troops a brief respite. Then, I happened to see you… But it seems your butler isn't here today?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Since I brought Lisa with me, I've left him in charge of our store," Rembrandt replied, gesturing toward his wife beside him. Lisa offered a warm smile and bowed gracefully.

The general responded with a casual wave before speaking again.

"No dependable butler, then? It's unbecoming for the lord of Tsige to travel around without proper protection."

"Not at all. I've brought someone capable in his stead… The new merchant from the Kuzunoha Company—the one I told you about—he's accompanying me," Rembrandt said, subtly watching the general's face to see how he would react to the name-drop.

The general smirked. "Hmph. That's precisely why I came to have a word with you. From the way you speak, it seems you've managed to keep him under control. I've heard all sorts of stories about this impudent upstart. Apparently, after founding a trading company in Tsige, which is part of my Aion territory, he had the audacity to declare his main store as being in the academy city and claimed to have 'no ties to Aion.' Quite the cheek."

Rembrandt deduced that the general wanted to know if he truly had control over the Kuzunoha Company. To mislead him, he portrayed Makoto as being under his supervision. Judging by the general's response, the ruse had worked.

"Well, after all, he's nothing more than a young upstart," Rembrandt said with a calm smile. "In his inexperience, he feels the need to exaggerate his importance to the world. Even now, the Kuzunoha Company is renting space from one of my stores in Tsige

and remains under my strict supervision. You can rest assured on that account.

"Ah, I just remembered! General, you're quite fond of good liquor, aren't you? There's a stall over there serving something excellent. Allow me to treat you. Come, come."

"Oh! Don't rush me so, Rembrandt. My apologies, Lisa-dono. It seems your husband will be stealing me away for a bit," the general said with a hearty laugh.

"Of course… Next time, though, please save a dance for me. I'll be waiting." Lisa watched, smiling, as her husband guided the general away into the crowd.

Once they had completely vanished from sight, she let out a gentle sigh.

He probably thinks he has Kuzunoha under control, doesn't he? Foolish man. He doesn't even realize which side is truly in control. Not even a shred of awareness that the reason he's been subtly pushed aside is to ensure those lecherous eyes of his don't land on my daughters.

Lisa hadn't needed to exchange a single word with her husband to fully grasp his intentions. The general, though a powerful figure in Aion, was a foolish man bloated with authority, all of it obtained through underhanded means. To make matters worse, he had a habit of setting his sights on women wherever he went and taking them as his wives.

As lively music filled the room and dancers moved with the rhythm, Lisa's thoughts wandered to the past.

Before we were afflicted by that Cursed Disease, Shifu and Yuno were getting marriage proposals all the time. Being daughters of a major merchant family in Tsige, they attracted attention and were truly lovely girls. Once they started at the academy, the number of proposals only increased. But the thought of the general proposing to Shifu after his own son did… That's a memory I'd rather erase altogether.

“Mom? Just you? Where’s dad?” Lisa’s reverie was interrupted by the cheerful voice of her daughter Yuno, who was approaching with her sister Shifu.

“Yuno. Watch how you speak in public. It’s ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ understood? If you can’t correct yourself here, I’ll make sure it’s enforced at home,” Lisa replied firmly.

“Ah! I’ll be careful, mother,” Yuno assured, straightening her posture.

Lisa nodded with approval. “Good.”

Shifu spoke up, concern in her voice. “Mother, wasn’t that man just now from Aion…?”

“That’s right, Shifu. His son is the one who proposed to you—and he followed suit. They’re stopping here on their way to Stella Fortress. Your father made sure to keep him at a distance for now, but be careful not to let him spot you.”

“I see. By the way, where’s Raidou-sensei?”

“He was taken away earlier by someone from Lorel, likely an important government figure. Oh…” Lisa lost her train of thought as her gaze shifted to the edge of the hall where she’d spotted him. “He’s already back. But it doesn’t seem like he’s particularly fond of places like this.” She chuckled softly. “Too bad, considering how much effort you two put into dressing up.”

Following their mother’s gaze, Shifu and Yuno saw Raidou walking in and suddenly understood what she meant. Both girls’ lips curved into smiles.

Shifu wore an elegant crimson gown that draped gracefully from her shoulders to her feet, exuding a dignified air.

Yuno, on the other hand, radiated a soft, alluring charm in her pastel blue cocktail dress with exposed shoulders.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Yuno replied with a sheepish smile. Though she was usually the more active and energetic of the two, her presence transformed when adorned in such refined attire. While Shifu also made a striking impression in her vivid gown, the contrast

between Yuno's usual demeanor and her current appearance drew more gazes from those around them.

"He might not have said anything, but he's surely noticed how you look. You can always ask him what he thought later," Lisa said with a sly grin. Then, her tone took on a note of seriousness. "But, Shifu, Yuno."

"What is it?"

"Huh?"

"You two have been living quite the flashy lifestyle at the academy, haven't you? The Rembrandt name doesn't carry the best reputation right now, you know."

"Have you been… keeping tabs on us?!" Shifu asked, startled.

"Of course. Grades alone don't tell me everything about how you've been living. It seems you've calmed down since reenrolling, but I've heard stories about how things were before."

"Ugh…"

"Eek…"

The two sisters shrank under their mother's intense gaze, their shoulders hunching as though they were trying to make themselves smaller.

"Should I report all of this to Raidou-sama?" Lisa mused, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Please don't!" Shifu and Yuno cried in unison, their voices overlapping in desperate harmony.





“You are to turn that bad reputation around by the time you graduate. Do you understand? Fixing a bad reputation is no small task. People are far more inclined to disparage than to praise. From now on, I expect you to work as if your life depends on it. Now, get back out there!”

“Yes, ma’am!!!”

Driven by their mother’s words, Shifu and Yuno rushed back to the center of the hall.

The two sisters were terrified of what might happen if Raidou found out about their past. It wasn’t that they feared being abandoned or looked down upon by him; such ideas didn’t even cross their minds. Rather, they were haunted by the possibility that he might take extreme measures to correct their conduct.

This fear, ironically, stemmed from the unique trust they had in him as their teacher. His intense and demanding lectures had conditioned them to expect the worst, making such concerns not entirely unfounded.

Meanwhile, Lisa’s gaze returned to Raidou at the edge of the hall. He looked distinctly out of place, seemingly shrinking into himself as if trying to become invisible.

He appeared to be deep in thought—or perhaps not thinking at all. His inscrutable demeanor made it hard to tell. Watching the quietly awkward figure of her family’s benefactor, Lisa felt a small smile tug at her lips.



"Thank you for today," Rembrandt told Makoto with a smile. "Because of you, I was able to enjoy seeing my daughters in all their splendor."

It was early evening, and the festival was only just getting started. Makoto was escorting the Rembrandt couple back to their inn, as they had decided to leave before the main festivities.

"It's I who should thank you," Makoto wrote in reply. *"I had the chance to meet so many people. I truly appreciate it."*

"And? How did my daughters look? Were they able to catch your eye, Raidou-sama?" Lisa asked.

"They were stunning—completely different from the versions of them I see during lectures. I was more surprised than anything."

"Hahaha! 'So beautiful, it's surprising'—Raidou-dono, you have an excellent eye!" Rembrandt laughed heartily, taking Makoto's words as a compliment to himself and basking in the glow of fatherly pride.

"Dear… They really did put a lot of thought into selecting their dresses. As their mother, I'm relieved to hear such kind words," Lisa added.

"You're too kind, Madam," Makoto wrote.

"Raidou-dono," Rembrandt interjected with a more serious tone. "I didn't introduce him to you, but there was a general from the Aion Kingdom present at the event."

"A general from Aion?"

"Yes. It seems he stopped by on his way to Stella Fortress. He asked about you, so I told him that I had you well under control. Since you're conducting business in Tsige, Aion isn't likely to remain silent forever. But it seems you've garnered quite a bit of attention. Even the Lorel Federation is interested in you."

"You saw our exchanges at the hall, I assume? It seems the reputation of our medicine has reached them, and they proposed that I establish a company branch in Lorel. I declined, since managing this location and the Tsige one was already more than enough for me."

Hearing Makoto's response, Rembrandt nodded deeply before speaking. "Just the fact that they're talking about new branches shows how impressive your reputation is. However, you must also be mindful of your footing in these situations. Unexpected pitfalls can appear in the most unlikely places."

"Thank you for your concern," Makoto wrote.

Lisa joined the conversation with a warm smile. "My dear, Raidou-sama has Tomoe-sama, Mio-sama, and Shiki-sama by his side. He's well supported."

"Oh, you're right. I didn't mean to meddle. My apologies for being overly cautious," Rembrandt replied, scratching his head sheepishly.

"Not at all. I truly appreciate your thoughtfulness," Makoto said sincerely.

"This seems like a good opportunity," Rembrandt continued more resolutely. "Let me say this, not just out of gratitude but because I feel it must be said. No matter who you may face as an enemy in the future, I will stand by your side—as both a merchant and your indebted ally. If you ever find yourself in trouble, don't hesitate to tell me. I'll do what I can to help."

As soon as Rembrandt finished speaking, Makoto stepped ahead of the couple and stopped abruptly.

Startled, they paused as well. It didn't take them long to realize the cause: Something—or rather, someone—had drawn Makoto's attention.

Ahead of them stood several students dressed in academy uniforms, expressions twisted with hostility clearly directed at Makoto.

"Hey, Raidou," one of the students called out, his tone sharp and aggressive.

"It's true my name is Raidou. However, I don't recall granting any student the right to address me so informally. What do you want?"

"You'd better not tell me you've forgotten me. I'm the one you nearly killed," the student spat, glaring fiercely.

Makoto tilted his head, puzzled. The student was entirely unfamiliar to him. He considered whether this might be someone who had attended his lectures. Yet, as he searched his mind, no memories surfaced of the young man now blocking his path.

"I'm sorry. I don't know who you are," Makoto wrote.

"Wha—?! Don't mess with me!"

"I'm not joking. I genuinely have no recollection of you. But if I did something to you, I apologize. As you can see, I'm currently with guests. If you have complaints, bring them up tomorrow. Now then…"

"You mean to say you really don't remember me at all?" the student interrupted, his voice trembling with anger and disbelief.

"Were you one of the students in my lectures? I don't believe you were." Makoto was now visibly perplexed.

"As if I'd ever attend your lectures!" the student exclaimed venomously. "Heh, you know, Raidou, there are only seven students left in your lecture now, aren't there? And no one else is signing up, right? That's because I've been applying pressure to make sure of it!"

Makoto's confusion became more obvious from his expression. The student's words made no sense to him, and he was still certain they had never met before.

As for the supposed "pressure," Makoto knew it was baseless. Numerous applications had been submitted for his lectures, but he had deliberately chosen not to process them. He'd kept the class limited to seven students, focusing on helping them develop to a level where they could assist newcomers. This wasn't due to unpopularity but a calculated approach to maintain a manageable class size.

He addressed the student calmly, taking care not to escalate the situation.

"I told you, I'll hear you out tomorrow. Let me make one thing clear: The people behind me are guests invited by the academy. You understand what kind of trouble you'll bring on yourself if you lay a hand on them, don't you?"

The student hesitated upon hearing Makoto's firm response. Then, following a silent cue, the Rembrandt couple passed by without interference.

As Makoto moved to follow them, the student shouted in frustration, "I'll never forgive you! I'll make you regret crossing me! Tomorrow, when the matchups for the tournament are announced, I'll crush the students in your lecture one by one—by any means necessary! Then, everyone will know how useless you are!"

Makoto paused briefly and responded with a short, direct *"Do as you please."*

Without another glance, he resumed walking, paying no further attention to the continued shouts behind him.

A short distance from the scene, Rembrandt spoke, his voice heavy with concern: "Raidou-dono, did that student just imply he might harm my daughters?"

"Please rest assured," Makoto replied calmly. *"There isn't even a one-in-a-million chance of anything happening to them*."

"If you say so, I'll try not to worry, but…" Rembrandt trailed off uneasily.

"Leave it to me," Makoto wrote, his expression resolute. *"I won't allow any harm to come to my students."*

His steady assurances gradually eased Rembrandt's anxiety.

After ensuring their safe arrival at the inn, Makoto turned his thoughts toward the previous conflict. Despite his best efforts to remember, the student's face and claims remained an utter mystery to him.

After returning to the Kuzunoha Company, Makoto immediately called for Shiki, his attendant, and shared what had happened.

Shiki listened silently, reflecting on the timeline since their arrival in Rotsgard. After a moment of contemplation, he spoke. "Young Master, could it perhaps be that incident?"

"You've thought of something?" Makoto replied. "Nothing came to mind for me."

"I believe it was shortly after we arrived here. There was an incident where you punished some students who were harassing Luria."

Makoto slapped his knee. "Ah! Now that you mention it, I did help that girl on a whim when they harassed her. But those guys said I nearly killed them, didn't they? I was sure I'd only scared them a little."

"The ground below was cobblestone. Falling from that height could have been fatal. What's more, none of them knew how to use levitation spells. Their fear would have been considerable."

"That's true. So that's what they mean by 'almost killed.'" Makoto let out a deep sigh, his shoulders sagging.

Falling from a modest height and they're making such a big deal out of it? When I first came to this world, I went through far worse.

"I'll look into the student in question tomorrow. I've already promised to accompany Jin to the tournament draw," Shiki offered.

"Oh, right, the tournament draw. I'll stop by with Tomoe, Mio, and even Luto to take a look. Could you have Jin and the others

spare me a moment of their time? I'd like to warn them—they might be targeted with some petty harassment."

"A warning, Young Master?"

"Exactly, just a warning. They'll need to start handling obstacles like this on their own if they want to be dependable. The office keeps asking me to increase my student numbers, but Jin and the others will need to step up first. It's not like I have to comply, but I do feel a little sorry for the staff, stuck between the academy bigwigs and me. Once those seven are trained up, I can use them as teaching assistants."

Shiki nodded in agreement.

Well, I guess it's time to head to the store where Tomoe, Mio, and that tagalong Luto are waiting. I need to hear what they've been up to today. And knowing them, they'll want to drink plenty tonight, so I'd better be ready to keep up!

With a wry smile, Makoto left the store. It had been a long day, and the thought of the coming evening festivities made him chuckle to himself as he stepped out into the night.



We stood out.

Tomoe and Mio were already eye-catching enough in their traditional Japanese attire. Add Luto, a slender, handsome young man in a pristine white suit, and we became the center of attention. Well, I supposed he called himself Fals when dealing with hyumans, but that wasn't my concern. Referring to him by his title—guild master—was good enough.

In any case, being with these three made me stand out in the worst way possible.

The sight of two men and two women walking together might typically suggest a double date. But I was absolutely certain no one would think that when they saw us. After all, Luto was glued to my side, completely shattering any semblance of a romantic outing. And that was why Mio, trailing a few steps behind us, was seething with silent fury.

She's been doing a lot more silent fuming and a lot less yelling or getting physical lately. Why did she have to develop that skill? I didn't sign up for this evolution in her anger repertoire.

The four of us were making our way to the lottery venue for the academy festival's main event: the tournament.

The streets were packed. What normally felt like a spacious thoroughfare now barely offered room to move. I couldn't believe just how much of a spectacle this lottery had become.

The actual tournament wouldn't even start until tomorrow. The participants were just being announced, yet the turnout was incredible. It was clear the crowds would only grow in the coming days.

So, this is what they mean by prime real estate for vendors. Looking at the bustling scene, I finally understood why this street was so competitive and had such expensive stalls.

I know this doesn't make me much of a merchant, but honestly, I'm relieved Kuzunoha didn't set up shop here.

"It's a lovely thing, isn't it? Walking side by side with someone you cherish," Luto said, turning to me with a smile that could only be described as dazzling.

"Restrain your perverse remarks, Guild Master," Tomoe snapped, her tone sharp with irritation.

"But I was making a heartfelt confession," Luto replied sincerely.

"And," Tomoe added with a sigh, "it wouldn't hurt you to consider how we appear to those around us. In other words, could you please distance yourself a bit from Young Master?"

"This is my rightful privilege. I have no intention of giving it up or stepping aside. I have the morning free, and I can go wherever I want with whomever I want."

Good grief. Maybe Luto was stressed after being summoned here and there as one of the honored guests every single day.

The night before, when I'd arrived at the store, the three of them were already thoroughly drunk. I'd noticed it before at banquets with the denizens of the Demiplane, but ever since the academy festival started, everyone seemed to get drunk during these parties. Even Luto, who had a very high alcohol tolerance, had had flushed cheeks and hadn't been able to stop giggling.

At some point during the revelry, a contest had been held to determine who would get to walk beside me today.

Since any contest involving outright combat would've caused major problems, they'd settled on a more peaceful approach. Initially, they'd considered playing whack-a-helmet rock paper scissors, but after realizing that hitting people was too dangerous, they'd switched to "look the other way." I must admit, it was a wise choice.

And the winner? Luto. His claim to this "rightful privilege" was entirely legitimate, and the two losers were now walking begrudgingly behind us.

For some inexplicable reason, I overheard passersby saying things like "That guy's showing off, walking with two beauties while his friend tags along behind him." *What? How am I the one tagging along? That makes no sense.*

If anyone would actually look at Luto's expression they'd realize that isn't the case at all. Can people just recognize reality for once…?

As we walked to the lottery venue, I remembered my encounter with Sairitsu. "So, the Lorel Federation really does use kanji?" I asked. "Does that mean Japanese is also used there to some extent?"

Luto nodded confidently. "They call it 'Sage's Script.' It's used alongside the usual alphabet, but their Japanese has evolved quite a bit compared to what you'd know from Earth."

"Like regional dialects?"

"Not quite… I've got a better example. Think of it as similar to Vulgar Latin on Earth."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, would Colloquial Latin make more sense? It's a language that's mostly used by scholars nowadays. Something like that."

"I have no clue what you're talking about. Just what kind of Japanese people have you been interacting with?"

"They insisted they were perfectly normal, but I have my doubts," Luto replied with a grin.

I'm still within the bounds of normality, I think. Not knowing some obscure language comparison isn't a problem, right?

Luto's analogy had gone over my head, so I decided to focus on what mattered to me. "Are you saying that if I speak Japanese, there's a chance it could be understood here?"

He sighed. "You've given up thinking it through again. You really should work on that. It's best to come to your own conclusions, even if they're imperfect, than to just blindly follow someone else. You'll have fewer regrets that way. As for your concern about Japanese being understood, there shouldn't be anyone who understands it precisely. Still, unless a hero explicitly asks about it, you don't need to worry. In Lorel, they use a unique form of telepathic communication to converse with visitors from other worlds. In most cases, spirits grant blessings almost immediately, enabling visitors to use the common language. So there's little opportunity for people from other worlds to use their native languages here."

"I see. So, the only people who could understand Japanese in this world are otherworlders… That said, now I'm curious about this unique telepathy."

"That telepathy, by the way, is the foundation for the advanced techniques the demons use. You've had contact with demon generals, haven't you? No wonder it caught your interest," Luto remarked.

"Ah, yeah," I replied, a little taken aback.

He really does know everything.

"Speaking of things that catch your interest," Luto continued, but then—

"Young Master!" Mio interrupted. "I tried this earlier, and it was delicious. You should try some."

Mio had been darting from stall to stall, buying snacks indiscriminately. With how much she'd eaten, anything she singled out as delicious was worth trying. I accepted her offer.

"Thanks, Mio. Your recommendations are always spot on."

"Ah!" she replied, her face lighting up as she handed me the snack. It was served in a triangular container, filled to the brim with

golden-brown morsels about the size of a thumb. A savory, oily aroma wafted up toward my nose—it was clearly fried.

I picked up one with a skewer and brought it to my mouth.

The coating was crispy, and the inside was juicy and meaty, with a subtle flavor and texture that reminded me of chicken tenderloin. It had just the right amount of spices in the batter to give it a delightful kick, and the saltiness was perfectly balanced. I loved it.

I found myself wishing for a citrusy accent, like a squeeze of lemon juice, as I always enjoyed on fried chicken. It was delicious anyway, but still…

"Wow, that looks delicious. Mio-chan, do you have some for me?" Luto asked, peering into my container.

"There's no way I'd have anything for you, you pervert! And don't call me Mio-chan— Wait, what are you—?!"

Before Mio could finish her retort, Luto plucked a skewer from my container and popped the fried morsel into his mouth.

"Ah, just borrowing a skewer," he said nonchalantly, glancing around for a moment before deliberately switching to my title, "Raidou-dono. Hmm, interesting. The meat itself is ordinary, but I've never had it prepared like this. It's good."

Luto's swift theft left me both impressed and annoyed. In an instant, he had taken one of my skewers, but also adjusted his language as though detecting a risk with using my name. *You might be a pervert, but that's some kind of situational awareness…*

"Would you like to die now, or would you like to die now?" Mio growled, her tone low and dangerous.

Mio. That's the same choice both times.

Seeing her trembling with fury, I spoke up. "Come on, Mio. It smells amazing, so let's let him off the hook for once. Thanks to you, I've found a new favorite food."

"Favorite food?! In that case, I'll make sure it's on the table next time!" Mio declared excitedly.

"I'll look forward to it. Oh, and when you do—"

“I’ll add lemon salt or yuzu zest for fragrance. That’s what you’d prefer, right?”

“Yeah.”

How did she know? Was it that obvious from my face? That’s a little embarrassing.

Luto, for once, didn’t interject. Instead, he stood there silently, looking off into the distance.

“Guild Master, why are you so quiet?” Tomoe, who had been silently eating the same fried snack, finally broke her silence.

Thanks to Mio offering me the food, our formation had shifted. Instead of two in front and two in the back, the four of us now walked side by side.

“I was just reminiscing a bit. There was a time when my partner asked me to make fried chicken tenderloin. I remember struggling to cook something with that meat. They praised me, saying it tasted really close to what they used to eat back in Japan… But I felt frustrated.”

“You were praised, were you not? Shouldn’t that make you happy?” Tomoe asked with a tone of genuine curiosity.

“I tried to replicate the exact taste they wanted, but I couldn’t fully meet their expectations. That’s why it frustrated me,” Luto said. “It’s like you—wouldn’t you prefer to be called a samurai instead of just being told you’re like one?”

“I see,” Tomoe replied thoughtfully, nodding along with his reasoning.

Mio, oblivious to the somber mood, spoke cheerfully as she reached for my hand. “Young Master, let’s check out that stall over there!”

Luto stepped in to stop her. “Okay, that’s enough. I’m the winner, Mio-chan. You and Tomoe take a step back. Today, I’m the one beside Makoto. Even inside the venue, let’s keep things in order, shall we?”

“Grr…”

“Tch.”

Tomoe and Mio clicked their tongues in unison before stepping ahead of us. *Say what you will about them, but they're good at keeping their promises when it matters.*

Soon, our destination came into view. Time seemed to fly when I was with these three. Shiki had likely arrived at the lottery venue ahead of us. I needed to meet up with him quickly.

So far, there's been no sign of that student who declared war last night. Considering how out of sorts Tomoe and Mio are today, I really hope he doesn't show up now.

There might have been people at the venue who would recognize Luto as the guild master, but I figured it would be fine to introduce him as a personal friend if anyone asked.

I wonder how my adorable students are doing. They probably aren't nervous at this stage, but after making such bold assurances to Rembrandt-san, I can't help feeling a little uneasy. If they seem too relaxed, I'll have to light a fire under them.

There's a lot to worry about but just as much to look forward to. I can't afford to show any weakness in front of my students, so I'll carry myself with confidence.

With that resolve in mind, I stepped into the venue.

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First, we met up with Shiki, who was waiting for us near the entrance, then we headed for the room Jin and the others were in.

Luto had planned to come with us, but as soon as we arrived, he disappeared, saying something absurd about "handing me over to Tomoe and Mio," as he'd "remembered an important errand."

An obvious lie.

He clearly had some purpose for being here. If I had pressed him with just the right question, he might have told me what it was, but otherwise, there was no way he'd give me a straight answer.

Well, no point in overthinking it while he's not around.

Following Shiki's lead, we arrived at the waiting room where Jin and the others were gathered. Tomoe was watching my students with a look of amusement.

Her gaze was likely making them uncomfortable. Being scrutinized by a stranger like that wouldn't sit well with anyone, especially my students.

"Well, well, so these are Young Master's students. Oh-ho, those two over there—I've seen their portraits before! They must be the daughters of Rembrandt-dono," Tomoe said, smiling as she addressed Shifu and Yuno.

Tomoe's easygoing demeanor contrasted starkly with the tense expressions of the students.

"Y-Yes! Nice to meet you! I'm Shifu Rembrandt!"

"And I'm her younger sister Yuno! It's a pleasure to meet you!"

The two responded energetically. While it was their first time meeting Tomoe, they had likely heard plenty about her from their dad. Compared to the other five, they seemed more nervous—or maybe it was just excitement.

"Good responses! As expected of the Rembrandt family. While this is our first meeting, I am—" Tomoe started.

"You must be Tomoe-sama and Mio-sama of the Kuzunoha Company," Shifu interjected. "Our father has spoken of you many times. It's an honor to finally meet you."

Interesting. Usually, Yuno speaks first in situations like this, especially when emotions are running high.

"Hopefully it doesn't come across as greediness. Still, I'm pleased our names are known, even though I'm rarely in Tsige, unlike Mio," Tomoe added with a grin.

"Father has always referred to the two of you as the twin pillars that support Raidou-sensei and the Kuzunoha Company both publicly

and privately," Shifu replied.

"Putting me on the same level as Tomoe is one thing, but calling us the twin pillars? Well, I suppose I'll allow it… It's telling that your father didn't consider adding this one a third pillar, isn't it?" Mio said with a pointed glance at Shiki.

Wow, Mio's competitive streak is showing, especially toward Tomoe. And does she really have to roast Shiki like that to his face?

"I am far from comparable to the two of you," Shiki replied, smiling warmly as he bowed in humility beside the students. "Mio-dono manages the Tsige store wonderfully, and Tomoe-dono oversees external trade. Thanks to the two of you, I've been able to learn from and work closely with Raidou-sama. I'm grateful every day for the opportunity."

Shiki's words caused Mio to raise an eyebrow.

Wait, what? Mio managing the store? Isn't she just cooking and running back and forth between Tsige and the Demiplane? Sure, she helps the adventurers, but managing the store? And Tomoe? She's always wandering around looking for the perfect seasonal spots. Sure, she gathers intel with her forest ogres across the continent, but "external trade"? That's news to me.

Honestly, I've been learning more about managing the business from Shiki than the other way around.

Shiki, you really don't need to go that far with your politeness. If you don't find a way to vent now and then, you might snap again like you did when Lime went missing. I should keep an eye on him.

I moved to address the rest of the group.

"Jin, Abelia, Daena, Mithra, Izumo. This is your first time meeting Tomoe and Mio, two of my most trusted followers," I wrote.

"I am Tomoe. Pleased to make your acquaintance," Tomoe said, nodding with her usual self-assurance.

When Mio spoke, her tone was flat and disinterested. "Mio."

Seriously? That's it? It's so obvious they only care about Shifu and Yuno. Could you two at least pretend to be polite?

Despite the brief introductions, the students followed Shifu and Yuno's lead, responding with polite bows. It was probably mimicry rather than understanding, though. There was no way they could gauge Tomoe and Mio's strength—not with their unassuming appearance and skill at masking their abilities.

"Um, Sensei. You called them your trusted followers, but what about Shiki-san?" Abelia asked cautiously.

"As Shiki himself mentioned earlier, he's still in the process of learning. In terms of business acumen, he's one of the most trusted members of the company. However, when it comes to overall ability, including handling dangerous situations—such as combat skills for transportation and procurement—he still falls short."

"In combat skills?" Daena muttered in disbelief.

"Shiki-san falling short?" Izumo followed, his smile strained as though he found the idea absurd.

Mithra joined in, summing up his thoughts in just two words: "A nightmare."

The three of them seemed truly horrified at my explanation.

"By the way," Tomoe interjected, "if you're learning from Young Master, you understand that levels and numbers alone don't determine the outcome of a battle, don't you?"

What's this all of a sudden?

The five students nodded silently, the Rembrandt sisters responding a beat quicker than the rest.

Ah, I see. Rembrandt-san must've told them about Tomoe's and Mio's levels. Probably in detail too.

"Well, what I want to convey is this: The level you've likely relied on as an absolute measure of strength is, at best, merely proof of how much harm you have inflicted upon others. It doesn't directly represent true strength. For example, there are cases where two individuals with levels over one thousand are effortlessly dealt with by a Level 1 human," Tomoe explained.

"Wha—?!"

All seven students reacted in unison, visibly shaken. Even though my lectures had already pushed them outside the realm of conventional thinking, hearing such extreme numbers still caught them off guard.

Tomoe grinned with pleasure at their response. "It's no lie," she continued. "Fufufu, I can see why Young Master and Shiki are so invested in you lot. You've still got much to learn, but you've all got good faces. I look forward to watching your matches."

"Hmph. I fail to see the appeal," Mio cut in, her tone cold and dismissive. "They've barely hatched out of their eggs. Their matches will be no better than watching a clumsy series of collisions."

Mio… You might be right from your perspective, but could you soften the delivery a little?

"Good grief. You should take some time to learn the joys of teaching," Tomoe retorted, shaking her head. "From tomorrow, you'd best stick to eating food from the stalls. Don't go upsetting Young Master with your grumbling."

I wonder if Tomoe learned the "joys of teaching" through tormenting her forest ogres. Regardless, it's nice to see her finding pleasure in educating. Maybe it will keep her from looking down on others just for being inexperienced.

"I would never make Young Master uncomfortable!" Mio declared, her tone sharp and indignant.

Maybe if Mio started teaching someone how to cook, she'd understand too. For now, though, she's still entirely focused on improving her own skills and knowledge.

"Both of you, stop bickering here," I told them. *"Take a page out of Shiki's book. Speaking of which—Shiki, about that matter we discussed…"*

The main reason I had come here today was to warn Jin and the others about the reckless student who'd appeared yesterday and threatened them. Especially since I'd told Rembrandt-san not to worry, I couldn't afford to let any unforeseen incidents occur.

"Yes," Shiki replied. "I've already informed them of the key details. I found out that the student who talked to you is the second son of the Hopleys family—one of the three most prominent noble houses in Limia, with blood ties to the royal family. While he has no inheritance rights yet, his personal achievements have earned him a reputation on par with his elder brother."

"A big shot, then. Not that his behavior reflected that."

A prominent noble family in Limia, huh? And he's the second son. It made sense. If the head of the family or the eldest son went to war, their lives would be at risk, so someone like him—the next in line—would be carefully protected.

Apparently, in Limia, it was customary for noble heads and heirs to take to the front lines during wartime, fulfilling their duty at risk of their lives. However, with the current war against the demons being the first large-scale conflict in a while, I wondered how strictly that tradition was being upheld.

So, he really is a significant figure. Limia, the Hopleys family…

I had planned to let Jin and the others handle things, but the situation seems a bit more complex now. He might not be so easy to deal with…

If he resorted to excessive measures—hiring assassins, using poison, or acting dishonorably outside the arena—I'd have to step in myself.

"You seem to have a knack for attracting troublesome individuals, Raidou-sensei," Jin remarked, his expression tinged with resignation.

Jin… Could you please drop that "I'm getting used to it" look? It's not as comforting as you think.

"Jin, your unflinching attitude is admirable," I wrote with a smile. *"As Shiki has likely mentioned, you'll need to handle the harassment on your own… By the way, I heard everyone passed the preliminary round, but it seems you weren't giving it your all, were you?"*

"Of course. We passed the preliminaries easily. We only used about half of our strength." All seven of them puffed out their chests, smug expressions on their faces. Considering their high levels compared to the other participants, it wasn't a surprising result.

"Impressive. Well done, everyone," I wrote.

Silence fell.

"What's wrong? Aren't you happy to be praised?"

"Well, usually when Sensei praises us, there's something coming," Jin said cautiously, raising his hand as though bracing for a blow.

Wow, they're pretty wary of me.

Still, I needed to be firm. Their performance in this tournament would help me determine whether to take on new students.

"Sharp instincts, Jin. I've only heard secondhand accounts about the preliminaries, but it's clear your abilities stood out," I wrote with a mischievous smile.

Again, silence.

"Which is why I've decided to impose certain restrictions on you. Shiki will now explain the rules you must follow for the main tournament."

The academy festival didn't slow down after the preliminaries; the selection for the main tournament was completed before the festival began. To catch the attention of the dignitaries in attendance, participants first had to prove their worth internally.

As Shiki explained the restrictions I'd devised, their expressions tightened, and a few even groaned out loud.

This tournament is far below the level of my lectures. There's no point in them going all out here. That's why I decided to have them fight with constraints—think of it as a challenge mode.

"Are you serious?" Abelia asked, her face pale.

How rude.

"Of course I am. Starting tomorrow, not just Shiki, but Tomoe, Mio, and I will also be watching your matches. I'm looking forward

to it.”

With that, my business here was done.

Tomoe cast them a pleasant smile, while Mio offered only a brief, dismissive glance. Shiki, meanwhile, stayed behind to watch over the students. If any interference came from the aristocratic troublemaker, he would handle it.

Still, Lorel, Aion, and now Limia. What’s next? Gritonia? At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised…

Dealing with all four major nations… I’m feeling overwhelmed.

Well, time to leave and move on to my next task.

Jin

“Shiki-san, wait, what?!”

“Raidou-sensei… He’s serious, isn’t he?”

“He’s serious. That wasn’t the look of someone who was joking.”

“Terrifying. He’s really terrifying…”

“Sensei could’ve at least said something about the dresses yesterday.”

“Just like mother said, we’ll have to ask him directly if we want his thoughts.”

As soon as Raidou-sensei, Tomoe-san, and Mio-san left the room, everyone started speaking at once, as if a dam of opinions had burst. *But, hey, you two Rembrandts, isn’t your lack of tension a bit much?*

First, that Hopleys idiot decides to barge in with basically a declaration of war on us. Then Sensei casually says that we’ll need to deal with any pressure or interference ourselves. Now, we’re being told not to fight at full strength in the main tournament. Seriously, what kind of teacher does this? He defies common sense at every turn.

A student’s performance in the tournament reflected directly on their instructor. Most instructors would pressure their students to win

at all costs but not Sensei. Instead, he placed restrictions on us.

This isn't just any tournament either. Whatever happens here, the academy will be talking about it for the next year. For some of us, it could even affect our job prospects after graduation.

Could it be that the Hopleys family has applied pressure on Sensei, forcing him to limit how much strength we can display?

No, that's not it. Sensei didn't look like he was yielding to pressure. He was enjoying seeing how we would tackle this trial.

This might be a serious turning point. One that could determine whether I achieve the path I'm aiming for.

"Jin, what's your restriction?" Abelia asked.

"I'm not allowed to use dual wielding," I replied. "What about you, Abelia?"

"He told me not to enhance my arrows," Abelia said, gathering the others in close. "Of course, since I'm in the mage division, I'll have to stick with my staff. What about everyone else?"

"That move I worked out with Zwei-san? Totally banned," Mithra muttered with a sigh.

His ultimate technique is prohibited? That's rough. Now all he's got left to show off is his iron defense… Poor guy.

"I can't use double reinforcement," Daena complained. "It's heartbreaking."

Daena, I feel for you. He was arguably the strongest one-on-one fighter besides me. That restriction effectively cut off his trump card—a special kind of magic that was vital to his style.

"I've been forbidden from using mobile incantations. I had finally gotten it to a usable level in real combat and was planning to showcase it here…" Izumo's voice was thick with frustration.

That's harsh. Izumo had poured everything into developing a way to cast spells while moving. He'd painstakingly refined it through trial and error, under Sensei and Shiki-san's guidance. He'd even proudly dubbed it mobile incantation; it was his prized accomplishment.

At least Sensei hadn't banned him from using the incantation language Shiki-san taught us, but to forbid something so integral to Izumo's fighting style… It had to be crushing for him.

"I'm limited to using only one type of weapon," Yuno shared, frowning.

That practically seals off her incredible versatility.

"My synthesis magic is forbidden. I can't combine earth spirits with fire magic," Shifu added. "I was hoping to use this tournament to demonstrate how useful earth magic can be…"

He's blocked her highest-powered attacks. Shifu could still put out plenty of firepower, but that was her best asset.

Everyone had been restricted from using the new techniques or combat styles they'd honed over the summer break—styles they had been guided toward by Sensei and the others.

"Could Sensei be doing this because of pressure from the Hopleys family?" Izumo voiced the same worry I'd briefly entertained.

A few others glanced around with troubled expressions, clearly sharing the same thought.

"That's impossible," Shiki-san said flatly. "Raidou-sama mentioned that this tournament is an excellent opportunity for all of you, especially given how lax you've been lately… After all, some of you have been idling away your time chatting with our store employees."

Ugh… No rebuttal there. We'd been caught red-handed. All we could do was bow our heads in silent apology.

Shiki-san cleared his throat and went on. "Think of it as a little test. Do your best."

A test? That word stuck out. It's always better to clarify things like this right away.

"Uh, Shiki-san, what do you mean by 'test'?" I asked cautiously. "It's… kind of bothering me."

"Oh dear, it seems I've misspoken," Shiki-san replied, almost too casually.

A slip of the tongue? Doubtful. Shiki-san wasn't the type to blunder like that. He'd probably had something to tell us all along.

"Does this test have something to do with the restrictions and the tournament?" I probed. I had no guarantee my hunch was correct, but it was worth a shot.

Shiki-san's face lit up with satisfaction, like he'd been waiting for this exact question.

"Well, I suppose I can't help it, but keep this between us, all right? If you all perform well under these conditions, Raidou-sama intends to add new students into his lectures after the festival ends. Do you understand what that means?"

Adding new students?

I'd heard that Raidou-sensei's lectures were so exclusive that not even trial participation was possible anymore. So, if he planned to reopen applications… *Wait. Could that mean… our lessons are coming to an end?!*

"Uh… Does that mean we're being abandoned or something…?" Izumo asked hesitantly.

Izumo, read the room! What are we supposed to do if Shiki-san says yes?!

Fortunately, Shiki replied, "Of course not. If that were the case, you'd be expected to have mastered the techniques and knowledge you've already learned."

"Then… Does that mean there's nothing left for us to learn?" Daena chimed in, uncertainty in his voice.

Daena, seriously, you too?!

"Absolutely not," Shiki repeated. "Hmm, you really don't understand, do you? Raidou-sama believes it's time to advance your lectures to the next stage."

"?!"

He sighed deeply, exasperated by our inability to connect the dots, then continued, "That's why Raidou-sama said he wanted you all to learn not to always reveal all your cards in battle. Instead,

impose constraints on yourselves, think deeply, and refine your skills."

We were silent.

"If all seven of you complete this challenge successfully, Raidou-sama intends to welcome new students, and he wants you to assist in their education. This will give you the opportunity to revisit everything you've learned so far and to progress in your own training as well."

No matter how much effort we put in, we were so far behind Sensei that we couldn't see his back—or even his shadow, for that matter.

To be recognized and evaluated by someone like that…

It's overwhelming and deeply rewarding.

As I contemplated Shiki-san's words, strength welled up from deep within me. My hands clenched, and I felt a tremendous energy spreading from my chest, radiating through my whole body. I couldn't help but smile.

"Of course, I'm looking forward to seeing how you perform as well," Shiki-san added, smiling warmly. "Please make sure Raidou-sama reopens the application process for new students. Well then, I'll leave you to get ready. Afterward, if any of you are free, let me treat you to a late lunch."

With that, Shiki-san left the room.

The idea of a next stage… We had made it to the point where our qualifications were being tested.

We've got to do everything we can to put on a good performance… No matter what.

"I shouldn't have asked. Now I'm so nervous I might get an upset stomach," Mithra muttered tensely.

You are clearly nervous, but come on, man… Find better things to complain about.

"I get what Mithra's saying," Abelia added with a wry smile. "Hearing something like that means we have no option to quit. That's a lot of pressure."

“We can’t afford any sloppy or halfhearted fights,” Daena said firmly. “How about this—after we get lunch with Shiki-san, we regroup and go over anything we can improve before the tournament.”

Daena was right. There was still time, and I wanted to use every second wisely.

“Not just Sensei—Tomoe-san and Mio-san will be watching!” Yuno exclaimed. “Not to mention, father and mother are coming as well. This is huge! I think I’m starting to lose track of everything…”

“We just have to go through with it. I’ve already resigned myself to facing this trial…” Shifu replied.

The Rembrandt sisters seemed overwhelmed by the lineup of spectators. They were relaxed before Raidou-sensei arrived, but now everything had changed.

Speaking of Sensei, something had been bothering me since he showed up. I was about to voice my thoughts, but Abelia beat me to it.

“Hey, Shifu, Yuno, I’ve got something I want to ask you.”

“What is it, Abelia-senpai?”

“Yes, what would you like to ask?”

“Those two with Sensei—Tomoe-san and Mio-san. Are they really stronger than Shiki-san? I know it’s foolish of me to ask this, considering I can’t even fully grasp Shiki-san’s strength, but someone on his level isn’t exactly common…”

Damn it. She asked first.

The sisters exchanged a glance and nodded before answering.

“If Raidou-sensei said so, it’s definitely true. We don’t know Shiki-san’s level since he’s not registered with the Adventurer’s Guild, but as for those two…” Shifu’s eyes seemed to glaze over as she stared aimlessly into the horizon.

“Our dad explained it to us so we wouldn’t accidentally offend them. Both are famous in Tsige—so much so that everyone knows who they are,” Yuno added, her tone intense and somber.

Famous in a frontier town? That's… impressive, I guess? But for people so close to Raidou-sensei, still a little underwhelming.

