
Tsukimichi
Moonlit Fantasy
8
Author
Kei Azumi
Illustrator
Mitsuaki Matsumoto
Hanashi
MEDIA


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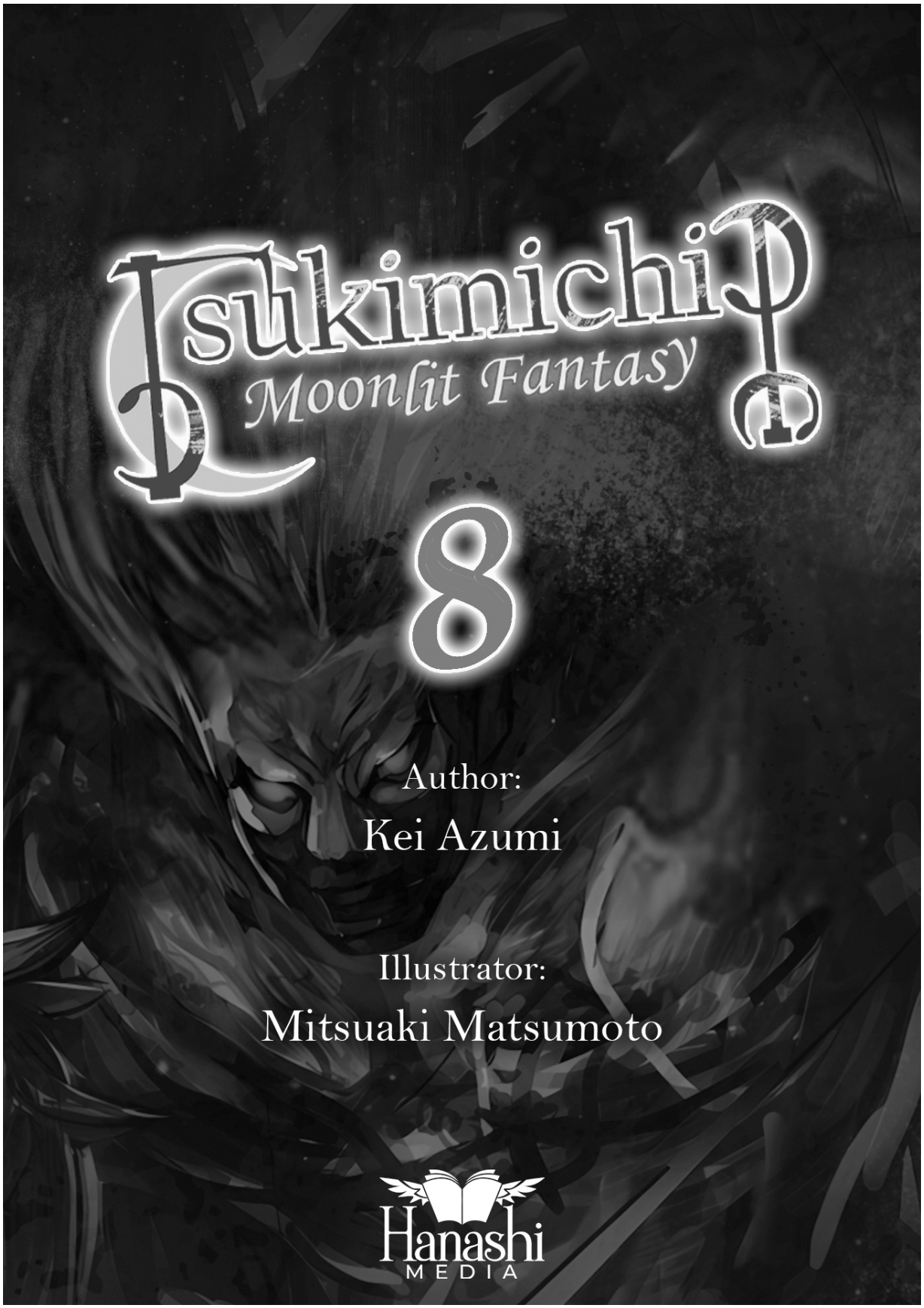
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MAJOR CHARACTERS
SHIKI
Formerly a lich, a high-tier undead, now reborn in human form through a contract with Makoto. At Rotsgard Academy, he serves as Makoto's assistant and right hand. Intelligent, meticulous, and deeply versed in both magic and lore, Shiki balances his dark origins with a scholar's grace.
JIN
A student at Rotsgard Academy and the de facto leader among Makoto's disciples. Calm under pressure and earnest in his training, he's steadily growing into a capable warrior and guide for his peers.
TOMOE
Once a mighty dragon known as "Shin," she took on human form after forging a Contract with Makoto. Fiercely loyal and steeped in old-world wisdom, she holds a deep reverence for Japanese culture—especially when it comes to the katana, which she obsesses over with samurai-like pride.
SAIRITSU
A high-ranking official of the Lorel Federation. Beneath her soft demeanor lies a clever strategist, capable of navigating diplomatic waters with subtle cunning.
LILY
The second princess of the Gritonia Empire. Presently visiting Rotsgard as a distinguished guest for the academy festival.
MIO
Once a massive spider monster, Mio has since taken on a striking human appearance after Contracting with Makoto. Despite her elegant looks, she's a full-blown combat fanatic with terrifying strength—and a somewhat unpredictable temper.
ABELIA
One of Makoto's disciples, known for her exceptional skill in both archery and magic. Though Makoto is her instructor, she holds Shiki in particularly high regard and often seeks his approval over her master's.
MAKOTO MISUMI
The protagonist. A high school student unceremoniously summoned to another world due to his parents' mysterious deal with a goddess. Struggling to juggle his roles as a merchant and a teacher, Makoto somehow manages to keep a diary through it all—one of the few normal habits in his increasingly abnormal life.


DEMON TERRITORY
Stella Fortress
Royal Capital: Ur
Imperial Capital: Ruinas
KINGDOM OF MILIA
GRITONIA EMPIRE
LOREL FEDERATION
THE ACADEMY CITY OF ROTSGARD
Bozda
Robin
KINGDOM OF AION
Tsige
Naoe
The Golden Road
THE EDGE OF THE WORLD
Tsukimichi
Moonlit Fantasy
World Map

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[redacted]



"The last part was rather entertaining, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmm… Pinning the opponent midair and slicing away without a care in the world—that has its own charm. Interesting… I might want to try it myself sometime."

Mio and Tomoe both nodded repeatedly with interest.

I, Makoto Misumi, had been watching this match unfold from the stands alongside my followers. The excitement in the crowd hadn't yet settled, and I found myself murmuring aloud, "Using a flying knee after hooking the opponent's leg, followed by an aerial combo… Wait, don't tell me Yuno is the same type as Eris?"

That kind of move… It feels oddly Earth-like—too familiar. Too unnatural for this world.

The deciding match of the Rotsgard Academy Festival Tournament's team battle finals had just concluded.