Then, as if coming to a mutual decision, the sisters glanced at each other, nodded firmly, and leaned in closer.

"They're Level 1,500, at least."

The words left their mouths in perfect unison, and silence fell over the group.

Although that short statement was whispered in familiar common language, it refused to register in my mind.

What did they just say?

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"You're wearing quite the stern expression, Princess Lily. I had a feeling you wanted to speak with me. Was I right?"

"Fals-dono. As the head of the Adventurer's Guild, would you be so kind as to explain why you're associating with that merchant?"

After parting ways with Makoto, Luto—now presenting as Fals—had met up with Lily, the princess of Gritonia.

After their eyes met at the entrance to the venue, they exchanged a casual greeting, then Luto slipped away from Makoto's group to meet her in seclusion. Only once he'd erected a barrier to nullify any attempts at eavesdropping or surveillance did the real conversation begin.

"Oh, so you know he's a merchant? He's one of my new favorites, actually," Luto replied with a teasing grin.

"I won't waste time correcting your insolent manner of speech, but I won't tolerate nonsense either. Fals-dono, what is your true connection to him?"

Lily's displeasure was evident as she pressed for answers. Her tone was sharp, and her demeanor, much like Luto's, was far from typical for an influential figure.

"I wasn't lying; he really is a favorite of mine," Luto replied.

"Is the Kuzunoha Company backed by the Adventurer's Guild?" Lily demanded.

"Of course not. The Adventurer's Guild doesn't align itself with any nation or power. We offer equal cooperation to all who recognize our value."

This was one of the core principles of the Adventurer's Guild, and there was no falsehood in his statement.

"I see… Now, about that woman, Tomoe, in their company. The hero of my nation has expressed a strong desire to make her his own. Her strength is undeniable, and it's difficult for me to refuse his wishes. But she gave him a clear rejection, and it seems he has no chance of convincing her otherwise… At this point, I'd welcome any information you can share. I can't ignore those who defy us. Could I crush them with my power?"

"The Empire's hero has taken a liking to Tomoe—now that's interesting," Luto replied with a wry smile. "But my answer to your question is no. Going up against the Kuzunoha Company would be like waging an all-out war with the demons. No matter how powerful Gritonia is, I wouldn't recommend it."

"They have ties to the demons?!"

"It's just a metaphor. What I mean is that they pose a similar level of threat. You already have more than enough cards in your hand to achieve your goals, don't you? Getting distracted by unnecessary targets is… unwise."

"I appreciate your advice. But you see, leaving important matters unchecked is not okay with me. So… the Kuzunoha Company's strength isn't limited to just Tomoe, is it?"

Luto had refrained from explicitly mentioning Makoto's connections to the demons. Lily, for her part, didn't believe the head of the Adventurer's Guild would share purely advantageous

information with her, anyway. She listened carefully, analyzing his words to extract even the smallest fragments of useful insight.

"More importantly," Luto added playfully, "are you sure it's wise for you to be here at a time like this? Your 'festival of war' is about to begin, isn't it?"

"There's no problem," Lily replied tersely before narrowing her eyes. "Fals-dono, perhaps you and I are more alike than I initially thought."

"Haha, you think so? You and me? No, I don't see it. Unlike you, I'm not consumed by revenge. I have my goals, and the path to reach them happens to overlap with yours for a time."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're someone I'd prefer not to make an enemy of," Lily admitted. "After all, you shared information on Sofia's betrayal and the demon rings in advance. Why not tell me about your goals? There might be ways I can help you."

Her words were sincere. Despite his enigmatic demeanor, this guild master had provided her with valuable information and timely warnings on more than one occasion. He had been helpful—at times, even essential—to her efforts. But he wasn't an ally. The uncertainty of his true objectives weighed heavily on her and left her with a lingering sense of unease.

Luto, however, didn't budge.

"If it becomes necessary, I'll share them someday. For now, you should focus on working with your hero to create the world you envision. As long as you continue to support adventurers, I have no intention of changing the nature of our relationship."

"'As long as I continue to support adventurers,' is that right?" Lily echoed, her gaze sharp.

"That's right… No matter who or where they are, as long as they support adventurers and accept the guild, I'll be their ally. Well then, we'll likely see each other again soon. Until then, goodbye."

With a parting smile, Luto—no, Fals—slipped through the barrier he had erected as if it weren't even there, and vanished. Lily could

do nothing but watch in stunned silence. Then, her eyes widened in sudden realization.

"'No matter who or where,' is it? You're saying that you're not an ally of the Empire or even the hyumans. Even if they're demi-humans or demons, if they support adventurers, you'll back them. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

Her lips tightened, trembling slightly as she bit down hard on them.

"He was the one who initiated contact, already understanding my goals. He also shared the existence of rings that suppress the Goddess's power and warned me of the betrayal by Sofia the Dragon Slayer."

Thanks to Luto, the Empire had been able to navigate this war with relative success.

Remembering this, Lily chose to set aside her unease about his true motives. Instead, she focused on her immediate objectives.

The fall of Stella Fortress is the top priority. If this tournament doesn't yield any promising talent, I should go back to the Empire quickly. At the very least, Fals's interaction with Raidou is a positive development. As long as his interests align with mine, it would be inconvenient for him to allow the Kuzunoha Company to be targeted. That's probably why he gave me all that information.

This time, I will *take Stella Fortress.*

Lily's eyes blazed with a fierce resolve for the war ahead.



I had completely underestimated the nobles' capabilities. Thank goodness I'd assigned Shiki to keep an eye on the students.

In just one night, an entire arsenal of sabotage had been unleashed on my students to disrupt their participation in the tournament.

First, the food at a restaurant they visited for dinner was laced with a toxin that would've caused them to lose their sense of balance for several days. Then, the water in their dorm rooms, prepared by the servants, was tainted with substances to induce severe diarrhea and abdominal pain. And to top it off, multiple teams of assassins attempted to break in during the night.

Thankfully, Shiki had intercepted everything before it could reach the students. While I had expected some interference, I couldn't believe just how far they'd gone.

Now—tournament day. I thought the worst of the sabotage had already passed. I was wrong.

Out of the blue, I received a message from Rembrandt-san. Apparently, there had been some issue involving me at the Merchant Guild. He and his wife had gone there on my behalf to handle the

situation, which meant they wouldn't be attending the tournament. Somehow, this too felt like a deliberate act of obstruction.

Do nobles really go this far? I wondered, looking down at the tournament pamphlet in my hand. I felt guilt weighing on me for burdening the Rembrandts.

The pamphlet contained the tournament's brackets, neatly printed and organized. But compared to the version I had glanced at yesterday, it had clearly been changed.

The tournament was still divided into two categories: the warrior division and the mage division. Both were set up in separate brackets, with the winners of each set to face off in the finals.

Among my students, Jin, Mithra, Daena, and Yuno were in the warrior division, while Abelia, Shifu, and Izumo were in the mage division.

There were around forty participants in the main tournament. Following the individual matches, there would also be a team competition. Jin and the others were participating in both. As for that noble brat—the Hopleys family's second son—he was also competing.

"In the first round, Jin's up against Mithra, and Daena's facing Yuno," I mused. "The winners will fight each other in the following round. In the mage division, Abelia's matched against Shifu in the first round, with the winner taking on Izumo, who has a bye. They even went as far as rigging the brackets…"

"In other words, it's matches between your students, isn't it?" Tomoe asked, smiling. "That should be entertaining."

"Tomoe… That's a really optimistic take—but honestly, I'm shocked. Is there no limit to what they'll do?"

Tomoe's comment missed the point entirely. What I was trying to convey was how absurdly unrestrained the nobles were.

They're still just students, yet they wield their authority so blatantly.

"It seems the Hopleys family has more power than I ever imagined. And the academy… It's far from the impartial institution it

pretends to be. Those people over there…" I sighed, glancing over at the distinguished guests seated in the VIP section, far away from the general audience.

Near the headmaster were a few unfamiliar faces—probably representatives from one of the four major nations. Further down was Luto, representing the Adventurer's Guild. Among the group dressed in religious garb, I recognized Bishop Sinai from our previous encounter. At the far end sat Sairitsu, the high-ranking envoy from Lorel. Her placement seemed noticeably peripheral, likely indicative of her status relative to the others.

I doubted any of them were aware of the sabotage against my students. But the fact that the Hopleys family had a representative seated among them made them all seem complicit.

Gazing up at them, I found myself reflecting on my connections since arriving in this world.

An otherworlder like me has somehow ended up mingling with high-ranking individuals and nobility… But every interaction with those kinds of people has been layered with lies and half-truths.

That's how it's been ever since I got here. Even with someone as trustworthy as Rembrandt-san, I've kept things hidden. I've told so many lies…

Sure, they'd helped me get by at the time, but they were still lies. They were accumulating into a pile of complications too large to ignore.

This can't go on forever.

"Young Master?" Tomoe's voice snapped me back to the present.

"Maybe all of my little deceptions are finally catching up to me—and that VIP section feels like the result. I may be reaching my limit. Don't you think, Tomoe?"

"H-Huh?"

Why's she acting nervous? Is it so strange for me to be serious for once?

"Young Master," Mio interjected as she returned, holding a small paper bag. "I found something interesting, so I bought it. Three portions, just in case."

Mio's cheerful mood changed the atmosphere immediately. *What a relief.*

"Thanks, Mio."

"You've become quite considerate, haven't you, Mio?" Tomoe added with a teasing grin.

As I accepted the paper bag, a basil-like aroma tickled my nose. Today's snack seemed to be all about the fragrance. Warmth seeped through the bag, letting me know its contents were freshly made. I couldn't wait to try it.

At this point, Jin and the others had done all they could to prepare. There was nothing more to be done but let the events play out. As much as I had concerns, my role now was simply to watch over them.

A booming voice echoed across the arena, announcing the start of the tournament.

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"And now, for the next match, featuring the highest-level contestants in this tournament! Both competitors are Level 97! Introducing first: Jin Rohan! A second-year in the academy's advanced division, he consistently ranks among the top in practical skills! He's known for his exceptional swordsmanship, and many are eagerly anticipating his performance today!

"And his opponent, Mithra Casper! Highly regarded even by mages, he's a frontline warrior with near impenetrable defense and

the versatility to use healing techniques as well!"

In stark contrast to the announcer's exuberance, the two standing on the stage wore expressions like they'd swallowed something bitter.

I didn't need to ask why. The cause was obvious—their weapons and, of course, their opponents. Both Jin and Mithra held wooden swords instead of their usual weapons. The swords were standard size, comparable to regular one-handed blades.

Meanwhile, other competitors were allowed to use their preferred equipment, with some matches already decided by nothing more than weapon disparities.

I certainly hadn't instructed them to fight with wooden swords, and it was clear this wasn't their choice either.

"Before we begin, a note to our audience. This year, several participants have surpassed Level 90. To ensure balance between these individuals and the other students, some restrictions have been put in place."

Ah, I see. So, all the restricted participants must be my students.

"One such restriction is the equipment they're using. Now, a quick review of the rules before we begin! Matches are ten minutes long. Damage taken will be transferred to a doll, which will serve as a proxy for each contestant. Complete destruction of the doll will signify incapacitation, ending the match immediately.

"For the warrior division, offensive and healing magic are prohibited, with only self-buffing techniques permitted. Leaving the arena will result in deductions, which could decide the match if time runs out."

The dolls. Handy gadgets that absorbed damage on behalf of the contestants. They looked like oversized roly-poly toys, roughly a meter tall, and shaped like gourds. These were often used in tournaments like these and were, unsurprisingly, extremely expensive.

In the event of an overkill—where the damage exceeded what the doll could absorb—the excess damage would transfer back to the contestant. For this reason, each competitor was allotted three dolls per match—another example of the academy's opulence on display.

Still, the rules felt almost cruel toward Mithra. He wasn't allowed to use healing magic, and he was expected to resolve the fight quickly. For a fighter who specialized in endurance and support through healing, this put him at a severe disadvantage.

Jin, meanwhile, wasn't hindered by these rules in the slightest. And knowing Jin, he wasn't the type to show any mercy. This match was bound to end with Jin on the offensive from start to finish. Even if it came down to a decision, the judges would undoubtedly rule in his favor.

"And now, Jin Rohan versus Mithra Casper—match start!"

The audience roared with deafening enthusiasm.

Jin wasted no time, closing the distance and bringing his wooden sword down from above. Mithra met the strike with his own blade, expertly absorbing the blow without losing his footing.

Perhaps because it was the opening of the match, Jin pushed aggressively, unleashing a relentless barrage of strikes. His attacks were precise and seamless, each movement leaving minimal openings.

Meanwhile, Mithra had yet to land any meaningful counterattacks. He was completely on the defensive, parrying and blocking as Jin's wooden sword hammered away.

This is just bad luck, Mithra. Jin's probably saying something like "Don't take it personally—it's just how the match turned out." And Mithra's probably replying with something along the lines of "Even so, I can't hold back."

I couldn't hear their voices over the audience's roar, but watching their mouths move, it wasn't hard to guess what was being said.

"What a dull, one-sided match this is," Tomoe remarked, disappointed.

I couldn’t blame her for her assessment. It wasn’t the kind of fight that would captivate casual viewers. However, for those who specialized in swordsmanship or close combat, there were valuable lessons to be learned here.

The way Jin chained his attacks together, the precision of his movements, the fluidity of his strikes, and the way Mithra held his ground—all of it was a level beyond what the academy’s students were accustomed to.

Mio seemed disappointed. “I’ll retract my earlier statement about it being a collision course, but still, I fail to see how this is worth the attention of so many people.”

Mithra’s defensive fighting style wasn’t flashy—it was methodical and deliberate, appealing more to those with a trained eye for combat. The fact that Mio corrected herself likely meant she’d reevaluated Mithra’s skill level.

Compared to when they’d first started taking my lectures, the way both Jin and Mithra approached the fight had clearly matured. Their thought processes during exchanges were calculated and deliberate, a far cry from the rash movements they’d used early on.

As Jin slashed at Mithra, the latter calmly observed the attack, sidestepping just enough to switch positions. Though it looked like Jin had been outmaneuvered, he seemed to have anticipated the move, stepping forward and delivering a quick thrust.

Unfazed, Mithra blocked the strike with precise timing.

Unlike in the frenzied rush at the start of the match, Jin now focused on exploiting the smallest openings in Mithra’s ironclad defense. His strikes aimed to create moments of imbalance, so he could capitalize on any hesitation or misstep.

Meanwhile, Mithra wasted no energy, countering each of Jin’s attacks with textbook precision. His impenetrable defense left no room for a decisive blow, showcasing his reputation as a living wall.

They were both fighting thoughtfully, their strategies honed and polished. *At this rate, their spontaneous decision-making during combat might already surpass mine.*

The crowd seemed to pick up on the difference between this match and the others—how much faster and more varied their techniques were. The cheers grew louder, though a noticeable number of them turned to boos, aimed at Mithra.

Of course, they just want an explosive back and forth slugfest. Poor Mithra.

Mithra had proven capable of handling Jin's dual-wielding style before. Despite Jin's clear advantage in raw talent for swordsmanship, he had internalized their sparring sessions and lessons, turning them into practical experience.

By controlling his body movements and positioning, Mithra dampened the force of Jin's onslaught, neutralizing his momentum. And the fact that Jin could still maintain his relentless offense, despite being repeatedly stonewalled, spoke volumes about his resilience.

Jin's ability to combine sharp instincts with his raw talent for swordsmanship was exceptional. But if I had to evaluate this match on technique alone, I'd commend Mithra.

Still, the boos directed at Mithra only grew louder. The match had shifted away from a competition for victory, transforming instead into a mutual exhibition of skill and strategy.

Few in the audience seemed to notice this shift, but those who did watched with appreciation. One of these was Tomoe, who narrowed her eyes in admiration and murmured, "Oh ho, interesting…"

Although most of us watching could feel that something was off, few people understood why. Jin and Mithra weren't fighting to overpower each other—they were predicting each other's moves and utilizing techniques accordingly. Understanding this required either experience in martial arts—specifically in observing demonstrations or forms—or a certain level of skill, like Tomoe had.

As for me, I belonged to the former group. I'd witnessed genuine demonstrations of swordsmanship before, and Jin and Mithra's fight had that same intensity.

Even Mio seemed to notice. She watched the match with an air of indifference, giving more attention to her festival food than to the fight.

A bell rang, signaling the end of the match. Jin hadn't managed to land a decisive blow on Mithra.

"Hmm, so that's it. The match is over. Judging by how things went, I'd say Jin takes the win by decision," I remarked.

"Indeed. As you said, the attacking one—Jin, was it?—will probably be declared the winner. However, as for the contest itself, it seems Mithra has won in spirit," Tomoe mused.

"Winning the match but losing the real battle, huh? Oh, look at Jin—he's wearing his feelings on his sleeve. He's absolutely seething. And Mithra? He looks like he's basking in the glow of achievement," I said with a wry smile.

"Ha, far more entertaining than those earlier farces," Tomoe replied. "Your students are exceptional, Young Master. The participants in the earlier matches couldn't even manage the basics properly. Honestly, with such sluggish movements, the outcomes were more about who had the better equipment than actual skill."

"No argument here. Jin and the others were saying they find it exhausting to keep up appearances in their other lectures, and now I understand why. If they fought like this outside my class, they'd stand out like a sore thumb. But they said they're holding back out of consideration for me. Honestly, I couldn't ask for better students," I replied, a genuine warmth filling my voice.

"Well said. Hmm, for my part, I'll consider a reward for Mithra. Perhaps a sparring match, or a sparring match, or a sparring match… Now, which to choose…"

One option, huh?

As predicted, the judges awarded Jin the victory by decision. Despite the loss, Mithra's satisfied expression as he stepped down from the stage left a lasting impression. A sparring session with Tomoe would undoubtedly be a great learning experience for him. I'd make sure to arrange it after the festival.

Next up were Yuno and Daena in the warrior division, followed by a match in the mage division. Since there probably wouldn't be much downtime between the matches, I decided to stay put and keep watching.

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Honestly, the matches in the mage division were even more dismal than those in the warrior division.

Stand still, chant, cast.

Stand still, chant, cast—repeat ad nauseam.

That was it.

Nobody moved properly. They just stood there, relying on pre-deployed barrier tools to block incoming attacks while they focused on chanting and casting spells. Whoever managed to land a powerful spell first would likely win. The one who took the hit couldn't recover, failing to concentrate enough to complete their own chants and sluggishly attempting to retreat.

It felt like watching a speed-talking competition rather than a battle. Reflecting on this, I realized that Shifu, during her first lecture, was far more capable than I had given her credit for.

This is supposed to be an academy that produces top-tier warriors and mages, right? Shouldn't they be better than this? Seriously.

Both Tomoe and Mio were in stitches. At first, they tried to stay silent, but by the second match, their restraint broke, and they burst out laughing. By the time a few more matches had passed, they were clutching their sides in uncontrollable mirth.

“Young Master, this is supposed to be a contest of magical skill, isn’t it?” Tomoe asked between chuckles.

“Even an orc child could manage better,” Mio added dryly. “Are they actually taking this seriously?”

“They seem to be,” I replied, trying to stifle a sigh. “Although it feels less like a spectacle and more like a chore to watch. But look at the audience—they’re loving it. Standing ovations and cheers all around.”

I felt a headache throbbing in my temples. Judging by the audience’s enthusiastic response, this wasn’t an off year; this seemed to be the norm. *I can’t believe anyone tasked with national defense would consider recruiting from this crowd. If I were in charge, I’d reject every single one of them on the spot.*

“Surely, your students aren’t about to perform like this, are they?” Tomoe pressed.

“This level of mediocrity… I nearly forgot the taste of my snacks. I hope it isn’t contagious,” Mio chimed in.

While it was true that mages typically operated from the back lines, this was something else entirely. The warrior division’s matches, despite their formulaic tactics, were at least passable. This? This was glorified turret practice.

“Wait, one’s moving!” Tomoe suddenly exclaimed, leaning forward.

“Finally, a mage duel that might actually resemble a proper fight,” Mio added, her voice tinged with rare optimism.

The match was starting: Shifu versus Abelia. Unfortunately, the outcome was already set in stone.

Considering the stage, the rules, and their respective skills as mages, Abelia didn’t stand a chance. Without her bow—her primary weapon—this was more like a punishment than a fair fight. Maybe the handicap worked against most opponents, but Shifu wasn’t “most opponents.”

I hadn’t expected the tournament brackets to pair these two in the first round. *Sorry, Abelia.*

Shifu's power was simply in a league of its own. Even if the Rembrandt family were here watching, I could confidently recommend they sit back and enjoy the match.

The arena fell into momentary silence. No one had expected what happened at the start. Instead of setting up barriers as was customary, Shifu immediately aimed her staff at Abelia, while Abelia dashed straight at her.

Shifu's staff wasn't the finely crafted, cherished one she typically used. Instead, it looked like a basic training model, thin and wooden, with a small gem on the tip to minimally assist with mana control.

Abelia's charge was a solid choice. She must have known she couldn't win in a spell-slinging contest against Shifu.

Shifu's specialty? Pure, unrelenting firepower. While she could employ battlefield support using earth elementals, her real talent lay in fire-based attacks, where her compatibility was unparalleled. Out of all my students, Shifu's single-strike firepower had improved the most during my lectures. Her lava bullets, for example. *That's basically cheating. The first time I saw one, I thought she'd summoned a meteor.*

Abelia's decision to close the distance was a smart move. Most mages excel in mid- to long-range combat, so forcing close-quarters engagement often disrupts their flow.

Abelia herself was exceptionally versatile, both as a warrior and as a mage. Agile enough to maneuver with a warrior's finesse and capable of swift spellcasting with a mage's precision—she was a double threat.

Shifu didn't hesitate, unleashing a standard arrow-type spell cloaked in red light. It looked more like a streaking projectile than a traditional arrow. And the casting speed? Leagues beyond anything else we'd seen in the tournament so far. The crowd erupted in astonishment.

Seeing the spell materialize, Abelia slowed her charge and muttered something under her breath. She sidestepped left, her

movements fluid, and resumed her dash toward Shifu. Her staff now glimmered faintly, suggesting she had finished chanting mid-step.

Was Abelia always this quick with her chants? Could this be some kind of desperation-fueled adrenaline boost?

No. That was Izumo's mobile incantation technique. Abelia can use it too?

Abelia's graceful sidestep let her evade the arrow entirely—or so it seemed. To the crowd's astonishment, the fiery projectile altered its course midair, homing in on her.

Shifu had mastered that guided spell technique she'd demonstrated only once before in training. Incredible. The tables turned swiftly, putting Abelia on the defensive.

The arena filled with raucous cheers once more. And this was only the beginning. The pace of this match was blistering compared to the others.

The fire arrow struck Abelia—

No, she avoided it!

Almost as if she anticipated the arrow's homing effect, she glanced back for a split second, then thrust her faintly glowing staff forward to divert its trajectory. It was a maneuver I'd used before in one of my mock battles with Shifu, knocking away a spear of light by coating my fist in mana and punching it. But Abelia's approach was far more refined.

With her staff extended just close enough to graze the arrow, she triggered a controlled detonation of light, redirecting the projectile's path by the slimmest margin. What an incredibly precise technique. It was a move only someone creative like Abelia could pull off.

Perhaps relieved to have neutralized the threat, Abelia picked up speed, surging forward. She exchanged a few words with Shifu, who appeared to respond in kind. *Are they encouraging each other? Those two do get along surprisingly well.*

Then Abelia's face twisted in alarm. For some reason, she skidded to a halt and turned around. *What's going on?*

In that instant, the fire arrow she'd diverted earlier came hurtling back and detonated just behind her. Shifu had anticipated Abelia's movements, even accounting for her evasive maneuvers. Perhaps their earlier exchange had been a subtle warning—or a signal to trigger the explosion.

Without a barrier, Abelia couldn't possibly evade the blast in time. Recognizing this, she quickly deployed a magical shield.

Good reflexes. Her practice is paying off. Abelia's spellcasting had become quite fluid, and while she lacked aptitude for complex spells, her proficiency with fundamental techniques was outstanding. I'd once tried complimenting her on this, only for her to look at me like I'd sprouted a second head. *People often overlook their strengths, don't they?*

The explosion's power must have exceeded her expectations. Despite her shield, Abelia was blown backward, her protective doll absorbing part of the impact. A portion of the doll's left shoulder shattered, reflecting significant damage. Even as an aftershock, the blast packed a considerable punch.

Seeing Abelia struggling, Shifu did something unexpected—she closed the distance between them. *Why?!*

Shifu stepped closer and tapped her staff against the stone floor of the arena. The platform trembled in response, stone tiles shifting and morphing until they formed a massive, clawlike hand. *Ah, elemental magic with earth spirits.*

The huge stone hand seized Abelia, who still hadn't regained her footing. It lifted her effortlessly two meters off the ground, leaving her suspended and vulnerable.

Shifu calmly pointed her staff at her captured opponent. Abelia, realizing her situation, closed her eyes and tilted her head skyward in quiet resignation.

This is it. It's over.

Abelia's voice, soft but clear, declared her defeat. The crowd erupted into thunderous applause as the signal for the end of the match was given.

The stone hand gently released Abelia, setting her back on the platform before dissolving into the stage it had risen from. *Elemental magic really is a game changer. The naturally short casting time makes it incredibly advantageous.*

"This was an excellent match," Tomoe remarked, her expression one of deep satisfaction. "The limited conditions favored Shifu, but in a real fight, who knows? Those two are fascinating opponents."

Her assessment was spot on. Despite the brevity of the battle—which had barely lasted three minutes—both combatants had showcased their skills impressively. Tomoe, in particular, seemed intrigued by Abelia's versatility. She recognized that, without the imposed restrictions and limitations, Abelia's intricate use of arrows imbued with magic for attack, support, and even defensive barriers could make her a truly formidable opponent. Shifu would certainly face significant challenges in an unrestricted duel.

"She still takes far too long with her incantations," Mio added with her characteristic bluntness. "But compared to the rest of this crowd? She's miles ahead."

Mio's criticism, while harsh, wasn't wrong. Her perspective was skewed by her own ability to fire off most spells without any incantation at all, which made traditional casting times seem unbearably slow in comparison.

The audience's cheers showed no sign of subsiding. Not a single boo or jeer marred Abelia's reception. After all, she had displayed extraordinary agility for a mage and executed her incantations with remarkable precision.

Still, knowing Abelia, her pride would likely lead her to dwell on her loss once the adrenaline wore off. *She'll probably analyze every moment later and sink into a funk. Shifu's genuine camaraderie and comfort, paired with a bit of reassurance from Shiki, should help lift her spirits. I won't interfere, though; I'd rather not become another target for her ire.*

As if reading my thoughts, Shifu extended a hand to Abelia, who had collapsed onto the stage, her energy spent. Abelia grasped it

firmly and allowed Shifu to pull her to her feet.

Both of them were smiling.

Shifu's going to breeze through the rest of the mage division. That thought filled me with a mix of pride and dread. Watching the two of them descend from the stage to the continued adoration of the crowd, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for her next opponent.

Poor Izumo. He doesn't stand a chance.

Luto

The crowd had fallen completely silent.

Ever since the first match of the warrior division—more specifically, the first one featuring one of Makoto-kun's students—that silence had lingered in the air.

Heheh, hehe… Including the four warriors from earlier, all six contestants so far had been Makoto-kun's students. *Just how far is he willing to go to keep me entertained?*

I was sitting in the guest area as the master of the Adventurer's Guild, watching the tournament unfold. This event, the highlight of the academy festival, doubled as a grand showcase for military recruiters from various nations, all scouting for future talent.

Truthfully, it wasn't entertaining most of the time. Just dull—painfully dull. *Once you transfer damage to those dolls, it kills all of the tension!* Year after year, attending this tournament amid my many other duties as guild master was torturous.

No, I should say it was only dull this year, thanks to Makoto-kun. I actually enjoyed myself.

Speaking of Makoto-kun, I'd heard that in his world, job hunting involved a brutal competition called "shūkatsu," where individuals fiercely battled to prove their worth to employers. Now that sounded far more captivating than this silly display. I'd love to see it for myself someday. The person who told me about it hadn't

experienced it firsthand—they'd arrived here before they had the chance—but they'd spoken of it with such a mix of relief and awe. *It must be a truly intense and genuine struggle.*

The first match of the warrior division had been a thrilling question of whether the attacker could break through or the defender could hold their ground. The defender, Mithra, had truly shone.

Knowing his opponent well gave him an advantage, and he had almost completely neutralized Jin's relentless attacks, limiting the damage to a few minor scratches on his doll. Jin, with his natural talent, won—but Mithra's performance was a victory in its own right.

As for the other match featuring Makoto-kun's students, it had been a whirlwind of speed and sheer tenacity. Daena, a boy wielding twin daggers, repeatedly closed the gap against Yuno, Shifu's younger sister who fought with a spear. The bout became a breathtaking battle of attrition, with both fighters vying to control the narrow space between her spear's range and his dagger's reach.

The most striking moment was when Daena's relentless barrage forced Yuno into a corner. In an instant, she adjusted her grip on the spear, shortening her reach to increase handling speed and narrowly escaping what could have been a decisive blow. Her ingenuity and composure were so impressive, I gasped aloud.

Although Daena's barrage gave him the edge in sheer volume of attacks, Yuno's explosive footwork had turned the tide, allowing her to widen the gap between them and reset the flow of the match. The resulting exchange became a captivating dance of advancing and retreating. Adjusting the grip on a spear might sound simple, but seeing her execute it seamlessly in the heat of battle was astonishing.

As the match progressed, Daena used his flurry of strikes strategically, cornering Yuno. It became a tough fight for her, but in the end, she managed to use her spear as a decoy. She deliberately discarded it and engaged in hand-to-hand combat instead. *For*

someone her age, it's remarkable how far she's willing to push herself.

Of course, it was a gamble that forced her into Daena's preferred close-range territory. Daena countered her kick from behind, landing a decisive blow and securing the victory. Only when the match concluded did I realize I'd been holding my breath. It was an excellent fight.

The next match took it to a whole new level…

It was between two girls, and started in an unconventional manner. Instead of the usual setup—deploying barriers followed by chanting spells—they broke all the norms.

Abelia launched herself forward with a speed that could rival some competitors in the warrior division. Even so, Shifu managed to chant her offensive spell before Abelia had closed half the distance. *To think she's just a student… Her casting speed is on par with seasoned combatants.*

Unfortunately, from my guest seat, I couldn't catch the language or specifics of the chant, but it was clear she'd customized it. She had shortened the incantation, likely at the cost of some power. Incredible. To think a student—who'd never experienced real combat—could attain a skill that only a handful of talented adventurers have learned, and execute it flawlessly… She was in an entirely different league from those military mages in their gaudy robes, chanting in unison on the battlefield.

Abelia, upon confirming the spell's activation, immediately adjusted her trajectory to the front left. Her steps were precise and efficient—minimal wasted movement. *She might be the kind who can handle all sorts of tasks with finesse.*

As for Shifu's spell—Fire Arrow—it wasn't the mundane type I had anticipated. Who would have thought she'd incorporate homing capabilities into it? But the surprises didn't stop there. Abelia thrust her staff along the arrow's path, releasing a burst of light that prevented it from striking her directly.

The two exchanged a few words, though I couldn't make out what was said. Then, suddenly, the arrow exploded behind Abelia. The boom resounded throughout the arena. That display of power commanded everyone's attention. It was truly remarkable.

In the end, Abelia was caught by a stone hand conjured through Shifu's elemental magic, forcing her to concede defeat. And with that, the match concluded.

"The earlier match in the warrior division, and now this? It's absolutely disgraceful," someone muttered from the guest seats.

"You've got that right!" another voice chimed in. "Focusing so cravenly on sheer volume of strikes or fighting defensively with no intention of winning—it's pathetic! And now, someone who can't even use proper magic resorts to cheap tricks? They should be ashamed to call themselves mages! What is this academy thinking, allowing these kinds of tactics to go unchecked?"

"The winning student is that *Rembrandt* girl," someone else added with a sneer. "A nouveau riche parading as aristocracy, letting their daughter stay in the noble dorms despite her lack of pedigree. No doubt they used their wealth and found some expensive tool to shorten the casting time."

Their derision quickly spread, and soon criticisms of the students' methods were spilling out from all corners of the venue. *Ah, it's the nobles of Limia.* The loudest voices belonged to prominent families affiliated with the Hopleys house. Fools. Were they already making excuses for their kin and allies in case they lost their matches?

Even the academy's administrators, who remained silent about the blatant biases in the tournament's structure and the aristocrats' specialized equipment, were complicit in this farce. These pigs had no redeeming qualities. Allowing money and power to influence this place so freely would destroy Makoto's vision of an independent educational institution—one founded to nurture exceptional talent. *Why do hyumans prioritize their own selfish desires over what really matters?*

Well, if so much of the underhanded maneuvering was orchestrated by the Hopleys family, no wonder Limia's nobles were making such a fuss. *Makoto-kun, what in the world did you do to clash with a distant house like theirs? Even if their second son attends this academy, it's large enough that you and he should rarely have had the opportunity to meet.*

Listening to their incessant jeers had become deeply unpleasant for me.

Perhaps I should defend the honor of those students who brought some excitement to this otherwise dull spectacle.

"Enough. This is unsightly."

"Stop it, you fools."

It seemed someone had beaten me to it.

Princess Lily and the king of Limia? Well, isn't that a rare occurrence—those two agreeing on something.

The group that had been making a fuss fell silent, especially the Limia and Gritonia representatives the words were aimed at. Since most of the complaints had come from Limia's nobles, their criticism of the students fizzled out almost immediately.

After the rebuke, Princess Lily and the king of Limia exchanged silent glances. Then, as the king gave a nod, Princess Lily began to speak.

"Their performances were truly remarkable. Their strength, easily befitting individuals above Level 90, was evident. Moreover, their refusal to settle for conventional strategies and their drive to experiment with new methods were commendable. To dismiss their efforts as inferior would be a grave mistake. If students persist with the same uninspired tactics seen in previous years, they will be swept aside the moment they face the demon army. These young people shine as beacons of hope for hyumanity's future. They deserve praise, not derision."

Whether out of wounded pride or simple arrogance, one of Gritonia's nobles couldn't resist speaking up in protest.

"But, Princess, such methods of fighting are ignoble, degrading, and unworthy of a proper soldier or kni—"

Princess Lily cut him off with a pointed question. "Then what of our kingdom's hero, who uses his mobility to strike down demons from the skies? Is his method of fighting also degrading? Would the soldiers and knights he has saved think his actions are 'ignoble?' Your perspective is fundamentally flawed. These students possess a clear understanding of their abilities and leverage them to their fullest potential. That is neither ignoble, degrading, nor base. Why can't you see that the new strategies the Imperial Army is slowly adopting share the same origins?"

"Princess, that statement—!" The noble's expression twisted in shock. The fact that she had casually mentioned state secrets in the presence of foreign dignitaries was nothing short of scandalous.

"Do you think that's classified?" she asked with a disdainful smile. "How ridiculous. The kingdoms fighting alongside our Empire already understand the magnitude of the demon army's threat through firsthand experience. If altering our tactics to counter them is necessary, that knowledge should be shared among all of hyumanity. You and those who echoed your foolish remarks should reconsider your stance… Your Highness, forgive me for interrupting."

She doesn't mean that apology in the slightest.

Sometimes, the words of a so-called "madman" can sound more reasonable than anyone else's. *Just like hers right now.*

"No, you need not concern yourself," the king said to the princess. "I feel much the same as you do. Listen well. Tradition and formality will not reduce casualties on the battlefield. They will not protect our lands. Do not confuse what must truly be defended with what is expendable. I found myself captivated by the three matches you dismissed. They reminded me of the valor shown by the hero who has recently descended upon my own kingdom. Your words were insulting, even bordering on a disgrace to that hero. As nobles of my realm, you must not conflate pride with arrogance."

There were no rebuttals to the king's statement. The Limia nobles wilted under his admonishment.

Still, his words were surprising. Even the temple representatives and Lorel's delegation seemed taken aback.

In my memory, the king himself is the old-fashioned type, deeply entrenched in his pride. He's often seemed a bit too self-assured. It seems that their perfect hero managed to influence even the king's disposition.

The impact of that hero shouldn't be underestimated. Could her ultimate goal be a governance modeled on democracy? It seems that many humans who come to this world are convinced it's the ideal political system. I wonder why they hold that kind of belief. Perhaps it's part of their education. Maybe I should discuss this with Makoto-kun at some point.

The room had fallen silent.

It wouldn't do for Makoto-kun to think I'm sitting idle here, I thought, deciding whether to add to the discussion. *With his wide network of connections, it's hard to predict who he might be tied to. This tournament has already consumed so much time that I've been unable to support him as much as I'd like.*

I cleared my throat, drawing the attention of the room, and began to speak.

"It feels presumptuous to follow the king and princess, but I would like to add a few words. Their methods of fighting were truly remarkable. Of course, I mean no disrespect to the blessings or power of the Goddess, but seeing individuals like them—who enhance their abilities by combining strength, skill, and magic—is something I find deeply admirable. Should they one day receive the Goddess's blessings as well, I am certain they would display even greater prowess on the battlefield. However, from my perspective, I sincerely hope that they will shine as the next generation's leading adventurers."

"Guild Master Fals, I do not believe for a moment that you, of all people, would deny the Goddess. Therefore, I take your words as

pure encouragement and high expectations for them. As you have said, if they were granted the blessings of the Goddess, their power would undoubtedly grow even further. I must admit, I have never witnessed students who fight in this manner, so it is difficult to assess their potential," the high priest of the temple said. While subtly trying to rein me in, he ultimately sided with the students.

Following his gaze, I noticed the presence of the bishop from Rotsgard.

Ah, I see. He's wondering why I hadn't acknowledged their presence sooner. I mean, considering the bishop was only recently appointed, it's really the late former bishop's fault for failing to document things properly. But still, what a stroke of bad luck for me. I'll probably be getting a scolding over this.

"It seems the second round is about to begin," I remarked lightheartedly, aiming to break the tension in the room. "I'm looking forward to lunch, but the tournament is shaping up to be just as exciting."

If I could have had my way, I would have loved to watch from the general audience seats, alongside Makoto-kun and the others. But, of course, that was far too much to ask.

Heheh, if things keep up at this pace, the team matches will be quite the show as well.

If their performances inspire even a small shift in perspective among the academy's students, the founding headmaster would no doubt be delighted.

As I thought of my long-departed friend, a wave of nostalgia swept over me, and I found myself narrowing my eyes wistfully.



Love is blind, love is dark, and love knows no hierarchy. Those who interfere in the paths of love deserve to be kicked to death by a horse—or so the saying goes.

Seeing Abelia clinging to Shiki's right arm, I was glad I hadn't gone to comfort her. There probably hadn't been any particular incident, but she had clearly enjoyed a blissful time.

So, I left Shiki to handle Abelia and anyone who needed healing, alongside Jin and Shifu. I also told him to get the already-defeated participants to help. Shiki gave me a polite bow before leaving the table with Abelia.

After the meal, the afternoon session proceeded without a hitch, and the individual matches were nearing their climax.

In the warrior division, Jin defeated Daena in the second round and effortlessly advanced from there. He disarmed his next opponent by knocking their weapon away, followed up with a series of light attacks, and then delivered a finishing blow that smashed two of their dolls.

Dolls were costly, but he didn't hold back to limit the damage. *Hmm, I'm thinking more and more like a merchant, aren't I?*

Even though he wielded only a wooden sword, his performance was impressive. He used body reinforcement magic exclusively during his attacks—a unique application.

Does limiting its activation enhance its effectiveness? From what I could see, Jin's attack power appeared stronger than his usual body enhancement. However, until today, he had never employed such a specialized technique.

Did he gain some insight during his match with Mithra or Daena?

It was hard to imagine this being learned just for today. *If it were, he would've used it in his bout against Mithra. I don't recall seeing it during his mock battle with the misty lizardfolk either.*

Well, I supposed I'd have to chalk it up to his uncanny battle sense.

These students were remarkable, and they grew stronger with each battle.

The only matches left in the individual competition were the finals for the warrior and mage divisions, followed by the championship match between the winners of each. The final victor would receive the title of Champion, which made my back itch just thinking about it.

The winners hadn't been decided yet, but considering their overwhelming performances so far, it was safe to assume Jin would take the warrior division, and Shifu the mage division.

Shifu will probably be the Champion.

Whether Rembrandt-san would be thrilled to see his beloved daughter crowned Champion was another matter, but as her teacher, I couldn't help but feel proud for one of my students to take home the victory.

Both divisions had been dominated by my students. In the mage division, Shifu had achieved a flawless victory against both Abelia and Izumo, making her the obvious unrivaled champion. However, Izumo had put up a good fight against Shifu in the second round.

The match had barely started when Shifu used earth spirit magic to create a stone wall around herself. Izumo had to destroy the wall before he could proceed. Thanks to the earth spirit's power, which allowed her to manipulate stone at will, Shifu was able to attack Izumo while remaining safely encased in her barrier. It was a devastating advantage—quite literally a home "ground" advantage.

Izumo did well, though.

The sheer determination he showed, even as the stone wall continually regenerated, deserved recognition.

"Hmm, Shifu has an overwhelming advantage here. This must be what they mean by a perfect scenario," Tomoe commented, her tone contemplative. "Jin's chances of victory…"

"Are nonexistent," Mio added decisively. "If he could launch sword slashes with enough force, he might have a chance, but even then, it'd likely be classified as an illegal offensive spell under these rules. Using the area outside the ring is also prohibited. Given that ranged attacks by warriors are heavily restricted, Shifu's elemental advantage is overwhelming."