It had been a showdown between my students—Jin, Izumo, and Yuno—and a team led by Ilumgand, the second son of the Hopleys family, a noble house of the Kingdom of Limia. Ever since the tournament began, Ilumgand's faction had made it their life's mission to make things difficult for my students.

Despite showcasing remarkable endurance and resilience, Ilumgand had fallen surprisingly quickly before Jin and his team.

It wasn't as if there were an overwhelming gap in pure ability. But faced with a level of combat so far removed from this world's standards, Ilumgand simply hadn't been able to keep up. He'd been swept away, unable to leave any significant mark before the battle ended.

His family was probably in the audience too… I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

Especially that last spear strike—it had landed squarely on his forehead. Even though the weapon was wooden, it still snapped in half at the middle upon impact.

Was Yuno's throw just that powerful, or was Ilumgand's forehead absurdly tough?

Either way, the strike must have been what finally knocked him unconscious.

"Your students have an interesting way of thinking, Young Master," Tomoe remarked, crossing her arms. "Despite their lack of raw power, they've clearly trained themselves to fight with ingenuity."

"The final match was quite enjoyable," Mio added with a satisfied smirk. "That girl's finishing move—her footwork was masterful."

Both of them sounded genuinely pleased. It was good to know they had at least found some entertainment in the match.

Though… judging by their commentary, they saw the whole thing more as a spectacle than a battle.

Well, I guess that's just how they are.

Tomoe, once a Greater Dragon, and Mio, formerly the Black Spider of Calamity… Neither of them was even hyuman to begin with. From their perspective, this whole tournament probably felt like some kids play-fighting.

Yeah… that's probably what they think.

Well, either way, I should go check on my students in the waiting room and congratulate them.

I was also a little curious about how Ilumgand was doing. *Maybe I should stop by and see him…*

No, that was probably a bad idea. Running into his family would just be awkward.

Better not risk it.

Huh?

Just as I stood up from my seat and took a step forward, I glimpsed something strange on the stage.

Jin and the others were still there.

Not only that, they were all still holding their weapons, ready for battle.

Yuno, whose spear had broken after striking Ilumgand, had shifted into an unarmed stance.

This shouldn't be happening. The referee had already declared the match over, yet their eyes remained locked on Ilumgand's unmoving form.

"What's going on?" I muttered, narrowing my eyes.

Tomoe, who was standing next to me, responded, "Young Master, there's something strange emanating from that boy's body. His mana is abnormal… It's swirling together with his emotions, radiating a distasteful energy."

I frowned. Because of my Realm ability suppressing my presence, I wasn't particularly attuned to detection or investigative magic. Without it, my perception wasn't exactly the greatest. So, if Tomoe was pointing it out, then…

"Strange," Mio murmured, her eyes narrowing with distaste. "That magic… It isn't just fueled by his emotions; it's intertwined with deep-rooted, lingering feelings. It's as if…" Her voice lowered into a whisper of disgust. "It's trying to merge with him. How utterly revolting."

Mio watched Ilumgand, bearing the same expression one might reserve for rotting garbage. The ominous energy Tomoe had called

“abnormal mana” continued to grow. Soon, it took on a distinct color—a phenomenon often associated with the use of high-level magic.

Mana varied in nature depending on the individual who wielded it, and its color was a widely studied indicator of its properties. Rotsgard Academy had plenty of research material on the subject.

Now that things had escalated, even I could sense Ilumgand’s mana.

The color was—surprisingly—a shade of blue, which I knew indicated a strong affinity for water magic. More specifically, it was a light blue, a hue often associated with healing and support spells.

Huh. Didn’t expect that from him.

My own mana was such a deep, murky shade that it almost looked pitch black… but that wasn’t important right now.

“This doesn’t seem to be his own will,” I murmured, glancing at the stage. “Should I step in and stop it?”

Tomoe let out a nonchalant chuckle. “Oh? But Young Master, neither you nor the Kuzunoha Company are responsible for managing this tournament. That duty falls to Rotsgard Academy. I’m sure they’ll handle it. Indeed, this is quite an unusual phenomenon, but…”

As she trailed off, Ilumgand, who had been lying motionless, began to stir. As we watched, he slowly pushed himself upright.

Jin and the others immediately adjusted their stances, shifting into combat formation. But before they could fully commit, Abelia shouted something at them from the sidelines.

The three fighters hesitated for a moment before dropping their stances. They swiftly jumped off the stage and sprinted toward the exit, following Abelia.

Ah. They went to get their weapons from the waiting room.

Which meant—

“Young Master,” a calm voice interrupted my thoughts. “It seems the situation is deteriorating.”

Of course, this was Shiki.

Once a lich, he became my follower and now worked as my assistant at the academy, which gave him a close connection with my students.

"Jin's team is planning on fighting Ilumgand with their personal weapons, right?" I asked, turning to him.

Shiki gave a curt nod. "Yes. As you commanded, Young Master, they were to receive weapons as a reward for their victory. I've already informed them that the weapons are in the waiting room." He paused, then added, "If they combine their strength with those weapons' abilities, they should be able to handle it."

"*It*, huh?" I muttered. "What exactly is happening to that noble kid?"

Shiki's expression was as composed as ever. "Something terribly dangerous, I would say. In fact… it may already be too late. At the very least, his body has been conditioned for months, through medication or other methods, and the moment has come."

My stomach twisted. "The moment has come?"

So, this isn't Ilumgand's doing. Someone's been setting this up for a long time.

Still, I had to wonder, how had he slipped through all the academy's medical and magical examinations?

Shiki's voice cut through my thoughts once more. "Yes, that boy… is no longer hyuman. His transformation has already begun."

"T-Transformation?" I asked in shock.

"Yes. Just as the word implies, he's ceasing to be hyuman. In a way, I am also a mutation of sorts, but I became a lich willingly."

He observed the grotesque transformation with unshaken calm and continued, as if delivering a lecture. "Before I met you, Young Master, I was intrigued by the boundary between hyumans and non-hyumans. I conducted research into what separated the two, and I can say with near certainty that Ilumgand is undergoing an irreversible metamorphosis."

The boy's body twisted and contorted, his very form beginning to deviate from what could be called hyuman.

"Who would even do something like this?" I couldn't wrap my head around it. "The Hopleys family is one of Limia's great noble houses. Who would go out of their way to make an enemy of them, and in such a public setting? The fact that this was planned months in advance makes it even more unsettling…"

Shiki nodded gently. "The use of advanced magic, the application of alchemical substances, the meticulous preparation, and the target being a hyuman—when we consider all those factors, only one faction fits the profile. Surely, you must already realize who is responsible?"

In silence, I clenched my jaw.

The demons. He was saying that Rona, the demon general who had infiltrated the academy under a false identity, had orchestrated this whole situation.

I couldn't deny that the pieces fit. The logic was sound. Even I had considered the possibility.

But—

That just doesn't make sense.

Because—

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"Raidou, it's good to hear from you. Is there something we can assist you with? Or… did you just want to talk to me?"