Both Tomoe and Mio were convinced Shifu had the victory in the bag. Sadly, no one seemed interested in discussing the mage division finals.

Shifu's opponent was a reasonably sturdy magic artillery specialist. It was obvious that the match would end before the "artillery" fired a shot.

As for Jin's opponent, he was the second son of the Hopleys family. Watching his matches had been surprising—he was a capable fighter. While his weapon was clearly better than everyone else's, his technique wasn't half bad either.

Considering the lackluster performance of everyone except my students, I found his skill somewhat impressive. For a noble of Limia, a nation supposedly fixated on tradition and formality, his fighting style was surprisingly flexible and pragmatic. *So, he's not just another spoiled noble brat, huh?*

The sword he brought out from his family's treasure vault was truly exceptional—it was being wasted on someone of his skill level.

What a shame.

Jin was probably planning to crush him. The restraint he'd shown throughout his earlier matches seemed to have built up tension, now ready to be released in this fight against Hopleys.

He had a habit of acting as though he didn't care about anything or anyone, yet he was deeply loyal to his companions. Despite what he might say, he couldn't abandon people who depended on him. That was Jin.

Even though everyone had poured their hearts into this tournament, half of his teammates had been eliminated in the first round due to interference from the nobles.

Jin had carried their frustration as he fought, suppressing his mounting anger, all for this final confrontation with the despised mastermind behind it all.

"Young Master? Do you have any opinions about the warrior division finals?" Tomoe asked.

"The result is obvious without even watching," Mio interjected. "Young Master, why not have a snack before the next match? Should I get you a drink as well?"

"Mio, I'm fine with food. If you're hungry, go ahead and get something. I don't have any particular opinions about the match. I was just thinking about how it's against Hopleys," I replied, addressing both of them.

"Ah… from Limia. That a mere second son of a noble would dare trouble Young Master… Honestly…" Tomoe trailed off, her voice laced with scorn.

"Now then, I wonder how Jin plans to end it," she mused. "The real question is whether Hopleys will be able to compete in the team tournament tomorrow."

As the announcer began introducing the finalists for the warrior division, I shifted my gaze to the stage.

Three matches remained.

The first day of the tournament was finally drawing to a close.

Jin

"Winner: Shifu Rembrandt!"

Despite being scheduled after the warrior division, the mage division finals were announced first. *That idiot Hopleys must be stalling. Maybe he's cooked up another petty trick.*

Of course, Shifu was declared the winner. Her strength stood out even among the mages in this tournament. On top of that, the stage and her elemental magic were an absurdly good match. If the use of spirit power had been prohibited, there might have been other ways for her fight, but…

Shifu's opponent was from a higher grade in the academy, someone who was supposedly set to join the Kingdom of Limia's court as a researcher after graduation. That "promising talent" was now sticking his head out of the cobblestone stage, half in tears.

The two of them had exchanged words before the match. If I had to guess, something he said must've really pissed Shifu off.

And I do mean really.

Right after the fight began, the man—who had his hair slicked back and proudly called himself the "greatest offensive force in the academy"—fell into a gaping hole that had appeared beneath his feet. Before he could react, the hole closed, leaving only his head sticking out.

It looked like the match had been decided in an instant, but his doll had only sustained minor damage from the fall. Shifu must've held back, adjusting her power to restrain him without causing harm.

Stripped of his staff, his barrier shattered, and his movement completely sealed, all he could do was watch helplessly as a pair of feet approached.

If he'd had time to look up, he would've seen Shifu's face—smiling wickedly.

With the end of her staff, she tapped her left palm a few times, like a teacher patiently explaining something to a student. The calm, condescending gesture only emphasized her dominance.

When she'd closed the distance to about a meter, she pointed her staff directly at him. The guy could've just declared his surrender, but instead, he kept shouting something incoherent and refused to give up.

Seriously? This guy is supposed to be my senpai? What a joke.

Shifu then tilted his chin up with the orb at the end of her staff and glanced at the referee.

"Still not calling it?" she seemed to ask.

Though he hadn't sustained irreparable damage and hadn't formally surrendered, it was obvious to everyone that Shifu had won. *They should just announce it already.*

Anything more would only leave a scar on his heart from the finishing spell. Shifu let out a sigh and narrowed her eyes. Then, a short chant escaped her lips.

What an idiot. Had he misjudged Shifu after seeing her return to school, thinking she'd become a kind, gentle lady who wouldn't deliver a final blow? Or had he been frantically searching for a way to turn the tables? Either way, he was an idiot.

His eyes widened in shock, and his mouth opened; he looked like he was about to declare his surrender. But before he could speak, a red light that had quietly concentrated at the orb of her staff fired directly at his face.

Oh, that one. Bull's-eye.

The heat and flames erupted with explosive force before him, briefly illuminating the already bright arena as though a second sun had appeared.

That's brutal.

Three of his dolls burst apart instantly, and her opponent's agonized scream echoed across the stage. Despite the scale of the

spell, she'd clearly held back. But destroying *all* his dolls?

That spell is terrifying.

It was Shifu's modified version of Flare Pillar, a spell she'd developed specifically to counter Zwei-san's close-quarters tactics. By adjusting the activation point to slightly below ground level and incorporating a brief charge before detonation, she increased the spell's explosive force. Flames surged diagonally upward from her opponent's feet, accompanied by a torrent of molten earth and stone. This wasn't just an attack—it was pure torture.

That moment reaffirmed for me that her true nature hadn't changed one bit. Even the referee seemed to have thoughts about it, muttering something to himself.

The spell's duration was mercifully short, dissipating before the screams could fade. The audience, however, erupted in deafening cheers, impressed by the sheer power of what they'd just witnessed.

Shifu's opponent now bore burn marks on his cheeks, with his hair scorched. He trembled violently; any trace of the confidence he'd displayed before the match was utterly shattered.

Injuries like that could be easily healed in the waiting room. There wouldn't even be any scars left. However, the emotional wounds he'd suffered would likely linger for a long time.

After the referee declared Shifu's victory, she knelt in front of the man, who still looked like just a head sticking out of the stage. Her delicate-looking hand gently touched his neck. As Shifu stood, her opponent's body rose with her, culminating in the surreal image of a female student casually lifting her male opponent with one hand.

She didn't spare the frightened loser a single glance, leaving him frozen in place. Instead, Shifu turned to the spectators around her, bowing several times before stepping off the stage.

"Impressive!" I called out as she headed back toward the waiting room. Against a performance like that, even I couldn't think of a countermeasure. My compliment was entirely sincere.

I want to win the championship if I can, though…

"Thank you, Jin. I could've ended it faster, but he's supposed to be on Hopleys's team tomorrow. I just wanted to give him a little scare," she said mischievously.

"A little? Don't kid yourself. You also seem pissed off at this tournament," I replied.

"I'll let you imagine what's on my mind. But let me just say, Jin, that I envy you for being in the warrior division. I trust you understand."

"Yeah, of course," I assured her.

"Good. That's a relief. Honestly, it's disgraceful how money and power can bring out such ugliness in people. It's something I've reflected on many times… Well then, I'll go strategize for the championship. I'll be watching—good luck."

Wearing a slightly disappointed expression, Shifu disappeared down the hallway toward the waiting room.

Is she projecting her former self onto Hopleys and wallowing in self-loathing?

Well, Shifu back then wasn't much different from Hopleys now. Not that I'd ever say that aloud.

I understood why Shifu might want to crush Hopleys herself. But that was a warrior's job—and that warrior was me.

Defeating Mithra and Daena, I could feel what it meant to be here, carrying the hopes of everyone who had struggled to reach this point. Even though I hadn't directly faced her, I carried Yuno's share of the burden too.

I would fight on behalf of every student of Raidou-sensei.

That's why… I can't stand the way you do things.

Ilumgand Hopleys.

"Jin! Jin Rohan! The finals are about to start—hurry up!" one of the staff yelled out.

So, it was time.

Finally, I get to face him.

"I'll be right there," I replied, turning sharply down the hallway leading to my entrance.

As I walked the long, straight corridor, I sensed several familiar presences nearby: Shiki-san, Abelia, Mithra, Daena, Yuno, and Izumo.

Are they watching to make sure nothing sketchy happens?

They must've avoided showing up before the match for that reason. I'd noticed lately—when I was hyper-focused, I could sense the presence of others around me.

Not bad. I'm in peak condition.

I continued down the hallway and stepped outside, greeted by the sudden brightness of the arena. My eyes swept over the stands. Up near the top sat Sensei and his two close aides.

"Sensei, watch closely," I murmured softly, my resolve solidifying.

Ahead of me lay the stage for the battle. The crowd's excitement hadn't waned from the earlier mage finals. Step by deliberate step, I ascended the stairs.

"Jin Rohan. Be punctual next time. I'm deducting points," the referee scolded.

"My apologies. I'll be more careful," I replied, though I wasn't really concerned. Point deductions weren't going to affect the result.

I met Hopleys's gaze.

You coward.

I wouldn't hurt him badly enough to take him out of tomorrow's team matches.

For the next two days, we would make him our stepping stone.

Breaking even one of his dolls would end the match. If I destroy all three, he'll take damage, and who knows what sort of tantrum he'll throw.

I'd practiced enough in my previous matches. This time, I'd break exactly two dolls and finish it there.

"Hm…? Oh, come now," he said, flashing an arrogant grin as he caught me looking at him. "This is a venerable weapon passed down through my family. It is the custom of the Hopleys family to attend

any prestigious venue or battlefield clad in this gear. So don't glare at me like that—it's well within the rules."

Apparently, my expression made him think I was dissatisfied with something. He couldn't have been more wrong.

I couldn't care less if your equipment's been upgraded since the semifinals. I couldn't care less if you delayed the match for more time to prepare. All I'm thinking about is how to end this.

"I have no complaints," I said calmly. "Let's make it a good match."

"How irritating. Don't give up too quickly and bore our distinguished guests. You should consider it your misfortune to have taken Raidou's lectures," he sneered.

Distinguished guests…

Right, they're here too. Any other year, I'd have been desperate to catch the attention of guests and scouts from various countries.

Now, I don't care who's watching—not even a little.

"Let's both give it our all," I replied politely, hiding my true feelings.

Perhaps he thought my words were patronizing, as I noticed his grip on his sword tighten. Then he made a signal to the referee, who raised his arm dramatically.

Hah. Bought and paid for, huh? Completely biased.

"And now! Ilumgand Hopleys versus Jin Rohan! The finals of the individual warrior division at the Rotsgard Academy Festival Tournament begin now!"

It was strange.

Before me stood a senpai known as a prodigy, dressed in incredibly rare equipment. Yet here I was, a junior in a standard uniform, wielding nothing but a wooden sword, feeling absolutely no fear.

Maybe it's from all those days fighting the blue-scaled lizardman.

Or perhaps it was because I was Level 90, significantly surpassing Hopleys's level of seventy.

I extended my right arm, holding the sword, and took a half-body stance. Ilumgand moved toward me with surprising agility for someone clad in heavy plate armor. Every piece of his equipment seemed to be enhanced with weight reduction or body reinforcement magic.

But his movements are too predictable.

It was clear he intended to swing his massive sword down from above, gripping it with both hands.

It's like he's moving in slow motion.

Ilumgand Hopleys uttered a battle cry, and his brilliantly glowing great sword came down. I considered dodging but quickly abandoned the idea, stepping forward instead.

Even though he's holding that great sword with both hands, it's being supported by his right hand alone. His left hand's just resting on the hilt.

I swung my wooden sword upward, striking his heavily armored right hand. The grandiose great sword slipped out of his grip and clattered to the ground.

The arena fell silent.

Turning my back to him on purpose, I stepped away to create some distance before turning to face him again, my wooden sword at the ready. I didn't pursue him, nor did I intend to. Ilumgand's expression twisted with anger as he retrieved his weapon.

Seriously? Why would you let your opponent see how agitated you are? Hide it, Senpai… like I do.

Well, I guess nobody likes being embarrassed. Especially not with their king and relatives watching.

Ilumgand began sluggishly chanting body reinforcement magic. *Fine. I'll wait until you're done.*

Once he finished, he shifted into an offensive stance.

What's this? Is he already resorting to his signature move?

How unimaginative.

Ah, right—about that strike earlier…

The damage to the dolls was minimal; at most, there might've been a crack somewhere. *That's some seriously strong defense armor he's wearing.*

Ilumgand dashed forward after reinforcing his body, preparing his signature horizontal slash as soon as I was within range. His movement reflected the pre-match information precisely.

I hadn't gone out of my way to gather intel on him, yet information about his favored moves and so-called "killer patterns" was freely available.

Not surprising, since he isn't trying to hide anything.

His dash wasn't linked to any attack and was very easy to block. *What a mess. So full of openings.*

He only prepared to attack after closing the distance. *Too slow. I don't even need body reinforcement to dodge this.*

Through Raidou-sensei's lectures, I'd honed my ability to think strategically during combat. Maybe that was why my opponent's movements felt so slow.

Finally, the long-awaited horizontal slash arrived. I powerfully struck the flat side of his great sword with my wooden one.

"?!"

Once again, his sword fell to the ground.

It's a fine weapon, no doubt, but in his hands, it's useless.

Ilumgand held out his trembling hands, palms up, almost questioningly.

So, the shock left his hands numb, and he dropped it again.

I sent a measured horizontal strike across his face with my wooden sword, leaving him in stunned disbelief. The impact rattled his doll, causing a large crack to form across its face. I then stepped back, putting distance between us once more, and readied my sword.

"Referee!!!" Ilumgand shouted, one hand covering his face and the other pointing at me.

If you're a swordsman, your priority should be picking up your dropped sword.

The referee listened to his complaints, nodding several times.

What now? Don't tell me he wants me to fight unarmed. Not that I'd mind…

"Jin Rohan," the referee called out, "you've been too passive, waiting for your opponent to move. Use your strength to fight more actively."

What a pointless complaint.

It's about time to wrap this up.

"All right. I'll end this now," I said calmly.

"?!"

Sensing the immediate surge in my killing intent, Ilumgand anxiously grasped for his sword and readied himself. His fair skin flushed red as though he'd been drinking.

All right. Let's go all out now.

The real beatdown would be reserved for the team matches. For now, I'd ensure he could properly embarrass himself in both the individual and team battles. Besides, if I pushed him to the point of no return, who knew what my teammates would say?

"Jin, was it? Jin Rohan! You— You won't get away with this!!! I'll __"

Before he could finish his bluster, I saw the referee's signal to go ahead. With a single dash forward for the first time in this match, I closed the distance. That alone was enough to interrupt Ilumgand mid-threat, his words replaced with a shriek of startled disbelief.

Panicking, he raised his sword in a clumsy attempt to guard. I stepped inside his range and delivered a kick straight to his armor-clad stomach. The armor prevented any physical damage, but the force sent him flying backward, landing flat on his rear. Not hesitating for a second, I gave chase and swung an overhead slash at his head.

Ilumgand reflexively raised his sword, blocking my attack. Had I continued, my wooden sword would have been cleaved in two. Adjusting quickly, I pulled my upper body back, transitioning my strike into a thrust toward his exposed face. It landed perfectly,

forcing his head to snap backward. The head of his second doll shattered.

I wasn't going to end it there. I extended my arm further, slamming him headfirst with a resounding crash that sent cracks spiderwebbing across the stone platform. A low, dull sound echoed throughout the arena as Ilumgand's third doll exploded.

He lay sprawled out on the stage in a pathetic, spread-eagle position, blood trickling down his forehead. To anyone watching, the outcome was unmistakable.

"Referee," I called out coolly, "all three dolls are destroyed."

I overdid it.





Not only had I taken out all three dolls, I'd even managed to leave a cut on his forehead. Fortunately, it was just a shallow wound—nothing the on-site treatment personnel couldn't handle. Like I'd planned, he'd still be able to participate in the team matches.

You'd better show up, all right?

I'd already humiliated him this much, after all. There was no way he would add to that by failing to show up for the team matches. *But you're going to come back with even dirtier tricks to get your revenge, aren't you?*

Disgrace Ilumgand Hopleys, dominate him completely, but don't cause excessive injuries. That's what I came here to do, and that's what I've done…

By the time my name was called as the winner of the warrior division, my mind was already drifting to other more important matters.

I wonder if Shiki-san and Sensei will have any feedback for me.

※ ※ ※

As expected, this year's Champion was Shifu.

The moment she turned the stage into semiliquid cement at the start of the match, there was nothing Jin could do. His mobility was crippled. On top of that, Shifu could move freely across the surface, as if she were skating.

When she used a spell with explosive beam magic called Dem-Ray—which Karen, disguised as Rona, once demonstrated in my lectures—and Jin didn't dodge but instead sliced it in half with his enchanted wooden sword, I couldn't help but be impressed. But honestly, that was his only highlight in the match.

Tomoe and Mio had described that move as "something interesting." They had the same reaction when Abelia altered the trajectory of Shifu's spell.

I guess they see these techniques as something they could replicate.

To be honest, if I tried to learn those techniques myself, I'd probably struggle. It didn't seem like something I could pull off casually.

The Flare Pillar variant Shifu had used in the mage division finals didn't make an appearance this time. When I first saw her use it, I'd instinctively likened it to an iconic finishing move from a well-known fighting game.

Imagery aside, it didn't feel like a spell meant for countering close-range attacks. Instead, it was designed to get up close and deliver a decisive blow. That had been especially surprising since Shifu usually aimed to dominate from a distance.

As a spell, it had plenty of potential. Adjusting the activation point, setting a delayed trigger—there were endless ways to modify it. It was a versatile technique, but it didn't look like Shifu had thought about it that deeply yet.

"She's really turning into an impenetrable fortress…"

And yet…

Tomoe and Mio's keen ears had caught my mutterings. Their eyes sparkled as they reflected on the spell's mechanics, murmuring to themselves in a way that gave me an uneasy feeling.

No, seriously, that's not the kind of spell you two should be using.

※ ※ ※

It was a dark room. Upon closer inspection, it looked as though a rampaging beast had torn through it.

A man sat on the edge of a bed, bouncing his leg anxiously, muttering incomprehensibly to himself. A fresh, painful-looking wound marred his forehead.

A few hours ago, someone had come to deliver a report to him. But as soon as their task was done, they had hurriedly left the room.

"I know. I'm not hesitating… I understand everything… Who do you think I am?!" His voice rose sharply, echoing through the room.

The festival's lively clamor failed to reach this isolated space.

Head bowed, the man muttered throughout the night to break the oppressive silence around him.



"I'm sorry, Raidou-dono. I couldn't manage it," Rembrandt confessed.

"Please don't worry about it," I replied.

After congratulating my students on their efforts, I'd headed back to the store, only to receive an unexpected apology from Rembrandt. Apparently, the summons from the Merchant Guild had been related to me, and the outcome wasn't favorable.

"Beyond the company's achievements, you personally are attracting attention on a national level. And it seems multiple nations are involved," he explained.

"Multiple nations? I don't recall doing anything that would provoke interference," I wrote, puzzled.

"Being noticed is enough," Rembrandt replied.

What does he mean by that?

"If a nation takes an interest in the Kuzunoha Company, or in you, Raidou-dono, and wants information, that interest doesn't remain private. The movements of nations reach us merchants surprisingly quickly. Court officials gather information from merchants and informants who frequent the castles. They also share

information laterally among their peers, which then spreads throughout social networks—from guilds to personal connections."

I nodded slowly as I began to grasp his logic. If a merchant had close ties with a nation's officials, it was natural to share information. In places like the Kingdom of Aion, merchants even took on intelligence roles.

"This much is fine. But this is where the real problem begins," Rembrandt continued. "Merchants who receive such information have their own prerogatives. For instance, let's say I have a good relationship with someone in Limia's administration. That person might ask me, 'Do you know anything about this newcomer Raidou?' Then, I might reply, 'I'll have the Merchant Guild look into him for me.' Do you know why?"

"So, you mean that you would act to gather information on behalf of your client?"

Rembrandt smiled. "That's not it. In this case, I wouldn't be acting for Limia—I'd be acting for myself."

"What?"

"In this scenario, I'd be considering the possibility that my vested interests, heavily tied to the Kingdom of Limia, might be threatened by you. So, instead of saying, 'Limia is interested in Raidou,' I'd script it as, 'Limia is suspicious of this merchant Raidou.' By doing so, I could potentially hinder the rise of a new competitor. This sort of thing happens more often than you'd think. People don't just serve nations—they leverage them for personal gain. And, well, I've done it myself, so I can't exactly criticize others."

Wow. That's… pretty ruthless.

Rembrandt continued, "Also, the Merchant Guild cannot afford to ignore a company perceived as potentially dangerous by certain nations, especially when multiple voices call attention to it."

"So, the Kuzunoha Company is attracting interest from several nations, while also being viewed unfavorably by the merchants in this city?" I asked.

"Not all of them, but there are likely quite a few. Just recently, I heard that the temple made some remarks about you. I'm skeptical, though, as to whether the temple was the actual origin of them. Even they rely on donations from merchants. But I don't know much about that—I've intentionally kept my distance. After all, Tsige has its own issues when it comes to faith in the Goddess."

"I'd like to coexist peacefully with other merchants, but it seems like a challenge."

"Even among allies, it's a competition over profits. In my more aggressive days, had you set up shop nearby, I might've taken some kind of action myself."

I guess that's just how things are.

"It may be time for you to make some decisions. Whether it's competing with peers or handling these problems, the sooner you act, the easier it'll be to stay ahead and avoid long-term setbacks. Luckily, this city is surrounded by several satellite cities, so there are plenty of opportunities. That said, I can't imagine you being the one to lose."

"Thank you for your advice."

"Don't thank me. I couldn't do much after all my lofty talk. It's embarrassing. But my daughter participated in the tournament without suffering any major injuries and achieved the highest honor as Champion. I owe you a lot for that."

"Her accomplishments are her own. I probably won't be able to attend tomorrow's team matches, but I hope you'll watch them."

"The Merchant Guild is bound to interrogate you about your company's distribution routes. They even suspect ties to the demons. You should put together some form of proof or else be ready to pay a hefty fine to settle the matter. Either way, you need a solid plan. If necessary, feel free to invoke the name of the Rembrandt Company. In Tsige, we're neighbors in business, and if you explain the accommodations you've received from us, you should be able to smooth things over. If there's anything else I can do…"

Proof, huh? I don't really have any to provide. I could ask Tomoe or Shiki to use some form of hypnosis to stop them from asking questions, but that wouldn't address the root of the problem.

Our distribution routes? We don't even use the Golden Road, let alone normal roads. We rely on a secure method that utilizes the Demiplane.

Teleportation-based transportation isn't standard practice due to its low success rate. If I tell them we're achieving a 100-percent success rate with teleportation, they'll inevitably demand we disclose the chant or technique for teleportation spells. It's no wonder nations might get involved.

It seems like I don't have much of a choice.

"You've already done more than enough for us, Rembrandt-san. Don't worry, we'll handle it from here," I wrote.

"I see. My apologies for the unnecessary concern," he replied sincerely. "Well, I'll take my leave. I want to say a quick word to each of my daughters before they retire for the night."

"Take care. Goodnight."

"Ah, you as well. Goodnight, Raidou-dono… You're young, so consider this all part of the experience."

Rembrandt left to commend Shifu and console Yuno. *Did he mutter something under his breath as he turned to go…? Well, whatever.*

With tomorrow's team matches, Shifu and Yuno might already be asleep. Waking them doesn't seem like a great idea.

"Lime, you're here, right?" I called.

"Yep." Like a ninja from a period drama, he stepped out smoothly from the shadows.

"Please make sure Rembrandt-san gets home safely. If you sense anything suspicious, have someone take turns standing guard over him through the night."

"Will do."

I'd already asked Shiki and Aqua to look after the students.

Sheesh, I keep asking people for favors that have nothing to do with our business.



Without being made to wait, I was ushered into a room labeled "Representative's Office."

In the Merchant Guild, the head of each branch is referred to as a representative. When you apply to establish a company, you're also designated as its representative, which might stem from this terminology. Or maybe it's the other way around?

Either way, the title didn't matter, especially not right now.

The young receptionist who had guided me to the entrance of the room bowed briefly before leaving.

Inside, there was one man seated in an imposing chair behind a luxurious desk—presumably the representative—and two others who appeared to be his bodyguards. In actuality, they might have been assistant representatives or something along those lines, but the feeling they gave off suggested hired muscle.

In all my time in this city, I'd never met anyone from the upper management of the Merchant Guild. Even when I had business here, it was usually resolved at the reception desk. This was my first time entering the Guild's inner areas.

In those rare situations where I needed to speak with someone higher up, it was typically a middle manager or someone from the

midlevel bureaucracy. I'd met a few of them, but didn't remember most of their names.

It was a disconcerting reminder of how rare—and undesirable—situations like this were.

"Thank you for coming, Raidou-dono. Please, have a seat," the representative said, standing from his chair and walking over to the seating area. He waited for me to choose one of the guest sofas before sitting across from me.

The setup had two sofas facing each other with a table in between. They were deep and comfortable, while the table had a sparkling glass top and intricate legs. Both were clearly expensive and luxurious articles.

Glass in this world was a luxury item, produced from rare crystalline metals. In other words, what I knew as "glass" was a different material altogether.

If I could produce inexpensive Earth-style glass here, it might turn out to be a profitable business.

Even so—

The atmosphere here was worlds apart from my office. My workspace had a simple desk, and the reception area was minimalistic. The furnishings and carpets were all basic. *Maybe I should put more thought into the appearance of my office for visitors. But then again, intimidating people isn't the goal either.*

All right, let's get this conversation moving.

"I was told you wanted to see me. How can I assist you?" I asked.

"Ah, right, you can't speak directly. Nice to meet you. I am Zara Hardis, the head of the Merchant Guild here in Rotsgard."

"I'm Raidou. It's an honor to meet you."

"Unfortunately, I must bring up a rather unpleasant matter." Zara's expression was somber. "But before we get to that, let me ask something. You've been in Rotsgard for quite some time now, and your store has already opened, hasn't it?"

"Yes, thanks to everyone's support," I replied. Zara closed his eyes in response, letting out a quiet sigh.

Does he not like what I look like? Maybe. But there's something else bothering him—something more specific.

"And yet, you haven't sought a meeting with me until now? It's only natural for a merchant belonging to the guild to greet the representative when opening a store in their region, don't you think?"

"I did consider greeting you several times, but I heard the Guild was extremely busy, and appointments required at least a month of waiting. We were swamped with work on our end as well, so I thought it would be best to arrange a meeting once things settled down."

"Appointments, you say. That's something you could have arranged during one of your visits to the Guild for other purposes, don't you think? And scheduling doesn't have to be done by you personally. Even if your employees aren't human, they can still handle that task. Above all, you—no, never mind."

"What about me?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Forget it. So, when you said, 'once things settled down,' you meant you planned to arrange a meeting after the academy festival, is that correct?" Zara's expression grew noticeably harsher as he posed the question.

This isn't looking good.

He seemed quite upset that I hadn't greeted him earlier. *What was he going to say about me? I can't think of anything.*

As someone juggling multiple responsibilities, including teaching, I realized I'd let smaller matters slip through the cracks. Something to reflect on.

"Yes. I sincerely apologize for the delay in greeting you," I wrote.

"Quite a delayed apology, isn't it?" Zara said with a wry smile. "Hmph. Well, I'll consider the circumstances. I hear you're also an instructor at the academy. You must be very busy."

"No, it was my own immaturity. I truly appreciate your understanding."

"Then I suppose your frequent absence from guild meetings—where the Kuzunoha Company's representative has attended only once—is also due to your busyness?"

"Yes, that's correct. One of my employees, Shiki, has been attending on my behalf. He's just as familiar with our operations as I am. Since the store has only recently opened, I've been overwhelmed with work and unable to attend as often as I should. I deeply apologize for this as well."

"You also rarely participate in gatherings with nearby merchant representatives."

"Unfortunately, those gatherings often seem more focused on probing into trade secrets or discussions bordering on price collusion—activities I find less than desirable. My goal is to provide customers with the best possible products at the lowest possible prices through my own efforts. Building deeper relationships with other merchants wouldn't benefit me."

Of course, I stayed informed on the meeting agendas through Shiki's reports.

"Nothing to gain, you say… I see. Understood."

Zara placed the documents he'd been holding on the table and fixed his gaze on me.

"There have been several allegations concerning you brought to the guild."

"Allegations?"

"Yes. Normally, inquiries like these decrease during the academy festival. But this time…"

"Is that so?" I replied, feigning calm.

"Indeed. There have been multiple requests from the four great nations—Limia and Lorel among them—as well as several smaller countries. Through their respective Merchant Guild representatives, these nations have demanded a detailed investigation into the

Kuzunoha Company's goods and distribution methods. Among these requests, some have expressed extremely concerning opinions—"

"Extremely concerning opinions?"

That doesn't sound good.

The representative's already stern gaze hardened further.

"The opinion is that the Kuzunoha Company is receiving cooperation from demons for its goods procurement and distribution. In other words, they're accusing you of collaborating with demons, betraying hyumanity, and reaping profits as a result."

Just like Rembrandt-san warned.

"That's outrageous," I wrote with a sigh. *"We adhere to the principles of hyuman society and conduct our business through legitimate means. I swear we have not received any assistance from demons in our operations*."

"That's likely true," the representative murmured under his breath.

"Pardon?"

"Regarding your goods, we received a notice from the temple guaranteeing their quality and production methods. When I informed the merchants who raised concerns, they withdrew their objections."

The temple. So, it's because of that incident from before?

That sultry-voiced bishop must have kept her word. *I don't trust hyumans—especially those associated with the Goddess—but at least this promise was honored.* That brought me some relief.

"The problem lies with your distribution. We've verified that you purchase raw materials from the guild-managed market. However, there are no records of the Kuzunoha Company carts or wagons traveling on any of the highways. What route are you using to transport your goods?"

Even though I had been forewarned by Rembrandt, being questioned face-to-face made my heart skip a beat.

There's no way I can talk about the Demiplane route. I needed to come up with something plausible, and fast.

"As you say, we source raw materials and other items from the guild-managed market. Regarding transportation routes, we use the highways just like other merchants. However, we've been borrowing carts and wagons from the Rembrandt Company in Tsige. We share a close relationship with them. Because of that, there are no records under Kuzunoha's name… It's a bit embarrassing to admit, but as a newly established company, we've been relying on their assistance in several different ways."

Using Rembrandt-san's name… Will that be enough to get me through this?

"I see. So that explains your distribution routes. But what about this?"

The representative pulled a piece of paper from his chest pocket and placed it on the desk.

"This document compares the list of raw materials the market sold to you with the materials found in the Kuzunoha Company's products. It's clear at a glance that there are numerous materials you've been using that were not purchased through the market. Some of them are particularly rare and difficult to obtain—quite unusual for a newly established company like yours. It's evident that you must have another means of procurement. Based on findings like these, we suspect that demons may be involved in your business __"

This investigation is more thorough than I expected.

"This is the first I've heard of such an investigation," I wrote, cutting him off to regain my composure.

"With such grave accusations, the guild had no choice but to conduct a discreet investigation. While complaints against your company have only recently become more public, unsettling information about you has been circulating for quite some time."

I admit there are things I'd rather not reveal, but learning that I was investigated without my knowledge feels like a slap in the face.

"Had you informed me, I would have gladly cooperated with the investigation," I wrote, suppressing my anger the best I could.

"Cooperated?" the representative scoffed. "Why would the guild bother asking someone under suspicion for cooperation? Whether the Kuzunoha Company is guilty or innocent is something the guild determines through its own investigation. Any information provided by the accused holds no value."

"Isn't it natural for someone accused to want to cooperate in order to clear their name?" I countered.

"You're naive. How can someone like you possibly run a business? Why can't you grasp the importance of conducting yourself appropriately given your position and circumstances? The fact that an amateur like you has managed to keep a business running is astonishing."

…

Why am I being berated like this? Did I say something wrong?

This conversation isn't going anywhere, and my frustration isn't easing either. Maybe it's time to be direct.

"Let me ask plainly. What exactly do you want from me?"

"Ah, so you do know how to behave, at least to some extent. Fine, let's get to the point. I want to know your distribution methods. Furthermore, I want you to provide them to the guild immediately and agree to share them."

You want me to hand over my distribution methods?

Is he deliberately demanding something I can't agree to just so he can squeeze money out of me?

"Is there a way to resolve this with money?" I offered cautiously. Rembrandt had mentioned fines as a possible solution, after all.

"With money, hmm? Of course, there is. In the world of merchants, there's almost nothing that can't be solved with money. But whether that's a practical solution for you right now is another matter entirely."

"I'm afraid the technology behind our distribution methods isn't something I can share. I'd like to resolve this monetarily instead.

Fortunately, business has been going well, so I can prepare a reasonable amount of funds."

"You really aren't suited to being a merchant," the representative said, his expression shifting.

"?!"

The contempt in his gaze was unmistakable—his disdain no longer concealed.

"You just openly admitted to a distribution method you initially tried to hide. In doing so, you've further eroded whatever trust you had left. A competent merchant wouldn't make such a pointless mistake. On top of that, you then proposed to settle things with money. That's an equally foolish move. Do you even understand the scale of the merchants who filed complaints against you? I told you—they're backed by national orders. Their influence and financial power are leagues beyond the Kuzunoha Company's, and you think you can resolve this with *money*? A newly established company like yours? All you're doing is broadcasting that your company has funds disproportionate to its size. Totally clueless. You're a child who's gotten lucky, nothing more—completely incompetent."

I was speechless.

He had delivered his tirade in one breath, and I could only sit there, stunned by the sheer force of his words. The representative's harsh, aggressive demeanor intensified as he let out a scornful laugh.

"What are you staring off into space for? Keeping up appearances is the bare minimum if you want to survive in the business world. Without that, you'll never make it… Seriously, Rembrandt went out of his way to step in from the backwaters of Tsige, so I expected you to be someone of exceptional caliber. But your understanding of how to deal with the guild, your relationships with other merchants, and even your fundamentals of business are completely lacking. Pathetic. What a disappointment. Just explain your distribution methods verbally and leave. That's all I want to hear from you. Hurry up and spit it out."

Explain and leave?

This guy… He's seriously pissing me off.

"Can't even suppress your anger or killing intent, huh? You're even more of a brat than you look. Not that I have much room to talk about appearances. But at least I know how to adjust my behavior depending on who I'm meeting and where I am. You're so embarrassing, I'll give you a bit of advice—your face is even uglier than mine, so you ought to pay more attention to your character."

So, the representative had finally resorted to criticizing my appearance.

What do you mean by ugly? You're plenty good-looking!

He might have had a rough demeanor, but his chiseled features, slightly dark skin, and rugged charm only enhanced his appeal.

Now that I think about it, I feel like I've met someone with a similar look recently. Where was it…?

No, this isn't the time for that. Explain and then leave? And verbally, no less? Considering the supposed lack of trust, this felt completely inconsistent.

"What do you mean by 'leave'?" I asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like. I no longer see any need to deal with you or your company."

"And what does that mean?"

"Just explain yourself already. That'll be the end of it."

"Could you tell me why?"

"You're going to pay, aren't you? In that case, the other side will withdraw their complaints. That's all there is to it."

"How much should I prepare?"

"Oh, there's no need to prepare it immediately."

"Not yet?"

"That's right. Well, if you hand over, say, 90 percent of your monthly revenue, nobody will have anything to complain about. Even if you're a bit of an eyesore, as long as they get their cut and you don't cause problems, that's enough. Even if the Kuzunoha

Company is working with demons, it wouldn't matter. Nobody loses except you."

"Ninety percent of our revenue?!"

Every month? For how long?

"You're paying, right? That's what you just said. Did you really think merchants who pull in dozens or even hundreds of times your revenue annually would settle for just a few coins?"

"And how long would this extortion continue?" I asked.

"Extortion? You've got a way with words for someone who offered to pay us off. But sure, let's call it that. As for how long, probably until the Kuzunoha Company ceases to exist."

"This is clearly an unreasonable demand. Are you saying the guild will turn a blind eye to this?"

Absurd was a better word for it. Losing 90 percent of our monthly revenue would make it impossible to sustain our business. There was no way I could agree to it.

"Unreasonable? You were the one who suggested solving the problem with money. The 90 percent was just my guess. The actual amount would be determined through discussions between the merchants. As for your question—yes, the guild will turn a blind eye. Or rather, there's nothing to turn a blind eye to. This is just negotiation between merchants. The guild doesn't intervene in such matters. We're not here to babysit. We help with trade, but you need to learn how to handle yourself."

"So, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down, and honest businesses aren't rewarded?"

"How foolish," the representative sneered. "Oh, that's right. Your employees are mostly demi-humans, aren't they? Why don't you go all the way and limit your customers to them too? Stop trying to do business in hyuman cities. It'd probably suit you better, judging by how you talk."

His gaze softened—not with malice but with genuine pity.

"Aspiring merchants traditionally join established companies to learn the basics of business, build connections, and eventually earn

recognition from their superiors before striking out on their own. You think you can just start a business and throw money at your problems? If that worked, any adventurer who made a bit of coin and studied could call themselves a merchant. And sure, they can become merchants, but most of them fail quickly. I heard a bit from Rembrandt… You've got some strong subordinates, don't you? And you're supposedly capable yourself. But understand this: That strength doesn't translate into business acumen. If you try to use it here… Your company will immediately be labeled as an ally of the demons and a traitor to hyumanity."

"That's absurd."

"No, you're just naive… Listen, take my advice: Shut down your shop and go back to Tsige. This city is too much for you right now. Go back and learn business properly under that man. As for the monetary issue, the guild will step in and add a clause that it's limited to while your store operates in Rotsgard. Without that, your shop would go under for real."

Why is he being kind all of a sudden? Wasn't he just saying the guild wouldn't intervene?

"For someone who's been mocking me, you're surprisingly considerate."

"Idiot. That man who's taken such a liking to you—he's a formidable adversary for me. Turning the cleanup for a misguided rookie into a favor I can hold over him—that's all this is."

"You mean Rembrandt-san?"

"I've heard he's mellowed with age, but to think he'd create such a glaring weakness for himself. It's lucky for you, though… Still, you're going to tell me about your distribution methods, understood? Now, let's hear it."

Lucky?

Causing trouble for Rembrandt-san and getting out unscathed is luck?

I told the representative that we used teleportation to transport goods. Of course, I concealed anything about the Demiplane. I

explained that I had subordinates with enough magical power to perform multiple long-distance teleportations.

And with that, I was released.

The representative informed me of a meeting date with the merchants who had filed the complaints, a prospect that only deepened my gloom.

I've caused trouble for Rembrandt-san. I've told another lie to hide the Demiplane… What should I do?

With the realization that I was being cornered, I slowly made my way back to the shop. I needed to talk this over with everyone. At that moment, I couldn't spare a single thought for the students' team matches.



The first day of the team matches in the tournament. Players' waiting room.

"Do you think they'll change the rules?" Abelia asked curiously.

"Definitely," Daena replied with measured confidence. "After watching yesterday's matches, if they don't make any adjustments, it would mean Hopleys has given up. But that's not likely."

Clearly, Daena had grasped the obsession of the nobles interfering in the tournament. His tone, however, lacked any enthusiasm.

"The team matches have fewer restrictions than the individual ones, right?" Yuno chimed in. "So, isn't it harder for anyone to interfere? Maybe we're overthinking things."

"Yuno, you shouldn't let your guard down," Abelia cautioned. "Sensei will probably know in an instant."

"Ugh, I'll be careful," Yuno muttered sheepishly.

"Now, now," Izumo interjected with a placating tone. "I get where Yuno's coming from. With the Champion here in top form and Jin, the runner-up, on our team, maybe we don't need to be too tense, right?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a voice called from the doorway.

The five were chatting when Jin and Mithra returned to the room.

"Welcome back. So, did they mess with the rules?" Abelia asked.

"Yeah, just as we expected," Jin replied, his tone resigned. "But there's something even more important you all need to know."

"What is it?" Abelia asked, her expression shifting to one of unease as she noticed Jin's disappointed face.

Jin responded flatly, "Sensei won't be able to watch us today."

All five of their expressions changed simultaneously. While their individual emotions varied, disappointment and dismay were evident in all their eyes.

"What about Shiki-san?!" Abelia demanded, her voice sharp with urgency.

"Yes, he'll be watching. So will those two attendants—Tomoe-san and Mio-san," Jin explained. "Sensei can't make it, but he's arranged to get a full report later."

"Why can't he come?" Shifu asked, her tone tinged with frustration. Yuno, Izumo, and the others nodded, clearly wondering the same thing.

"Apparently, the Merchant Guild summoned him," Jin replied.

"Father couldn't handle it alone?" Yuno muttered, a hint of worry in her voice.

"Looks like it. For them to call him on a day like this, it must be something troublesome. I specifically asked them to avoid bothering Raidou-sama…" Shifu's voice trailed off, but her expression hardened.

For just a few seconds, the light in the Rembrandt sisters' eyes was anything but calm. Jin noticed and, in spite of himself, felt a flicker of fear toward them.

"Well, it can't be helped," Abelia noted confidently, regaining her composure. "So, what changes did they make to the rules? Judging by Mithra's expression, it must be something serious…"

Abelia's demeanor suggested she was already confident they could handle whatever it was, especially with Shiki watching from the stands. Her curiosity was more practical than worried.

"Ah, well… Mithra's odd behavior is for a different reason," Jin clarified. "As for the changes to the team match rules, there's only one. Honestly, it's infuriating how they think this is all it'll take to defeat us."

He paused, a wicked grin spreading across his face. It wasn't directed at the rule itself but at the sheer arrogance of whoever thought such a change would bring their team down.

"Come on, stop teasing and just tell us," Abelia pressed, her tone impatient.

"They added a level cap for the entire party—365 total. If the combined levels exceed that, the team has to adjust its numbers," Jin said.

"What a specific number," she said with a smirk. "So basically, we have to fight with just three people."

Her words hit the mark. Their team had been approved with the maximum of seven members, yet the new level cap was set at just the right number to limit them to three.

"It's clearly targeted at us," Jin suggested. "Hopleys's party totals 363 with all seven of their members. We're the only team in the tournament affected by this new rule."

"How petty," Abelia remarked, shaking her head. "But, as Jin said, it's not really a problem for us. This won't change anything. A smaller group just means tighter coordination… So, Mithra, why do you still look so bothered?"

"Well… I was told I'd get some training," Mithra muttered, his face pale and his voice sounding unusually subdued.

"By who?" Yuno prompted. She didn't understand why he seemed so upset by the idea.

"That blue-haired person who's one of Sensei's attendants… Tomoe-san," Jin replied.

“No way!” The Rembrandt sisters’ voices harmonized perfectly in their exclamation.

“It’s true,” Mithra confirmed. “She was impressed after watching my match yesterday. She said she’d spar with me after the festival’s over.”

“That’s amazing,” Yuno remarked.

“To think—Tomoe-sama! Even in Tsige, there are hardly any adventurers who’ve been fortunate enough to receive personal training from her. Mithra-san, you’re incredible,” Shifu added, her amazement mirrored by her sister.

Their surprise was well founded. Although Tomoe occasionally mentored adventurers in Tsige, much like Mio, she rarely took on personal disciples or offered one-on-one training. The only exceptions were Lime, who had left the Adventurer’s Guild to devote himself to her, and Mio, who had taken a particular interest in a young lady’s group of adventurers from Limia. Tomoe’s guidance was truly a rare privilege.

“But,” Jin interjected with a smirk, “this guy’s been scared out of his wits ever since.”

“Come on, anyone would feel like that after hearing what she said!” Mithra retorted.

“What did she say?” Izumo asked with a grin.

“She put her hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Don’t die on me,’ with a completely straight face. She added that she’d go easy on me, but only because she didn’t want to get scolded by her master.”

“Wow,” Abelia responded, deadpan.

“See?! You’d be pale too if someone at Level 1,500 said that to you!” Mithra shouted, his expression a mix of indignation and lingering fear.

“If you die, I’m sure Shiki-san will revive you,” Abelia joked. “Anyway, since Mithra isn’t in top form, let’s have him sit out the first round. Oh, Jin, are we allowed to swap team members between matches?”

"Hey! I'll do it, I'll fight too! Yesterday left me completely unsatisfied. Don't just exclude me without asking!" Mithra exclaimed. His fear had given way to outrage.

"You're ruthless, Abelia," Jin said, still chuckling. "But yeah, you can swap members between matches. However, if the team loses, it's game over for everyone, including those who didn't get a chance to fight."

"Looks like the real battle might be here instead of on the stage," Yuno quipped. "All right, let's settle this quickly."

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Princess Lily of the Gritonia Empire clicked her tongue silently as she watched the team matches unfold. A three-on-seven battle—by any normal logic, the team with seven members should have dominated, but the scene before her was the complete opposite. The three-person team was toying with the seven, completely in control of the match.

To the hyumans present, who believed that straightforward displays of strength were the ultimate form of combat, this was an utterly alien way of fighting: using coordination, skill, and strategy to overcome disadvantages. It was the very method employed by demons in their war against the Goddess-blessed hyumans.

In fact, Lily had considered implementing this method on a trial basis within the Imperial Military. Now here, before her eyes, were students who wielded this approach with impressive mastery. They not only nullified their disadvantage but also overwhelmed their opponents with raw capability.

From the individual matches, Lily had already grasped that these students were far from ordinary. But the power they now demonstrated far surpassed her expectations. This match would prove to be an even greater display of dominance than anything in the individual battles.

Currently in the fight were Jin Rohan, the individual runner-up; Yuno Rembrandt, with an exceptional spear technique; and Abelia Hopleys, who, despite competing as a mage, had shown footwork rivaling that of a warrior. This time, Abelia was not using a staff but her weapon of choice—a bow.

Discovering individuals who embodied Lily's ideal combat style should have been a joyous occasion. Jin and his team represented a beacon of hope in the fight against the demons.

Under normal circumstances, she would have done everything in her power, sparing no effort or resources, to bring them under her banner.

But she couldn't.

They were under the influence of Raidou.

Lily found this infuriating beyond measure. The Kuzunoha Company, which she had learned about from Tomoe—who had effortlessly overpowered both the Hero Tomoki and the Dragon Summoner Mora—was connected to this team.

It's like watching scarecrows or wooden dummies get knocked over…

The match before her could hardly be called a battle.

Jin dashed toward the opposing team's front line. His overwhelming speed, strength, and precision dismantled their formation from the vanguard. Even the midline and rear, although untouched by his strikes, faltered from the sheer pressure he exuded.

As their ranks broke, Yuno wasted no time in slicing her spear through their defenses. The front and middle lines, unable to fulfill their roles, devolved into individuals struggling to shield themselves.

Those in the rear who attempted a counterattack were struck down by Abelia's arrows and magic before they could complete even a single incantation.

Raidou's students were clearly experienced in group combat, but more than that, they were playing with their opponents.

To Lily's eyes, it seemed like they were showcasing their coordination and maneuvers as if performing for an unseen audience. If Jin had so desired, he could have defeated the entire opposing team single-handedly.

Yet they refrained from doing so. Instead, they worked as a unit, layering coordinated attacks and follow-ups against their opponents.

Their intent was clear, even to the imperial princess.

The result was inevitable: total annihilation. The opposing team failed to land even a single effective strike and was made to struggle tirelessly for five minutes before being soundly defeated.

As for Raidou's students? They hadn't even broken a sweat.

Not stopping to celebrate their victory, they calmly descended from the stage, regrouped with their teammates, and returned to the waiting room together. Their demeanors were almost serene.

They're just students! Lily marveled. *How could they possibly have mastered group combat to this extent? How can they stay so composed under pressure?*

More than anything, Lily wanted to understand Raidou's methods as a mentor and the source of his students' incredible abilities. Yet she had to heed Tomoe's warning. To avoid any connection with Kuzunoha, reaching out to them was out of the question.

Looking around, the princess saw that she wasn't the only one captivated. Limia's king, the priestess faction of Lorel, the high priest from the temple, the academy's elite instructors, and even its headmaster—all had been intently watching the match. Now that it was over, they were whispering to their subordinates and sending them out to act.

These students were no longer unknowns.

The attention they'd garnered during the individual matches was reinforced by their performance in the team battles.

The Gritonia Empire already had its trump card—a hero. Since his encounter with Tomoe, he had trained with a renewed intensity, honing his skills to new heights. Nevertheless, Raidou and his students were an enticing option that couldn't be ignored.

In the escalating war against the demons, the more useful pieces on the board, the better. Hyumans needed individuals with flexible thinking, not the typical reliance on brute strength. If the source of the students' ability truly lay in Raidou's tutelage, then bringing him to the Empire could mean producing soldiers as capable as his students.

In that case, if I approach Raidou respectfully, focusing on the students, I might be able to communicate with him while keeping my promise to Tomoe intact. He claims to be a merchant, but with this level of instructional skill, I want him just as much as I want Tomoe… Letting him fall into another country's hands would be far too dangerous—and far too wasteful.

As the team matches continued, Lily considered ways to establish a positive relationship with the Kuzunoha Company.

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"There are such exceptional young individuals in this world," the king of Limia mused.

"Indeed, father," Limia's second prince replied.

"Watching Hibiki-dono often makes me think as much, but to encounter such talent at a tournament in Rotsgard—which prides

itself on traditional education—that was entirely unexpected."

"We're gathering as much information on them as possible," the prince reported.

The first day of the team matches had concluded. After the four semifinal teams were introduced and the event was dismissed, the king and prince of Limia remained engrossed in discussion, their focus entirely on one team.

"Hmm… their abilities are, of course, impressive," the king admitted. "But perhaps the one we truly need to investigate is their instructor."

"Their only shared class is taught by one individual, so we've begun investigating that instructor. Additionally, the Hopleys family already conducted research on this person, so I've ordered them to submit their findings," the prince added.

"The Hopleys, you say…?" The king furrowed his brow. "I was aware they had a conflict within the academy, but I didn't expect it to involve an instructor… Just a hunch, but the one who truly possesses remarkable strength might be the person who guided these students' progress."

"You're saying… they're manufactured prodigies?" the prince asked, astonished.

The students, their level of coordination, and their ingenuity reminiscent of their kingdom's own hero, had left a deep impression on the prince. If their exceptional abilities had been cultivated by a single instructor, that individual would be their first priority.

Even if Limia didn't manage to recruit the students, obtaining their instructor could transform the kingdom's soldiers into a force to be reckoned with.

"Of course, this is only my speculation," the king clarified. "However, judging by the behavior of the Hopleys family's second son, it's possible something unsavory is afoot."

"Given the irregularities in the tournament proceedings, it's plausible that he orchestrated targeted harassment against those students," the prince concluded.

"It may already be too late, but ensure the head of the Hopleys family is prevented from causing further interference. And… do we know the name of that instructor?"

"I understand. His name is Raidou. He's also the representative of a new merchant company called the Kuzunoha Company."

"Raidou, is it? Can arrangements be made to meet him?"

"I'll see what I can do." The prince's expression darkened. "However, one question remains."

Unfazed, the king motioned for him to continue.

"It's about Ilumgand Hopleys, the second son of the Hopleys family. As I recall, he questioned the state of our nobility from a young age. He was treated like a backup to his elder brother and family's heir, Walken, but he seemed to use that status to his advantage. I remember him as someone who trained diligently at the academy. Always living by his ideals. So… how has he come to embody the corruption he once despised?"

"That, I don't know," the king replied gravely. "If Walken were to fall in battle, Ilumgand would inherit the title. Like you, I had high hopes for him—much like I do for Hibiki-dono. It's disappointing."

"Could he have been influenced by the scheming merchants operating in Rotsgard—or perhaps…"

"Shall we investigate him as well?"

"No, that won't be necessary. That's a matter for the Hopleys family. I doubt they would overlook such a drastic change in their own kin. Focus the investigation on the Kuzunoha Company… We'll make contact after Stella has been reclaimed."

"The retaking of Stella Fortress is finally upon us," the prince remarked.

"Hibiki-dono seems more motivated than ever. Her recent growth during her time in Tsige, along with the dependable allies she has brought back, has been remarkable."

"The adventurers, you mean? Their approach is quite different from that of our kingdom's forces. Per your command, they're to be formed into a specialized unit under Hibiki-sama's direct authority."

“As it should be,” the king affirmed, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon.

Limia’s hero Hibiki Otonashi was bringing about significant changes to the kingdom’s future.

She had been born and raised in a democratic nation and occasionally questioned the monarchy—an attitude many of the great nobles viewed as dangerous.

Outwardly, the king maintained a stance of restraint toward Hibiki, but inwardly, he had accepted her. He provided her with various forms of support.

It was thanks to the king’s backing that she had been able to travel to Tsige and integrate her adventurers seamlessly into the kingdom’s framework.

The primary liaison between Hibiki’s party and the king was the second prince, Joshua. He conveyed the king’s intentions to her and helped foster an amicable relationship.

“Gritonia’s Princess Lily, Lorel’s priestess faction, the far reaches of the world under Aion’s influence… and the Adventurer’s Guild, which continues to maintain its neutrality,” the king mused. “I would prefer for Hibiki-dono to focus solely on the fight against the demons, but things rarely go as one wishes.”

“Defeating the demons will not bring peace to the world,” Joshua replied, his tone measured. “It seems she understands that as well.”

“Even so, alleviating that concern is better than leaving it unchecked. Joshua, I’ll rely on you to handle this.”

“Yes, father. I await your orders.”

And so their discussions, too, led to the Kuzunoha Company.



With Makoto summoned to the Merchant Guild, Tomoe and Mio sat in the audience, observing Jin and his team's group match.

The students were forced into a three-against-seven matchup due to the scheming of the Hopleys family, yet the two women found themselves sighing as they watched the battle unfold.

"This is boring," Tomoe remarked. "When the gap in skill is this big, it's not even a fight anymore." She folded her hands behind her head in an exaggerated display of disinterest.

"That's exactly what I've been saying since yesterday," Mio agreed. "If they weren't Young Master's students, I wouldn't bother watching."

"If they were my students, maybe I'd find it more entertaining… Mio, what's with that overstuffed bag you have there?"

"What do you think? It's full of goodies from the food stalls—local specialties, of course. Everything looks delicious."

"That's not what I'm asking," Tomoe retorted, glancing at the mountain of oversized brown paper bags stacked in the seat next to Mio. "Just how much did you buy?!"

The bags occupied not only Mio's space but also the empty seat that was supposed to be Makoto's. The sight was conspicuous amid

the crowded audience.

"Don't worry, I'll finish it all before we leave… If you'd like me to share, just say so," Mio teased with a smirk.

"No, thank you… I'd get indigestion," Tomoe replied, looking away as if the thought alone made her queasy.

"Hmph. If it were sake, you'd snatch it up without a word…"

As they continued their idle banter, the matches proceeded predictably. Even Jin's match had lacked excitement—his opponents had been far too weak to make it interesting. With Makoto absent, expecting Tomoe and Mio to watch the matches with any interest was asking too much.

"At this rate, I doubt tomorrow's semifinals or finals will be any better. Well, if I can spend time with Young Master, it doesn't really matter," Tomoe remarked nonchalantly.

"I couldn't agree more. As long as I'm with Young Master, the location is irrelevant," Mio said with a smile.

"Hmm… It looks like the match is finally over. Oh?"

"…!"

"Mio, Young Master's calling for us. Let's go," Tomoe said decisively.

"I know. He seems a bit down—we should hurry!"

Both girls had received a telepathic message: *"I have something to discuss. Return to the company."*

The message carried an uncharacteristically subdued tone.

Exchanging a quick nod, Tomoe and Mio rose from their seats and hurried toward the Kuzunoha Company's store, only stopping briefly to meet with Shiki on the way.

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As soon as Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki reached the shop, I told them everything that had happened at the Merchant Guild.

As I began recounting how the guild representative had hurled insults at me, Mio quietly muttered, "So, I need to go and kill that representative, right?"

"Mio, the story isn't finished yet! Calm down," Tomoe interjected.

"Calm? I *am* calm," Mio replied firmly. "The solution is crystal clear."

Tomoe sighed and rested a hand lightly on Mio's shoulder. "Hold your horses. You can wait a bit longer."

"To think someone would dare to insult Young Master… What shall I do to them?"

"Mio!" Tomoe said forcefully, her golden eyes narrowing. "I'm telling you to listen to the rest of the story."

"Fine."

Mio finally sat back down, her shoulders visibly stiff.

Behind Mio and Tomoe, Shiki—who had remained silent—finally spoke, his expression somber. "We should have had someone accompany you, Master."

In hindsight, he was right.

If I'd brought one of them with me, the outcome might have been different. With one of my followers by my side, I'm sure we could have resolved the issue—most likely through sheer force.

Unfortunately, I hadn't thought that to be necessary.

Business in both Tsige and Rotsgard had been going so well that I'd let a sense of complacency creep in.

Rembrandt had spoken of the "malice of merchants," and my shallow curiosity had wanted to know just how far that extended. Through my experiences at the academy entrance exams and daily life there, I had arrogantly come to see the hyumans of this world as far beneath me.

When I'd first met Rembrandt and delivered the Ruby Eyes, things had gone well enough. I was confident that as long as I was dealing with merchants, I'd be able to reason with them, even without resorting to intimidation or bringing one of my followers along. More than that, I didn't *want* to use such heavy-handed tactics.

That naive mindset—that hubris—had led to this result. I returned having been subjected to absurd demands and outright ridicule.

"Sorry for thinking I could go alone," I muttered.

"If one of us had gone with you, there's a fair chance the place would have turned into a bloodbath… Not every outcome here is all bad, so don't let it weigh on you," Tomoe reassured me.

"Tomoe-san!" Mio cut in sharply. "Why are you talking like it's Young Master's fault at all?! Young Master did nothing wrong! It's 100 percent the guild's fault!"

"In hindsight, none of us are all that skilled in business," Shiki reflected. "We all started from scratch. While the guild's actions are infuriating, perhaps there were steps we could have taken—like asking Rembrandt to introduce us to experienced merchants or even learning the basics from someone well-versed in trade."

He's right.

It wasn't just a possibility; it was what I should have done. I had underestimated what it meant to run a business.

Even though my company was still in its infancy, I'd allowed myself to dabble in too many ventures—half-heartedly attempting to be a merchant without any real foundation. It wouldn't be unreasonable to assume I wasn't taking it seriously.

And yet, despite all that, business had been going well.

Looking back now, maybe it only *seemed* like things were going well. Avoiding a proper introduction to the head of the guild had been a big mistake.

Why did I let that slide?

“Shiki, even you?!” Mio’s voice rose in frustration. “Why must Young Master endure this? He saw people’s suffering, how their lives were cut short without a cure, and decided to make sure no one else would suffer! Why should someone like him—who’s just trying to do good for everyone—have to learn low-level survival skills just to appease greedy, despicable merchants?! It’s absurd! Can’t you see that?!”

Her words struck me deeply. I’d started this venture to make medicine affordable and accessible to everyone. Everything else—the trinkets and miscellaneous goods we added to the lineup—was secondary.

“Mio, that’s idealistic,” Tomoe remarked gently but firmly. “This is commerce. As long as the goal is to sell and profit, even for a noble cause, situations like this are bound to arise. I won’t say Young Master was entirely at fault, but he was unprepared. There’s no question about that.”

“I feel the same,” Shiki added sincerely. “As his followers, it was our duty to navigate these obstacles. The fault lies with us for failing to anticipate this.”

“You’re both wrong!!!” Mio’s voice trembled. “Young Master is *always* prepared! If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s those selfish merchants, blinded by greed! How can you think otherwise?!”

I knew Mio would defend me, no matter the circumstances.

Even if I became a villain, even if the whole world turned against me, she’d fall in beside me without hesitation.

That’s why I need to be strong.

The room fell into a heavy silence, a stifling tension hanging in the air. Finally, Tomoe’s voice broke it.

“Young Master. That representative, I know what he said was insulting, but he did present an intriguing idea. A focus on commerce with non-hyumans. What do you think? Maybe this is an opportunity to stop dealing with them entirely and establish shops in demi-human settlements instead.”

“Only dealing with demi-humans, huh…”

"Right. If necessary, even trading with magical beasts or monsters could be a possibility… This may stray from the topic a bit, but regarding the location on the map I showed you before—if you plan on securing that place, you'll likely form a connection with the demons. In that case, doing business with them wouldn't be a bad idea either. Staying tangled up in hyuman society, weighed down by their issues, would only create unnecessary burdens for you—at least that's my humble opinion."

Shiki, who had been listening with a satisfied expression, chimed in, "Demons harbor deep resentment toward hyumans but tend to show tolerance toward other races. They wouldn't express any animosity toward the demi-humans working for the company. I believe Tomoe-sama's proposal is well worth considering."

"I… don't understand these complex matters," Mio said softly, "but I don't think Young Master needs to remain under the heel of anyone who exploits his pure kindness."

"Pure kindness," huh. Maybe I've only been pretending to help, while feeding my own self-righteousness. Have those around me always seen me this way?

"I…"

Words rose to my throat but stopped before they escaped. Would they agree with this line of thinking? The worry left me unable to speak.

"Young Master, please tell us what you're thinking," Tomoe urged gently. "If it's what you want, we *will* fight—or bow our heads—whatever you decide."

Mio and Shiki nodded in agreement.

That's right—there's no need to keep secrets from them.

They're my family in this world.

"I… am going to do as Tomoe suggested," I began. "I've already spoken with one of the demon generals, in hopes of forming a relationship with the demons. After the festival, I'll meet with the Demon Lord to negotiate borrowing or acquiring the land near the space Tomoe discovered—the place where the seasons are born."

All three of them were now listening in silence.

I continued: "And it might mean incurring a significant debt to the demons. I won't know for sure until I speak with him. There's a chance I'll be drawn into the conflict between hyumans and demons—the war for dominance over this world. Ideally—and I know this might be naive—I'd like to continue doing business with both hyumans and demons. But that might not be possible."

I spoke quickly, my gaze lowered. When I finally mustered the courage to look up at them…

Tomoe was staring at me with hope shining in her eyes, nodding firmly.

Shiki had his eyes closed, a look of quiet understanding on his face.

Mio simply smiled at me, her face radiating acceptance.

Even with my clumsy delivery, they had understood everything and were on board. They didn't need to say it—I could see it in their expressions.

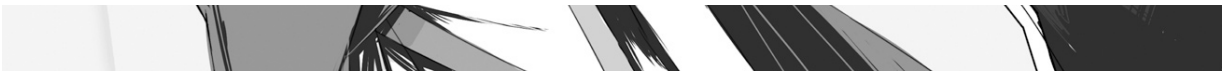
With them by my side, I can overcome anything, no matter how difficult.

I was certain of that.

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I needed to explain our plans in more detail.





I retrieved the map that Tomoe had once shown me—one of this world that bore an uncanny resemblance to Japan. I spread it out on my desk and pointed to the location she'd mentioned in her report.

"This is the place, right, Tomoe?"

"Yes, that's it," she replied with a nod.

"The former Kaleneon Kingdom, once under the Elysion umbrella… If I overlay this on a map of Japan, it roughly corresponds to Yamagata Prefecture, specifically the area around Mount Gassan." I traced the area on the map as I spoke. "Quite the coincidence, really…"

The place that would bring the four seasons to the Demiplane. And a place deeply connected to me—and to the two humans I'd met here.

"Yamagata?" Shiki interjected, tilting his head in confusion.

I paused, realizing my mistake. *Right, a prefecture name wouldn't mean anything here. It just happened to be near Mount Gassan, which has ties to Tsukuyomi-sama, so I couldn't help myself…*

"No, sorry. That's just a personal reference," I said, shaking my head. "What's important is the name I said before—Kaleneon… It seems to be the country where my parents were born."

The three of them reacted in unison, their eyes widening.

"My parents met there, became adventurers, and eventually traveled across the world using teleportation magic. So, in a way, it's my motherland… But that's not relevant to the Demiplane and the four seasons," I added.

Still, if I could somehow uncover even a scrap of information about my parents, that would be incredible.

The nation of Kaleneon had been destroyed, and I didn't know how much of its history had survived. *Hopefully, when the demons invaded, they didn't reduce everything to ash.*

"But, Young Master," Shiki interjected, "if I recall correctly, Kaleneon is where the librarian, Eva, and Luria from Ironclad hail

from…”

“That’s right—it’s their birthplace,” I confirmed with a solemn nod. “Which is why I intend to ask them to make a decision. If they agree, then I—”

I proceeded to explain my plan for the Aensland sisters. It wasn’t a well-thought-out strategy. In fact, it was more of a desperate gamble—a half-baked idea borne out of frustration and necessity.

“Heh… hehehe. Now this is amusing, Young Master,” Shiki chuckled, but the laugh carried a hint of admiration as well.

“Indeed. If it works, it could become the trump card we need in our current predicament,” added Tomoe.

“I have no objections to whatever you decide, Young Master,” said Mio with a sly smile. “Besides, fretting over untapped power while our backs are against the wall is absurd, wouldn’t you agree?”

Their unwavering loyalty, their trust—it gave me strength.

Then it’s settled. As Raidou of the Kuzunoha Company… and as the third otherworlder to step into this world…

Listen, you damn Goddess. Two of your so-called heroes have already pledged themselves to the hyumans. So what if I decide to tip the scales a little in favor of the demons?

You wouldn’t mind, would you? You useless, meddling goddess.



He was one of the many students attending the academy in Rotsgard. But he wasn't just any student.

As the second son of the Hopleys family—an illustrious noble house universally recognized within the powerful Kingdom of Limia—Ilumgand stood out among his peers. Born into privilege, he excelled in both academics and martial prowess, and his unwavering sense of justice marked him as a true thoroughbred of nobility.

The eldest son of the Hopleys family had taken up arms on the front lines against the demon race, fulfilling his duties as a noble and bolstering his prestige in the process. Ilumgand had been sent to the academy instead, deemed a safeguard—a "spare," in case harm befell the heir.

Such arrangements were standard practice among noble families. Ilumgand Hopleys understood this perfectly well. But to call him a dutiful son, loyal to the family? That would be a mistake.

Ilumgand despised the rot festering within Limia's nobility. Since the moment he became self-aware, he had viewed their corruption with growing hatred.

Yet, he played the role of an obedient son—at least, when his father was around.

Not yet. This is the time to bow my head and bide my time.

Ilumgand harbored a secret ambition: to reform the nobility.

To him, nobles were bound by a sacred responsibility. Born of high blood, they were to live lives untainted by shame, protecting the weak, and serving as their sword and shield. They were to pledge undivided loyalty to the king, govern their granted lands with fairness, and become figures admired by those under their care.

Two women had played pivotal roles in shaping his philosophy: one was a young girl he had once known—the daughter of a family closely allied with his own during childhood…

In those days, he had shared his lofty ideals with her from a place of innocent confidence. She had responded with a radiant smile, clapping as if his words were a masterwork.

The memory of that day, standing in a field of flowers, was seared into Ilumgand's heart. What he had intended as a show of bravado had become a powerful source of validation. Her smile and applause were more divine to him than any goddess' blessing—a vivid and sacred memory.

The second person was Hibiki Otonashi, the brave hero who had descended upon Limia.

Hibiki's sudden arrival in the kingdom was nothing short of a phenomenon. Unlike the nobles bound by tradition and monarchy, she spoke freely, unshackled by the weight of status. Her bold, candid words—considered dangerous by many within the aristocracy—gave structure to Ilumgand's hazy ideals.

It was only after meeting her that Ilumgand began to pursue his aspirations clearly and with conviction.

He supported her however he could, and they trained together in swordsmanship. Hibiki, perhaps thanks to her natural talents as a hero, improved rapidly. It wasn't long before she surpassed even the most adept noble warriors, leaving them in awe—or, in some cases, in envy.

Though many resented her meteoric rise, Ilumgand never felt a shred of jealousy. To him, she was someone to respect, someone who embodied what he hoped to achieve.

“Ilm,” she had said warmly, “when you graduate and return to the kingdom, I hope we can fight side by side. With your strength, everyone—including me—would feel so much more secure. I’ll be waiting for the day you come back as my comrade.”

Her words were the recognition he’d long hoped for, and they filled him with elation.

Had he been free to follow his heart, Ilumgand would have left the academy that very moment, abandoning his studies to assist her. He wanted nothing more than to stay by her side and absorb her wisdom.

Though Hibiki was said to be around his age, Ilumgand recognized that she was far more mature. Her words always seemed to come from a place far beyond his reach.

Nevertheless, he suppressed his yearning and resolved to remain at the academy until graduation, as per his family’s wishes.

The war with the demon race would not be resolved in just a few years. He knew that if he ever had to assume the mantle of the Hopleys family, graduating with honors would lend him credibility in his mission to reform the nobility. Furthermore, the education and connections he’d gain there would be invaluable when the time came to aid Hibiki.

This decision became a defining moment in his life.

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The spring of the year Hibiki departed for the battlefield.

On a rare holiday in the academy city, Ilumgand had an unexpected encounter. He saw a woman, barely recognizable from the child he once knew—except for one unmistakable accessory.

A black choker adorned with a bell and ribbon.

"Luria? Luria Aensland?" he called out instinctively, his voice breaking with surprise as the woman walked past him.

Speaking that name felt surreal, almost absurd. She was unforgettable—yet also someone he had believed he would never meet again.

She quietly turned toward him, scanning Ilumgand and his companions. She wore a server's uniform and a flat expression, her eyes devoid of the spark he remembered.

The bell on her choker didn't make a sound as she turned. It seemed to be little more than a decorative trinket now.

"Why…? How are you here…?"

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice calm but distant. "Have we met before?"

"It's me! Ilumgand!" he exclaimed, his words spilling out in haste. "From Limia! The Hopleys family! I visited the Aensland territory in Kaleneon several times. Don't you… remember me?"

At the mention of Kaleneon, Luria stiffened.

"I remember you," he pressed. "We played together in the flower fields of Agarest… Luria, it is you, isn't it? Why are you walking away?!"

Visibly shaken, Luria turned to leave. She moved quickly—her steps almost frantic.

"I… I'm in a hurry. Please excuse me!"

"Wait!" Ilumgand shouted, grabbing her wrist as she tried to pass.

His grip was firm, halting her in her tracks.

At that moment, her entire body trembled violently. Her gaze fell to the arm Ilumgand was gripping, her eyes wide with fear.

One of Ilumgand's companions, who had been silent until now, furrowed his brow in thought.

"Ilm-san," he murmured cautiously. "Kaleneon… Wasn't that one of the neighboring countries to Elysion? It was wiped out in the early

stages of the Great Invasion, right? I think that came up in a lecture recently…"

"Y-Yeah, that's right," Ilumgand replied, glancing back at Luria. "She's… She's the daughter of the Aensland family, one of the great noble houses there."

He spoke with conviction, his eyes locked on Luria as if trying to make sense of the years that had passed.

Hearing this, the others turned their gazes toward her. Luria averted her eyes.

"Isn't that strange?" another of Ilumgand's companions chimed in—his tone uneasy but curious. "That country… It was destroyed by the demons almost overnight, wasn't it? I mean, weren't the nobles there all—"

"Enough!" Ilumgand snapped, cutting him off.

The question was only natural, but he refused to let it be spoken aloud. He couldn't ignore the storm of emotions swirling within the woman, nor could he allow such careless words to deepen her pain.

"Ah, I… I'm sorry," the other student stammered, his voice shrinking under Ilumgand's glare. He fumbled for an explanation, casting nervous glances between Luria and Ilumgand.

"It *has* to be you," Ilumgand pressed, his voice softer now, tinged with uncertainty. "The choker with the bell—it doesn't ring anymore, but I remember it. She wore one just like it. And when I mentioned Kaleneon… you reacted. You're… You *are* Luria, aren't you?"

Kaleneon had been annihilated during the Great Invasion. By all accounts, no noble family could have survived such devastation. This cruel reality rattled Ilumgand, causing his resolve to falter.

"Yes," the woman finally admitted, her voice quiet yet firm. "I am… Luria. I don't remember much from my childhood, but I believe you're right. We must have met back then."

Her gaze finally met his, surrendering to the unyielding persistence in his eyes. She acknowledged what she had been trying

to conceal—the truth that she was the daughter of a fallen noble family and a survivor from a nation that no longer existed.

Luria wasn't feigning ignorance to deceive Ilumgand.

After narrowly escaping the flames of war thanks to her parents' sacrifice, she and her older sister, Eva, had faced harsh treatment wherever they'd gone. The humiliation they endured was unspeakable, causing Luria to lock away nearly all recollection of her life in the Aensland territory.

"Excuse me," she said softly, pointing at the arm Ilumgand still gripped tightly. "Could you let go? It's… painful."

"Ah… Sorry," he muttered, releasing her arm with visible hesitation.

"It's fine," she replied tersely, rubbing her wrist.

The silence that followed was heavy and awkward, broken only by the distant hum of the bustling street around them.

One wanted to leave as quickly as possible. The other wanted to prolong the moment, even if just for a few more seconds. Their opposing desires clashed silently, irreconcilable.

"Luria…" Ilumgand began hesitantly. "Why are you here, in this city? Your… Your country—it was… destroyed in the war against the demons. You're a noble, and yet…"

His words faltered. What he really wanted to do was rejoice in her survival, to embrace her and let the flood of emotions spill out. Luria wasn't just a face from his past—she was his first love.

The girl from his memories, representing the ideals he cherished, was standing in front of him. She was the pure embodiment of a dream, etched indelibly on his heart. But with his companions nearby, he couldn't act on his feelings. Instead, what came out were accusatory words—words steeped in the ideals of nobility he held so dear, now shattered by her mere existence, a reminder of the values he believed in but saw betrayed.

"I was… sent away," Luria answered softly. Her tone was flat, devoid of the emotion her words deserved. "My parents… They let me escape. I was still young, so my memories are hazy, but…"

What?!

The explanation hit Ilumgand like a hammer.

Luria, the girl who had once pledged with him to uphold the responsibilities of nobility in the flower fields of Agarest, the beacon of his ideals—she had survived. But not as a noble protecting her people.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the words twisted in his throat. Everything he wanted to say was drowned out by the storm inside him.

What happened to the vow we made that day?

But you're alive. That still makes me happy.

To survive without protecting anyone, a disgraced noble… What a shame.

But losing her parents must have been so painful.

The hero fights on the front lines, risking her life to protect the people.

But it's all right now. From now on, I'll be here for you.

Part of him knew it was his own selfish idealism—shaped by his expectations and values. But he couldn't bring himself to admit it.

"So, you abandoned your land and your people to save yourself?"

The cold accusation was delivered not by Ilumgand but by one of his companions, who glared at Luria with disdain.

"Unbelievable," another of them chimed in. "As a noble, you should have been the first to face the enemy, to defend your people with your life."

"Look at you now, reduced to servitude just to cling to life. What a disgrace."

Their words poured out, each one sharp and dripping with venom.

Ilumgand's companions had all been drawn to him because of his unwavering ideals around the responsibilities of nobility. It was precisely because of those values that they reacted with revulsion to Luria's story of survival.

Their words cut deep. But in a twisted way, their accusations mirrored the darker corners of Ilumgand's own conflicted heart. That was why he couldn't bring himself to stop them.

Had it been anyone else standing before him, Ilumgand might have joined in their condemnation without hesitation.

Luria endured the onslaught in silence, with the look of someone who had long since ceased fighting, resigned to whatever judgment was passed.

Her passivity only fueled the fire in Ilumgand's heart, pushing him to the edge. Before he could stop himself, he shouted, "You're a disgrace to hyumanity! The Aensland family and you yourself. While we studied our asses off at the academy, getting ready to fight the demons, you abandoned your responsibilities as a noble and to your land. You lowered yourself to the status of a commoner, just to survive. How utterly shameful!"

Whether it was doubt in his heart or the weight of his conflicted emotions, Ilumgand couldn't bring himself to meet Luria's gaze.

Luria's voice, though soft and trembling, carried a quiet defiance as she responded, "You have no idea what you're saying. You've never even faced a moment where you might truly die. You have no idea how I've lived."

Ilumgand sighed; she was right. Luria hadn't lived an easy life simply because she'd been allowed to escape. The path that led her to be a server in this city had been fraught with humiliation and suffering. Even now, the life she'd painstakingly carved out for herself was haunted by the ghosts of her past, constantly threatening to unravel everything.

For Luria, seeing these students—nurtured in the safety and affluence of their academy—speak so self-righteously must have been galling.

Ilumgand's mouth opened and closed as he searched his mind for a response.

He realized, belatedly, how reckless and thoughtless his earlier words had been. Guilt prickled at the edges of his conscience, and

just as he was about to speak again—

"What did you just say?!" one of his companions erupted in fury. "Is this cowardly, traitorous noble seriously insulting us?!"

"Do you think we'd ever cling to life and run from a fight like you?!"

"We're ready to die with dignity, unlike you!"

The group's indignant shouts filled the space. Yet still, Luria stood firm. Her cold, distant gaze swept over the group.

When she spoke again, her tone was quiet but sharp with contempt. "People like you love to talk grand about bravery. But you're always the first to resort to bullying someone weaker, aren't you? From the comfort of peace and safety, where you can study and boast about ideals you've never tested… What do you know about fighting a war, about putting your life on the line?"

"Shut up!" one of the students shouted. Unable to contain his anger, he gave her shoulder a rough shove.

Luria staggered backward, struggling to keep her footing, but even then, her expression remained detached. She simply gazed at them, her eyes still as cold and unyielding as ever.

"Say something, damn it!" the boy barked, his frustration mounting.

"Luria…" Ilumgand muttered, his voice trembling with hesitation. "You… How far… Even so…"

My first love.

She's alive.

She shared my ideals, once. And now she's disgracing herself before my very eyes.

The contradiction was unbearable, and as he struggled to find the right words to say—

"Uh, maybe you should stop?" a voice interrupted, cutting through the tension like a knife.

Two individuals stepped forward, positioning themselves between the group and Luria. Their appearances drew immediate

attention, but it was the shorter one, a young man, who stood out the most.

His face was grotesque by hyuman standards, marred by features that verged on animalistic. There was no question that he sat on the bottom rung of the aesthetic hierarchy.

Is he some kind of beastman? Ilumgand and his companions wondered. *Maybe a monkey-type demi-human?*

The idea wasn't entirely far-fetched. His appearance straddled the line between a human and a beastman in a way that seemed almost deliberate.

"Who the hell are *you* guys?" one of Ilumgand's companions demanded.

"Hey," the short man scoffed, gesturing to the emblem of the Rotsgard Academy prominently displayed on his clothing. "Can't you see these uniforms? Are you idiots?"

Despite the evident provocation, Ilumgand's companions were in no mood to tolerate interference. Their emotions were still simmering, and their frustration with Luria now turned toward these two interlopers.

Ilumgand kept silent; though he knew in the back of his mind that his companions' behavior was unbefitting of anyone who aspired to lead, all he could think about was Luria.

I just need to talk to her alone.

That was all he wanted. To understand, to reconcile the image of his childhood ideal with the reality standing before him.

But fate had other plans.

This pair, insignificant as they seemed, was about to irreversibly alter Ilumgand's destiny.

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Overwhelming violence.

Ilumgand would never forget the power displayed by Makoto and Shiki. Absolutely powerless to resist, he and his companions had been forced to flee, their pride in tatters.

After his encounter with Makoto, Ilumgand managed to track down the place where Luria worked—a tavern and eatery called Ironclad Inn.

Frustratingly, every time he tried to meet with her, his attempts were thwarted by the Kuzunoha Company, led by Makoto. While he never encountered Makoto directly, the company's employees repeatedly obstructed him whenever he sought contact with Luria.

Sometimes through cunning.

Sometimes through brute force.

It was a humiliation he couldn't tolerate. Denied any chance to speak with Luria, Ilumgand found himself spiraling into frustration and desperation.

He deeply regretted the thoughtless words he had spoken during their first encounter.

I just want to apologize. To clear up the misunderstanding.

Ilumgand had felt such joy at knowing she was alive. He longed to express that truth, to mend the fragile bridge between them. But that desire was continually thwarted. Even with the support of his noble family, every attempt to break the impasse failed.

Why? Why do they keep interfering? What grudge do they hold against me?

What he didn't know was that the Kuzunoha Company had no intention of sabotaging him. Makoto and Shiki were unaware of his plight.

The entire situation stemmed from a simple request Luria had made.

Feeling cornered and harassed, Luria had confided in some of the company's employees during one of their visits to Ironclad.

"Ilumgand has been following me," she said. "Could you keep an eye out and help me if he comes around?"

Lime Latte, the forest ogre sisters Aqua and Eris, and even the elder dwarf employees—each of them had taken Luria's request to heart. They quietly ensured that Ilumgand and anyone acting on his behalf could not approach her.

Meanwhile, Ilumgand's frustration toward the Kuzunoha Company began to curdle into hatred. Kuzunoha and Makoto were now obstacles to be overcome, adversaries standing in the way of his heartfelt desire to reconnect with Luria.

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"Ilumgand Hopleys, I presume?"

"Who are you?" the young man asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Would you like power?" the other student asked smoothly. "I've heard… things haven't been going well for you lately."

This unfamiliar male student seemed suspicious; Ilumgand's instincts told him to remain on guard. Still, Rotsgard Academy was a big place, and new faces were not uncommon. Students came and went for a variety of reasons, so being approached by someone unfamiliar wasn't entirely strange. But this man's words were far too pointed, far too deliberate, for Ilumgand to dismiss his wariness.

"Power?" Ilumgand echoed sharply. "You know about my abilities, and you're still asking if I want *power*?"

"Of course," the man replied smoothly, his lips curling into a faint smile. "I know of your abilities—and your desire for greater strength."

"Wh-What?" Ilumgand stiffened.

“Can you really help the hero in your current state?” the man continued, his voice calm but unrelenting. “Can you even eliminate the obstacles that stand in your way? These are the doubts weighing on you, aren’t they?”

“Who are you?!”

The mysterious student was unfazed by Ilumgand’s outburst. “Please, calm down. We’re your allies. At the academy, a groundbreaking magic potion has been developed recently. It significantly enhances physical abilities and magical power alike. It’s already been tested on several students, and all of them have demonstrated remarkable improvement.”

As the man began listing success stories, many of whom Ilumgand knew personally, Ilumgand’s heart wavered.

“Not only does it have no side effects, but it’s been approved by the academy. It will pass any inspection without issue,” the student explained smoothly. “Given your exceptional talents, Ilumgand-sama, we’re eager to see just how effective it can be for someone like you. Once proven, the academy plans to make it widely available. Forgive my bluntness, but for the sake of the academy’s progress, would you consider assisting us as a test subject?”

“A potion… approved by the academy… that makes one stronger?” Ilumgand repeated, his thoughts spinning.

“Yes. It will grant you the strength to realize your aspirations.”

“Fine. I’ll cooperate,” Ilumgand decided. “What are the conditions?”

“Our superior, who’s overseeing this project, will contact you periodically via telepathy. When they do, we’ll need you to provide updates on your experience. That’s all we ask.”

The student reached into his pocket and carefully retrieved a small bottle of pills, holding it delicately between his thumb and forefinger and extending it toward Ilumgand.