"Excuse me for using telepathy. Hello, Rona-san. I'd like to say both, but today, I have a request."

"All right, I'm listening."

"I need you to withdraw any demons you have stationed in Rotsgard, at least until the tournament is over. I've turned a blind eye so far, since there haven't been any issues, but…"

"May I ask why?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't."

"Hmm… I see. But I can't promise it'll be immediate…"

"I can't share the details, but it's also for Jin's and Abelia's sake."

"Oh my. Well, we did attend the same lectures for a short while. If it's for them… I suppose I can make an exception. But in return, how about you meet with the Demon King? Just once?"

"Fine. When is convenient for you?"

"Ufufu, I'll set aside time just for you. Then I'll have all of my subordinates in Rotsgard—let's see, there were about ten of them, right?—take a leave of absence until the festival ends."

"Thirteen, actually. And please make sure of it."

"Getting the number wrong—how embarrassing. A leader should never make such a mistake. Keep that between us, will you, Raidou-dooono?"

"Of course. That will be all."

"All right, I'll have all thirteen of them retreat from the academy city. Let's talk again soon, whenever you feel like it. Even if it's just small talk, I wouldn't mind one biiit."

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"Rona-san pulled her forces out of the city before the tournament, just like she promised," I told Shiki. "So, I don't think this is the work of the demons. Besides, she even said she'd be willing to help if it was for Jin's or Abelia's sake—after all, she did study with them for a bit."

Yes. Even looking back on it now, she's been nothing but cooperative with me.

If she had truly been planning something like this, then why would she go along with my request? Wouldn't it be completely pointless?

Shiki cast me a sorrowful look, as if sensing my hesitation. "Young Master, I understand how you feel. But please, think

carefully. Did that woman ever say the demons *wouldn't* take any action in Rotsgard?"

"I-I mean… no. She only agreed to my request… The only other thing was that I promised I would meet the Demon King eventually."

That was true. Not once had Rona explicitly promised that the demons wouldn't act within the city. And I'd never thought to ask her for such an assurance.

But still, she had willingly gone along with my request. She had even invited me to meet the Demon King.

That doesn't sound like someone scheming against me.

Shiki, ever composed, lowered his gaze before continuing.

"Then even if this is Rona's doing, she hasn't broken her promise with you, Young Master… At least, that's what she would say."

That reasoning seemed superficial.

I had trusted Rona. I had put my faith in the demons.

Thinking back, she'd accepted my request without a hint of hesitation. Almost too easily. That bothered me now.

I don't want to believe she'd betray Jin and the others so easily.

"This all just sounds like a weak excuse," I muttered, forcing the words out.

A heavy, unpleasant feeling settled in my chest—the same suffocating weight I felt when I was cornered by the Rotsgard Merchant Guild's representative.

Shiki watched me with a measured gaze before speaking.

"Young Master, you and that woman had nothing in writing. Regardless of how well you and the demons might get along, you're still a human. I highly doubt that Rona, as wary and calculating as she is, would place enough trust in you to reveal her true intentions so soon."

I swallowed hard as he continued, "This isn't just about Rona's personal feelings. This concerns the entire demon race. If they had informed us of their plans, we might have interfered. And that, I suspect, was something they could not allow. Additionally, Rona is

fully aware of a portion of your strength and of my existence as Larva, which means…"

He looked toward the disaster unfolding onstage.

"Whatever's happening right now, she must have determined that you and I could handle it."

"You're kidding," I whispered.

"Since Rona also stressed the importance of arranging an audience with the Demon King, it's possible this entire situation was set up to be resolved peacefully, provided we didn't interfere with the demons' plans."

That… is ridiculous.

Shiki hadn't even spoken to Rona directly, yet here he was—calmly analyzing the situation as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I had thought that negotiating with demons might not be such a bad idea—that forming some kind of working relationship with them could be possible.

But in the end…

Was it foolish to even hope that they would accept a human as an ally?

Tomoe had been listening to our exchange silently, her arms crossed and her expression dark, but she scoffed. "Tch. Sounds like the demons are just as much of a hassle as anyone else."

Mio, however, didn't bother hiding her anger.

"They're all the same! Every last one of them, trying to manipulate Young Master—trying to use him for their gain! I find it utterly unforgivable!"

Each of my three followers had their own reaction, yet I found myself unable to respond to any of them.

I wasn't sure if I could ever truly get along with hyumans, and that was why I had considered speaking with the demons.

Maybe that was naive. Maybe it was foolish.

But does that mean I should just brush off this betrayal and keep on negotiating with them, anyway?

Something surged within me—frustration, resentment, something I couldn't quite name. I had no place to direct it. No words to express it.

Damn it.

Damn it, damn it, damn it!

I knew this already!

From the moment I set up shop here, I knew that both the Kuzunoha Company and I had been drawing attention from the Four Great Nations, the demons, and even factions I hadn't considered.

The idea that a place like Rotsgard, unaffiliated with any country, would let me operate freely was completely wrong. A foolish assumption.

Unfortunately, I had only just come to understand that. And instead of properly handling this unintended consequence, I had found myself being tossed around by hyumans, the Merchant Guild, and demons—repeatedly pulled into things beyond my control.

As a merchant and an instructor, I was losing sight of how I was supposed to act.

I'd been far too unaware of just how vast Rotsgard's stage was—how many forces lurked in its shadows.

Now I had to ask myself, was it even possible to restore the fallen nation of Kaleneon and conceal everything connected to me and the Kuzunoha Company within its borders?

No. I had already spoken to Eva and Luria Aensland, the key figures in this plan, asking them to be prepared. There was no turning back now.

This isn't about my confidence anymore.

I never thought I would have to question my resolve like this. Not now. Not after all this time.

Eva

The tournament had been shocking.

Several students who, just this past spring, had been no different from any other academy attendees had just demonstrated power that far surpassed not only their classmates but even their seniors.

One of them had the talent but had been away from the academy for a long time due to health reasons. The other was a scholarship student, gifted but never considered one of the absolute best.

And yet…

This year's champion and runner-up were those very two.

During the academy festival, the library was closed, which meant I was temporarily out of work. So, of course, I watched the tournament.

The moment the individual battles ended, I stood up from my seat, ready to head home, Raidou called out to me.

He said he wanted to talk.

I didn't know his intentions, but if it was an invitation from him… there was no way I could refuse. Our meeting was late at night. When the time arrived, I entered his shop through the back entrance, as he'd instructed, and made my way up to his room on the second floor.

No matter what he asks of me, I'm ready to comply.

I took a breath, steadying myself before knocking on the door. "Raidou-sensei, it's Eva. May I come in?"

Of course, I knew he couldn't speak the common language. Instead, a glowing "Come in" appeared on the door's surface, and with a soft click, the magical locks released.

Bracing myself, I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

It felt… like stepping into a mage's personal research chamber. Raidou stood up to greet me when I entered, although he had no obligation to do so. It would have been just as reasonable if he had remained indifferent or dismissive.