Ilumgand hesitated for only a moment before reaching out and taking the bottle in his right hand.

“One pill a day,” the student instructed calmly. “You can take more if you wish—it won’t harm your health—but it won’t increase the effect, so there’s no need to overdo it. When you’re nearing the end of the bottle, simply inform our superior. I’ll personally deliver a new supply to you.”

Ilumgand stared at the bottle, its contents glinting faintly under the light. The student provided a few additional notes on dosage and usage, but Ilumgand was only half listening, his focus locked on the small vial in his hand.

By the time Ilumgand finally lifted his gaze, ready to ask more questions, the student had vanished without a trace.



Raidou had recently joined the academy as an instructor, and it seemed that his classes were gaining popularity among certain students.

For Ilumgand, however, this was far from welcome news.

As promised, the pills the mysterious student had given him came with no side effects, and his physical abilities and magical power had grown significantly. The enhancements just kept getting better, pushing his strength to new heights.

His increased capabilities accelerated his leveling process, and he was now approaching Level 70—a feat that many would envy. Yet, despite his newfound strength, Ilumgand's frustration only deepened.

"Raidou. That bastard's always flitting around the campus!"

Even with his enhanced abilities, Ilumgand still hadn't managed to speak with Luria.

Worse, his companions reported that Makoto and Shiki were frequent visitors to Ironclad. They spoke with Luria casually, sometimes even laughing and chatting with her in a way that felt infuriatingly carefree.

Ilumgand found nothing funny about the situation. These men had trampled into his world, stolen his rightful place, and basked in the smiles that should have been his.

His resentment finally boiled over when, during a practical class on one-on-one combat techniques, he suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of one of Raidou's students.

Losing to a student—*Raidou's* student, no less—was an unacceptable disgrace for someone of Ilumgand's stature.

What made it worse was the girl's reaction after her decisive victory.

"Oh, oops. Guess I overdid it," she murmured, barely sparing him a glance as he knelt, dazed from the blow that had brought him down.

She didn't sound like she was gloating. Her words were quiet, almost like an absent-minded remark meant for herself. Then, she nonchalantly returned to the lineup of students.

Ilumgand recognized her. Her name was Abelia Hopleys. The name resurfaced in his mind, a connection he had noted long ago but had never paid much attention to.

He seethed with rage, his thoughts swirling uncontrollably. The girl who had defeated him shared his family name. While they could have been distant relatives if she hailed from Limia, Abelia was from Gritonia. And she was a rural commoner, a scholarship student. In a world with countless noble families and commoners sharing similar surnames, Ilumgand had dismissed any connection as a coincidence. He hadn't bothered to investigate further.

What mattered wasn't her name. It was the fact that she'd held back.

Handicapped against me? The great Ilumgand Hopleys, and you held back?!

Abelia was younger, weaker in level, and lacked the blessing of the Goddess. Yet she had defeated him, one of the top students in the highest grade at the academy. And to make matters worse, Abelia was one of Raidou's students. Unacceptable.

"Raidou's? Raidou's student beat me?! Unforgivable! Unforgivableeeeee!!!" Forgetting he was in public, Ilumgand erupted, his voice echoing down the street.

Bit by bit, without realizing it, he was losing control over his emotions. The anger was an unstoppable tide eroding his once proud demeanor. His expression had grown harsher by the day, his features tightening with frustration and anger. Fewer and fewer companions remained by his side. Rumors about his increasingly erratic behavior had started to spread.

There were whispers of shouts and crashes emanating from his room late at night, the sound of furniture breaking, of muffled cries of rage leaking beyond his door.

After one such outburst, Ilumgand slumped onto his bed, his chest heaving with unspent fury. He shouted into the air, his voice raw and demanding. "Hey! Answer me! Are you there?! Answer me, damn it!"

That these words, meant for telepathic communication, were shouted aloud was a sign of how frayed his composure had become.

"My apologies, Ilm-sama," came a woman's calm, polished voice in his mind. *"I was occupied and unable to respond immediately. What troubles you? Are you running low on the medicine?"*

This was the overseer of the drug trial. Despite the storm of emotions in Ilumgand's voice, hers remained composed—almost unnervingly so.

"It's not that!" Ilumgand roared telepathically. *"How could this medicine allow me to lose to some student of a temporary instructor?! Is that man another one of your experiments? Another secret project of the academy?!"*

"Ilm-sama, please calm yourself," she replied.

"How can I stay calm?! Today, I lost to a girl who attends Raidou's lectures! A girl whose level is significantly lower than mine!"

"There shouldn't be any such project… Raidou, you said? That instructor's name is Raidou?"

"That's right! That hideous… merchant dares mock me at every turn!"

Ilumgand's outburst was no different from the fits of rage he had always ridiculed in other nobles, the same tantrums he had long

dismissed as foolish. Yet, he remained oblivious to the irony of his own behavior.

No side effects, he thought.

Indeed, Ilumgand had no awareness of the changes happening within himself. He couldn't see the cracks forming in his mind, couldn't recognize the instability growing stronger day by day.

The woman on the other end of the telepathic link had given a start when she heard Raidou's name, but she didn't let on.

It's happening faster than I anticipated, she thought.

For some time now, she had been subtly destabilizing Ilumgand's mental state through their telepathic conversations. Slowly but surely, she had guided his emotions into a perpetual state of negativity—nurturing his hatred, jealousy, anger, and resentment until they became his default mindset.

Her methods were calculated and deliberate. She relied on his own nature, refraining from using overt hypnosis or strong suggestion. It wasn't kindness or mercy that drove this decision—it was convenience. Keeping Ilumgand as himself while he unraveled suited her purpose better. She had estimated that it would take at least six more months for her plan to fully mature. But Ilumgand was unraveling faster than expected—all thanks to Raidou.

I'll need to investigate him, she realized.

There was no logical way a supposedly enhanced Ilumgand could lose to a much lower-leveled student. Not unless that student wasn't an ordinary hyuman.

Her curiosity was piqued. She hadn't intended to visit the academy city herself, but now she found her interest turning toward it.

"Understood. I completely sympathize with your frustration, Ilm-sama. Although I had intended for you to acclimate further first, I'll prepare the next level of medication," she offered.

"The next level?! If you had something stronger, you should have given it to me from the start!" Ilumgand replied immediately.

"My apologies. This medication does come with minor side effects. For those who struggle with emotional self-control, it can pose certain risks, and it places a strain on the body as well…"

"I don't care! My emotions are under control! Are you mocking me, woman?!"

"My sincerest apologies, Ilm-sama. I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me… Very well, I'll have it delivered to you immediately. I'm also going to include a necklace. It's enchanted to enhance resistance against magic. This is a gift from us to you. It's compact and won't get in your way, so I hope you'll find it useful."

"Hmph! Don't think a trinket like that will make up for withholding the medicine from me!"

"Of course not. I assure you, Ilm-sama, that we will continue to provide our full support. Please accept my deepest apologies."

"I'm going to hold you to that!"

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The dimly lit room was silent save for the faint creak of the floorboards as the woman stood alone. She neither sighed nor showed any sign of irritation as Ilumgand abruptly severed their connection. Instead, her lips curled into a distorted smile.

"Fufufu, the winds are blowing quite favorably," she murmured, her voice dripping with quiet amusement. "'My emotions are under control,' he says. What a laughable little boy. The Hopleys family is as good as crumbling. Limia will have no choice but to act now.

"But… Raidou, was it? I can't let things go too far, now, can I? Perhaps I should see just what kind of person he is."

Her skin was a faint blue, and her head was devoid of the horns typical of her kind.

The Demon General Rona stood alone in the shadowed room, one hand thoughtfully placed near her lips as she considered her next move.

A few days later, she would arrive at the academy, adopting the guise of a new student named Karen Fols.

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Timing.

Misjudging it would spell disaster.

This was the final stage of the operation, the culmination of meticulous preparation and planning.

“So far, everything has gone unbelievably smoothly. Limia is a given, but the real problem was how many high-ranking officials I could lure from Gritonia… And yet, I managed to snag Princess Lily herself. And now she’s ensnaring the king of Limia for me.” Rona chuckled, not even trying to restrain her delight. “I can’t stop laughing.”

Still, there was one concern: Raidou.

The instructor-slash-merchant had declared himself neutral, but he was still hyuman. That alone made him a potential wildcard in her plans.

While she would have preferred to have him indebted to her, she couldn’t afford to let him derail the operation. At worst, there was the possibility that he might act to suppress the chaos.

“Raidou… you agreed to an audience with the Demon Lord, didn’t you?” she mused. “That means you’re at least curious about

us. So, why don’t you just stay out of this one? I pray you let me finish this in peace…”

Rona let out a soft, ironic laugh.

Praying, huh? How absurd. We demons have no gods to pray to.

“Rona!”

The booming voice of her partner for this operation, the giant Demon General Io, echoed through the room.

The time had come.

The plan was nearing fruition. Soon, she would deliver the news of their victory—and the downfall of their enemies—to their king.



I felt heavy.

Soon, I would be committing an act that was practically a betrayal of everyone here.

I might as well accept that continuing to do business in Rotsgard will be difficult after this. It wasn't as though things hadn't already started going downhill—word was that a few of the city's major trading companies had taken notice of me. And not the good kind of notice.

Asking Rembrandt-san for help? Yeah, that's not going to happen. I've relied on him far too much as it is.

To be honest, the success of the Kuzunoha Company in Tsige probably owed a lot to his behind-the-scenes support. And to think that not long ago, I'd thought I was getting the hang of running a business! That had been nothing but wishful thinking.

Zara hadn't even treated me like a proper merchant. Toward the end, he had outright mocked me. He'd even gone as far as to say that he'd let me off this time if I left town, implying that he didn't consider me worth his trouble.

That… still makes my blood boil. But if I'm being honest, I'm just as frustrated at my own incompetence.

Zara seemed like the kind of person for whom money was king, someone who measured the world by its value. I wondered… Had

Rembrandt-san been like that before his family fell ill? It wouldn't have surprised me. To hold his own against someone like Zara, Rembrandt would have needed a similar cutthroat mentality.

As much as I hate to admit it, Zara's criticism of me wasn't wrong. I wasn't good enough. I was naive.

Now, here I was, running away and about to make alliances with the demons.

If things really go south, I could lose everything—not just in Rotsgard but in Tsige too. All the relationships I've built, all the trust I've earned, wiped out in an instant.

No matter how much Rembrandt had tried to reassure me, the reality was clear: A person like me—someone who was at odds with the Goddess and openly opposing the hyumans—would inevitably become a burden to him.

What am I even doing, coming all the way to another world just to get into a mess like this?

I sat in the seats that Tomoe and Mio had reserved for me, glancing at the empty arena below. The coliseum was packed, the crowd's excitement filling the air. The team competition had reached its final act—the championship match.

I have to watch this carefully. It might be the last time I see these students.

The level restriction imposed during the tournament, an obvious attempt to sabotage them, hadn't seemed to affect them much. Their practice against the misty lizardfolk must have trained them well in team combat.

Still, something bothered me: the Hopleys family's second son. His performance in the semifinals had been anything but normal.

"That doesn't look good," I murmured. "Tomoe, do you sense anything?"

"Hmm, that nobleman?" She spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "I'd wager he's enhancing his abilities through magic or some form of drug, and what we're seeing are the side effects."

"Mio, what do you think?"

"It felt… unpleasant," she said with a slight frown. "Like someone added something unnatural to a hyuman. It looked unsettling."

"Added something? Do you mean like a demi-human?" I said.

"No, not quite… How should I put it? Hmm…" She paused, searching for the right words. "You could think of hyumans and demi-humans as being different types, but they're still in the same category—like different kinds of cake. That nobleman, though… He seemed like someone had stuffed something foreign inside him. Like a pound cake with little pieces of dried fruit stuck into it."

"Is that right…"

Her metaphor wasn't the most helpful, but I agreed with Tomoe's assessment.

Unsettling was the right word for him; it almost looked like he was losing his grip on sanity. His hollow demeanor and unnerving strength had reminded me less of a hyuman and more of a monster.

It wasn't just him either. The rest of his party, while not as extreme, didn't seem entirely normal.

Officially, the use of magic potions was prohibited in this tournament, but considering everything the Hopleys boy had done so far, I wouldn't have been surprised if he was using them anyway. The other possibility was magic, but that seemed less likely.

From what I'd seen, his strength was significant, but still below Zwei's level. His technique? Nowhere near the Blue Lizard's. If it came down to a fight against my three students, I was pretty sure they'd come out on top.

"Shiki, I thought you'd be back around now. How are they holding up?" I asked as he returned from checking on the students.

"They were engaged in a fierce competition for player slots," Shiki replied with a faint smile. "Settled by none other than the rock-paper-scissors game you taught them, Young Master."

I chuckled. *At least they don't seem too tense.*

"Shiki, what's your impression of that Hopleys kid? He seems a lot different compared to when he was in the solo matches."

"Yes. While I cannot say for certain, it does appear that something has been done to him."

"'Something's been done'?"

"Indeed. He seems to be on the verge of losing his sanity. The atmosphere he exudes is consistent with the use of magic potions. It reminds me of certain substances I dealt with in the past."

So, it really is a drug. Honestly, sometimes it feels like anything goes in this world.

"Out of curiosity, what kind of effects did the potions you used to handle have?" I asked.

"They were designed to transform hyumans into ghouls—the half-undead—to use as thralls," Shiki explained casually. "The potions worked quickly, but the ghouls were so weak that they were practically useless. The project was deemed a failure."

Yet another reminder of Shiki's dark past; one of his ethically questionable ventures.

"Thralls, huh?" I shook my head. "That Hopleys boy doesn't seem to be controlled or weak, though."

"Indeed. If he begins to spiral out of control, the worst-case scenario is that we will intervene to stop him. I have already instructed the students to forfeit if the situation becomes too dangerous. What concerns me more about him is—"

"Wait, Shiki," I said, stopping him. "You told them to *forfeit*?"

"Yes, I mentioned it to them," he replied, blinking in confusion.

"Ahh… If you told them that, isn't Abelia, at the very least, going to do something reckless?"

Even if it's not just Abelia, I could imagine them all thinking something like: "There's no way that's going to happen. We'll crush them with our sheer force!"

"You meant well, looking out for them, but…" I sighed. "If it comes down to it, even if they get disqualified for breaking the rules, we can step in to stop things. So, what was it you were about to say?"

"Yes, there is something about Hopleys that caught my attention," Shiki answered. "Specifically, the necklace he's wearing…"

"Necklace? Don't tell me he's sneaked something else out from his family's treasury again?"

"The necklace appears to enhance magical resistance, but… that effect has been disguised."

Disguised?

That was odd. Magical resistance was a common and reasonable enhancement for accessories, but there would normally be no reason to disguise such an effect. Which meant there was likely another hidden ability beneath the facade.

"Could it be one of those 'awakens and powers you up' kinds of things?" I asked.

"Awakens? No, I believe it has some sort of accumulation effect…" Shiki hesitated, a rarity for him, which only made his words more unsettling. "But it does not seem to be functioning at the moment, which is concerning."

"This whole situation has a strange feeling about it," Mio said, her gaze fixed upward. Was she sensing something unusual in her own way?

"Could you bring some weapons from the store that Jin and the others might find useful?" I asked after a moment. "Leave them in their waiting room. Once you're done, come back, and we'll watch the match together."

"Will do," Shiki replied, bowing slightly before leaving.

This might be the last thing I can do for them.

Weapons weren't a cure-all. They were only tools—at best, they might help fend off trouble. Still, if those kids found themselves in danger, anything that could help them defend themselves was worth it.

I'd spent months with them. A little attachment was bound to form.

No, a *lot* of attachment had formed. I thought I'd been careful not to let that happen, but I'd failed miserably.

For now, I would do all I could to protect them.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" came a rich, booming voice from center stage, pulling my attention back to the arena. *"We are pleased to announce the start of the finals for the team combat tournament!"*

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"All right! Let's do this! And don't you dare hold back against Hopleys, you little punks!" Jin called out with an enthusiastic grin.

"Who are you calling little punks? And like I'd hold back!" Izumo shot back, his excitement bubbling to the surface. "I finally get to try that instant body-strengthening technique in a real fight!"

"Teasing people about their height is pretty childish, isn't it, Jin-senpai? Keep that up, and I'll steal all the glory while you're distracted!" Yuno retorted with a playful smirk.

The three students stood ready, their combat uniforms reinforced with thick leather pads on their shoulders, knees, and elbows. Their banter might have been lighthearted, but their focus was razor sharp.

The tallest of the three, Jin, had set the tone with his first comment—a sentiment that perfectly captured the dynamic of their team. Jin and his "little duo," as they were often called.

Even the four other students, who had failed to secure spots on the team, silently agreed with the description. Unlike the eager trio on the stage, they carried a gloomier atmosphere.

"Why, why did I throw rock back there?!" one of them groaned.

"If you hadn't tied with me, I would've been out there!"

"Four times in a row with scissors? Were you trolling us?!"

“I… I didn’t even get to go once…”

While the defeated participants lamented their losses in the brutal rock-paper-scissors competition that had decided the team lineup, Jin, Yuno, and Izumo selected their weapons with enthusiasm. Jin grabbed a standard one-handed sword, Yuno hefted an oversized spear that looked almost comically disproportionate to her frame, and Izumo opted for a staff with a decorative orb at its tip—a weapon that looked more ornamental than practical.

The other four students followed them to the edge of the stage, watching as they stepped up to face their seven opponents—one of which was Ilumgand Hopleys, looking anything but okay.

“Crush… crush… crush…” the boy muttered under his breath. His eyes were locked on Jin with a strange intensity.

“Whoa, did you take something before this match, Senpai?” Jin quipped. “Not that it’s gonna help you now.”

“Clearly not normal. He’s doing something shady, and the referee is just pretending not to see it…” Izumo commented, looking from Ilumgand to the referee with a frosty glare.

“Gross,” Yuno muttered in disdain.

Ilumgand Hopleys stood gripping the finely crafted great sword he had wielded during the solo matches. His gaze was fixed, unfocused yet somehow intense, directed vaguely toward Jin and his companions.

On one side stood Ilumgand’s team; six individuals who seemed oddly detached, accompanied by Ilumgand himself, whose very presence radiated a chilling abnormality. On the other side were Jin, Yuno, and Izumo, grinning with unflappable confidence. If they were bothered by the unsettling aura emanating from their opponents, they didn’t show it.

Eyes from the packed audience and the distinguished guests bore down on the arena, the anticipation for the match was palpable. Normally, standing in this final match would have been a crowning achievement for any academy student, but the atmosphere of this championship was heavy with unease.

"Begin!"

The instant the command rang out, the arena erupted into motion.

Yuno and Izumo ran to flank Jin with explosive bursts of speed. At first glance, their movements appeared disjointed, as though they were ignoring their own teammate. But Jin didn't flinch. They were doing exactly as planned.

They had worked together before the match to perfect this strategy. The burst of acceleration, fueled by body-strengthening magic, was even faster than what Yuno and Izumo had displayed in their solo matches. Both of them had managed to pick up Jin's instantaneous body-strengthening technique in record time.

Across from them, Ilumgand charged directly at Jin, his intent clear and unrelenting. His speed didn't match Yuno and Izumo's, but his sheer presence—his large frame armored from head to toe and swinging that great sword—was impossible to ignore.

"This is the final match, Senpai! Get ready to lose!" Jin's grin widened. *Perfect.*

Ilumgand's six teammates were left to deal with the two streaks of light speeding toward them: Yuno and Izumo. Jin didn't spare them a thought. He could see that the four mages had only just begun their chants, and the two remaining warriors were splitting off to intercept his friends. That left him free to focus entirely on Ilumgand.

They're clueless, Jin thought, his lips curling upward in a smirk. *They've got no idea what Yuno and Izumo have planned for them.*

"Annoying trash!" Ilumgand bellowed. "I'll crush you all!"

His attack was one Jin remembered well. Ilumgand had used the exact same technique in the individual matches: a horizontal slash delivered mid-charge, powered by his enhanced speed. And that time, too, the move had easily been countered.

Jin met Ilumgand's powerful swing head-on with his wooden practice sword. There was no need to disrupt the attack at its start like he had in the solo matches.

As their weapons clashed, an unexpected force surged through Jin's sword.

The magically reinforced wooden blade, which should have been sturdy enough to withstand at least one exchange, groaned under the pressure. The edge of Ilumgand's great sword bit into it, and Jin felt his footing waver as the overwhelming strength pushed against him.

"Tch!"

Jin clicked his tongue, swiftly pulling back to deflect the blow and redirect the force. He shifted his stance, ready to counter—

Another unexpected move followed.

Ilumgand had been thrown off-balance by the deflection, but he recovered and stepped forward with brute force. His foot slammed down to close the gap between them, and with a reckless disregard for balance or safety, he thrust his free hand forward, forming a fist aimed directly at Jin's face.

The attack was wild, almost deranged. The sheer lack of restraint, the reckless intensity, bordered on madness.

Shit, Jin thought, *I can't dodge it.*

Acting on instinct, he raised his arm, guarding with his elbow.

The defense barely held. Though there was armor padding his elbow, it wasn't designed to withstand this kind of raw power.

Ilumgand's fist crashed into Jin's arm, the force pushing through the defense and continuing on. The impact sent Jin stumbling backward, and he hit the ground hard, momentarily losing his grip on the fight.

Fortunately, Jin was quick. In one fluid motion, he rolled to his feet and raised his sword again, his expression calm yet fierce. Even with the punishing blow to his arm, his grip on the sword hadn't faltered.

"That's how a noble fights, huh? Damn it, doing that crap right in front of Sensei."

Anger flared in Jin's eyes. He knew his carelessness had contributed to the blow, but the rush of combat drowned out any

self-recrimination.

"Yuno, Izumo. Sorry, but I'm starting this early," Jin muttered in a low voice.

His words had barely left his lips before Ilumgand charged at him again.

This time, Jin didn't wait. He surged forward to meet him, his feet kicking off the ground as he rushed to intercept the attack head-on.

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Meanwhile, Izumo and Yuno closed in from both flanks on the six opponents who had lined up in formation.

The two warriors had already drawn their weapons—swords and spears—but the mages were still in the middle of their incantations, with several seconds left before their spells could be unleashed.

The first to act was Yuno.

Even before she had fully closed the gap to the nearest warrior, she launched her spear with an impressive throw, the weapon threading perfectly between the two warriors.

The spear flew straight and true, cutting through the air with precision. It struck the chest of the rearmost male mage, the one standing furthest from her.

It was only a wooden spear with a blunt, rounded tip, but the sheer force of the throw was enough to send the mage staggering backward. He toppled over, landing flat on his back as the spear clattered harmlessly to the ground nearby.

"Bull's-eye!" Yuno's cheerful voice rang out across the arena, brimming with genuine enjoyment, but she didn't stop moving for a

second.

Momentarily distracted by the flying spear, her opponents attempted to intercept her charge—and suddenly found themselves unable to move.

Izumo had acted.

Taking advantage of the opponents' focus on Yuno, he had ceased his rapid movement, completing an incantation instead. Ice surged upward from the ground beneath the two warriors, encasing their legs up to the knees in a solid frost.

The warriors were sitting ducks.

Izumo didn't waste the opportunity. Standing beside the trapped fighters, he began rapidly moving his hands to form a new incantation.

The shift in dynamics was immediate.

While the frozen warriors turned their attention to Izumo, Yuno continued her assault. She deftly slipped between them, ducking low to close the distance to the nearest mage. Without hesitation, she darted into his guard, her small frame making it look almost effortless.

Her sharp eyes caught a flicker of magic gathering at the tip of the mage's staff—an incomplete spell that had yet to take form. Taking note of this, she zeroed in on his exposed chin.

With practiced precision, Yuno drove her right palm upward into the man's jaw, her entire body coiling and releasing like a spring.

Yuno might have looked like a petite girl, yet her strike was anything but weak. She had used her enhanced physical abilities to channel both her weight and momentum into the blow.

The mage's head snapped upward, his feet momentarily leaving the ground as the force of the impact lifted him.

Just as the surprised cheers of the audience began, Yuno followed up with another assault. Her elbow smashed into the mage's now exposed abdomen, the forceful attack driving him back with a grunt of pain.

Every one of her strikes was enhanced by her body-strengthening magic, and no mage—especially one untrained in hand-to-hand combat—could endure such punishment.

The man's body crumpled as he tumbled backward off the stage, landing unceremoniously on the ground below. His doll shattered upon impact.

The arena roared with a wave of cheers and applause.

"One down!" Yuno called out with glee, her voice cutting through the noise.

Her sharp eyes were already locked onto her next target. The remaining mages, lined up across the stage, were now her prey.

The first mage—the one who'd taken her spear—was trembling violently, struggling to get back on his feet. She had known he wasn't out of the fight just yet. And that was why she had only counted "one" as down.





"Ah… Aum… R-reeh… h-!" the female mage stammered, her incantation faltering as she saw her companion being violently thrown off the stage. Her eyes found Yuno Rembrandt's fierce, predatory gaze, and panic overtook her.

She knew she was next.

"Second one's mine!" Yuno's declaration was cheerful and confident, but it made her opponents shiver.

The mage swung her staff wildly, desperation overtaking any semblance of skill, but Yuno slipped past the erratic attacks with ease. Her movements were so fluid, they almost looked mocking.

How can she move so fast at this range? The mage couldn't comprehend what was happening. Just then, Yuno vanished from her sight entirely.

The terror of not knowing where her enemy had gone froze the mage in place. Before fear could fully register, a blunt, heavy impact struck the back of her neck. Her consciousness faded in an instant.

"Bonus hit!"

Yuno had slipped behind her, delivering a precise spinning elbow to her nape. The strike was dangerously brutal, but Yuno wasn't holding back.

The doll serving as the mage's proxy shuddered, its head cracking and swaying ominously, though it hadn't fully registered her as defeated.

With another playful quip of "Bonus!" Yuno locked the mage's arm in a precise hold, twisting her body with surprising strength, and flung the unconscious girl toward the remaining mages. Her limp form collided with another mage, sending both tumbling.

Before the fallen mage could recover, Yuno leaped forward to follow up with a swift kick. The blow finally shattered the doll, officially removing the second mage from the battle.

In mere moments, Yuno's relentless assault had taken down two mages with an almost terrifying display of physical prowess.

She wasn't stopping there.

“Three down!” Yuno called out as she continued her dance-like onslaught.

Another mage, who had stumbled backward to avoid the flying body of her ally, was struggling to regain her footing when she felt a sudden weight on her knee.

Yuno had already closed the gap, perching one foot atop the kneeling mage’s leg.

Before the mage could react, Yuno’s other foot came up. The strike was a textbook example of a powerful kick—one that could have been recognized by anyone familiar with Earth’s martial arts. Yuno didn’t know its name; she had done it simply because it felt right.

The blow sent the mage sprawling, her doll breaking into fragments on impact.

Yuno set her sights on the last remaining mage.

“Time to get my spear back! And… four down!” she chirped as she made her way to where her weapon lay.

The male mage, finally recovering from the damage he’d taken earlier, barely had time to react before Yuno struck. With a quick swing, she batted his staff away. The weapon clattered uselessly across the stage.

“Ah! Gah!”

Without missing a beat, she followed up with a horizontal strike, her spear slamming into the mage’s head.

The blow was decisive. The mage collapsed, motionless, his proxy doll splintering apart as the impact sealed his defeat.

“All done! Fufufu! Looks like I win, Izumo-kun!” Yuno called out triumphantly, her voice playful and smug.

“Almost had you… but yeah, I lost,” Izumo admitted with a small sigh.

Yuno turned to face Izumo with a victorious grin. Behind him, she spotted the broken and battered forms of the opposing warriors, one of whom was just barely managing to stay upright.

"The short chant for Wind Blades makes their power drop quite a bit when you use them one right after the other," Izumo lamented. "I ended up relying on numbers to overwhelm them. Haah…"

The heavily armored warrior, armor shredded and body riddled with shallow cuts, swayed unsteadily before collapsing. His proxy doll was marked with dozens of slashes, as though attacked by a swarm of blades.

The other frontline fighter had already been dispatched earlier and lay unconscious on the stage.

"Fufufu! That just leaves—huh? Wha— *Aaah?!*"

"What's wrong, Yuno… wait— *What?!* Jin! You said no going solo!"

For the first time since the match began, Yuno and Izumo's voices were filled with urgency.

Their eyes snapped to the center of the stage, where Ilumgand Hopleys and Jin were locked in combat.

Ilumgand was fighting like a berserker, swinging his great sword with wild, unchecked power. But Jin was showing no sign of retreat. His strikes landed again and again, driving Ilumgand back with as much force and determination as Yuno and Izumo had ever seen from him.

This wasn't the plan.

The three had agreed during their pre-match strategy session that they would take on Ilumgand together. Yuno and Izumo were to eliminate the rest of the opposing team while Jin kept Ilumgand occupied.

"Shit, you've gotten ridiculously tough, Ilumgand-senpai! Show me more of that desperation!" Jin taunted. His voice was brimming with adrenaline, and a fierce grin was plastered on his face.

"Guh… ughh… crush… crush… giiiihh," Ilumgand growled, his voice cracking with a feral edge.

Ilumgand's skill and strength would have undoubtedly made him Champion in any other year's tournament. And yet, Jin was overwhelming him.

The audience, both in the stands and the VIP seats, was finally beginning to grasp just how singular this battle was.

It wasn't just a matter of level differences.

The keenest observers among them were starting to realize that Jin and his teammates had been taught something beyond the reach of the average student—something extraordinary.

"Aah! If we don't hurry, Jin's gonna finish him off before we get a turn!" Yuno whined, stamping her foot impatiently.

"Wait a second, Yuno," Izumo said, his voice tense.

"What is it, Izumo-kun?"

"Something's off. Look at Hopleys's doll—it's barely damaged. And from what I can see, it doesn't look like his armor is mitigating many of the blows either."

"You're right," Yuno murmured, narrowing her eyes at the stage.

"Even though Jin's mixing in attacks meant to knock him out, they don't seem to have any effect."

"Jin might talk a lot of smack, but he's weirdly softhearted," Yuno said with a shrug. "If it were me, I wouldn't stop at knocking Hopleys out. I'd make sure to embarrass him thoroughly. Maybe even leave a few scars for good measure."

"You're darker than I expected, Yuno," Izumo replied, shaking his head. "Though I can't say I disagree with you. Not when it comes to Hopleys-senpai."

"Let's just get in there already!"

"I'll stay here and start chanting," Izumo said, planting his feet firmly. "If you two are taking the front line, I can handle support from the back without worry."

"Fine," Yuno agreed, shifting her weight to spring forward into the fight. "Then— Huh?!"

Just as she prepared to charge, Jin broke away from Ilumgand, creating distance between them. His retreat wasn't deliberate; it was a sharp, reactive movement that looked more like an emergency dodge.

"If you're coming in, be careful!" Jin barked. "Senpai's giving off a seriously bad vibe!"

"Got it!" Yuno called back, her grin replaced by a determined focus as she dashed toward the fierce clash of swords.

Jin kept one eye on his two teammates and the other on Ilumgand. Despite his casual tone and occasional bursts of anger, he remained calm and focused, meticulously analyzing the situation.

This guy… He's bad news, Jin thought, his expression tightening. *Or maybe just plain wrong. No matter how much I hit him, he doesn't slow down, and I can't seem to knock him out.*

While Ilumgand occasionally displayed flashes of skill, his overall fighting style had devolved into brute force. He swung his great sword recklessly, relying on sheer power. Jin wasn't even sure if he was planning his attacks anymore.

This isn't normal. He's nothing like the guy I faced the other day.

"Ref! Is this okay?" Jin called out, frustration creeping into his voice. "Senpai's clearly not right!"

"All of it… If only he weren't here… If only he weren't…" Ilumgand's low, guttural voice sounded almost disconnected from reality.

"Fight on," the referee replied. "He clearly still has the intent to fight, and judging by his doll, the damage from your attacks is negligible. Continue the match."

So the ref decides based only on the state of our proxy dolls, Jin realized. *Ilumgand's one hardly shows any damage, and he's not visibly incapacitated, so nothing's wrong.*

He gritted his teeth. *If they're saying we have to keep going, I'll just have to end this as fast as possible. The quicker this is over, the less time we'll have to deal with this madness.*

"I… I will…! The hero… My ideals… My ideals… Raidou! Raidou!!! Don't interfere!!!" Ilumgand bellowed, his voice a mixture of rage and anguish.

Raidou?

Before Jin could process this confusing outburst, Ilumgand's attacks became even more ferocious.

It wasn't just his movements—his entire presence seemed to grow. His body appeared to swell, muscles bulging unnaturally, as though he'd become larger in mere moments.

Jin felt his grip on his sword tremble faintly. The growing strength behind Ilumgand's attacks was palpable. His expression darkened, irritation mixing with concern.

"Like I care!" Jin shouted, cutting through the tension. "I'm not a teacher, and I couldn't care less about your ideals! If you're willing to pull dirty tricks in a match, then your 'ideals' aren't worth crap!"

Jin sidestepped a devastating overhead swing of Ilumgand's great sword, slipping into range to counterattack.

A hook shot out from Ilumgand's free hand, following his wild pattern of sword and fist combinations, but Jin deftly avoided every strike.

This feeling… is getting worse by the second. I don't know what he's been pumped full of, but ending this fast is the only option. Yuno and Izumo look like they're preparing something too—if we coordinate and overwhelm him, we can finish this.

Jin crouched low, his body coiling like a spring.

He aimed to launch a precise strike, his frame twisting into position as his right hand prepared for a thrust aimed squarely at Ilumgand's jaw. The release would be swift and decisive, designed to end the fight.

"Yuno, Izumo! If you're planning something, sync up with me! We're finishing this now!" Jin shouted.

As he lunged forward, his focus briefly shifted to his teammates to confirm their movements. Both were already in motion, seemingly responding to Jin's lead. He knew they would follow through. But just as the tip of Jin's blade closed in on its target—

Ilumgand dipped slightly, lowering his body just enough.

Jin's strike didn't hit his jaw. Instead, Ilumgand did something unthinkable. He caught the oncoming blade with his mouth.

His teeth clamped down with unnatural strength, locking the blade in place.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Jin yelled, his expression twisting in disbelief and frustration.

He immediately adjusted, releasing the hilt with his right hand while slamming the pommel with his palm.

With a powerful stomp, Jin drove energy from his legs through his body, channeling it all into the strike. The force was enough to push Ilumgand back; his body tilted diagonally before lifting slightly off the ground.

Although the blade remained clamped in Ilumgand's teeth, the sheer momentum flung him backward, leaving him momentarily airborne.

"Nice! Leave the rest to me! Yuno, your turn! Aerial!" Izumo shouted as his spell activated.

A soft green light enveloped the area around Ilumgand, extending a few meters outward. Jin took a swift step out of the glowing zone.

Ilumgand's body had been falling, but it abruptly stopped, midair.

He flailed wildly, his limbs thrashing as if an invisible force were pulling him upward. Slowly, steadily, his entire body began to rise, suspended in the glowing field.

Aerial.

The spell bound its targets within a radius of several meters, lifting them upward on currents of wind. While it could be incredibly useful, it had no direct offensive capability.

"Twenty seconds, tops!" Izumo called out.

"Got it! Well then, here I gooo!" Yuno replied, her eyes gleaming with fierce determination.

As Ilumgand continued to ascend within the glowing green pillar, Yuno entered its range. Her steps were deliberate, and at the final moment, she kicked off the ground, launching herself upward with remarkable force.

Using the momentum of her jump, she quickly caught up to Ilumgand. That's when the onslaught began.

Her first strike aimed to match Ilumgand's rising speed, adjusting her own momentum with a precise blow.

From there, it was a relentless barrage. Yuno rained down attack after attack, skillfully avoiding Ilumgand's wildly thrashing limbs while targeting the vulnerable seams in his armor and exposed parts of his body.

Every one of her movements was deliberate, demonstrating an uncanny familiarity with fighting in such an unusual space. Ilumgand, meanwhile, flailed helplessly as he struggled to maintain his balance.

"So, Senpai, since you seem to love eating weapons… here's a special treat for you!"

With a cheeky grin, Yuno used a kick against the flat side of Ilumgand's great sword to push herself out of the spell's effective area. She gracefully exited the green column, twisting midair to assume a throwing stance.

Her spear gleamed and began to hum as she infused it with magic.

The enhancement wouldn't last long after the weapon left her hands—a few moments at best. But Yuno's precision ensured that those moments were enough.

With practiced ease, she launched the spear at Ilumgand. The weapon tore through the air at lightning speed, aimed directly at her still-ascending opponent.

Meanwhile, having left the spell's lift zone, Yuno fell.

Jin dashed toward her likely landing point with concern etched across his face. But his worry proved unnecessary.

Ten meters from the ground, Yuno activated a form of self-levitation, slowing her fall enough to land gracefully. She had yet to master levitation magic, but her improvised technique was more than sufficient.

As Yuno descended, the glowing pillar of Aerial faded rapidly; by the time she reached the ground, the spell's effects had dissipated entirely, the green light scattering into the air like mist.

Oddly, Ilumgand Hopleys remained suspended in midair, his face streaked with blood. The wooden spear had struck his forehead with brutal precision.

The audience, still stunned by the unprecedented spectacle of coordinated aerial combat in the tournament, finally turned their attention to Ilumgand's doll.

It swayed precariously, large cracks spiderwebbing across its surface. The doll wasn't destroyed yet, but it was clear to everyone watching that it wouldn't survive the impact of Ilumgand's fall.

"Damn… That was one hell of an attack," Jin muttered as he rejoined the group.

"It's simple. In the air, most people can't fight back effectively unless they're used to it," Yuno explained matter-of-factly. "Izumo and I tried it as a joke during training, but we realized it works really well against opponents who aren't expecting it."

"And our goal is to land this on Zwei someday!" Yuno added with a mischievous grin. "Oh, look, he's falling."

A loud, dull thud echoed across the arena as Ilumgand's body hit the ground. The impact sent a visible shock wave through the stage, and the crowd held its breath.

The sound of splintering wood followed.

Ilumgand's doll had shattered—split cleanly in two.

"And that's it! The match is over!" the announcer bellowed. *"The winners of the team competition finals are Jin Rohan, Izumo Ikusabe, and Yuno Rembrandt!"*

Even as the audience erupted into cheers, a strange unease lingered.

The tournament wasn't over.

Not yet.



Tomoe stood by the edge of a serene lake. Its surface was only disturbed by the gentle ripples of the wind. Towering trees of an ancient forest encircled the area, isolating it entirely from the hustle and bustle of hyuman civilization.

"This is odd. Not just Myriad Color, but even Lyca the Waterfall has relocated?" Tomoe murmured thoughtfully. "That one hasn't changed dwellings in centuries."

By now, Makoto had probably arrived at the academy city and was preparing for the upcoming trials. But for today, Tomoe was on her own.

"And yet the barrier is still intact… Good grief. I thought I'd drop by for the first time in a few centuries and grace Lyca with my presence, but…"

With a sigh, she scratched at her striking blue hair. She turned to the lake, letting her gaze linger on the water for a moment longer before giving up.

"Lime! Lime! Are you not here yet?" Tomoe's voice rang out, echoing through the dense forest.

No immediate response came.

Just as her words faded into the quiet hum of the forest, the tall grass began to rustle. A man emerged, his breath ragged, his shoulders heaving as he struggled to recover. His body bore several shallow cuts, evidence of a difficult journey.

"I… I'm late…" he managed to gasp out.

Tomoe glanced at him with mild disapproval but quickly waved it off. "Hmm, well, no matter. Now, head to the villages around here and gather information. Focus on Lyca and any recent updates. I'll go ahead to the lake's heart."

"W-Wait, anee! Villages around here? We're in the middle of Maylis Lake and the Maylis Sea of Trees! And Lyca… Isn't that a Greater Dragon? How am I supposed to get 'recent updates' on one of those?! Even folklore is pushing it!"

Lime was clearly exasperated.

Tomoe had left him behind without a second thought, expecting him to fend for himself in the treacherous forest. Somehow, he had managed to reach the lake on his own, effectively crossing the Maylis Sea of Trees alone—a feat that was daunting even for seasoned adventurers.

For most, what Lime had accomplished would be considered a monumental feat.

In the Kingdom of Limia, proving such strength and resourcefulness could easily earn one a lower noble title in exchange for pledging loyalty to the crown.

I've proven myself, haven't I? I showed my worth… Right? Lime's eyes silently pleaded for acknowledgment as they met Tomoe's.

"Indeed, you have. And?" she added, unimpressed. "There are about ten villages and towns scattered about, all benefiting from the blessings of this forest and its waters, are there not?"

"Y-Yes. There are," Lime answered automatically. The matter-of-factness of Tomoe's tone left him momentarily forgetting to push for recognition of his own achievements.

“Then turn around, get out of the forest, and gather information. Were my instructions that difficult to understand, Lime?”

“No, ma’am. The instructions were clear,” he replied hesitantly.

“Then go. With the skills you’ve shown, it shouldn’t take you more than five days, right? Although…” Tomoe paused, and there was an edge in her voice.

“Huh?” Lime perked up at the change, unsure of where her words were leading.

“Let’s say you’ve already reached your limit just by making it this far.” Tomoe’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “In that case, I wouldn’t be unreasonable. I could see to it that you’re escorted safely out of the forest and assign you only the safest, least demanding tasks from here on out.”

“Wh-What?!”

“After all, for a hyuman, you’ve done well enough. So? What’s your decision?”

“I’ll do it. In five days, where will you be waiting?”