Yet…

That wasn't how he was.

To put it bluntly, my relationship with Raidou was heavily one-sided.

I wanted something from him.

But he… wanted nothing from me.

"Apologies for making you come at this hour without anyone to escort you. The staff are all out today, so I'm alone," he wrote.

Alone.

That single word sent a faint ripple of tension through my chest.

Is that what this is? Is that his intent?

If so…

Then this is exactly what I want.

At last, I might find something he wants. Something I can offer for what I seek from him.

I folded my hands in front of me, keeping my posture poised. "If Raidou-sensei calls for me, I am always at his disposal," I said with a practiced smile.

"I appreciate it," he replied.

"To begin with… Congratulations on your students' victory in the individual matches today. The academy was in an uproar afterward—everyone wanted to know who had trained them."

"It was all thanks to their own talent and effort," Raidou wrote with a smile. *"No one else can claim credit but them."*

"You're humble, Sensei," I remarked, watching him carefully. "Meanwhile, in the faculty office, every instructor who ever taught them was fighting to claim the achievement as their own. Of course… once they realize that the only shared class among all the winners was yours, they'll quiet down."

Even as I praised their victories, he never once let arrogance slip into his expression. To him, it was a reflection of the students' growth—nothing more.

Yet…

In less than half a year, he had taken students who weren't even among the top contenders and pushed them beyond their limits, turning them into forces to be reckoned with.

He was the sole reason for their overwhelming growth. If any of the Four Great Nations caught wind of this, they would immediately try to recruit him.

Of course, they would offer him far better terms than his current position as a temporary instructor.

If he accepted… then the few points of contact I had with him would dwindle further.

Yet strangely enough… I couldn't picture that happening.

No matter how lucrative an offer was placed before him, I had the feeling that Raidou would never pledge allegiance to any country.

There was no logic behind this thought—just a gut instinct.

"That being the case, Eva, I'd appreciate it if you didn't go around spreading unnecessary details," he wrote.

I let out a soft laugh. "Of course, Sensei. I would never do anything that might bring you harm."

"Now, as for the reason I called you here today…"

It was time.

My lips curled into a poised, confident smile as I waited for his next words.

"Before we begin… promise me you'll keep this matter a secret from Luria. This discussion is to stay between us."

Luria too?

Not that it mattered. Even if she was my sister, this wasn't something I would have discussed with her.

I nodded in agreement.

"Then…"

Raidou beckoned me closer.

Even though we were alone, he wrote in small, cautious strokes, as if wary of unseen eyes.

I inhaled sharply. This was…

The proposal Raidou presented to me was something I could never have foreseen. In an instant, it erased all of my assumptions and expectations.

No…

It was so shocking that I forgot about the madness that had been smoldering within me for so long.

"Sensei… No, Raidou-san… Are you truly serious about this?"

"This is no joke. You have two days to decide. I expect your answer at this time, the day after tomorrow."

"The day after tomorrow?!"

"Yes. There's no point in overthinking it. Besides, I have my schedule to consider as well. That's all for today. It's late, so if you have no other engagements, you can rest in one of the vacant rooms here."

Two days.

He expects me to make such a monumental decision in just two days? And without even telling my sister?

Just that morning, I had been looking forward to the team battles in the next day's tournament.

But now—

None of that mattered anymore.

I had considered seducing him, if it came down to it. But in the face of this revelation, even that thought had vanished from my mind.

Although the room they provided me at the Kuzunoha Company was comfortable, I didn't get a wink of sleep that night.

Raidou's proposal… It would grant my wish, no question there. But in doing so, it would irreversibly distort both the Aensland name and Kaleneon itself.

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"R-Raidou-sensei! It's terrible—something awful is happening in the city!!!"

"Monsters have suddenly appeared out of nowhere and started rampaging all over the place!"

"Even Ironclad and the area around the store are in complete chaos!"

Two voices frantically shouting jolted me back to my senses, cutting like a blade through the general uproar of the arena. I turned to see Luria and Eva Aensland, panting and bracing themselves against their knees as they tried to catch their breath.

Had they come just to warn me about the status of the city? Or had they assumed that, out of everywhere in the arena, this spot—where I was—was the safest place to be? Either way… their timing was uncanny.

I had just been thinking about them, and now here they were. The night I had proposed the matter of Kaleneon to Eva, I had, in fact, gone to Luria as well with the same offer. If the two of them reached the same conclusion, then… my course would be set.

That could wait; the city was under attack. And more importantly, Ilumgand's transformation wasn't just some isolated anomaly. It was happening all over.

Rona-san.

No, Rona…

So, you really did deceive me, didn't you?

She hadn't lied. She hadn't broken her word. She hadn't even hidden anything—I had just never asked. A mere verbal agreement, nothing more.

None of that mattered.

Because if this was how she wanted to play the game… then I would respond in kind.

Since the official stance was that the demons had absolutely nothing to do with this… then, no matter what means I used to resolve this situation, it would all be my choice.

Shiki was right. Looking back, I had been the only one trusting blindly.

Still—

Even knowing that—

I couldn't suppress the feeling that I'd been betrayed.

"Either we run, or we fight—but we have to do something, or even this place won't be safe, Sensei!" Eva pressed, desperation in her eyes.

"Eva, calm yourself," I wrote.

"But—!"

"But staying calm will *not* help right now, Raidou-san!" Luria chimed in, glancing around with clear distress.

She wasn't wrong. But I had already made up my mind.

"First, tell me everything you know. And then… I know it's a little early, but I want to hear your answers from the other night as well."

The sisters stared in shock. It was understandable, but even as I looked at them, I could feel myself calming down.

It wasn't just Eva and Luria. The entire arena had descended into chaos. When Ilumgand's mutation had begun, it was surreal—many people had simply frozen in disbelief. But now, that hesitation was gone, replaced by pure panic. It was as if someone had kicked open a hornet's nest.

Somehow, I was the opposite. Maybe it was because the more brute force a situation demanded, the less doubt I felt. In times like these, I at least had some confidence in what I could do.

I had been naive, thinking, *The demons haven't wronged me, so that must mean they're trustworthy.* What a foolish assumption.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Back in my old world, I had mocked that phrase, thinking reality was far harsher and alliances were never that simple. And yet, the moment I found myself in a similar situation, I had fallen for that same illusion.

I'm such an idiot. An absolute idiot.

This wasn't just negotiation. If so, I might not have had a way to recover. This was a battlefield, a place where violence dictated the rules. That meant I—no, we—still had options.

First, I would hear Eva's and Luria's answers. Then, I would decide on the next course of action.

Despite the turmoil inside me, I met their eyes with the same composed expression as always—the face of Raidou.

Now, I would wait. Wait for the Aensland sisters' answers.

Tomoe

At Young Master's final confirmation, Eva answered without a moment of hesitation.

"Of course. My name, the Aensland name, and the land of Kaleneon—if offering them is the price to start anew in that place, then I give them to you. Please, use them however you see fit."

"So, that's your decision? Both of you? No regrets?"

Hmm… that went more smoothly than I expected.

"I have no objections either," Luria added, mirroring her sister's resolve. "I was never too attached to the name, anyway."

Young Master had mentioned he questioned them separately, yet both had arrived at the same conclusion. I thought the younger one was the more grounded and realistic of the two… but perhaps they were both equally broken in their own way.

Luria's gaze briefly flickered toward the arena.

Ah, I see. She had some sort of connection to Ilumgand Hopleys. Well, if it poses no threat to Young Master, it's best left alone.

"So, Raidou-sensei, you asked Luria the same question?" Eva asked, pursing her lips. "How cruel. What would you have done if one of us had refused?"

"Seriously! That's just plain mean," Luria huffed.

"If the two of you had decided differently, I would have erased the choice from both of your minds. But… I'm relieved to see there was no need for that. So, I'll give you my word as well. That time will come soon. Never forget this contract. It may be only a verbal agreement, but should it ever be broken… know that the consequences will extend beyond just your lives."

Fufufu. As expected of Young Master.

For a fleeting moment, a certain demon woman crossed my thoughts. *But this time, Young Master is the one granting the sisters' wish. It is highly unlikely that they'll betray him.*

If they dared attempt it, we would not allow it.

"*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaggggghhhhhhh!!!*"

How irritating. That wretched noise came from what had once been Ilumgand.

The creature's body was wrapped in an ill-fitting, gentle shade of light blue, occasionally twitching as spasms racked its form. Its flesh continued to swell from within, its skin now a lifeless gray that bore no semblance to hyuman pigmentation.

It was truly becoming something… other.

It was still in the middle of its transformation, but that grotesquely elongated neck was already an eyesore.

Now that I've taken on a humanoid form myself, I realize… Completely inhuman monsters—ones beyond comprehension—might be terrifying in their own right, but creatures that are almost hyuman, yet undeniably warped, may be even more repulsive to the hyuman eye.

There may be value in incorporating that into my illusions…

"It's absorbing mana from its party members as well. It seems they, too, have been taking the same drug," Shiki observed, his tone clinical and detached. "From what I can tell, once the transformation progresses to a certain stage, those affected can draw mana from others who share the same substance within their system. A rather efficient mechanism."

Hmph. He certainly sees things clearly. I suppose his past research plays a part in that.

"If their mana accumulates like that, it means that the more of them there are in proximity, the stronger the transformed individual becomes," I remarked. "How convenient. Scattering those accessories and drugs would create monsters *and* their food source at the same time. And these creatures, unlike naturally occurring

monsters, would be far stronger. Depending on the objective, this method could be quite… effective."

Young Master was still processing everything. As his followers, it was our duty to assess the situation clearly and provide him with a concise understanding of events.

Mio spared the body only a single glance before looking away in disgust. "Hmph. That thing does not look appetizing at all. No thanks."

Heh. How typical.

Young Master's students had yet to return from the waiting room, but I wasn't worried about it; the creature's transformation process would take several more minutes.

"Shiki," Young Master asked, "is there a way to turn that thing back to normal?"

Young Master…

Ah, this reminded me of the time he asked us to research a method to undo a certain secret technique, one wielded by the forest ogres, capable of turning hyumans into trees.

This transformation was very different from that, both in method and circumstance… but I was curious.

How would Shiki answer?

Hopefully, he wouldn't say something dumb like, *"It would be difficult, but not impossible."*

"It would be difficult. I won't say it's completely impossible, but it would be an incredibly troublesome process… and frankly, I have no desire to do it," Shiki replied.

Ku ku ku. Now that's a good answer.

True, it's not something that can't *be done.* In fact, if Young Master were to take part, then failure wouldn't even be an option. However, it would be nothing but a tedious, meaningless endeavor. Neither he nor we had any reason to waste our time on such an act. I liked how Shiki said it: *"I have no desire to do it."*

"I see. Tomoe, call for Mondo from the Demiplane. Have him pair up with Lime and take command of Aqua's team. Their job is to

suppress the disturbances in the city. Also, capture a few of the monsters as test subjects. You have permission to use Tree Execution. I know it's a hassle, but can I ask you to oversee the transport of the specimens as well?"

"All right," I replied.

I checked the number of forest ogres and elder dwarves currently in Rotsgard, then relayed the orders to Lime and Mondo, placing them in charge of the operation. For now, I had them hold off on taking action, just in case. Still… Young Master was truly kind to those he considered his own. This was likely a precautionary measure, just in case someone from the Demiplane ever fell victim to a similar crisis. By securing samples, he intended to develop countermeasures.

"Young Master, Lime reports that all merchandise displayed in the company's storefront, along with the entire inventory within the store, has already been removed," I told him. "You don't need to worry."

"Got it," he replied with a nod. "Thanks. All right, Shiki—you focus on supporting the students. No matter how much he changes, Ilumgand is still Ilumgand at his core. That means you should be able to handle him without issue, right?"

"Of course," Shiki replied. "However, if I may be so bold, I do have a concern regarding your earlier orders. The current number of personnel in the company is insufficient to manage the entire city, is it not?"

Indeed. That had been my thought as well. There was no need for us to take responsibility for the entire city. Now then, how would Young Master respond?

"I see. In that case, we'll call in the misty lizardfolk as well. But they might be mistaken for transformed creatures, so they'll need to move with people who can properly explain their presence. The students have been trained, so they should be able to."

This won't do. Young Master, at this rate, you'll end up taking on everything for free again.

Unfortunately, hyumans don't always respect those who help them. The more one extends a helping hand, the more some will see that hand as a convenient tool to be used at will. That's just their nature.

"Of course," Shiki responded with a nod.

Hmm. This one… could it be that, after spending so much time among them, he's been influenced by hyumans even more than Young Master himself?

It should have been his responsibility to guide Young Master toward a more realistic outlook on hyumans. Yet, he simply followed orders without so much as a word of caution.

"And then, Mio and Shiki will—"

"Young Master," I interjected.

"Hm? What is it, Tomoe?" he asked, tilting his head.

Young Master had, at least outwardly, exercised more caution when dealing with hyumans and demons alike. However, deep within his heart, he was still as kindhearted as ever.

I had zero intention of changing that part of him. However, constantly having to deal with opportunistic idiots who would take advantage of his kindness was growing rather tiresome. Given the current chaos, this was the perfect opportunity to adjust the situation in our favor.

"Upon closer reflection, this is a rather splendid situation, wouldn't you say?" I remarked with a smirk.

"What?" Young Master asked, his brow furrowing.

"In the grand flow of a period drama, this would be the turning point!" I continued, a spark of amusement in my voice. "The climactic moment where the events that unfold dictate the final, satisfying conclusion of the story! Hm, yes, yes…"

"Uh… so what you're saying is… this is where we decide how we're going to fight our way through this mess?"