“Fufu. That’s the spirit. We’ll meet near the village by Star Lake, as it’s been called lately. There’s a forest close to the lake as well, so I’ll be there.”

“Understood. I’ll be there,” Lime replied emphatically.

“I like that determination in your eyes. Ah, one more thing—this lake’s water, if enchanted with healing magic before being consumed, will amplify the magic’s effects. Make use of it. And remember, Lyca could come back at any moment, so be sure to leave as fast as you can. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Lime agreed, stiffly correcting his earlier informal tone.

Whether she heard him was unclear, but by the time he looked up, her presence by the lakeside had vanished.

A faint mist lingered over the area, but Tomoe’s aura was entirely absent.

Lime was alone now, standing in the heart of the Maylis Sea of Trees—the most dangerous woodland in the Kingdom of Limia.

Taking Tomoe's advice, he crouched by the lake and filled his canteen with its crystal-clear water. He murmured a healing incantation, his hands glowing with warm light as the magic infused the water.

When the glow faded, he raised the canteen to his lips and gulped it down in one swift motion.

The effects were apparent almost immediately. The bloody gashes crisscrossing his arms sealed shut, the dark bruises marring his skin faded, and the pain that had been gnawing at his body vanished. Even the color returned to his face, and with it, a renewed vigor in his expression.

"Wow, this stuff's incredible," he muttered, inspecting his now pristine skin. "Too bad it's just water. Still, I'll stock up as much as I can."

Lime's gaze drifted toward the dense forest stretching out on the far side of the lake.

For a brief moment, his eyes softened, relishing the brief reprieve the water had granted him. Then, he drew in a sharp breath, steeling himself for what lay ahead.

"Now that I think about it… Making it here isn't enough. Getting back—that's what makes you the real deal. If I can't make it out alive, then tagging along with anee in the first place was the real mistake. All right, let's do this!"

He double-checked his gear, adjusting his straps and ensuring everything was secure. Finally, he slapped his cheeks with both hands. If anyone had been there to see it, he would have looked like a new man, full of energy for this next challenge.

Lime Latte, a former adventurer, was no stranger to danger. Yet his life had taken a strange turn since crossing paths with Tomoe and Makoto.

Now, despite the perils ahead, his steps carried no hesitation as he strode toward the forest, a man walking boldly into the unknown.

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Star Lake.

It wasn't an official name—nor did this lake have any official designation yet.

Until recently, this spot, located not far from Limia's royal capital, hadn't even been a lake at all.

After all, it had just formed.

Star Lake was born as a result of the battle during the hyumans' siege of Stella Fortress. When the demons launched a counterattack against Limia's forces and pushed toward the capital, this very area had become a key battleground.

In other words, Star Lake was a testament to the fierce conflict that had taken place.

"So, you were there, then," Tomoe said, her voice calm but probing.

She stood in the middle of the small forest settlement she had mentioned to Lime.

The area around Star Lake had become something of an anomaly—a place where even monsters avoided treading. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there were people who had chosen to live here.

This fact alone filled Tomoe with curiosity, and before long she had arrived in the settlement and begun questioning its residents.

"Yeah… I was there," replied a middle-aged man, his gaze distant as though revisiting a memory he'd rather not relive.

The man was muscular and well-built, and his demeanor exuded the weight of deep experience.

A former soldier, Tomoe concluded with a glance, her sharp instincts sparing her the need to use her memory-reading ability. His

history was etched into his posture, his expression, and the very air around him.

"I will offer proper thanks. Could you share what you know? About this settlement, and that lake. Rest assured, I have no intention of reporting this to any kingdom or authority—it would be unseemly to betray such trust."

Tomoe's tone was polite but firm. Her words carried sincerity, but beneath them was a quiet resolve. If the man refused to speak, she was prepared to read his memories by force.

Silence fell between them.

The wind rustled the man's hair and beard and made Tomoe's long, tied-back hair sway.

The quiet stretched on. Just as Tomoe began to close her eyes in resignation, the man finally spoke.

"That lake is a punishment."

Tomoe's gaze sharpened as she studied the man anew.

Interesting. So he's willing to talk, but there's something unusual in his eyes—an almost fervent heat.

"It's a rebuke—a single arrow of warning. It's a reminder of the vile nature of our war, the conflict between hyumans and demons. It's a sign that such an ugly struggle cannot be condoned… by her."

"'Her'? Who do you mean?"

"The Goddess; someone who serves her, no doubt," the man replied, his tone firm but distant.

"Not someone you know of with certainty, then?"

"That's right… I don't know. Come to think of it, while we know of the Goddess herself, we know little of those who serve her. It's not only spirits and Greater Dragons who stand in her service—there are others, apparently. The Goddess, she graces us hyumans with nothing but love and mercy. But then… who would chastise us? Who would punish us when we stray?"

"I see."

Tomoe's eyelids twitched ever so slightly as the man casually lumped Greater Dragons in with the Goddess's servants. *So, the*

spirits aside, we dragons don't serve the Goddess. Myriad Color made that clear long ago when she negotiated as the elder of the native dragons. That said, I don't particularly care to upend the current understanding of the world.

She kept her thoughts to herself, silently waiting for the man to continue.

"The one who assumes that role… It must have been *her*. The one who punishes all things equally—hyumans, demons, everything that walks this earth. She kills, destroys, annihilates. To carry out the Goddess's judgments, she must've assigned an executioner, or perhaps…" The man's voice grew more animated, his words tumbling out with increasing fervor. "Perhaps another deity who presides over punishment itself? No, no, that's far too audacious to suggest, isn't it? But still…"

Still, Tomoe kept silent and calm, not letting onto the wariness she felt as she observed him.

"And we survived. All of us who were there… we lived. That blue-cloaked boy who unleashed that light—I saw him with my own eyes! Others claimed he was a red-cloaked demi-human. They said he wielded incredible magic, or that he was a swordsman or an archer! He must have shown a different form to each of us!"

He's… unraveling, Tomoe thought, her sharp eyes narrowing slightly. *Confusion isn't quite the right word—this is more like madness.*

Deciding it was time to investigate further, she extended her senses into the man's memories.

Fragmented… Chaotic. Emotions swirling everywhere. What an unpleasant mind to sift through…

In the haze of recollection, Tomoe discerned that the man had fought in the Stella Fortress conflict. During a retreat, he was caught in a brilliant blue light and lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he was missing an eye and a leg, yet somehow survived. His superiors begged him to stay on as a military instructor

in Limia, valuing his skills and experience. Instead, he cut all ties—distributing his wealth to his family and retreating into isolation.

He's a true recluse, Tomoe thought with a touch of pity.

"This life of mine… I owe it all to their will. These memories, this pain—they're my anchor. Their message was clear: Live this life with humility, cherishing every moment. The Wicked One has spoken," the man declared, his voice trembling with a strange blend of reverence and fear.

So, this man was once a highly capable soldier—a prized asset of Limia. And yet…

Tomoe's gaze softened momentarily. *Young Master's single strike utterly shattered his worldview. It twisted his entire perspective on life itself.*

Having severed ties with his family and relinquished his wealth, the man had embraced a life of total isolation, surviving on his own in a forest where no one dared to tread. He lived as though gripped by a fervent religious zeal.

"Hmm… hold on a second. 'The Wicked One'? What do you mean by that?" Tomoe asked.

"I don't know who said it first," the man admitted. "But several of the others drawn to this place—those who have gathered here—have started calling them that. The term just… felt right. Someone who represents both hyumans and demons, yet spares neither. It somehow suits them perfectly."

Tomoe narrowed her eyes.

Not in anger. Rather, in delight.

The identity of this so-called Wicked One was unmistakable.

Her master had inadvertently earned a second name.

The Wicked One, huh? Treating hyumans and demons alike, destroying both indiscriminately. What a fitting moniker. Not a servant of the Goddess, nor another deity—but the name itself is marvelous. Kufufu. Tomoe's shoulders subtly shook with barely contained laughter.

The man took no notice. “My sins were forgiven in exchange for an eye and a leg,” he continued solemnly. “Thus, I’m devoting my remaining years to avoiding further sins. I offer my prayers to Star Lake—the creation of the Wicked One—and I live quietly. That is all I have left, young lady.”

“A most enlightening story,” Tomoe said, dipping her head in gratitude. “You have my thanks. However, I find myself troubled. I can’t seem to think of a proper way to repay you.”

She had brought gold and goods aplenty, yet somehow, none of it felt appropriate.

“Gold, goods… I have no need of such things anymore,” the man said with a soft shake of his head. “If I had a wish, it would be…”

“Speak it,” Tomoe encouraged. “I cannot promise to fulfill it, but I will do what I can.”

“All I wish for is peace—days of quiet prayer. If you keep this place a secret, that will be enough.”

“Very well. I shall honor your request.”

Tomoe recalled the faint concealment barrier she had sensed when she first entered the settlement. *I see now. This place houses hyumans, demi-humans, and demons all living together—none interfering too much with one another, no outright hostility. It reminds me of Tsige or the bases we’ve set up in the Wasteland. If Limia or the hyumans learned about this, their reaction would be… interesting. Well, all the more reason to keep it as it is.*

With her promise made, Tomoe bid farewell to the man and walked toward the simple wooden fence that marked the settlement’s entrance and exit.

Muttering something under her breath, she plucked a few strands of her own hair and severed them with a small blade. The blade bore a striking resemblance to a kogatana—a small utility knife traditionally included with Japanese swords.

The two swords she wore at her waist were modeled after katana, and their constructions mirrored the originals to a certain

extent. The presence of a kogatana was one such detail.

Next, she nicked her fingertip, allowing a drop of blood to bead. She smeared the blood onto the strands of hair, then, with a quiet incantation, completed her spell. The blood-soaked hair floated upward, spiraling into the sky before vanishing entirely.

The barrier won't last a thousand years, but it should suffice for now. Anyone who wants to spend their remaining days offering prayers to my master deserves at least this much protection, Tomoe thought to herself.

Stepping out of the forest, she found herself standing on the wild shores of Star Lake. The expanse of water stretched wide before her—a deep, crystal clear blue that seemed to radiate a serene beauty. And yet, the complete absence of any signs of life around it lent the scene an unsettling quiet.

Clad in her distinctive wafuku that starkly contrasted with the local attire, Tomoe gazed out at the lake, an unusual expression crossing her face.

Then, slowly at first, she began to chuckle then to laugh out loud.

"Fufu… hahahaha!"

It wasn't the refined smile she usually wore, nor the sly grin she flashed when savoring a clever plan. This was different; purer, less restrained.

Unbothered by the dirt clinging to her kimono, Tomoe doubled over, clutching her stomach as she laughed uncontrollably, even rolling onto the ground in her mirth.

Her thoughts wandered southward to Makoto in the academy city, surely grappling with the pressures of the trials and his studies.

She recalled what he'd said before he left.

"Honestly, my last strike probably didn't do much… Maybe it was just a bit of an annoyance."

Well, *said* wasn't quite true; strictly speaking, it had been a private thought Tomoe had overheard by skimming his mind.

And yet, that "annoyance" had created this lake—a monumental landmark. The sheer absurdity of the disparity between her master's humble perception of his actions and the extraordinary reality filled her with a joy she could no longer contain.

After laughing herself breathless and finally regaining her composure, Tomoe stood by the lakeshore. Her expression shifted to something far more contemplative as she gazed out at Star Lake.

"To think… an attack meant to be no more than a nuisance ended up creating a lake," she murmured, shaking her head with a small smirk. "Truly, my Young Master never ceases to surprise me. If only I could have witnessed that strike firsthand, instead of piecing it together from the fragmented memories of a broken man. How disappointing."

The man who had spoken with her earlier hadn't actually seen the moment Makoto unleashed his attack. Most likely, he had merely been caught in the fallout from a spell—a Bridt—that had pierced the earth from the heavens and detonated.

It was precisely the vagueness of his memory that led the man to interpret the power as divine punishment, creating the misconception of some executioner acting in the Goddess's stead.

When the man kept referring to Makoto as the Wicked One, Tomoe found the term amusing enough not to correct him. Plus, she thought, the man's psyche was probably too shattered to glean any more meaningful information.

"An overwhelming force that executes hyumans and demons alike, with no distinction between the two… so they call him the Wicked One. I suppose it fits, though. Whether it's a hyuman, demi-human, dragon, or even a deity, if my Young Master sees them as an obstacle, he'll remove them without hesitation. Of course, he's no servant of the Goddess, nor some executioner acting on her behalf. Still… as a nickname, the Wicked One isn't entirely unfitting."

With that thought lingering, Tomoe began the investigation Makoto had tasked her with.

Over the next several days, until she reunited with Lime, Tomoe delved deeper into her inquiries.

She spoke with the inhabitants of the first man's settlement and, after nightfall, sought out the non-hyumans lurking in the surrounding area, extracting whatever information she could from them.

Star Lake was relatively close to the royal capital, yet Tomoe deliberately chose to lodge in nearby villages. This allowed her to gather local accounts and observe the lake from a variety of perspectives.

It formed not that long ago, so it hasn't attracted any powerful monsters yet. A few rivers feed into it, and I've even spotted some fish inside. The lack of major threats is probably because of my master's lingering magical residue. It's faint now, but any monster capable of sensing it would definitely avoid the area. It's like a giant territorial marker.

Seated alone in her room at the inn, Tomoe lightly bit her lip, her sharp mind sorting through the collected pieces of her investigation.

Honestly, the hyumans settling near the lake are the strange ones. Still, the lake's blessings—like the fish and fresh water—will probably outweigh any harm. Young Master didn't seem concerned about these developments, so there's no need for me to interfere. For now, I'll just see what Lime has for me tomorrow.

Tomoe's investigation had hit an impasse. She had yet to uncover any significant information about the ring Makoto had tasked her to find—the one meant to seal the Goddess's power.

The overwhelming focus on the so-called Wicked One and the creation of Star Lake had overshadowed all else.

Even the interference with telepathy, which must have involved certain demons, didn't come up in their accounts or memories. This is going to be a tough nut to crack, she mused, her frustration mounting.

Resigned to rest for the night, she flopped onto the bed, ready to regroup with Lime the next day.

The following day, Tomoe met with Lime in a rented room in a village near Star Lake. They had coordinated via telepathy earlier, and Lime arrived armed with a trove of diverse and valuable information.

"Intruders, Lyca's absence, and the heightened danger of the Sea of Trees," Tomoe murmured, her brows furrowing as she processed the data.

"Yeah. When you put it all together, it's pretty clear that some skilled folks entered the Maylis Sea of Trees around the time of that big clash. And since then, the forest's been all kinds of rowdy. Which means—"

"Lyca might've clashed with those skilled intruders and been wounded in the process," Tomoe finished. Her tone carried an air of reluctant admiration. "Whoever they were, they managed to give a Greater Dragon trouble. That's no small feat."

"Exactly. And for a Greater Dragon to abandon its lair over an injury? That's next-level weird. Sure, if it was you or the boss, this wouldn't even be a topic of conversation, but for anyone else? It's out of the ordinary, no doubt about it."

"The barrier's still intact, so Lyca isn't dead. Still…" Tomoe trailed off before fixing Lime with a testing gaze. "Lime, who do you think could've fought Lyca?"

Her tone had shifted, a subtle challenge laced into her words.

"Best guess? One of the heroes," Lime replied without hesitation. "But if it was one of them, there'd be way more buzz about it. And, uh… I briefly considered the boss having done it on the down-low, but if he had, I don't think the barrier—or the Sea of Trees, for that matter—would still be standing. Feels like the whole area would've been wiped clean."

"Hmm."

He's gotten sharper, Tomoe thought, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. *A good trend indeed.*

"Excluding the heroes, if I think about who around here might've fought a dragon…" Lime began, scratching his head. "The Dragon Slayer seems like the most likely candidate. Though, to be honest, calling it a 'likely' explanation rubs me the wrong way."

"Hmm… the Dragon Slayer, you think? And what exactly bothers you about that idea?"

"Well," Lime sighed, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "If the Dragon Slayer fought Lyca and managed to not only hold her ground but come out on top before her run-in with the boss… and even managed to injure him during that mess… then that'd make the Dragon Slayer some kind of crazy monster. And, well, I don't like the idea of anyone being that monstrous."

"Hmm."

"The Dragon Slayer I know hadn't quite crossed the line into abandoning hyumanity. At least, that's how it seemed to me. That's why it's hard to fully believe it. But if I had to guess, I'd still put my money on her party."

"A reasonable assumption," Tomoe replied with a nod. "If it had been my master who clashed with Lyca, the barrier wouldn't still be standing. If it had been one of the heroes, it'd either be the talk of the kingdom or hidden away with extreme secrecy. As for anything else capable of dealing with a Greater Dragon… Well, this is no wasteland like Tsige, so I doubt anyone with that kind of power would be wandering around."

"True enough," Lime agreed with a laugh.

"What about the ring or the interference with telepathy? Did you learn anything about those?"

Lime's expression darkened.

"No, nothing," he admitted. "Not even a whisper. As for the telepathy interference, it doesn't feel like it's just unknown—it's like people are actively avoiding the topic, being really careful not to

mention it. But even when I tried probing around, it felt like I was hitting a wall. It's… strange."

"Indeed…" Tomoe murmured, her sharp eyes narrowing. "To find nothing, not even with your probing… That is peculiar."

"It is. And, based on my experience, I have a theory."

"What's that?"

"It feels like… they're looking into us at the same time."

"Hmm?" Tomoe tilted her head slightly. "Explain yourself."

Lime took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully.

"It's like… when we're digging for information, someone else is digging into us, almost like they're reacting to our movements. I've only felt this way once before—when we were sniffing around the sisters and got that sudden wave of strangers asking about the Kuzunoha Company. It's that same vibe."

"I see," Tomoe murmured, her voice low and thoughtful. "The kingdom's been investigating demon telepathy amid ongoing battles, piecing together theories. Yet, their progress has been slow. And as for that information—"

"They've slapped a gag order on it to make sure it doesn't leak anywhere else."

"I suppose that's what caught your attention."

"Maybe. It's just a hunch, but I think it's worth considering."

Tomoe rested a hand under her chin, her expression pensive as she mulled over the situation. After a moment, she broke the silence.

"No."

"Huh?" Lime blinked in confusion.

"It's not a bad insight. Lime, your instincts are sharper than most give you credit for," she said, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "However, if that's the case… it's best not to spread talk about telepathy too much. We lack significant information as it is, and infiltrating the capital isn't worth the risk."

"But if the rumors about telepathy are true, it might be worth sneaking in, don't you think, anee?"

"It's not. Improving telepathy would be better left to Shiki and the others. Fewer obstacles that way."

"Really?"

"Unless Young Master explicitly orders it, it's not worth pursuing. He doesn't like involving outsiders in matters we can handle internally."

Lime nodded as realization dawned. "Now that you mention it… Yeah, the boss doesn't rely on other organizations much, does he?"

"Exactly. Even if I suggested infiltrating the grand capital of the Kingdom of Limia, I guarantee you he would say, 'Can't we handle it ourselves?'"

"And knowing the others, especially Shiki-san, they'd probably find a way to make it work, wouldn't they?" Lime chuckled dryly.

"Most likely," Tomoe agreed.

Lime scratched his head, and a rueful grin crossed his face. "Got it! For now, we'll focus on gathering intel about the rings. That means tracking down the folks involved in that battle and—"

"Shh!" Tomoe cut him off. Her piercing eyes darted around the room, scanning for unseen threats.

Lime's playful demeanor vanished as he followed her lead. He sharpened his awareness, his muscles coiled like a spring.

Tomoe's fingers moved subtly, weaving a barrier around the room to fend off any potential surveillance. The air shimmered faintly as the protective field settled into place.

"It seems you were followed," she said, her voice icy and clipped.

"Wha—?! No way! I wouldn't screw up like that!"

"I don't think they know who we are," Tomoe muttered. "They're… dull, in a way."

"Dull?"

"They don't radiate hostility, nor do they appear to have tracked you down with a clear purpose. Still, there's no doubt they're trying to probe us. If it were just some lovestruck town girl enamored with you, this would be simpler."

Lime chuckled awkwardly, scratching his neck. “I didn’t exactly have the leisure to charm anyone this time… And besides, I’ll pass on any shady girl using magic to snoop on me. Eris warned me about something like this recently—she called them ‘land mine girls.’”

“Land mine girls? What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“Apparently, it’s slang for girls you should avoid at all costs. You know, the kind of women who are all trouble if you get involved with them. I think that’s the gist of it.”

“Hmph, sounds just like Young Master,” Tomoe remarked with a smirk. “In that case, would he be a ‘land mine man’? Interesting.”

“Uh.”

“I can never quite follow Eris’s way of thinking. ‘Land mine’ or not, I’d rather stick to calling him Wicked One. It has a nicer ring to it.”

“You’re talking about the boss, right?” Lime asked, latching onto the familiar term to steer the conversation away from more dangerous territory.

“Of course. Between his behavior and the way people speak of him, the title fits, wouldn’t you agree?”

“As expected of the boss. How does he manage to leave behind such wildly inconsistent eyewitness accounts?” Lime asked with a wry laugh. “A tall, willowy beauty wrapped in a thick blue coat but still looking incredibly voluptuous… A girl dragging a massive red coat behind her… A demi-human radiating golden light… An old man in bizarre robes with one side blue and the other red… A stark-naked youth of inhuman beauty. And that’s just scratching the surface.”

Tomoe chuckled, folding her arms as her gaze softened. “It’s no wonder their memories are scrambled. Between the attack that created the lake and the sheer shock waves of power, they must have been overwhelmed.”

Lime shook his head. “Some even speculate he’s a shape-shifting beast of some sort. If I hadn’t known about the boss beforehand, I’d never have believed any of it.”

“Can’t blame them for thinking that.”

"Ah… the probing magic's gone."

Tomoe's brows furrowed. "Hmm. Are they planning on approaching directly? They don't seem hostile… but this is odd."

The intrusive magic faded, replaced by a distinct movement from the caster. Tomoe's gaze sharpened as she quietly observed their next steps.

Such extravagant equipment… They're well prepared. They even have tools to fight dragons. I doubt they've come to target me specifically, but their presence is conspicuously armed. Two women, one man…

Tomoe remained silent, her senses extended as she scrutinized the approaching group and thought of how best to engage them based on the role she currently played.

If they're here investigating Star Lake, Maylis Lake, or the Sea of Trees, they'll be easiest to deal with…

The trio halted at the door, then a firm knock echoed through the room.

Tomoe exchanged a brief glance with Lime, and both nodded in silent agreement. Lime stepped forward.

"Who's there?" he asked, his voice casual but guarded.

"Pardon our sudden visit," came a young woman's voice, polite and refined. "We're travelers staying in the same inn. We heard someone here possesses a rare weapon, and we couldn't resist the chance to see it for ourselves. Might you grant us this request?"

At the mention of "weapon," Lime's eyes instinctively flicked to his own. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword—no, his katana.

Tomoe's gaze followed, settling on the blade. *Interesting… While their true motives remain unclear, anyone familiar with swords like Lime's could genuinely be intrigued. If they know about katanas, they might have valuable information. In that case, claiming to be an adventurer or a member of the Kuzunoha Company should suffice.*

She gave Lime a small, almost imperceptible nod to proceed.

"I see. Please, come in," Lime said.

“Thank you. Pardon the intrusion,” the woman replied as the door creaked open.

The woman exuded an air of refinement. Her movements were smooth, her presence calm but deliberate. Following her was a taller man, his posture relaxed but his eyes alert, scanning the room. Lastly, a girl who could only be described as youthful, perhaps even childlike in appearance, entered with a curious but cautious expression, practically clinging to the man’s side.

As the girl reached to close the door behind her, the man suddenly exclaimed in a loud, astonished voice, “A samurai?!”

“Hmm?” Tomoe tilted her head slightly, intrigued by the unfamiliar yet strangely nostalgic word spoken by someone from this world. Her lips curved into a smile as she turned to the man, amusement and interest dancing in her eyes.

It was the first time anyone in this world had called her that. Somehow, it felt… satisfying.

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“So, your trade is guarding a merchant, is it?” the woman asked.

“Indeed,” Tomoe replied smoothly. “I serve a small shop called the Kuzunoha Company. My duties include guarding, assisting my master as a subordinate trader, and, well, handling a bit of everything.”

The trio’s sharpest gaze—belonging to the older woman—focused on Tomoe, clearly attempting to gauge her. Yet, Tomoe remained entirely unfazed, answering with steady poise.

Lime, on the other hand, had stepped back into the role of a quiet subordinate. Although he kept silent, he was far from idle,

observing the visitors carefully, analyzing their clothing, mannerisms, and behavior. His eyes moved subtly but methodically, leaving no detail unnoticed.

"I mean, looking at you, you can't be more than twenty or so, right? Are you one of those 'loli-grannies'?" the man suddenly asked, a mixture of incredulity and mischief in his tone.

"Hmm?" Tomoe tilted her head slightly before giving a small smirk. "Well, something like that, I suppose. But, you know, asking a woman her age right after meeting her is rather impolite… boy."

"B-Boy?!" the man sputtered, his voice rising with indignation and his face turning red. Lime, meanwhile, was struggling to keep his composure, biting the inside of his cheek to suppress a laugh. Despite feeling a twinge of annoyance at the man's attitude toward Tomoe, Lime found himself oddly unmotivated to intervene. It was almost like watching a younger sibling embarrass themselves—more pathetic than aggravating.

Not that either Tomoe or the man fully understood what "loli-granny" meant.

Standing beside the man, the small girl puffed her cheeks in irritation, glaring at Tomoe as if defending her companion's honor. It was almost adorable, though Tomoe didn't seem to notice—or care.

"For a merchant, you seem rather careless with your words," the woman remarked reproachfully.

Her words carried a distinct air of elegance, but her demeanor wasn't merely refined—it was commanding. Every gesture, every glance, spoke of someone accustomed to authority and power. Her presence felt anything but ordinary.

Both Tomoe and Lime caught on quickly. Lime, in particular, narrowed his eyes slightly as he mentally categorized her. *At the very least, she's the daughter of a wealthy magnate or a noblewoman… Possibly both.*

Impeccably maintained hair. A tasteful, understated hairpiece that exudes refinement. Even though she's on a journey, her lips are tinted, and her brows are perfectly groomed. Her clothes are clean,

with a flawless cut that screams wealth. And the man—heterochromatic eyes, a striking oddity even here, and he's decked out in absurdly ornate gear without a hint of hesitation. Still… he doesn't seem like someone we need to be overly wary of. His demeanor and the way he talks to anee seem genuine enough. Might even be a decent guy.

Unbeknownst to Lime, a faint distortion rippled through his reasoning. Small, almost imperceptible, it nudged his conclusions toward answers that should have been impossible to reach. And yet, the incongruity didn't strike him as strange.

Oblivious to his own mental disturbance, Lime tentatively pegged the three as knights or nobles on an official mission—or perhaps just wealthy adventurers indulging in a sightseeing detour.

"Listen here," Tomoe began, her tone pointed but not hostile, "I don't recall giving nameless strangers the right to call me 'you.' Judging by your age, boy, I'd say you're no more than a squire at best. Am I wrong? Your aura suggests you're a knight or noble of some sort… but what brings someone like you to a small village like this? The capital isn't far from here. This hardly seems like a simple rest stop."

"I'm not a boy!" the silver-haired man snapped, his cheeks coloring slightly. "I have a name—it's Tomoki!"

"Tomoki-sama, please, we're incognito," the elegant woman beside him interjected, her tone gentle but firm.

"Big brother…" the girl whispered, tugging on Tomoki's sleeve.

"Ah—right," Tomoki muttered, flustered.

"Tomoki, is it?" Tomoe repeated with a smile, her sharp gaze assessing him anew. "If being called a boy offends you, I'll refrain from doing so henceforth. My apologies. Now then—what of the other two? We've already introduced ourselves, but I don't believe we've been graced with your names yet."

Tomoe's gaze moved past Tomoki, resting briefly on the two women. Her calm yet probing tone left them little room to evade.

"I am Lily," the refined woman said after a brief pause, her voice carrying the same poise as her demeanor. "I serve Tomoki-sama."

"I'm Mora!" the younger girl chimed in, her voice bright and earnest. "I'm one of big brother's companions."

Lily and Tomoki, hmm? Tomoe's mind worked quickly as she analyzed the pieces. *Given their equipment, demeanor, and interactions, it seems likely… they're from Gritonia. If so, this Tomoki must be their hero. Much like our Young Master, he's an otherworlder. Fascinating, but—*

Meanwhile, Lime's thoughts raced as he processed their introductions. *Wait a second—Lily? As in, Lily Gritonia, the imperial princess?! That would make this guy the Empire's hero. And Mora… Judging by the name, she's probably the famed Dragon Summoner. Damn, we've stumbled across some heavy hitters. No wonder the guy has that air about him. Heroes really aren't ordinary people, are they?*

Both Tomoe and Lime independently arrived at the same conclusion—their visitors were almost certainly the hero's party from the Gritonia Empire. As this realization settled, Tomoe sifted through her memories of the man named Tomoki, her lips pressing into a thin line. With a quiet sigh, she glanced at Lime, who remained silent but alert.

"Lily-dono, Mora-dono," Tomoe began smoothly, her tone formal yet casual enough to avoid undue suspicion. "Allow me to reintroduce myself—I'm Tomoe from the Kuzunoha Company. This here is Lime, my subordinate. Now, let's revisit my earlier question. What brings you to this village? Like many others, I came to see the lake that reportedly appeared overnight. However, given the… extravagant equipment your group carries, it appears your purpose may differ."

Tomoki's party visibly stiffened. The subtle reference to their concealed arsenal clearly struck a nerve. The surprise and unease rippled through the group—it was obvious they hadn't anticipated being called out so directly.

"And considering your status," Tomoe continued, "the need for you to operate incognito in Limia raises certain… questions."

"Th-That's enough of that!" Tomoki suddenly interjected. His voice was louder than he intended. "What about the swords at your waist? Those are katanas, aren't they? That's what caught my attention and why I came over. I happened to see that guy there carrying one," he said, gesturing toward Lime, "and I couldn't resist. Can I take a look at them?"

The abrupt shift in the topic was painfully transparent, but Tomoe decided to let it slide, if only to observe where the conversation would lead.

"Hmm? So you're interested in katanas?" Tomoe replied, her lips curling into a playful smirk. "You mentioned the word 'samurai' earlier. If you want to see one, I don't mind. Here."

With a faint chuckle, she unsheathed the shorter of her two blades, a wakizashi, and handed it to Tomoki. Her expression carried a hint of teasing, or testing.

Tomoki's eyes lit up as he eagerly grasped the hilt. He was like a child with a toy, filled with uncontained enthusiasm as he immediately began inspecting the weapon.

Tomoe watched him with a neutral expression, but her thoughts were far less charitable.

What a disappointment… No interest in the craftsmanship of the scabbard, the delicate detailing of the tsuba, or the intricate design of the hilt itself. How dull. Young Master, by contrast, humored my explanations and even praised the artisans' skills. Both are from the same world, yet it seems not all otherworlders are of equal merit. If this is the level of curiosity displayed by a so-called hero, I shudder to think what the hero of Limia must be like.

Her initial disappointment deepened as she continued observing Tomoki. His eagerness to draw the blade made it clear that he saw the weapon only as a tool, not an artifact imbued with artistry or history.

Tomoe's lips pressed into a thin line, her previous amusement now replaced with something closer to disdain. Watching Tomoki handle the katana, she couldn't help but feel disillusioned.

Even before handing over the wakizashi, Tomoe had experienced a distinct sense of discomfort from the brazen and unrefined gaze that the silver-haired youth had cast her way. It was rude, almost invasive, and though she hid it well, the experience grated on her. She had chosen to prioritize observing him over expressing her disdain, keeping her face perfectly neutral.

Tomoe had harbored modest expectations for heroes, especially those who hailed from the same otherworldly origins as her master. Yet, the reality of Tomoki—by now she was sure the guy standing before her was Gritonia's hero—was proving to be profoundly disappointing.

His movements, his magical power, the way he talked—each fell short in ways she couldn't ignore.

Even his physical bearing was nothing remarkable. Compared to the adventurers in Tsige, his movements were passable but far from impressive. If she compared him to Toa, the adventurer who had spent some time training alongside Makoto, Tomoki was clearly inferior.

His magical power was decent, sure, but it was still far below Tomoe's, let alone Makoto's. Perhaps he could have surpassed the pre-Contract version of herself…? But not by much.

Then there was his behavior—an utter travesty. His conduct was brash and crude, on par with a common thug. For someone who went around carrying the title of hero, it was laughably inadequate.

As Tomoe observed him fiddling with the wakizashi, attempting to draw the blade, her disillusionment only deepened.

"Huh? What's going on? This thing won't come out!" Tomoki grumbled, frustration creeping into his voice.

Of course the blade wasn't coming out.

Tomoe wouldn't hand over such a finely crafted weapon to just anyone. Even if she deemed Tomoki a lesser threat, she had no

intention of allowing him access to something of such significance. This wakizashi, along with her longer katana, were gifts from the eldwar—smiths who, out of deep respect, had forged these weapons specifically for her and Makoto. These were no mere prototypes; they were masterpieces imbued with enchantments.

The enchantments ensured that only three individuals could draw the blades: Tomoe herself, Makoto as her master, and the smith who maintained them. To anyone else, the weapons were as immovable as a mountain.

So it didn't bother Tomoe that Tomoki was unable to draw the blade. What grated on her was that he hadn't even thought to ask for permission before attempting to do so. His presumptuous attitude struck her as juvenile and utterly disrespectful.

You, of all people, could never hope to wield such a blade, Tomoe thought, suppressing a sigh.

Tomoe cleared her throat and addressed him in a calm tone, though perhaps he could sense the sharp edge beneath her words. "Ah, you wish to see the blade itself? My apologies—it seems I neglected to mention something. These swords have been enchanted to only be drawn by myself. A safeguard, you see."

She extended her hand toward him, signaling for the wakizashi to be returned. But Tomoki made no move to comply.

"No, that can't be right! I can wield *any* weapon in this world, so this one should be no different!" he exclaimed. Desperation was written on his face as he redoubled his efforts to draw the blade, now resorting to brute force.

Honestly… Tomoe thought in exasperation. With a smooth, almost imperceptible motion, she retrieved the wakizashi from Tomoki's grasp.

"Wha—? Huh?" the hero stammered, staring down at his now empty hands. He hadn't even seen Tomoe move.

Across the room, Lily's eyes narrowed. Though she couldn't discern how Tomoe had done it, she had definitely just reclaimed the blade without alerting Tomoki, Lily, or Mora. Such an effortless

demonstration of skill set off alarm bells in Lily's mind. She found herself regretting not bringing Guinevere, a knight who might have better assessed Tomoe's capabilities.

"Please, don't be so rough with it," Tomoe chided gently, holding the wakizashi with care. "This is a cherished partner of mine. If you wish to see the blade itself, then here."

With the same natural grace, Tomoe tilted the koiguchi—the scabbard's mouth—slightly toward her thumb and smoothly unsheathed the wakizashi in a single, fluid motion.

"This is Shirafuji," she announced with quiet pride. "Gaze upon it to your heart's content."

The moment the blade was drawn, the room seemed to change.

"Whoa… Amazing!" Tomoki's voice trembled with awe.

"This is… remarkable," Lily murmured, her composed facade momentarily faltering.

"Beautiful…" Mora whispered, her wide eyes reflecting the gleam of the blade.

All three of them stood transfixed by the undeniable artistry of the Japanese sword. Its polished surface glistened as though kissed by morning dew, despite having touched no water. The delicate temper line, the hamon, etched along the blade shimmered like waves of moonlight, a pattern unique to katana and rarely seen in other swords. The beauty was so striking it felt as though the blade itself could pull one's very soul into its ethereal allure.

For those with an eye for detail, the intricate craftsmanship extended far beyond the blade. The wrap of the hilt, the ornamental tsuba guard, and the lacquered scabbard—all spoke of a level of artistry and care that left even the untrained mesmerized.

The sword's beauty wasn't merely aesthetic. From the moment Tomoe had unsheathed it, a faint, biting chill had emanated from the blade, lowering the temperature in the room. It wasn't oppressive, but the icy aura heightened the sword's otherworldly presence, imbuing it with a sense of power that was almost palpable.

"Hmm. Even during the day, the air here is chilly," Tomoe remarked, her tone casual as she deftly slid the blade back into its scabbard. "If I keep it unsheathed for too long, it may not be kind to your health.

"Are you satisfied now?" she added. "We, too, have our business to attend to. I must ask you to take your leave."

To think the hero would be so underwhelming. What a waste of time. And as for Lime… Letting himself get tailed by this lot? He's in for a stern punishment later, the idiot.

"Wait!" Tomoki cried.

"I believe I made it clear that we are not at leisure," Tomoe replied, her tone edged with annoyance as she turned to face him, her disinterest now barely veiled.

Tomoki hesitated, then leaned toward Lily and whispered something in her ear. Lily nodded a few times, a faint frown crossing her face before she turned to address Tomoe.

"Tomoe-san, was it? That weapon… you called it a 'katana,' I believe? It's truly an exceptional piece. Might I propose a trade? We are prepared to pay any price you name for it. Would you consider parting with it?" Lily's tone was polite but firm, her sharp eyes gauging Tomoe's reaction.

So, it's this woman handling the negotiations, not the hero. Makes sense—she's probably the one holding the purse strings in this group. Still, to covet a weapon they can't even wield… Are they desperate, or is there some ulterior motive at play? Regardless, there's no chance I'd part with this blade.

"I believe I already mentioned that this katana is enchanted to be usable only by me," Tomoe replied coolly. "While I appreciate your offer, whether it be gold or otherwise, I have no intention of parting with it. If you're in need of a blade, I suggest you visit the frontier city of Tsige. With some luck, you may find a smith capable of forging one for you."

Her blunt refusal made Lily's expression falter for a moment—a faint crack in her composure.

"I had hoped to avoid this, but it seems I have no choice," Lily said, her voice lowering as she straightened her posture. "The man standing here, Tomoki-sama, is none other than a hero sent by the Goddess to aid our empire. And I… I am Lily Gritonia, the princess of the Gritonia Empire."

"Oh! A hero and a princess, you say? What a revelation!" Tomoe exclaimed, fighting to keep from laughing out loud as she feigned surprise.

Lily stepped forward, earnestly pressing her case. "Please, Tomoe-sama, I hope you'll reconsider. For the future of hyumanity… no, for the future of this world, I humbly ask for your cooperation. Though I've renounced my claim to the throne, I am still a princess of Gritonia. Should the Kuzunoha Company ever seek to do business in our nation, I would ensure my support. I swear it on my name."

Her appeal was delivered with the gravity and poise expected of royalty. Yet, Tomoe's sharp eyes narrowed as she regarded the woman before her.

"Oh my, how frightening," Tomoe said with mock amusement. "As soon as you reveal your noble status, you start making demands of us. And to bring up the name of my trading company—so intimidating. To think, a royal would lower themselves to address me with such courtesy. One can only wonder what kind of deep schemes lie beneath such words."

"No, no, I assure you that was not my intent," Lily replied, her voice unwavering in its poise. "I am, after all, a royal in name only. To bow my head and beseech you for aid on behalf of the hero to whom I have devoted myself is the least I can do."

Tomoe, was it? Lily was thinking to herself. *I've never heard of a company called Kuzunoha before, but from the way she speaks, it must be a new player in Tsige. That region borders the edge of the known world—certainly not a place I can afford to ignore. I'll need to look into this further. And that weapon of hers… If they have artisans capable of creating such fine work, perhaps it could offer a breakthrough in our stagnating firearms development.*

Although she maintained her composed, elegant demeanor, Lily's mind was already calculating her next moves.

"Oh, is that so? And yet, I can't help but feel you're harboring some rather dangerous ideas," Tomoe retorted, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Th-That's simply not true," Lily replied, her composure cracking for just a moment before she quickly recovered.

"Regardless," Tomoe continued, her tone sharpening, "I will not part with my katana."

"Um, anee," Lime interjected, hesitantly raising his hand.

"What is it, Lime?" Tomoe asked in irritation.

"Well, you see, the hero and his party are fighting for the sake of the world, right? A noble cause, no doubt. And this wouldn't be a deal that harms us in any way, so maybe…" Lime gestured to his own blade, his face conflicted. "Maybe I could offer them mine. It's not as precious as yours, and they might actually be able to use—"

"Lime." Tomoe's voice dropped an octave. "You will be silent."

Her words cut through the air, halting Lime's suggestion before he could fully articulate it. Her eyes bore into him, her displeasure unmistakable. Lime's offer was not just uncharacteristic—it was wrong. That blade held deep meaning for him, something far beyond its craftsmanship or value. For him to so casually suggest giving it away wasn't just a bad idea, it was alarming.

Tomoe found her patience fraying. She was beginning to regret indulging this conversation for as long as she had.

"My apologies," she said, her gaze locking onto Lily. Her voice was steel. "My subordinate seems to have lost his senses for a moment, but let me make this clear: None of these blades are for sale or trade. I trust you will understand."

"Then I don't need the swords."

"Big brother?!" Mora's voice cut through the silence, shock and confusion on her face.

"Tomoki-sama, are you certain about this?" Lily asked sharply, though her voice retained a thin veneer of calm.

Tomoe raised an eyebrow, her gaze flickering toward Tomoki. "An admirable sentiment, to be sure."

Tomoki rose to his full height and looked directly into Tomoe's eyes. When he spoke, his voice was filled with conviction. "Like Lily said earlier, I'm a hero. I've been sent to fight for this world, to defeat the Demon Lord and bring peace. And for that, I need your help, Tomoe-san. I'm asking you to lend us your strength. Join us, and together we can create a peaceful world!"