I nodded. "Precisely. The demons have set their plot in motion, the city's in chaos, corrupt merchants, nobles, innocent townsfolk, and even those who have some connection to us—it looks like

everyone's been caught in the storm. However, unlike the other factions, we have absolute freedom over how we act in this moment."

Young Master remained silent, his expression unreadable.

I deliberately kept my tone light and inviting. "In short, we can decide what outcome we want, fight on our terms, and still come out of this as the ones being thanked for it. And as for the rewards… we can take our pick."

Young Master… Ah, as expected, he looks rather put off by my words.

He had been angry enough to consider these very tactics himself—and yet, hearing them voiced aloud made him hesitate.

This was precisely why now was the perfect time.

"Wait, we have Koshiroya—no, Tomoeya—standing right here. Why are you grinning like some villain, Tomoe?" Young Master muttered in exasperation.

"Kakakaka! Even I have my limits, Young Master," I chuckled, letting the amusement linger in my voice. "Watching you be toyed with by mere city merchants… I find it rather irritating."

I wasn't lying. Even if I'd expected this level of interference, knowing it and seeing it unfold were two different things.

I may not be one to hold grudges… but I'm at least irritated enough to allow a little retribution.

Yes, just enough for a small fraction of this city's creatures to perish—that level of pettiness should be acceptable.

"Oh, I agree," Mio chimed in, raising her hand casually. "Though, honestly, I'm so furious I want to crush every last one of them into dust. At the very least, the stronger merchants should be exterminated during this chaos."

Mio. Why must you be so direct?

Raising your hand like you're agreeing with me… you'll make me look like some bloodthirsty villain.

"Well, if we're considering our next moves strategically," Shiki cut in, his tone composed, "Eva and Luria are both here, and Jin and

Abelia's group is here as well. I believe our best course of action is to neutralize Ilumgand first and secure this location. Then, if we intend to leverage this situation for the company's benefit, we should only intervene in areas where we can ensure gratitude. Ignoring the rest is also a viable option."

Hmph. Even Shiki is unconsciously prioritizing the academy's safety. Though he had once been hyuman, I would have expected him to be more detached by now.

"So, you're saying it's better if we don't spread ourselves too thin?" Young Master asked, tapping a finger against his temple.

"Precisely," Shiki confirmed. "As for future dealings with the merchants, the greater the chaos, the more delayed their responses will be. While not guaranteed, some of the larger merchant associations that view us as enemies may disappear entirely in the aftermath. Well-structured organizations will be more difficult to shake, but many larger firms rely entirely on the authority of their representatives. If those figures fall, their influence crumbles as well. Either way, throwing ourselves headfirst into a selfless campaign to protect the city would be unwise. Given their track record, the more we do for them, the more they will take advantage of us."

"Which is why," Mio suddenly cut in, her voice rising in pitch, "we should just eliminate every single bastard plotting against Young Master and every envious wretch who resents him, one by one—quietly, not leaving any trace of evidence—"

"Mio," Young Master sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Just… stop talking for a minute."

Mio pouted but didn't object.

Hmph. Mio is as unwavering as ever. And truthfully… her suggestion would be quite an effective one.

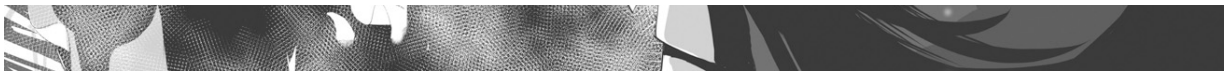
For that approach to work, the Kuzunoha Company would need to fully embrace the ways of the underworld. And that, at least for now, was off the table.

"Hmm… so even if we save the city outright, it wouldn't improve Kuzunoha's standing?" Young Master muttered, deep in thought.

Shiki nodded. “If the guests notice your capabilities as a lecturer, it might make your situation worse. You’d become the center of attention for every major nation.”

“Guh,” Young Master groaned, wincing at the thought.





"This time, I would say a mercenary approach is best," I suggested, stroking my chin. "Rather than pure good-versus-evil, something with a bit more strategic. Don't you think, Young Master?"

"And what specifically do you have in mind?" he asked, wary but intrigued.

I had expected this. As long as we laid things out logically, he would listen. That was why we needed to have this discussion before the merchants and nobles had a chance to sway him. If there were consequences, he could always reprimand me later.

"We should swoop in like righteous heroes and put an end to this chaos in spectacular fashion!!!" I declared, brimming with enthusiasm.

"Oi. That's just straight out of a shogun's or old magistrate's playbook," Young Master deadpanned.

"However," I continued, ignoring his retort.

"Hm?"

"The key is the timing. If we're going to play the role of heroes, we need to only act once the damage has spread, and the city's begun to drown in despair."

"Wait, not immediately?" Young Master blinked in surprise.

"If we fix things too soon, it'll be like the crisis never happened at all. Back to normal, no lasting impression. If that happens, no one will feel gratitude toward you."

"A-Ah…" Young Master hesitated as realization dawned on him.

"When this city has felt true suffering, when it begs for salvation from the depths of its heart, *that* is when we move. We'll act with the utmost care for hyuman life, demand no compensation, provide resources, and mourn the losses that have already occurred while preventing further destruction. That way, we'll be sure the Kuzunoha Company becomes the trusted savior of the city. And once peace is restored, even if some merchants still want to oppose us, they will have seen our overwhelming strength and crisis-handling ability firsthand. No sane merchant would dare make an enemy of a

company that wields that kind of power and has the full backing of the people."

"So basically, being saved when you're at your lowest makes a deeper impression than being saved before the danger becomes real," Young Master murmured, finally grasping the concept.

"If we work behind the scenes, no one will know, and no one will thank us. That is simply how the human world works, unfortunate as that may be."

Young Master sighed. "Feels like a strategy that could easily get us criticized if we mistime it."

"Leave that to me!" I proclaimed, striking my chest with confidence. "I'll determine the perfect moment to act!"

"Mio, what about you?" Young Master turned toward her.

Mio, you understand, don't you? Now is not the time to sulk or object.

"I still think eliminating obstacles is the best way to ensure no lingering threats remain," Mio said, her arms crossed and her voice as sharp as ever. "But… if Young Master intends to continue living in this city as he has, then… Tomoe-san's plan isn't bad. From what I've heard, the people of this city will have already tasted enough fear and lost enough lives. It infuriates me that we can't take advantage of that to wipe out those tyrannical merchants, but… I'll endure it."

"S-Sounds good," Young Master replied, blinking at her rare display of restraint.

Excellent. Both of them accepted the plan at almost the same time. Now, all that's left is for me to put the pieces into motion.

"What do you think, Young Master?" I prompted, watching him carefully.

"I think… it's the best option," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "But what about the demons? Are they just going to accept it if we resolve this on our own?"

"If the plan was designed to benefit them entirely, then no, they won't. But… Young Master, you weren't planning to align yourself

with the demon race, were you?"