His words sound noble enough… Tomoe thought, keeping her expression placid. *But actions speak louder than words, don't they? That lecherous way he looked at my body earlier, the careless disrespect toward the katana… and this look he's giving me now.*

Ah, yes, I see it now. A charming gaze infused with the power of a magical allure—a compulsion, perhaps? What a pitiful little trick. Lime may have fallen prey to it, but to think I would succumb as well… Absurd.

This fool thinks he can mask his hunger for power behind a veneer of heroism. "Peace," he says? It's plain to see he's already planning his grip on the reins of authority in a post-war world. How hollow. How… revolting.

Tomoe held Tomoki's stare without a flicker of change in her demeanor. Sensing his charm wasn't working, Tomoki tried intensifying the pressure of his magical compulsion. His eyes glowed faintly as he focused his efforts entirely on Tomoe. Yet, no matter how much he pushed, Tomoe remained unmoved, her serene expression a reflection of her inner disdain.

Standing beside Tomoki, Lily looked on in silence. Her sharp eyes narrowed as she realized what was happening, but she said nothing, choosing to wait and see how the situation unfolded.

The ensuing silence pressed down on the room like a heavy weight.

Then, unexpectedly, Mora stepped forward from behind Lily. Her small frame was tense, but her voice was steady. "You. You're a dragon, aren't you?"

A ripple of shock ran through the group. Even Tomoki, who had been fixated on Tomoe, faltered for a moment.

Only Tomoe herself seemed utterly unperturbed. She tilted her head slightly, her expression curious but calm. "Oh? And what makes you think that?"

She paused briefly, then raised her hand. "Ah, wait. I see now. Mora, was it? You're a dragon summoner, aren't you? A rare talent among hyumans. Yes, I've heard that your kind are born with a unique affinity for sensing dragons. Those abilities are never found among demonfolk, or so I've read. Interesting… So you're one of those rare individuals."

"Mmm…"

From the pained groan Mora let out, it was clear she wasn't used to her instincts being so thoroughly exposed.

"So, Mora-dono, did you sense a dragon's scent on me?" Tomoe asked. "I hate to disappoint you, but as you can see, I'm no dragon."

A sting of hostility laced her words, growing thornier with each deliberate syllable. The slow, methodical rhythm of her speech pressed against the trio, the air itself seeming to grow heavier. "But if I were," she continued, "tell me—what exactly were you planning to do?"

"You're lying!" Mora erupted, her voice shaking. "It's not just some faint dragon's scent! Your scent, your presence, your power—they're unmistakably pure! Absolutely, you're… You're an incredibly powerful dragon!"

"You still haven't answered my question, Mora." Tomoe's tone dropped lower, her words now carrying an almost suffocating weight.

A dragon? Lily's thoughts raced as she processed Mora's declaration. *Mora is a dragon summoner—there's no one better at sensing dragons. And she said Tomoe's not just any dragon but an incredibly powerful one. If that's true, then… could she be Lyca the Waterfall, the most powerful dragon rumored to reside in this region? Or perhaps one of their kin? That might explain the*

overwhelming aura of her blade, Shirafuji, as well—it's imbued with water-elemental power, after all…

Before Lily could articulate her thoughts, Tomoe began to chuckle softly. The laugh grew into a restrained but mocking mirth. "Kukuku… Forgive me, but I'm neither Lyca nor one of their kin, Princess. While you're free to entertain such theories, I suggest tempering your wild imagination. It's unbecoming."

"What? How did you—?!" Lily clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes widening in disbelief. Had Tomoe read her thoughts?

"Now, then," Tomoe began again. Her gaze shifted to Mora, who stood holding a translucent orb roughly the size of a man's fist in both hands. Mora's hands trembled slightly, but her eyes held a fierce determination as she faced Tomoe's presence head-on.

"If it's a dragon…" Mora began, her voice faltering but regaining strength, "no matter how strong, dragons listen to me! Tomoe! Please, join us! Help big brother with your power!"

Tomoe had been casually brushing off Mora's words, goading her lightly to continue speaking, but the repeated and overly familiar use of her name finally made her brow twitch in irritation.

"The dragon you've tamed must spoil you rotten," Tomoe realized, her tone suddenly icy.

"Huh? Wh-What do you…" Mora stammered, confused and taken aback.

Tomoe didn't let her finish.

"Or perhaps your dragon companion… or companions have an unusual fondness for little girls? Either way, they lack the proper discipline required of a servant. Even if you were a prodigy who had fully realized your extraordinary talents, such immaturity is unacceptable. Yet they've allowed their young, weak, and inexperienced master to remain unchecked. I don't know how many dragons you command, but… what fools they are."

"Ugh, you—" Mora began, her voice trembling with indignation and fear.

“Silence!” Tomoe’s single, commanding shout cleaved through Mora’s attempted rebuttal like a blade, the sheer force of it resonating throughout the room.

Not only did it sever the influence Mora had channeled through the translucent orb toward Tomoe, it also obliterated the lingering charm magic emanating from Tomoki’s enthralling gaze. The oppressive compulsion vanished from the room just as quietly as it had come.

Mora stood frozen. For the first time in her life, she found her strength nullified. This outright failure left her utterly stunned.

“Impossible…” she whispered in disbelief.

“You… Even *my* power…” Tomoki muttered, his expression mirroring Mora’s shock.

Lime, meanwhile, stood off to the side, his hand trembling slightly as it rested on the scabbard of his blade. He looked pale and shaken, as if just waking from a nightmare. His lips quivered, and a faint, pained groan escaped him—an echo of the profound shame and regret that now consumed him. While the charm magic was gone, its effects remained fresh in his memory, and the realization of his earlier words cut deeply.

Tomoe stood at the center of it all, her expression colder than ever. With a single shout, she had extinguished the compulsion aimed at her and shredded Mora’s attempt to assert dominance through the orb. Her sharp gaze swept over the party from Gritonia, brimming with unveiled contempt.

“What… Why…” Mora stammered, her voice barely audible as she visibly trembled under Tomoe’s withering glare. Fear and confusion gripped her small frame, rendering her utterly powerless in the face of such raw presence.

“Do not,” Tomoe snarled, her voice low and seething with authority, “send such pathetic, worthless thoughts my way again. You insolent child!”





Mora let out a frightened "Eek!" as the translucent orb in her hands shattered, scattering shards across the floor. Whether it broke from her fear or from Tomoe's overwhelming presence was unclear.

In any case, Tomoe's gaze didn't waver. "I won't deny your meager talent," she said, her words cutting like a blade. "It seems to have the ability to command and tame mid-tier dragons with little effort. But that's the extent of it—mediocre at best."

Mora clenched her trembling fists but was too afraid to say anything in return.

"Judging by your aura, you're probably most compatible with wyverns," Tomoe continued with a disdainful chuckle. "Those winged fools, good for nothing but flapping through the sky. I've always considered them imbeciles, and it seems those under your control are even more hopeless."

"Don't you dare insult Nagi!" Mora cried out instinctively.

"Do not raise your voice at me!" Tomoe barked, her voice a sharp crack of authority.

"Ah!" Mora flinched, trembling even more.

"And that Nagi of yours—if they won't even show up when their master is in peril, they're as worthless as you are. Dragons, even the dumbest of them, know how to measure their opponent's strength. After all this, do you still fail to grasp the difference in power between us?" Tomoe's gaze narrowed, her voice sinking lower, more ominous. "Perhaps I should demonstrate it. Right here. Right now."

The oppressive aura radiating from Tomoe stilled the room. Mora, Tomoki, and even Lily were struck dumb. The sheer disparity in power between them was suffocating, leaving them frozen in place like prey before a predator.

Still… what a troublesome situation I've found myself in, Tomoe thought, her frustration tempered by a moment of introspection. *I let my anger get the better of me. This lot's rudeness has pushed me too far, but laying a hand on a hero without Young Master's approval would be reckless. Still, how utterly insufferable these fools are.*

Her thoughts briefly turned to her master. While he didn't express much interest in assisting heroes, he did have a certain curiosity about their actions and whereabouts. Even Tomoe, along with Mio and Shiki, couldn't fully decipher Makoto's true stance on the matter.

As the tension thickened, Tomoki seemed to summon his resolve. "You still haven't answered my invitation, Tomoe," he said, his voice still trembling slightly.

"To think you'd still have the gall to spout such words after all this. That sheer audacity is perhaps the one quality I can commend you for. But to think a so-called hero would rely on such petty tricks, using your eyes to turn others into mere puppets? Hardly what I'd call an admirable pastime. Before you rush to defend your favorite doll"—her gaze flicked briefly to Mora—"perhaps you should first rid me of that nauseating stare you've been aiming at me."

"What… did you just say?" An edge of danger had crept into Tomoki's voice.

"I said it's disgusting," Tomoe replied flatly, her gaze unwavering. "I hear you're a guest from another world, but you seem awfully insecure for someone with your title. As for your invitation…" She paused briefly, and her next words were heavy with finality. "My answer is, of course, no. I've already pledged my heart and soul to another master."

"Did you say 'disgusting'?" Tomoki's face darkened as anger overtook him.

"Don't worry," Tomoe continued, unperturbed. "My opinion of you doesn't change whether you use that cheap trick of yours or not. You're uninteresting, hero. Not worth fighting beside, or even crossing blades with as an enemy—"

"Divine Lance!"

The room was suddenly awash with light as Tomoki summoned his weapon, its brilliance filling the space.

Lily and Mora froze in shock as the glowing spear materialized in Tomoki's grip.

Tomoe, however, was as unfazed as ever. Her cold, dispassionate eyes observed the hero with about as much interest as one might show to a pebble on the roadside.

"How childish. Throwing a tantrum, are we?"

"Shut *up*!" Tomoki roared, lunging forward. The glowing spear thrust out—but it wasn't aimed at Tomoe.

"Gah!" Lime cried as the lance pierced his left shoulder. The acrid smell of burning flesh quickly filled the air.

A flicker of irritation flashed across Tomoe's face while Lime gritted his teeth and moved his hand instinctively to the hilt of his blade. He staggered but steadied himself, his resolve burning at least as much as the flesh on his arm.

"Damn… How far…" Lime muttered through clenched teeth. His face was twisted in pain as he prepared to retaliate.

Tomoki wasn't done. "I clean up all the trash in my way!" he snarled. "And that blade of yours? Looks like even I can use it. I'll take it after I'm done with you!"

With an especially powerful hit, Tomoki flung Lime through the nearby window. Lime's velocity was so fast that the shattering glass barely slowed his body on its way outside.

Tomoe's eyes flicked toward the broken window, then back to Tomoki, whose full attention was now on her. Power surged around him, the divine lance glowing brighter as he lunged again—this time aiming directly for Tomoe's chest.

As the weapon pierced her chest, Tomoe could feel the radiant energy coursing through her body. And yet, Tomoe showed no sign of pain. Unlike Lime, not a single drop of blood seeped from her wound. She stood tall, her expression calm yet heavy with disdain.

"Tomoki, hero of the Empire," she began, and this time there was more pity in her voice than anger. "You are truly beyond saving. What a pitiable creature you are."

"Don't you dare look at me like that!" Tomoki roared, his rage exploding alongside his power as he gripped his divine lance tightly.

Before he could lash out again, Tomoe's figure began to blur. Her outline wavered, her form dissolving into countless tiny particles that scattered into the air like shimmering dust.

Tomoki stumbled back in shock as Tomoe's voice seemed to come from every corner of the room at once. "To think you can't even discern whether the being you're speaking to is real or an illusion. Hah. Princess Lily, let me offer you some advice: I will overlook this encounter, despite how lenient it may seem. But if you fail to grasp the meaning behind my mercy and repeat such foolishness, you will soon find this world short one hero."

The air in the room grew heavier as her words settled, and a thick mist crept in, swirling around their knees. Though her presence was no longer visible, her voice carried an unmistakable finality that sent chills down their spines.

Stifling her surprise, Lily began analyzing the situation. *This mist… Illusion magic? No, something far more advanced. And her warning… At the very least, it's a clear message to avoid further contact with the Kuzunoha Company. Or perhaps even Tsige itself.*

Until we understand more about her true power, investigating her directly would be too risky. For now, we'll have to rely on indirect methods to gather information. But what is she? A dragon that can read thoughts? I've never heard of such a being.

For a while, the mist held them captive in the small room, an oppressive atmosphere that refused to lift. When it finally began to dissipate, the three were left in silence, each grappling with the weight of what had transpired.

"Damn it!" Tomoki growled, storming toward the shattered window. He glanced outside, but Lime was nowhere to be seen. Clicking his tongue in frustration, he muttered, "I guess I must've finished him off, but… that blade… such a waste. And that woman, Tomoe—"

His words faltered as his body trembled ever so slightly. Whether from anger, fear, or both, it was impossible to tell.

Beside him, Mora sat on the floor, clutching the fragments of the shattered orb in her hands. Her usually vibrant demeanor was dulled, her face pale as she stared blankly at the pieces. The illusion might have faded, but the weight of Tomoe's overwhelming presence still lingered.

The room remained eerily still, all three of its occupants pinned in place by their shaken spirits. A ghostly chill lingered, a reminder of the profound gap in power between themselves and the enigmatic figure they had dared to challenge.

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Night.

Deep in the forest on the outskirts of the Demiplane, the occasional screams of forest ogres echoed faintly. Beside a quiet water source, a gravely injured man lay sprawled on the ground. His left arm was torn nearly to the root, and his body trembled from the pain and shock.

Lime was crying. His sobs echoed softly in the stillness, unrestrained and raw.

The scene was shared by two other presences: Tomoe, and one of Makoto's loyal followers, Shiki.

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry, anee…" Lime's voice cracked as he spoke, moving his good arm to cover his tear-streaked face. He made no effort to hide his sobbing or the sound of his runny nose. He lay there completely crushed, overwhelmed by guilt and shame.

Tomoe and Shiki stood over him, their expressions a mix of concern and quiet contemplation.

“Charmed, were you?” Shiki asked, his analytical tone cutting through Lime’s sobs. “Based on what you’ve told us, it sounds like a form of magical eye power—a Mystic Eye, most likely. I’d wager it’s a gift from the Goddess.”

“Right,” Tomoe agreed with a nod. “It seems quite potent, especially against hyumans.”

“Indeed. As a hyuman, Lime is naturally more susceptible to the Goddess’s influence.”

“Utterly pathetic,” Tomoe sighed, but her tone carried a hint of begrudging understanding. “It was almost too pitiful to bear. I was ready to discipline him myself later, but it seems the hero got to him first.”

Lime let out a choked cry, gripping the dirt beneath him with trembling fingers. “What… What have I done? The blade… you and the boss gave me… How could I… How could I even think of offering it away so easily? Damn it… Damn it all!”

Shiki glanced at Tomoe before speaking calmly. “Tomoe-dono, may I begin the healing process now?”

Tomoe raised a hand to stop him, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “Wait, Shiki, there’s something—”

Lime cut her off, his voice a desperate wail. “Shiki-san! Don’t bother! I’m too ashamed to keep living! How can I ever face the boss again? I let some brat of a hero play me so easily… I even thought, for a moment, that he wasn’t so bad! Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

Shiki sighed heavily. “So, what is this, then? A plea to be left to die?”

Tomoe nodded, her gaze softening as she observed Lime. “Something like that. Despite his flaws, he’s a useful man. Resilient too. But this… This hit him hard.”

“Tomoe-dono,” Shiki said, a faint smirk curling his lips, “you’re surprisingly kind.”

“Am I?” Tomoe asked with a tilt of her head. “I just thought, as someone who was once hyuman yourself, you might understand him

better than I."

Shiki's smirk widened as he turned to Lime, but his voice grew sharper. "If you were truly intent on dying to atone, you'd already have done it. You'd have taken that treasured blade of yours and ended it—cut your throat, your belly, whatever it took. But instead, here you are, lying on the ground, crying like a child. You say you want to die, but what you really want is forgiveness."

"Th-That's not true!" Lime stammered, though the tremble in his voice told the real truth. "I… I can't stand myself anymore. I'm disgusted… I hate everything about myself…"

Shiki's cold gaze bore into Lime as he spoke. "Don't be ridiculous. You're not grieving; you're just frustrated and angry. But instead of facing those emotions, you're leaping to the false conclusion that you want to die. Why? Because you have no outlet for the fist you've raised in anger."

Lime's breath hitched. "Th-That's…" he stammered.

"Your injuries, your humiliation—yes, they're the work of that Empire's so-called hero," Shiki went on. "But the person you truly cannot forgive is yourself. You're furious with your own failure, your own weakness. The part of your heart you can't reach, the version of you from just moments ago who made a fool of himself—those are what you want to punch. But you can't. No matter how much you want to change it, the past is untouchable."

Lime fell silent. Shiki's calm, matter-of-fact words had hit with undeniable clarity. He stared at the ground, his hands clenching into fists.

"And as for your claim that you can't face the boss… Don't worry about it," Shiki added flatly.

"What?" Lime looked up, startled.

"We won't tell him," Shiki clarified.

"No, I mean—" Lime began to protest, but Shiki cut him off, his voice softer but still commanding.

"Keep this failure to yourself. Let it serve as a permanent reminder, an indelible scar on your pride. You've lived barely over

two decades, haven't you? Surely you've accumulated other memories so bitter you'd rather keep them locked away. Let this one take its place at the top of the pile. Young Master isn't the type to demand you bare every secret or burden of your past. He isn't interested in prying into what you've hidden in your heart."

Tomoe nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Well said, Shiki. I'm impressed."

Shiki shrugged and gave a modest smile. "What else could I say? The fact that you brought me here to tend to Lime, Tomoe-dono, tells me you never had any intention of ending his life or reporting this incident to the master. Isn't that right?"

Tomoe's smile was almost motherly as she replied, "Exactly. There's no need to tell him about everything. Young Master always says, 'Just tell me what I need to know.' It's far better to report that we've gained another capable ally than to announce, 'One of ours got careless and cried himself half to death.' Don't you agree?"

Shiki chuckled softly. "Indeed."

"Anee… Shiki-san… I…"

Lime's tears had long since dried. Though harsh words had rained down on him, the gazes of Tomoe and Shiki bore a warmth that felt, to Lime, like kindness. It stirred something deep within him—an overwhelming joy and gratitude, almost enough to make him cry out again.

The raw pain in his shoulder, where most of the flesh had been torn away, began to make itself known, dull at first but steadily sharpening as his nerves slowly recovered from the shock.

"Let's move on to the main issue," Tomoe said, sitting down beside Lime and fixing him with a steady gaze. "What do you think I am? After today's events, surely you've had some thoughts."

"Well… yeah, I have. But honestly, I don't really care about that sort of thing…" Lime tried.

Tomoe leaned in a little, her expression unyielding. "Then answer me. What am I?"

Lime hesitated for just a moment. "A Greater Dragon. Your name is Shin, isn't it? You're the dragon of the Wasteland, from that old legend. The Mirage Dragon, one of the greater echelons, who isn't even fazed by dragon summoners."

"Well done," Tomoe said with a small smile. "You're correct. I was once a Greater Dragon, the Mirage Dragon named Shin. I'm no hyuman."

"I figured you weren't hyuman. But even knowing that… it doesn't change anything for me," Lime replied, his voice steady.

"Wouldn't you like to change?" Tomoe asked.

"Hm?" Lime blinked, caught off guard.

Shiki let out a slow breath. "Ah… So that's what this is about, Tomoe-dono."

Tomoe gave him a brief glance, nodding almost imperceptibly before turning her attention back to Lime.

"Change?" Lime asked, obviously still confused.

"Yes," Tomoe said, leaning closer. "Your shoulder—let me give you my flesh and blood to replace what was lost. I may no longer be a full dragon, but I'm still a being that exists between dragon and hyuman. Lime, how about becoming my kin?"

Lime's answer was so immediate that it nearly broke the flow of the conversation. "Sure."

"Lime!" Shiki's voice rose with urgency. "Think carefully before you agree to that! Becoming Tomoe-dono's kin means abandoning your hyumanity. You'll become something closer to a demi-human. Is that what you want?"

"Yes," Lime replied, his voice steady and resolute.

"I admit, I had some guilt about making this offer when you're in a weakened state," Tomoe said, "but to think you'd accept so readily… I'm honestly surprised."

Lime offered a faint, almost self-deprecating smile as he spoke. "It's fun, sure, trying to grow stronger as I am. But when the time comes, when I really need power, if it's not there? That's a regret I never want to experience again. I've had enough of that. Besides, I

don’t think being hyuman is anything special, nor do I feel much attachment to staying one. And honestly… I’ve been wanting to speak with the boss directly, not just through written notes. This works out perfectly.”

Shiki sighed in reluctant acceptance. “Lime, if you encounter any difficulties, come to me. You’ll be a unique test subject, and I’ll make sure your needs are met. You’re bound to become quite a fascinating existence.”

Lime laughed weakly. “Heh, thanks for that. Go easy on me, though, Shiki-san.”

Tomoe straightened, her expression was now serious but calm. “Very well, then. Let’s begin. Don’t worry, there will be no pain. As long as you don’t resist the transformation, it’ll be over quickly.”

“Got it, anee. I’m ready,” Lime said, closing his eyes in acceptance.

What followed was a quiet, solemn ritual. Tomoe and Lime’s blood and flesh mingled, merging seamlessly within his body.

There were no bursts of light or dramatic displays of power—only a serene, almost reverent silence as Lime’s body underwent its transformation.

By the time it was over, Lime was no longer fully hyuman.

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Having left Lime in Shiki’s capable hands, Tomoe exhaled deeply, finally releasing the tension that had built throughout the night. The evening was still young, and she knew Makoto wouldn’t have gone to bed yet. With that in mind, she turned her steps toward her

master's residence—a structure that had grown to resemble more of a castle or palace than a mansion.

Reaching the room where Makoto spent his evenings, Tomoe rapped lightly on the door before entering.

"Oh, Tomoe?" Makoto greeted, turning around from where he had been lounging with his back to the door. His expression was relaxed, but his curious gaze met hers as he spoke. "What's up?"

"Young Master," Tomoe began, inclining her head respectfully. "I was in the middle of following up on the Limia investigation, but something unexpected came up, and I thought it best to ask for your input."

"The Limia investigation? Sure, what's on your mind?" Makoto replied, gesturing for her to continue. His sharp eyes, however, flicked down to her waist, focusing on one of her blades.

"Hey, Tomoe. That short sword—*Shirafuji*, right? Did you draw it?"

Tomoe stiffened for a moment before nodding sheepishly. "Ah, yes… just a bit. How did you notice?"

"The bigger one looks exactly the same as always, but the shorter one looks… I don't know, almost like it's been freshly cleaned. That's what stood out."

"I see… Truly, your powers of observation are unmatched, Young Master."

"You know, drawing just the wakizashi—that's usually for pretty specific situations. That's why it caught my attention."

"Specific?" Tomoe echoed, frowning slightly. "Well, you see… there was someone who showed interest in my blades. I let them handle it for a moment, and then I demonstrated by drawing it myself. That's all."

"You let someone hold the wakizashi? Because they were interested in swords? In that case, wouldn't it make more sense to show them the odachi, Eightfold Black Dragon?"

"I thought it would be a waste to let them see the odachi."

"A waste? Tomoe… a wakizashi isn't just some backup weapon, you know," Makoto said, his tone shifting into one of exasperated explanation. "Sure, the name might imply it's secondary compared to the katana, but that's not how it works. The wakizashi is a sword with its own purpose and meaning."

"What do you mean?"

"Wakizashi were used in close quarters, like indoor fights or when there wasn't enough room to swing a full katana. They were also drawn during chaotic brawls. And, in the most extreme cases…" Makoto hesitated for a moment before continuing, "it was the sword samurai used for seppuku—ritual suicide. For a samurai, the wakizashi could hold much greater significance than the katana, depending on the situation. It's not just some sidearm."

"Wh-What?!" Tomoe's eyes widened in shock and disbelief.

"I mean, I'm not an expert or anything," Makoto went on, "but that's pretty common knowledge. For a samurai, the wakizashi wasn't just a smaller version of the katana. It had its own distinct role and weight."

Makoto knew a little more about sword culture than the average person—he had the kind of knowledge one might pick up from an interest in historical dramas and samurai films.

Tomoe stared at him, her mind racing as she processed this newfound perspective. "B But, Young Master! I remember from your memories that there were samurai who wielded only wakizashi! They fought duels and everything!"

Makoto leaned back, sounding more and more like a professor as he shared more of his knowledge. "So, there's this thing called the Buke shohatto—the samurai code and regulations. Samurai were required to carry two swords, but retired ones were allowed to carry just the wakizashi. In a lot of historical dramas, you'll see a retired master swordsman carrying only a wakizashi. That's because…"

Thus began Makoto's impromptu samurai info session, fueled by his knowledge for period dramas and random bits of Edo era trivia.

Tomoe listened intently. But as the lecture went on, her expression shifted from attentive to increasingly pained.

She had deeply misunderstood the significance of the wakizashi, she realized. In her mind, the two swords had always been a pair for combat—a katana as the primary weapon and a wakizashi as a secondary tool, sometimes thrown or used when the primary was unavailable. This misconception, born from her skewed understanding of samurai culture, now stood corrected—and with it, the weight of her earlier mistake loomed larger.

"Why," Tomoe muttered, her voice strained with regret, "why did I give that fool my wakizashi…"

"Just, you know, stick to showing the odachi next time," Makoto said, trying to sound reassuring.

"I should have asked you about this sooner… Ugh…" Tomoe groaned. Her hands were planted firmly on the floor as she bowed her head in despair.

Makoto smiled awkwardly, scratching the back of his head. "Okay, so… what about the Limia investigation? Let's hear it."

Tomoe, pushed herself to her feet, her movements sluggish and defeated. After a quick, apologetic cough, she straightened her posture and did her best to regain her composure.

"Ahem. Then, Young Master, I hope you'll allow me to ask a few questions. At the battlefield, did you happen to… glow?"

"What?"

"And, uh, have you ever had the… peculiar habit of wearing a coat that's half blue and half red, split straight down the middle?"

"Tomoe?" Makoto's tone went flat with suspicion.

"Or," Tomoe stammered, her voice picking up speed, "during your fight with the Dragon Slayer, did you… well, perhaps find yourself completely nude?"

"Tomoe," Makoto interrupted, his eyes narrowing. "What exactly do you think I am?"

Sensing the growing tension in Makoto's aura, Tomoe waved her hands frantically. "No, no, no! I swear, these are serious questions!

But—um—how about this! Have you… perhaps been secretly an old man all along?”

Makoto’s face darkened further, a vein faintly throbbing on his temple. “I see,” he said, his voice eerily calm.

“What… What do you see, Young Master?”

Makoto’s faint smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I see that it’s time for some archery practice.”

“Huh?” Tomoe blinked, caught completely off guard.

“Come on, Tomoe. Join me.”

“Of course, why not?”

“Great. You’re the target.”

“The… target?”

“Yep. The target. Don’t worry, it’s just a light practice.”

“Uh, Young Master,” Tomoe began cautiously, “being the target for your archery, in the dead of night no less, feels less like training and more like… well, torture. Just my humble opinion.”

“I’ll be gentle,” Makoto replied with unnerving calmness as he grabbed Tomoe’s shoulder. His grip was uncomfortably firm.

“Ah, such a passionate invitation,” Tomoe said with a nervous laugh as she attempted to wriggle free. “It warms my heart, really! But, you see, I still have some things I need to get done. Unless, of course”—she tilted her head and dropped her voice into a playful, teasing tone—”you insist on keeping me awake all night, in which case…”

Tomoe tried to step away, but Makoto’s hold on her didn’t loosen in the slightest.

“Oh, I’ll keep you up all night,” he said with an ominous grin. “Passionately. Intensely. Until sunrise. Now, let’s go.”

“Wait! Ah, you’re too strong!” Tomoe yelped.

“Let’s see how many shots I can get in—think we can hit a thousand?”

“A thousand?! Young Master, a thousand is far from light! Not light at all!”

That night, the Demiplane bore witness to a symphony of chaos —terrifying roars, joyful laughter, and anguished screams resonated endlessly until the first light of dawn.



"Let's see… Thick seaweed and something like dried, hardened fish…" Mio murmured to herself as she walked through the bustling market of a port town.

The vibrant streets were lined with stalls overflowing with goods, each vendor energetically calling out to passersby to advertise their wares. The chaotic arrangement of booths and narrow paths gave the town an almost labyrinthine layout, making it hard to discern where the market ended and the streets began.

Most of the people milling about were rugged, muscular men, wearing open vests or simple shirts, their suntanned skin glistening with sweat. But one figure stood out starkly—a woman clad in a jet-black nagagi robe tied with a vivid crimson sash.

Her attire, known as a kimono, was unlike anything the port town's residents had ever seen. Her perfectly straight, glossy black hair and piercing almond-shaped eyes contrasted sharply with her strikingly crimson lips. Her beauty, dark and radiant, was so otherworldly that it drew the gaze of nearly everyone she passed. Some did a doubletake, unable to believe their eyes.

It was none other than Mio, one of the strongest employees of the Kuzunoha Company. Her master, Makoto, was preoccupied with

preparations for a new store in the academy city. And Tomoe, who often accompanied her on errands, was away handling another task on Makoto's behalf. Thus, Mio found herself traveling alone.

Mio's task, also from Makoto, was to "investigate" Koran, a port town nestled along the coastline north from Tsige. However, in truth, her assignment was more of a sightseeing trip.

Despite possessing a large port capable of docking sizable merchant ships, plus being located near the Edge of the World—a region rich in precious resources—Koran had failed to prosper in the way Tsige had. This was primarily due to the Golden Road, the safest and most lucrative trade route in this world, which positioned Tsige as the dominant trade hub. With Tsige monopolizing inland distribution, Koran's value as a logistics center was severely diminished.

Koran had one undeniable strength: its wealth of marine products. The seafood offerings were far superior to those of Tsige, and the market brimmed with ingredients that even Mio, with her extensive culinary knowledge, was encountering for the first time.

Unfortunately, the items Mio sought were nowhere to be found. She sighed deeply as she halted in her tracks.

"No konbu… No katsuobushi… Nothing even close to what I'm looking for," she lamented aloud, sighing in frustration.

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Mio, once the voracious, all-consuming Black Spider of Calamity, had evolved into a being with an unparalleled passion for food. Her obsession with culinary delights had grown so intense that it defined much of her current existence.

While Makoto was busy elsewhere, Mio had thoroughly explored the renowned eateries and taverns of Tsige, the city she called her base of operations. Whenever Makoto returned to Tsige, she delighted in sharing her discoveries of delicious restaurants and foods with him.

Despite Tsige's bustling size and its reputation as a trade hub, it was, at the end of the day, still just one city. Mio couldn't ignore the creeping dread that, eventually, she would run out of new culinary treasures to share with Makoto. This knowledge had begun to weigh heavily on her mind, growing larger with each passing day.

For someone like Mio, who loved both Makoto and fine cuisine immensely, it was a problem of grave proportions.

Then one day, a chance comment from Tomoe had completely upended Mio's perspective.

"If you're so concerned," Tomoe had said nonchalantly, "why not just cook dishes that Young Master would enjoy?"

The words struck Mio like a divine revelation.

Cook. Myself.

For someone who had spent her entire life as a consumer of food—devouring whatever was set before her—the idea of making her own dishes was earth-shattering. The sheer impact of Tomoe's suggestion caused Mio to physically stagger, her eyes wide with astonishment. She stared at Tomoe as though she were a genius, her words the light of truth piercing Mio's soul.

It made perfect sense.

If she cooked the meals herself, she could craft flavors exactly as she envisioned them. Better yet, she could create dishes tailored specifically to Makoto's tastes.

Determined to recreate every dish she'd savored in the past, Mio had eagerly embarked on her culinary journey. Yet, she was quickly met with a crushing realization—she had no idea *how* to actually cook.

Sure, she understood the basics: slicing, frying, boiling, grilling, and so on. But beyond that? The intricacies of seasoning, timing,

and preparation? They were a complete mystery to her.

Frustrated but undeterred, Mio began seeking out those in the Demiplane who could cook—mostly orcs—and asking them to teach her. Day after day, she worked to improve her skills, but no matter how much she tried, she found herself unable to replicate the dishes she enjoyed in Tsige.

Her frustration grew until she finally decided enough was enough. She stopped accepting nearly so many adventurer requests through the guild, instead dedicating her time to revisiting the restaurants and taverns she had once enjoyed. She humbled herself before their chefs and proprietors, bowing deeply and asking to be taught their methods. She promised that her cooking would remain private and would never interfere with their business. She assured them she wouldn't demand their secret recipes or techniques and was content with learning just the basics.

Mio quickly developed a newfound respect for the chefs. The skill and knowledge required to craft the dishes she loved were far beyond her initial expectations. For the chefs, however, this was an overwhelming experience. Mio was already a well-known figure in Tsige who commanded fear, respect, and awe. To have such a person bowing and requesting cooking lessons? It left them trembling. Most of them agreed without hesitation, though some nervously explained that proprietary recipes couldn't be shared due to competition and tradition.

Mio accepted these limitations graciously, keeping her word and respecting their boundaries. She even went so far as to immerse herself in the daily lives of Tsige's chefs—helping with prep work, accompanying them on ingredient runs, and shadowing their routines. Over the course of a month, she developed a solid understanding of the foundational principles behind Tsige's cuisine. Her ability to replicate dishes improved remarkably, and while she still lacked the finesse of the professionals, she was making impressive progress.

Now, having arrived in the port town of Koran, Mio had a clear goal: to recreate the Japanese cuisine of Makoto's home world.

Unlike the hearty, meat-centric fare of Tsige, Japanese cuisine placed greater emphasis on seafood, subtle flavors, and delicate presentations. The port town, with its abundance of fish and sea products, seemed like the perfect place to gather the necessary ingredients.

Things, however, were not going as planned.

"This is so annoying…" Mio murmured to herself. "They hardly have any dried goods here! The only Japanese dish I've successfully recreated so far is tamagoyaki. Tomoe-san has been helping me research cooking methods and techniques, but it seems konbu and katsuobushi are essential for authentic Japanese cuisine. Tomoe's already working on recreating rice and miso, so I've left that to her. I want to procure ingredients and experiment on my own, but…"

Her shoulders slumped as she gazed at the bustling market of Koran. While this port town provided no shortage of intriguing ingredients she wanted to experiment with, essential items like konbu and katsuobushi remained elusive.

The answers she received from locals were no more encouraging:

"Dried goods? Oh, you mean like dried fish? Well, around here, we catch fish year-round, so there's not much reason to dry them. If it's for transport, they're packed in ice and shipped that way…"

"Sure, some families might do simple one-night drying at home, but it's not something people here rely on…"

"There might be some dried stuff in souvenir shops or wholesalers, but it won't be much, I reckon."

Even if she described konbu in detail, most people gave her blank, uncomprehending stares.

Realizing she'd exhausted her options at the market, Mio decided to head to the beach. Some of the fishmongers had told her that drying fish often took place on the sandy shores, so she hoped that speaking directly to the workers involved in the process might

yield some additional insights—or, at the very least, spark a new lead.

So, this is it… she thought, breathing in the salty air. *It has such a distinct smell. Not quite the fishy stench of the market but still pungent. And yet, here on the beach, there's no shortage of seaweed washing ashore. How is it that I can't find the right one?*

Her gaze wandered over the makeshift drying racks nearby, wooden frames stacked with fish to be left out in the sun. Small fish were left whole, while larger ones had been split open. Though the drying racks were stacked with product, nothing on them resembled konbu. With a deep sigh of disappointment, she let her eyes drift toward the pile of blackened seaweed in a corner of the beach.

A worker glanced her way and called out, "That's just sea trash, you know!" But Mio was already walking toward the heap of seaweed.

"There's quite a variety here," she muttered, plucking at the different types. "Thicker pieces, thinner ones… The colors are surprisingly diverse too. Greens, blues, even reds. I wonder what they taste like…"

She picked up a piece, took a bite, and her eyes lit up. "Oh, this is crisp and delicious. They call this trash? What a waste. Let's see… Hmm, this one's a bit slimy but still edible. Oh? This thick one has white powder on it… Interesting. This one has a strong umami flavor. The scent's like the ocean itself, so fresh and vibrant. When it's dry, it gets tougher, but the flavor gets deeper." She chuckled to herself. "It's perfectly suitable as an ingredient. These people have no eye for quality."

As she sorted through the pile, tasting and selecting the best pieces, the workers drying fish nearby began exchanging uneasy glances. This strangely dressed girl picking through beach detritus must have seemed nothing short of bizarre.

Suddenly, one of the workers let out a panicked shout, raising both hands and pointing frantically in Mio's direction. Others quickly joined in, their voices rising in alarm.

Still focused on her seaweed, Mio noticed the commotion too late. *What now? Are they upset that I ate this so-called trash? Honestly, these people—*

Her thoughts were cut short as she felt a massive impact slam into her back.

"Wha—?!"

The force of the blow launched her off her feet, sending her hurtling through the air. Her body skidded across the shallow water before finally splashing into the waves with an unceremonious crash.

The precious seaweed she had so carefully selected was ripped from her grasp and swept away by the tide, vanishing into the ocean. Her gems of flavor had been returned to the sea.

Mio rose silently.

Hanging from her left shoulder was a large silver wolf, its jaws locked tightly onto her flesh, its hind legs repeatedly kicking at her torso in an attempt to drive her down. Despite the increasing force of its bites, Mio's expression remained eerily calm, her body unaffected.

In the distance, a figure sprinted toward her across the sandy beach. Her gaze shifted slightly as the figure drew closer, but her focus quickly returned to the creature still attached to her.

"I'm soaking wet," Mio muttered, her voice devoid of emotion.

The wolf—nearly as long as Mio was tall—gave a low growl, but the sound carried an unmistakable tremor of fear. Its eyes betrayed its hesitation, the aggression in its stance beginning to falter under Mio's oppressive presence.

Mio raised her right hand and gripped the wolf's neck firmly. She then yanked the wolf from her shoulder and slammed it into the shallow water below, as if it weighed no more than a stuffed toy.

The impact resounded sharply as the spray of water briefly obscured the wolf's form. It struggled to stand, its legs trembling under the force of the blow. The beast managed to prop itself up on its forelegs, but its hind legs faltered, leaving it half-slumped and pitifully growling at Mio.

Mio pulled a fan from her sleeve and held it aloft. “Perish, you wretched beast,” she intoned icily, her sharp gaze boring into the wolf’s wide, desperate eyes.

With a swift motion, she swung the fan downward, aiming to strike a final blow.

In that fleeting instant, a black blur surged between Mio and the wolf. The fan narrowly missed its target as the shadow wrapped itself around the fallen beast and darted away.

The intruder dashed several meters before staggering to a halt, collapsing to the ground with the wolf clutched in their arms. It was clear the figure had pushed themselves to their limit; their chest was heaving with the exertion of their desperate sprint.

Mio stood still, her fan still poised mid-swing, and turned toward the kneeling figure.

A tense silence settled over the scene, broken only by the soft sound of shifting waves. But then—

Szzzzzt.

A strange, unfamiliar sound rippled through the air.

The figure glanced instinctively toward the source of the noise—the sea. Deprived of its intended target, Mio’s fan had struck the water’s edge. The waves, which had been steadily rolling forward and back, were now… splitting.

A dozen meters away from Mio, the sea split open to reveal the bare ocean floor beneath. After a few heartbeats, the water rushed back, restoring the shoreline to its original state as if nothing had happened.

The intruder stared in disbelief, still kneeling on the sand and clutching the injured wolf.

“Are you its owner?” Mio called to them. “Then you can join it in death.” She began to close the distance between them, her fan once again poised to strike.

“I’m sorry!” the intruder cried out suddenly, their voice trembling with desperation.

Mio's hand hesitated mid-swing. Her eyes locked onto the figure before her, who now bowed deeply, forehead nearly touching the ground.

They took a deep breath and spoke quickly, words tumbling out in a frantic rush. "I—I just came to see the beach, but this child suddenly attacked you out of nowhere! It's completely my fault. I understand why you're angry, and I'll do anything to make amends. Please, I beg you, forgive us. I'll pay for your medical treatment, and I'll even repair your kimono!"

Mio slowly lowered her fan, sliding it back into her sleeve with measured precision. Her cold gaze remained fixed on the black-haired girl who continued to bow deeply before her. The girl knew the word "kimono"—now that was unexpected.

Mio wasn't about to forgive either the wolf or its owner, which should have been clear from her frosty glare. The girl, however, must have misinterpreted the lowering of the fan as a sign of forgiveness, because her shoulders sagged in relief.

"I'm not injured," Mio said, her voice flat. "So there's no need for treatment. As for my kimono…" She glanced briefly at the faint marks left by the wolf's teeth, barely visible against the fabric. "I'm afraid it's not something you could repair."

In truth, the damage was minimal. The only losses she had suffered were her carefully chosen seaweed being swept away and her clothes getting wet.

"Then, at the very least, please allow me to offer something as an apology," the girl insisted.

Mio gazed at her silently for a moment, pondering. Then, with a faint smirk, she made her demand.

"Very well. If you assist me with my current work and invite me to a satisfying dinner, I'll consider this matter resolved."

"Of course! I'll gladly help with whatever you need! Dinner as well! Thank you so much! Um, may I ask your name?" the girl replied, her tone filled with relief and gratitude.

“Mio,” she answered simply, her gaze softening ever so slightly. “And yours?”

“Hibiki,” the girl replied quickly, glancing nervously at the wolf she still held in her arms. “Mio-san, I truly apologize for everything. This child… I assure you, he’s repentant too.”