"Well, no. I'd prefer to take Kaleneon peacefully, though."

"I doubt it will be an issue," I assured him. "From my research, Kaleneon was never a priority for them. It's not much more than an abandoned fortress that they've repurposed, and they only keep a modest number of forces there. So long as we play dumb about their involvement in this… incident, I doubt it'll escalate into a major problem."

At my words, Eva and Luria widened their eyes in shock.

A fair reaction. No hyuman information network could have accurately tracked the current state of Kaleneon under demon occupation. It was knowledge beyond their reach.

"Do you think Rona will contact me after this mess?" Young Master asked.

"Absolutely. No matter how this gets resolved, she *will* reach out. I don't think this'll interfere with your arranged audience with the Demon King."

The demons were a race that worshipped power above all else. Regardless of how much faith they'd placed in this scheme, if Young Master ended up being the one to suppress the chaos, then rather than viewing it as an obstacle, they would likely see it as evidence of his strength—a reason to keep a closer eye on him.

They were already fighting at a disadvantage.

Any competent leader in their position would try to nail down all the variables as soon as possible.

"All right," Young Master finally decided. "Tomoe, I'll leave the timing to you. When the moment is right, we'll act."

"Got it," I responded with a satisfied nod.

"Young Master," Shiki interjected, taking a small step forward. "I wish to confirm one thing. Setting aside the current situation, who—or what—is it that you truly wish to protect?"

Ah.

Shiki must have found it unsettling that Young Master had accepted the city's losses as a necessary consequence.

Hmph. Unnecessary as it may seem, I understand.

In his own way, he was trying to ensure that Young Master wouldn't make choices he ended up regretting. That much was clear. Knowing that, I had no reason to stop him.

"Who… and what do I want to protect?" Young Master murmured, momentarily thrown off by the question. His expression was clouded with thought.

The arena had all but emptied. Now, it was just us, sitting idly and having a leisurely discussion amid the growing turmoil.

Hmph. I can see it—his mind is flickering through names, images, faces… some appearing, some fading away.

Eventually, a few figures lingered faintly, while a select few remained clearly in his heart.

Young Master mourned those who lost their lives to disease and curses. However, when it came to accidents and battle, he…

No. Now's not *the time to probe deeper into that.*

He was revealing so much already. It would be too intrusive to push further.

He considers himself responsible for his students… Rembrandt… a few regulars at the store…

It was neither purely emotional nor purely logical, but a balance of both.

Hm?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move.

"Young Master, Rembrandt and his wife are here." I pointed. "Over there."

Young Master followed my gaze. On the stage, his students had all gathered and stood face-to-face with Ilumgand, who had become nothing more than a hulking, gray giant. The battle was about to begin. But… Young Master's face softened into a gentle smile when he caught sight of his favorite couple.

Ridiculous.

Young Master isn't so weak that he needs to be worried over by the likes of Rembrandt.

I could hardly imagine a situation dangerous enough that he would need to be concerned.

However…

The genuine worry in Rembrandt's ignorant hyuman expression seemed to have eased something inside Young Master. And for some reason I didn't fully understand, that irked me.

I glanced at Mio.

She, too, was watching Rembrandt with the same unreadable look in her eyes.

Yes… she feels it too. Our young master is still tenderhearted, still far too vulnerable to pain.

If anyone had the right to bring that rare smile to his face, it should have been us, his followers. This moment of peace amid the storm—that was *our* role to give him.

And yet…

I guess I still have a lot to learn.

At the very least, I would see this "heroic saviors" plan through to perfection.

※※※

A little before the chaos in Rotsgard began, a critical final strategy meeting was taking place at Stella Fortress—one of the most crucial strongholds in the hyuman-demon war.

During that meeting, Demon General Rona had left her seat. This was unusual for someone of her rank. Even more unusual, instead of returning, she quietly slipped outside the fortress.

Now, she stood on the watchtower, gazing out over the horizon.

This was a position used by archers and mages to rain down attacks from the fortress walls, but in times of peace, it doubled as a resting place for the soldiers. Since training was currently in progress, the area was deserted.

“You’re leaving in the middle of a strategy meeting?” a voice called out from behind her. “You’re starting to remind me of Sofia, Rona.”

This was Io, the other demon general stationed at Stella Fortress.

He’d known exactly where to find her. After all, they’d known each other for quite some time.

“Funny,” Rona scoffed, not even turning around. “Don’t lump me in with that battle-crazed lunatic. She’s an entirely different kind of mess.”

She finally shifted her gaze slightly, her lips curving into a smirk.

“Anyway, Io, I assume preparations on your end are going smoothly?”

“Of course,” he answered. “But… that was a telepathic message, wasn’t it?”

“Observant, aren’t you? You know, men who eavesdrop on a woman’s telepathic calls aren’t exactly popular.”

“Not my concern. My loyalty is to the Demon King and our people. What women think of me is irrelevant. More importantly, did it affect the operation?”

Io’s expression darkened slightly. Because of Rona, Raidou’s name had already reached the upper echelons of demon leadership —not as an enemy but as someone too valuable and dangerous to antagonize.

If he proved to be a potential ally, then unnecessary hostility could be a grave mistake.

“There’s no issue,” Rona replied smoothly, flipping around to lean her back against the watchtower’s railing. “I was a little irritated that he figured out exactly how many operatives I had in Rotsgard… and even more irritated at my subordinates for being incompetent. But we’ve already done everything that was necessary. I could pull them out at any time.”

Io’s four muscular arms crossed over his chest as he gave her a hard look. “Pulling our people out of Rotsgard, huh? If he knows we

were there, that means he might already be aware of our movements. And if you agreed to his conditions, then proceeding with this plan would go directly against his request, wouldn't it?"

Rona's eyes narrowed, and her lips curled into an amused smirk. "Raidou has no other way of gathering intelligence on the demon faction besides me. And he only asked me to withdraw my subordinates. He never asked me to *personally* stay out of this. So, as long as I'm the one taking action, it doesn't violate our agreement, now does it?"

There were those who described her fox-like expression as charming. But to Io, a warrior at heart, it was simply an unpleasant sight.

"You're a nasty woman," he muttered with a sigh. "I almost feel bad for Raidou."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Rona laughed. "And you understand, don't you? This is the moment we've been waiting for."

"You don't need to tell me," Io rumbled. His huge frame shifted slightly as he cracked his knuckles. "Hibiki… the hero of Limia… no matter how much stronger she's grown in these past six months, I'll crush her all the same."

His glowing red eyes gleamed with anticipation of a proper battle.

Rona's gaze sharpened. "What about the rings?"

"Of course," Io answered. "The early prototypes have been upgraded to the mid-stage models. That goddess will have her powers sealed again, just like last time. And after a few more uses…"

Rona's voice dropped slightly, but it carried absolute certainty.

"The hyumans will be forced into retreat. The Demon King's strategy will take effect. And the demon race will finally claim fertile lands and the blessings of the spirits, as we deserve."