The wolf, called Horn, remained defiant even as its tail curled under its body in submission. Its sharp, distrustful eyes stayed locked on Mio.

“Repentant, you say?” Disbelief seeped out of Mio’s voice.

Hibiki, now flustered, clapped her hands together and called out, “I’m sorry! Horn! Go back, now!”

The silver wolf was enveloped in a shimmering light before vanishing into Hibiki’s sash. Mio’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. She was intrigued.

“So, it lives in a tool? A spirit or something similar?” she asked.

“Well… I don’t know all the details, but he’s supposedly a kind of guardian beast,” Hibiki replied sheepishly.

“Interesting.” Mio’s gaze lingered on Hibiki for a moment before she gestured toward the pile of seaweed. “Then, Hibiki, could you assist me in sorting through this seaweed for anything in good condition?”

“Seaweed? Like wakame or konbu? Are you… a chef, Mio-san?”

Mio’s eyes widened dramatically at the word konbu, and she stepped closer, her excitement palpable. “Konbu! Is there konbu here?! Where?! Show me *now*!”

Startled, Hibiki hesitated before pointing at a heap of larger seaweed. “Uh… I think… maybe that big piece over there?”

“This one?! Or this?!” Mio demanded, her intensity returning as she grabbed handfuls of the seaweed and thrust them toward Hibiki for confirmation.

“The one in your right hand… probably,” Hibiki stammered.

Mio froze, staring down at the piece in question. Her mouth opened slightly in astonishment. “I can’t believe it… Not only is it not sold in markets, but it’s just lying here on the shore…”

She tossed aside the seaweed in her left hand, clutching the confirmed konbu with both hands like a sacred artifact. Her awe-filled gaze studied the seaweed as if she'd uncovered a priceless treasure.

Hibiki grew increasingly baffled as she watched the spectacle. *Wait… Is she really a chef? Or something else entirely? I came prepared for the strange things beyond Tsige, but this? A girl who shrugs off wolf attacks and splits the sea with a fan* and *is obsessed with cooking…?*

Hibiki decided to speak up, pointing to the discarded seaweed. "Um, Mio-san… the one you threw away might be wakame. It's used in soups, salads, or even stews."

Mio turned instantly, grabbing the seaweed she'd discarded and inspecting it again. After rinsing it in the sea, she held it up to the light, her eyes glittering with newfound recognition. "Wakame! This is *wakame*! Hibiki-san, I have to say thank you. This discovery… I owe it to Young Master's guidance!"

With a burst of overwhelming enthusiasm, Mio pulled Hibiki into a fierce embrace, lifting her slightly off the ground. She radiated joy as she clung to Hibiki with surprising force.

"Whoa! Mio-san, wait! Who is this young master? Also, I— Ow! This smells so strongly like the ocean! Can you please let go?!" Hibiki cried out, her voice muffled.

Thus, in a strange twist of fate, Hibiki Otonashi, the hero of Limia, and Mio, one of Makoto's strongest followers, reunited in an unexpected and chaotic embrace, their paths crossing once more in the most unconventional way.

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“So, Hibiki, you were heading to Tsige to look for weapons?” Mio asked as they walked. The path was a humble dirt road, its surface compacted solely by the tread of countless feet over the years.

“Yes,” Hibiki replied with a polite nod. “We were originally planning to use the teleportation network along the Golden Road to reach Tsige, but… circumstances forced us to take a more discreet route using ships and less-traveled teleport points. And that led us here.”

This was the shortest route between Koran and Tsige. To either side of the road lay mountains, forests, and lakes, making it a popular area for adventurers from Tsige to complete requests or hone their skills. However, it was far less traveled than the bustling Golden Road; it was midday, but it had been at least half an hour since they had seen other travelers.

It had been two days since Mio and Hibiki first met on the shores of Koran. Since then, Hibiki had shared myriad insights about seafood preparation with Mio, who proved an enthusiastic student. They had also stopped at several eateries where Mio had heartily sampled new dishes, expanding her culinary repertoire.

When Hibiki mentioned that her party was on their way to Tsige, Mio had offered to accompany them. Hibiki’s companions, though initially hesitant, ultimately accepted Mio’s offer. They understood that Hibiki had been struggling emotionally after witnessing the death of a close companion during the battle at Stella Fortress.

For them, this journey was meant to be incognito. The last thing they wanted to do was reveal Hibiki’s true identity or their status as a hero’s party. Even now, Hibiki hadn’t told Mio she was a hero; instead, they’d bonded with her over their shared passion for recreating food from another world. Hibiki even shared snippets of her own knowledge about cuisine from her original world, eager to contribute to Mio’s endeavors.

“Hmm, what exactly is this ‘otoshibuta’ you mentioned?” Mio asked.

“It’s a type of lid used in simmering dishes to ensure the ingredients cook—” Hibiki began, but her explanation was interrupted.

“Excuse me, but may I have a moment?” The interruption came from Woody, the mage walking alongside them. Having observed that once Mio and Hibiki started talking about food, their conversations tended to stretch on indefinitely, he’d decided it was better to clear up any pressing matters beforehand.

“What is it, Woody?” Mio replied, only betraying a hint of irritation at the interruption.

“I’ll be brief. I know how long these discussions can get once they start,” Woody said with a small, apologetic bow. “I need to ask you something straightforward. Who exactly are you, Mio-dono? You’ve mentioned being an adventurer, a merchant, and a cook…”

Woody had been quietly analyzing Mio for some time. Despite her claims of being an adventurer and merchant, her behavior and mannerisms suggested someone who wasn’t accustomed to mingling with society. She reminded him of either a reclusive sage who had abandoned worldly concerns or the sheltered daughter of a wealthy noble family.

And yet, here she was, traveling alone from Tsige to Koran. Something about her story felt off; there was a dissonance about her that he couldn’t quite ignore.

“I am indeed registered as an adventurer,” Mio began, her tone calm but measured. “I’m also a member of a certain trading company. And as I mentioned earlier, cooking is what captivates me most these days. If you’re asking who I am, that’s the best answer I can give.”

“That’s… quite the mishmash of a background,” Woody murmured.

Belda spoke up next. “If you’re an adventurer, why don’t you travel with a party?”

Ever cautious, Belda had approved of Mio coming along for the journey but had never dropped his guard. It was only natural to

question someone whose background and identity were unclear.

"Hmm, yes, about that," Mio replied nonchalantly. "Apparently, my level is such that there are very few people I can form a party with. Ideally, I'd love to work alongside Young Master, but there's such a vast gap in our levels… And he's traveling elsewhere at the moment."

In truth, Mio wasn't part of any party. While she mentioned wanting to team up with Makoto, his level of one made it a nonstarter. Even Tomoe, the closest to her in level, was too distant for them to form a viable party. And so, thanks to guild regulations, Mio adventured solo.

"Pardon me, Mio-dono," Woody began, "but may I ask—what *is* your level?"

"I'm sorry, but Young Master has forbidden me from revealing my level to anyone else without reason. In exchange, I won't ask about your levels either, so let's leave it at that."

"Woody, Belda! This isn't an interrogation," Hibiki interjected, her voice tinged with frustration. "Let's try to enjoy ourselves, okay? Sure, we're on a tight schedule and taking the shortest route, but we're still going to be traveling together for at least another day."

Woody and Belda murmured quick apologies, and their expressions softened. Apparently Hibiki's gentle reprimand was enough to quell their inquisitiveness.

The route Tomoe and Mio originally intended to take from Tsige to Koran was a longer one which passed through several hyuman and demi-human settlements. It would have taken close to a week to reach their destination. In contrast, the path the five of them were currently traversing was a far shorter but more treacherous route. Impassable for wagons and rife with encounters with monsters, it was an option suitable only for adventurers.

The group, which included the physically frail Chiya, planned to spend two days traveling this route to Tsige.

"Thank you, Hibiki," Mio said with a nod of appreciation before turning to the group. "By the way, speaking of levels… How strong

are you all, relatively speaking?”

“We can hold our own in a fight,” Hibiki answered, though her words carried a hint of hesitation, and a cloud seemed to pass over the expressions of her party members.

“Is that so…” Mio mused. “Normally, I wouldn’t bring this up, but today I’ve been keeping a close eye on everything. There’s something unusual heading our way. Can I leave it to you, or would you rather I handle it?”

“You’re pulling our legs, right? There’s nothing out there,” Woody replied, furrowing his brows.

“Yeah, I don’t sense anything either,” Chiya added, shaking her head. As a mage, she had been alternating with Woody to maintain detection spells for their surroundings. As they spoke, she reactivated her spell to double-check, but still she detected nothing.

“I extended my detection range a bit further, so it’s not surprising you haven’t noticed yet,” Mio explained calmly. Then her eyes sharpened. “Ah, you won’t need detection anymore. Look—over there.”

Mio pointed toward the distant mountain range. At the base of the hills, where a dense forest stretched out toward them, something strange was happening.

“What… is that?”

“The wind… It’s raging?”

In the distance, trees were being uprooted and thrown into the air, swirling as if caught in a massive storm. The forest below swayed wildly, though no sound yet reached the group. Even from this far away, it was clear something extraordinary and dangerous was unfolding. Worse still, the source of the disturbance was moving rapidly in their direction, accelerating as it came.

“See it now? So, what will you do?” Mio asked.

“Mio-san, do you know what that is?!” Hibiki asked, frightened.

“A detection range that far? Impossible…” Woody muttered to himself in disbelief, though Mio ignored his remark as she answered Hibiki’s question.

“I can’t say for certain what it is, but… my guess is that it’s an insect-type monster, probably one that mutated in the Wasteland and crossed the mountains. It’s rare, but not unheard of.”

“A Wasteland monster?!” Belda exclaimed, anxiety written plainly on his face. He had been planning to equip himself properly in Tsige before venturing into the Wasteland. Facing a creature like this before even reaching the city had not been part of his calculations.

As the group talked over their options, the monster moved closer with staggering speed. Its form became clearer with each passing moment. Finally, the creature was close enough to trigger both Woody and Chiya’s detection spells.

“What is that thing?!” Woody exclaimed.

“It’s… so strong! And huge!” Chiya gasped, her voice trembling.

“What do we do, Hibiki?!” Belda shouted, looking to the hero for leadership.

Hibiki hesitated a second, then turned to Mio. “Mio-san, is that thing heading our way stronger than the Black Spider of Calamity?”

“Uh, a spider?” Mio asked, tilting her head.

“Yes,” Hibiki confirmed. “It’s a monstrous, ravenous spider. Have you heard of it?”

“I have,” Mio replied, smiling as if recalling a distant memory. “But if you’re asking which is stronger, the answer is the spider. But… does it matter?”

Mio’s response carried a deeper meaning than her words let on. From her perspective, the “spider”—in other words, herself in her past form—had never fought with her full strength. Thus, comparing her past self to any other monster seemed meaningless.

So, she’d answered based on her honest assessment: In terms of raw power, there was no doubt that she would triumph over whatever was now approaching. For Mio, the comparison was not one of concern, merely a point of idle curiosity.

The difference in power between the nonserious spider Hibiki imagined and the fully serious spider Mio envisioned was vast. This

disparity in understanding would ultimately lead Hibiki to make a critical misjudgment.

"For us, it does matter," Hibiki decided, drawing her sword. "Everyone, get ready! We'll fight!" At her command, the rest of the party followed suit, each preparing their respective weapons and readying themselves for battle.

Oh my, they're really going for it, Mio thought. *That monster is clearly out of their league. Is this group the type that won't survive long in the Wasteland? That would be troublesome. Well, as long as I step in if Hibiki gets into serious danger, it should be fine.*

"Okay. Best of luck. Let me know if things get dire," Mio said casually.

As if on cue, a violent wind began to howl through the area. Unfazed, Mio floated gracefully into the air and perched herself on a nearby tree branch, resting her chin on her hand as she observed.

When the gale subsided, the full figure of the approaching monster was revealed.

Its lower body rested on four legs that extended from its abdomen, while its upper body was humanoid in shape, complete with two massive scythe-like arms.

"A… praying mantis?" Hibiki muttered, not quite believing what she was seeing.

Indeed, standing before them was an insectile creature that rather resembled a mantis—except that it stood over three meters tall. Not waiting a moment, the creature lunged, swinging its massive scythe arms in a horizontal arc aimed at the group.

Oh?

Mio's razor-sharp eyes saw leaves caught in the path of the attack, instantly shredded into tiny fragments. Her interest piqued; she studied the creature more closely.

I see. It must have absorbed a weakened wind spirit somewhere and mutated. Judging from its size, it looks like it's eaten quite a lot since then. That explains why it moved over the mountains—it ran out of prey in its territory. Normally, this would've

triggered an emergency quest, and the Tsige Adventurer's Guild would've been in an uproar.

Mio's calm analysis was a result of much practice; she'd dealt with dozens of Wasteland-related requests and even escorted novice adventurers, tasks that had taught her how to balance observation with intervention.

Compared to the seasoned adventurers of the Tsige guild, Mio figured that Hibiki's party ranked around third-tier at best. While she didn't know their precise levels, their survival instincts and overall judgment placed them as a moderately skilled group.

"Belda!" Hibiki called out sharply.

"Got it!" Belda cried, stepping forward to intercept one of the mantis' scythe blows with his wide sword.

Oh, that was actually an impressive defense. Still… the weapon's visibly damaged already. I thought their gear looked shabby when we met, but this is just… Wait, what?!

Mio's shock stemmed entirely from Belda. She'd just realized that his sword, which had taken the brunt of the attack, was no longer usable, yet Belda himself seemed unaware of this. Instead, he raised the damaged weapon to block the mantis's next strike with its other scythe.

Even worse, Belda appeared oblivious to the difference in nature between the two attacks. The right scythe, now descending, was clearly the most powerful part of the monster's body. This attack was going to be on a completely different level. And neither Belda nor any of Hibiki's party knew what was coming.

Mio clicked her tongue in frustration. She realized she had overestimated this group, and her disappointment was overwhelming.

"Idiot! Dodge it!" she shouted in warning, unable to stand by any longer.

"Huh?" Belda didn't even react to Mio's words, let alone take her warning seriously. The only one to respond was Hibiki, who voiced her confusion from behind him.

A flash.

The monster's second strike.

Belda attempted to deflect it just as he had before. But this time, the result was drastically different.

The scythe sliced cleanly through Belda's sword, splitting it in two. The attack didn't stop there—it tore through his metal armor as though it were paper. A spray of crimson blood erupted as Belda collapsed onto his back.

His expression wasn't one of despair but sheer disbelief. He was still alive, though barely. Almost immediately, Chiya's healing magic bathed him in a soft glow, beginning the process of mending his grievous wounds. Meanwhile, Woody was chanting, readying an attack spell to counter the monster.

The fight wasn't over yet—it was just beginning.

"Belda! No… Mio-san, help us, please!" Hibiki's desperate plea rang out.

A ripple of unease spread through Woody and Chiya at those words. Even Mio was taken aback by Hibiki's unexpected cry for help.

Belda's injuries were severe, but the party was still capable of fighting. If they didn't regroup now, it was clear they'd all be slaughtered. To abandon the fight at this point and shift to a retreat was an unforgivable mistake.

What Mio couldn't possibly know was the depth of Hibiki's trauma from losing her comrade Navarre in battle. On the surface, sure, she appeared to have moved on, but she was far from healed. The shock of failing to save an ally on the battlefield had fostered an aversion to combat itself. But the monster had no regard for human emotions or circumstances.

Though Mio hadn't anticipated stepping in this early, she moved with astounding—almost inhuman—speed to where Belda had fallen.

"Hibiki, I'm disappointed," she declared as she knelt down next to Mio. "Pathetic. If you're inexperienced, then acknowledge it and

stay out of trouble. You're a nuisance. You two there—can I leave you to treat this knight?"

Hibiki's shoulders trembled at Mio's sharp rebuke, while Woody and Chiya stammered out affirmations.

"Honestly. A little bug wreaking havoc on the forest. Who's going to compensate for the lost mushrooms and fruit if its rampage destroys the harvest sites?"

The monster let out a grating screech, baring its fangs, and swung its scythe at Mio. With a flick of her closed fan, she sent the descending blade skyward.

"What?!"

"No way?!"

Hibiki and company could only gape in astonishment.

"Perish," Mio murmured coldly.

With another graceful motion, she swept her fan horizontally. In an instant, the monster was cleaved in half along with several of the surrounding trees. Its upper and lower body crumpled to the ground in two separate heaps.

"It's done," Mio declared calmly. "At least this way, you can harvest the materials."

No one spoke. That monster had exuded an undeniable presence of power, but it had been felled like a bumbling street thug.

For her part, Mio hadn't even broken a sweat. She stood there breathing normally, leisurely opening her fan and fanning her face.

"Is the knight going to be all right?" she asked casually.

"Ah, um, yes. I think I can close his wounds," Chiya replied hesitantly.

"I see. Then you won't be needing me. Hibiki, help me dissect this monster," Mio instructed.

"Mio-san! Behi—" Hibiki's warning came too late.

A scythe slashed across Mio's back in a diagonal strike. Her stance faltered slightly, forcing her to take a few steps forward to

regain her footing. Behind her, the upper half of the monster—the one that had just been cut in half—floated eerily in midair.

The wings on the creature's back beat so fast they were invisible, keeping its body aloft. Its vitality was astounding.

"Mio… san?" Hibiki called out.

"Hibiki," Mio responded, her voice noticeably lower, colder than it had been back on the beach. *How is she so calm?* Hibiki marveled. If she hadn't seen the scythe hit, she would have had no idea she was injured.

But… was she injured? The monster, driven mad with rage at being cleaved in half, continued its furious assault on Mio, its scythes slashing at her back again and again. Yet, her skin stayed intact; no blood splattered from her body. The brutality of the attack was met with an eerie stillness.

"Does my kimono look frayed?" Mio asked, sounding like she didn't really care one way or the other.

"Uh…" Hibiki hesitated, unsure how to respond.

"It's… shredded, Mio-onee-chan," Chiya said cautiously, her words reluctant but honest.

"I see," Mio replied simply. She returned her fan to her pocket, inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly.

Then she turned swiftly to face the monster behind her. She was facing a chaotic storm of whirling scythe blades, a deadly domain of destruction.

And yet… Mio showed not the slightest hesitation. She reached out with both hands, her movements deliberate and steady.

"You worthless insect!" she roared in fury.

With her left hand, she caught the monster's right scythe mid-swing as though it were a twig. Simultaneously, a dark energy surged from her right hand, wrapping around the creature's left scythe and pinning it down along with the entire arm at its base.

In the next instant, the grotesquely muscular arm of the monster shriveled as though drained of life. Then, with a gruesome ripping sound, it tore off at the root.

Hibiki and her companions were too stunned to breathe, let alone speak. The creature let out a piercing, agonized scream.

Mio wasn't quite finished yet. With her now free right hand, she gripped the monster's remaining arm. Then, with sheer brute strength, she ripped the monster's right arm from its body.

A delicate, refined woman's slender arms had just torn an enormous, muscular limb—complete with its massive scythe—clean off a giant, powerful monster.

Another terrible, guttural scream echoed through the air. The monster was reduced to a broken husk, its lower body gone and both arms torn off. What was left of it collapsed to the ground.

The monster seemed to have finally realized its defeat. Yet, clinging desperately to life, it attempted to flee the battlefield, using what little flying ability it had left. Its wings buzzed furiously, whipping up gusts of wind as its mutilated form struggled to escape.

"Be silent!" Mio snapped.

The creature's massive body floated into the air—not by its own volition, but because Mio had impaled its torso with the severed arm she had torn off earlier. Lifting it high, she slammed it into the ground with enough force to crack the earth beneath at the site of impact.

"This kimono… A gift from Young Master… How dare you?!"

As the creature's mangled upper body lay motionless and the remnants of its lower half sprawled uselessly, both were suddenly engulfed by darkness. This was no ordinary shadow—the darkness writhed and pulsated, as if living, while it enveloped the enormous form. Slowly, the creature was consumed, the shadow shrinking until it vanished entirely, leaving no trace of the monster behind.

"Oh no… How careless of me… Will the kimono even be repairable?" Mio murmured, her expression a picture of distress as she inspected the damage to her clothes.

Hibiki's party could only gape in wonder. That display of power had been unbelievable; they now knew they were in the presence of a being far beyond their level of comprehension. And now, all of that

anger was gone. It was like Mio had transformed into a different person.

"This won't do," Mio announced, her tone sharpening again. "We don't have the luxury of dawdling."

For a moment she stared off into space, as if deliberating on something… or talking to someone, Woody realized. He had left Chiya to tend to Belda's injuries and was now watching Mio closely.

Telepathy? But with whom…?

After a brief pause, Mio turned back to the group. "I've decided we need to get back to Tsige right now. I can't leave you behind, so you'll have to forgive me for this."

Before anyone could respond, a shroud of darkness enveloped the three. The soft sound of collapsing bodies echoed as Hibiki and her companions lost consciousness.

Mio reestablished her telepathic connection. *"Tomoe-san, they're all down. Take us to Tsige, please."*

"I'm not a taxi service, you know…"

"Taxi? Is that a term I haven't learned yet? Remember, this is all for the sake of completing my knowledge of Japanese cuisine. Surely, that's reason enough for you to help me."

"Ah, yes, I forgot. Fine, fine. For such a noble cause, I'll oblige. I'll drop you off at the gates of Tsige. Agreed?"

"That will be perfect."

With those words, the battlefield was left silent with its scars. The five presences that had filled it vanished without a trace.

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"Oh, you're here."

A familiar voice came from behind the counter, near the hidden entrance to the workshop. This was the Tsige branch of the Kuzunoha Company, situated in a corner of a frontier city renowned for its rapid growth.

At the counter, a dusky-skinned demi-human greeted them with a warm smile, exuding a calming presence.

The Kuzunoha Company had quickly grown into one of the most beloved establishments in the city, particularly among adventurers. Known for its superior-quality weapons and equipment crafted from exceptional materials, it was a dream destination for anyone seeking top-notch gear. For the right price, the company also offered custom modifications and original weapon designs. Their wares, reputed to save lives in critical moments, were not only sought after by adventurers but also highly regarded by anyone in professions requiring combat readiness.

Next to the adventurers in line for weapons, several townsfolk stood, waiting for their turn to purchase medicines. The company's medicines, often touted as being more effective than average magical potions, were in high demand and flew off the shelves, contributing to the trading company's meteoric success.

Hibiki's party had been brought to Tsige unconscious, courtesy of Mio. She'd delivered them to an inn, quietly explaining the situation to the innkeeper before taking her leave. Over the next few days, the group gradually recovered, Belda in particular focusing on healing from his injuries. The innkeeper, under Mio's instruction (and with some details altered for convenience), provided an explanation of what had transpired.

And now, today.

Belda was finally walking normally, and the party had reunited to visit the Kuzunoha Company branch, where they'd been told Mio was waiting for them.

As soon as they stepped inside, they felt the curious and envious glances landing on them from all over the store. What they didn't know that was these looks stemmed from the assumption that

Hibiki's group had some sort of connection to Mio and, by extension, the Kuzunoha Company—a connection that anyone in Tsige would be envious of.

As the forest ogre clerk announced, "Thank you for waiting," Mio emerged from the back room.

"It looks like the knight's fully recovered. I'm glad it wasn't anything serious," she said.

"About that, I must thank you again for your help. I heard you even assisted with my treatment. I'm truly grateful," Belda said, stepping forward and offering a polite bow. Mio gave him a quick glance before turning her attention to Hibiki.

"Don't mention it. I'm used to babysitting. So, Hibiki, your companions seem to be in good shape now. Do you have some time to spare?"

"Yes. The innkeeper told me you wanted to speak with me. Is it about the battle with the monster?" Hibiki's expression clouded. She was still weighed down by the memory of her humiliating failure in the fight and the sting of Mio's harsh words about her incompetence. In all her life, Hibiki had never had someone express disappointment in her, nor had she been forced to confront her own weaknesses.

Combined with the doubts about her own power that had begun to grow after the battle with the demon general, this sense of inadequacy had become a growing burden for her.

"The battle? Oh, no, that doesn't concern me," Mio replied dismissively. "Like I mentioned earlier, I'm used to protecting people like you. You can chalk it up to luck."

"Uh, luck? I assumed after showing you such a pathetic display, I thought you might have some words of reprimand for me."

"Oh, I was exasperated, to be sure. But you survived, didn't you? That's what matters. Besides, I'm not your companion or your mentor. Why should I have to offer you advice or scold you?"

The comment—and its implication that their survival hardly interested Mio—hit Hibiki and her companions hard.

"Then why did you help us?" Hibiki asked, her voice trembling.

"I told the innkeeper already, Hibiki." Mio answered matter-of-factly. "I had business with you. You haven't told me yet how to extract stock from seafood and dried goods."

"Stock…?" Hibiki repeated, incredulous.

"Yes."

"That's the only reason?"

"Of course. If someone knows a superior cooking method, it would be a waste to let them die. That's all. Now, Hibiki, since your other concerns are resolved, spare me some of your time, will you?"

Hibiki stood staring for a moment. *After all of that, all she cares about is* cooking*?*

"Mio-dono, we're grateful for your help, but we cannot accept your request," Woody cut in. "We came here seeking rigorous training and superior equipment. Unfortunately, we can't afford to waste our time."

It was true; Hibiki's group had traveled to Tsige in search of the best training grounds and equipment to get ready for their rematch with the demon general and the eventual reclamation of Stella Fortress. Their purpose left little room for distractions.

"Stop it." Mio spoke without malice or mockery but with the tone of an adult gently scolding a child. "A party that struggles against something of that level, with no grasp of proper judgment, is nothing but prey in the Wasteland. Your levels may be high, but out there, you're just oversized kids. It's pointless."

"Even so! We have to get stronger! We don't have time!" Hibiki exclaimed, her voice heavy with urgency.

"I don't understand. I thought you were just peculiar adventurers, but is there some urgent reason driving you?" Mio sighed deeply. She recognized the peculiar, narrow-focused desperation of adventurers rushing headlong toward their deaths. Hibiki's eyes carried that unmistakable glimmer.

"That's…" Hibiki faltered.

"Regardless, I'd appreciate some repayment for saving your lives. And are you seriously planning to take such a young kid into

the Wasteland?" Mio added, her gaze shifting briefly to Chiya.

"…"

"Not talking now, are we? More foolish than I thought. That's troubling. I can't back down on this either…"

"Mio-san, how about we limit ourselves to day trips into the Wasteland for now, so we can gradually acclimate ourselves?" Hibiki offered. "Then in the evenings, I'll see what I can do to help you."

"With your abilities the way they are now, even a few days is a gamble," Mio said, shaking her head and tapping her fingers on the counter as she considered their plight. "What to do, what to do…"

Their conversation was interrupted by a deep voice from behind the counter: "In that case, how about this?"

A man emerged from the same room Mio had come from earlier. He was no hyuman but an elder dwarf craftsman.

"Hmm? Beren, do you have an idea?" Mio asked, her interest piqued.

"It's not exactly brilliant, but hear me out. Mio-sama, you want to learn about cooking from the young lady here, correct? Ideally, you'd also like to hone your skills."

"That's right," Mio confirmed.

"And this young lady's group here wishes to strengthen themselves in the Wasteland?"

"Yes, that's why we came," Hibiki replied resolutely.

Hibiki's group members all nodded in agreement.

"I see. However, as Mio-sama said, if you proceed as you are now, it won't be long before you meet your demise. There's no doubt about it."

"Ugh!" Hibiki grimaced at the blunt assessment.

"Beren, stop dragging it out and explain," Mio interjected impatiently.

"My apologies, Mio-sama," Beren said. "Here's my proposal: If the young lady here agrees to teach you her culinary techniques, we'll provide your party with new equipment. Payment can be deferred, and we'll even offer a discount. Once you have your new

gear, you can head into the Wasteland. That will give Mio-sama about three days—roughly the time needed to craft the equipment—to learn from you. Afterward, you can continue teaching her in the evenings. Might I add, your current equipment—it is decent quality but quite battered. Venturing into the Wasteland with equipment in such a state would be suicide."

"What if even new equipment doesn't guarantee their survival?" Mio questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"In that case, we can arrange for Toa and her party to go with them. If the request comes from Mio-sama, they won't refuse."

"Hmm, with Toa and her team, a day-trip range into the Wasteland shouldn't be too concerning. Beren, this is a solid plan."

"Thank you, Mio-sama. So, what say you all?" Beren asked, turning to Hibiki and her companions.

"Three days, huh?" Belda asked skeptically. "Can't that timeline be shortened?"

"Considering we'll need to take measurements and craft the equipment from scratch, three days is already an extraordinarily short time frame," Beren replied, his tone patient but firm. "Most craftsmen would consider it impossible."

"And how can we be sure we can trust these adventurers who will accompany us?" Woody inquired. For a mage, betrayal by hired adventurers in dangerous territory wasn't an unfounded concern—it could spell disaster for the entire party.

"Toa and her party are the top adventurers in Tsige," Beren assured him. "They're well known, and she's not the type to act recklessly. The average level in their party is over 450, which puts them on the cusp of elite status. What's more, no adventurer in this town would be foolish enough to betray Mio-sama's trust."

"Level 450?!" Woody exclaimed.

"If you still can't bring yourself to trust Toa and her party, we'll have to consider alternative measures," Beren added, his gaze darkening ominously. For a fleeting moment, a hint of killing intent radiated from the dwarf, and it sent a shiver down Woody's spine.

The mage quietly stepped back, leaving a subtle nod that could be interpreted as reluctant approval.

"Now then, Hibiki, what's your decision?" Mio asked, her tone calm but firm. "This arrangement should work in your favor."

"I understand. We accept. Please take care of us," Hibiki replied with a slight bow.





“Great! Let’s start measurements and preparations straightaway.” Mio began giving directions with her usual authority. “Beren, hurry up. Hibiki, you’re first. After that, contact Toa…”

Beren gave a respectful nod. “As you wish. Everyone, this way, please.”

Hibiki’s party followed Mio and Beren into the back of the shop, and so began the reawakening of the hero of Limia in the frontier.

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For Hibiki, these past few months had felt like the shortest of her life.

After Mio introduced her to Toa’s adventurer party, Hibiki spent her days learning the unique decision-making skills and thought processes that adventurers rely on. Toa herself wielded incredible speed and excelled in exploiting vulnerabilities, a stark contrast to Hibiki’s straightforward approach.

Still grappling with the trauma of losing her comrade, Hibiki found herself utterly defeated by Toa in their sparring matches—a first for her, especially to be so thoroughly outdone by a mere hyuman. Occasionally, Hibiki managed to hold her own.

While her level hadn’t increased significantly during this period, she grew exponentially in types of strength that couldn’t be measured by numbers.

She also sparred with Mio during this time, but the results were even more humiliating. Mio barely allowed Hibiki to make a single move before ending the bout.

The lessons weren’t limited to sparring either. One night, while Hibiki rested in a room reinforced with protective barriers against

potential attackers, she awoke to Mio's hand gripping the back of her neck. Somehow, Mio had bypassed the barriers entirely. Hibiki's attempt to resist was effortlessly subdued, and she found herself dragged to the kitchen, where Mio's eyes gleamed with excitement as she demanded another cooking lesson.

One time, Hibiki, unable to hold back her frustration, asked both Mio and Toa why she was losing to Toa despite having a higher level.

Toa smiled wryly as she recalled her own time in Zetsuya. "I used to think the same way back then. But you know, levels are just one indicator. They don't tell the whole story."

The response made Toa think of a certain masked merchant, and a small chuckle came to her lips.

Mio dismissed the concept entirely. "A high level just means you've killed a lot. Real strength isn't something you quantify—it's something you feel. Learn to trust your instincts, not just the numbers."

Mio was reflecting on her past as a ravenous creature driven solely by hunger. While there was a trace of self-deprecation in her tone, Hibiki could only look at her in admiration, captivated by the sheer intensity and honesty Mio exuded.

When Hibiki—as incomplete as her own knowledge was—taught Mio how to extract broth from dried sardines and kelp, Mio reacted like a child discovering something wondrous for the first time. Her eyes sparkled with an innocent, unrestrained joy that contrasted sharply with her otherwise fearsome demeanor.

The two shared more than just black hair—they shared knowledge from the world Hibiki had once called home. For Hibiki, who was slowly overcoming her trauma, Mio became a source of comfort and familiarity.

Finally, Hibiki's party received their recall order from Limia. It would be their last night in Tsige.

Months before, the group had been met with cold stares and skepticism, perceived as beneficiaries of special treatment from the Kuzunoha Company. However, their camaraderie with Toa's party,

their mutual aid in the Wasteland, and Hibiki's gradual recovery of her natural charisma—a trait that had drawn people to her since she was young—gradually won over the frontier adventurers. By the time of their departure, they were embraced as part of the community.

That night, a farewell banquet was held in their honor. Adventurers gathered by the dozens, drinking and reminiscing with lively chatter and laughter. Some even declared their intention to follow Hibiki back to Limia and fight alongside her.

Belda and Woody disappeared somewhere in a drunken haze. Perhaps they had been whisked away by some women wishing to share one final, intimate moment before the parting.

Chiya, who had at first felt homesick and out of place among the rough adventurers, found a kindred spirit in Toa's sister, Rinon, who aspired to become an artist. The two young girls had bonded over shared interests, and tonight, they had already retired together, curled up in the same bed, with glasses of juice left by the bedside.

Hibiki, however…

Hibiki had climbed the city's outer wall, leaving the noise and celebration behind. From her perch, the lights of Tsige twinkled behind her, while the Golden Road stretched ahead. It was the very spot where Tsige's most influential merchant, Patrick Rembrandt, had once stood next to his butler and bid farewell to Makoto Misumi.

Hibiki, however, wasn't alone.

Sitting casually on the wall's parapet, a familiar figure gazed at her: Mio.

"You said you had something to discuss? Was it important enough to call me to a place like this?" Mio asked, her tone calm yet sharp.

"Yes," Hibiki replied, turning her gaze from the road ahead to meet Mio's.

"Make it brief," Mio said, crossing her legs elegantly and tilting her head slightly. "Being out here at this hour could lead to unnecessary misunderstandings."

"Short and to the point, as always, when it's not about cooking," Hibiki said with a soft smile. "Fine, I'll keep it quick. I have two things to say. First of all, Mio-san, thank you very much."

Hibiki bowed deeply in gratitude. "If we hadn't met you in Koran, I don't think we'd still be alive. The Wasteland was much harsher than I ever imagined. It all started with Horn's outburst. But, anyway, I'm truly glad we met you."

"I had my reasons as well. You don't need to thank me so formally," Mio replied with her usual detachment.

It was Horn's reaction to my scent that triggered that attack, Mio thought. *Although these kids never realized that I was the Black Spider they've likely heard of, that wolf knew from the start. Even so, I've made sure to silence him. There's no point bringing it up now.*

Mio had already deduced the reason for the silver wolf's aggression and had "explained" the matter to Horn, ensuring the creature wouldn't reveal her true identity to Hibiki and the others.

"It was surprising enough that there was a katana, but this sword that Beren crafted—it's amazing. My encounter with him was thanks to you, so please accept my gratitude."

Hibiki's fascination with the katana she'd seen in Beren's workshop was unmistakable. Thanks to her background in kendo, she had felt an immediate connection to the blade. When she held and drew it for the first time, the craftsmanship took her breath away. But Beren had immediately dismissed the idea of her wielding a katana.

"The techniques your body remembers are suited for single-edged blades," the dwarf had told her. "However, the sword style you're using now clearly aligns with double-edged weapons. A katana requires specialized maintenance and techniques. I wouldn't recommend it. It's a weapon I only suggest to people whose activities are within my oversight."

His words struck home. Hibiki's original familiarity with swordsmanship came from kendo and a smattering of self-taught

techniques. However, her combat skills in this world were a fusion of what she'd learned from the late Navarre and her own improvisations with a bastard sword. Transitioning to a katana now would not only be difficult but impractical.

She heeded his advice and, as a result, received her first weapon that exceeded her current abilities. Rather than serving as a simple tool to channel her skills, this sword required her to grow stronger to fully wield it. The design, laced with Beren's playful creativity, was closer to a great sword in size, but its weight was surprisingly lighter than her previous weapon.

When wielded with proper consideration for its size, however, the new sword felt no different from her previous weapon. One detail Hibiki didn't know was that the weapon was forged using the mantis monster's scythes—material Mio had casually shown to Beren as inspiration.

Hibiki averted her gaze from Mio, turning her eyes toward the starry night sky. "I still think I'm only using about half of this sword's potential. Beren-san seemed disappointed… He said I haven't unlocked its true mechanisms yet. Leaving this city with unfinished business like this frustrates me."

"You don't need to stay here any longer to improve," Mio assured her. "With your current strength, you can refine your skills wherever you go. As for Beren's intricate designs, you'll figure them out soon enough. That sort of toy won't trouble you for long."

"Ahaha, I'll do my best," Hibiki promised, then hesitated for a moment. It was rare to see her struggle with her words, yet now she seemed to be carefully considering how to phrase her next statement. Mio, who had eaten her fill and had nothing pressing to do, waited patiently.

"Mio-san, would you come with us?" Hibiki suddenly asked. "I promise we'll make sure there's no disrespect shown to your company's leader!"

Although she'd spent time at the Kuzunoha Company's store, Hibiki had never met its enigmatic leader, Raidou. He was often

spoken of by those around him, and Hibiki had even heard tales from Toa. Yet, he hadn't gotten back yet from his latest procurement trip, and neither she nor her companions had ever crossed paths with him.

"Raidou-san?" Toa had said when asked to describe him. "Hmm, if I had to put it simply, he's someone without limits. I met him back in the Wasteland at our base, Zetsuya, which is destroyed now, ahaha… Well, he's not a bad person, but let me give you some advice—don't even think about making an enemy of him. You'd only regret it."

Mio's account was equally emphatic: "Young Master? He's a magnificent person. I've devoted everything to serving him."

And Beren had said, "My dream is to craft a weapon that satisfies him. When that will happen? Even I dare not say yet."

From the way the company's staff spoke of him, it was clear Raidou was deeply respected, almost revered. Hibiki could almost feel the pride emanating from them whenever they spoke his name.

Mio answered Hibiki's request immediately. "No. I have my Young Master. I believe I've mentioned that before."

"Then bring him along too," Hibiki pressed. "We'll get a store ready for him in Limia."

"My answer is the same. Young Master is busy right now. Like I already mentioned."

Hibiki tried another tactic. "What if I told you my wish concerns the entire world? That it might involve your cherished Young Master, that he would be drawn into the conflict? What if your strength could help prevent that from happening?"

Hibiki had never told Mio she was a hero, just like she'd never told her that her cooking knowledge didn't come from reading books. The latter, of course, was a flimsy enough excuse to crumble under scrutiny. Yet, Mio never pressed her for details. To Mio, the only important things about Hibiki were her culinary knowledge and techniques. Everything else was irrelevant.

Hibiki feared that revealing her identity as a hero would change how Mio or Toa treated her. The last few months of being just another adventurer had been a refreshing and irreplaceable experience for her.

"That doesn't change anything," Mio said with a shrug. "I couldn't care less about the world. My only priority is Young Master. If it's a problem I could solve, then surely Young Master could resolve it far better than I ever could. My place is by his side, following his commands. Nothing else matters."

"Absolutely nothing?" Hibiki pressed.

"Absolutely nothing," Mio replied firmly.

Hibiki briefly considered revealing her role as a hero to plead for Mio's help, but she quickly dismissed the idea. Mio had made it abundantly clear that the world didn't concern her. Even if Hibiki declared her purpose was to protect the hyuman realm, it wouldn't sway Mio's decision.

Who in the world is this Young Master that Mio is so devoted to? Even Toa kind of laughs nervously when she talks about him, saying something like his level is beyond comparison. Honestly, with him and Mio, they might be able to save the world on their own…

"Phew. So that's a hard no, huh? Guess I got rejected spectacularly," Hibiki said with a wry smile.

"I have no intention of following anyone's will but Young Master's," Mio reaffirmed.

"Yeah, yeah. Message received. That's all I had to say. Well then, Mio-san, take care."

"You as well. Be safe on your way back."

"Sure thing. And, Mio-san, if you ever find yourself in Limia, let me know. By then, I'll have a few more recipes to share with you."

"Oh my, now that is the first tempting offer I've heard tonight. I'll keep it in mind," Mio replied, her lips curving slightly upward.

Hibiki bowed deeply one final time before turning and vanishing into the night.

Thus, the peculiar reunion between Mio and Hibiki ended.

Back Matter

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Azumi Kei was born in Aichi Prefecture. In 2012, Kei began serializing "Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū" (Tsukimichi: Moonlit Fantasy) on the web. It quickly became a popular series and won the Readers' Choice Award at the 5th Alphapolis Fantasy Novel Awards. In May 2013, following revisions, Kei made their publishing debut with "Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū."

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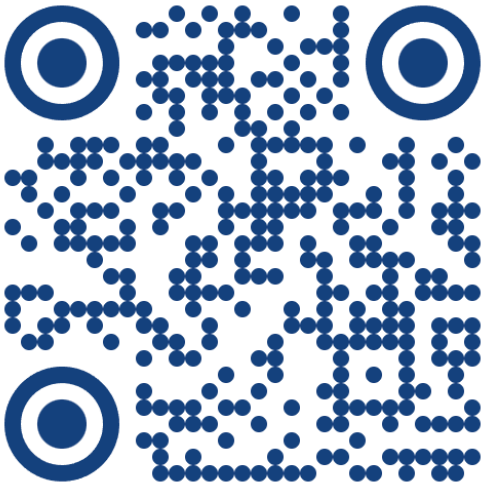
Thank you all

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