The rings that could seal the power of the Goddess were already complete. However, using them repeatedly meant that the Goddess's forces would eventually develop countermeasures. That was why, in the previous battle at Stella Fortress, they'd tested an

early prototype to confirm that it could effectively suppress divine power.

Now, having gathered enough data, they had moved on to a more advanced version—one designed to neutralize any new countermeasures the Goddess might have developed.

To guarantee that the hyumans took the bait, they had deliberately leaked information about the earlier prototypes to select hyumans, ensuring that the knowledge would eventually reach the Goddess herself.

The trap had been meticulously set. Now, the teeth of the demon race were about to sink deep into their enemies.



"Raidou-dono, I've been looking for you! First and foremost, I'm relieved to see you safe!" Rembrandt's voice carried genuine relief as he placed a firm hand on my shoulder.

"I'm glad to see you and your wife safe as well. It seems I've caused you some worry… I apologize for that." I was calm as I wrote this, probably because I had just agreed to my followers' plan to resolve this crisis to our advantage.

"There's no need to apologize. Just being able to see you again puts me at ease."

Rembrandt's sincerity hit me deeper than expected, and I couldn't bring myself to meet their eyes. All I could say was, *"Likewise, I'm truly relieved to see you both unharmed. That's all that matters."*

"We still haven't been able to grasp the full situation, but… do you know anything, Raidou-dono?" Rembrandt asked.

"Not much more than you, unfortunately. Some kind of disturbance has caused monstrous transformations, and the affected creatures are running rampant. As for Shifu and Yuno, they and their comrades seem intent on dealing with… what's left of Ilumgand-kun."

Perhaps it was because of my presence, or maybe because of Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki, but despite the chaos unfolding around us, Rembrandt and his wife remained astonishingly composed.

Maybe this was what set seasoned merchants apart—even in times of crisis, they could still analyze the situation rationally and remain levelheaded.

"I see… Even if you don't have the full picture yet, huh? That certainly makes things more difficult…" Rembrandt folded his arms, his gaze sharpening.

"Speaking of telepathic communication, if I recall correctly, your entire staff is trained in it, correct? Being able to keep in constant contact even in emergencies… I envy that level of coordination. But…"

He suddenly froze mid-thought, his brows furrowed. Then his expression changed in an instant—his back arched slightly, and his mouth opened in disbelief.

"Wait…! R-Raidou-dono?!" His head whipped around to face me, his voice rising in pitch. "Th-They're d-dealing with him?! What do you mean by that?!"

The composed merchant from moments ago was now nowhere to be seen. Rembrandt began pacing back and forth frantically, mumbling under his breath.

Right. I take back what I was thinking earlier about him being an impressive merchant for staying calm even after hearing his daughter would be fighting.

His wife, on the other hand, remained completely unbothered. With one hand resting against her chin, she watched her husband's meltdown with an expression of mild exasperation.

Honestly, she seems more suited to being the great merchant of Tsige…

Rather than voicing this observation, I kept my expression neutral and wrote a response toward the increasingly frantic Rembrandt.

"Most likely, they want to test their skills. Since we plan to remain here and keep watch over them, I don't believe you need to be overly concerned."

Rembrandt snapped his head toward me, clearly unconvinced.

"No, no, no, no! Raidou-dono, this is not acceptable! Absolutely not!" He waved his hands wildly as he spoke. "Look, I apologize for asking this of you, but isn't there some way you and your people can just… handle this quietly? Without my daughters having to step in?!"

I was pretty sure Rembrandt didn't notice the small sigh that escaped my lips.

"And besides, is this the right time to be testing them?! Shouldn't the local military forces be handling something like this?! I heard the academy has a security force for situations just like this…!" His pacing grew even more erratic as his rant escalated. "Come to think of it, isn't the entire tournament itself a problem?! Why are students even fighting in an event like that in the first place?!"

At this point, our entire group stood in silent amazement. Even Tomoe, for once, had nothing to say.

There was only one person who could end this: his wife.

I glanced over to see that she was still entirely composed. Sensing my silent plea, she smiled gently before finally speaking.

"Since Raidou-sama isn't panicking, neither I nor my husband has any reason to worry about our daughters," she said smoothly.

I… I'm sorry, but your husband is very much panicking right now.

She turned toward Rembrandt with a confident smile.

"We have Raidou-sama and his followers here. I'm sure that even a worst-case scenario would be manageable for them. Besides… eventually, our daughters will have to face the harsh reality that there are things in this world they can't handle alone. If that happens to be today, then so be it. In fact, I'd be grateful that it happened with all of you present."

So basically, she's saying that since they'll have to experience failure at some point, it's better if it happens now, while someone is

watching over them?

That's a terrifying thing to say in a situation like this.

Lisa Rembrandt was clearly the strict disciplinarian in their household. She probably ensured Shifu and Yuno received proper instruction, since her husband was overly indulgent.

That said…

Although she spoke calmly, her left hand trembled, fingers clutching her right hand. She was forcing herself to remain composed.

I chose not to point it out and instead wrote my response carefully, then held it up toward them.

"I'm honored by your trust. As their instructor, I take full responsibility for their safety. What will the two of you do now? I believe this location within the academy grounds is safer than the city. If you have no pressing matters, I recommend staying here for the time being."

"I see. Dear, dear!" Lisa called out sharply, but her husband wasn't hearing it.

"No, we've got to prepare for the worst! Perhaps we can mobilize the mercenaries through the Merchant Guild—" he began, pacing back and forth frantically.

"*Dear!*" Lisa interrupted, her voice cutting through his rambling like a blade.

"Uoah! Wh-What is it, Lisa?!" Rembrandt yelped, nearly tripping over himself as he turned to face her. "I was in the middle of *resolving* this situation!"

"Shifu and Yuno are under Raidou-sama's protection, so there is nothing for you to worry about," she stated firmly. "Now then, we've been asked what we'll do next. You were paying attention, weren't you?"

For a brief moment, I could swear I felt the temperature drop.

Rembrandt-san, I hope you were listening, because that tone is terrifying.

Overwhelmed by his wife's aura, Rembrandt finally snapped back to reality. He wiped the sweat off his brow and straightened his posture to regain some semblance of composure.

"Of… of course I was paying attention, Lisa!" he stammered, voice cracking slightly. "I… uh… yes… that's right… Raidou-dono was asking… about that, yes… Fuu…"

I watched silently as he tried—and failed—to act natural. He was a complete mess.

"… And 'fuu,' huh?" I muttered under my breath. "Don't just sigh in relief like that."

Rembrandt had completely spiraled, going so far as to mention the Merchant Guild—a topic I didn't want to hear about right now.

And mercenaries… huh?

I'd heard that, through the Merchant Guild, one could secure mercenaries at discounted rates. Since merchants often required prolonged protection for transporting goods, hiring dedicated mercenaries was far more cost-effective than relying on adventurers for short-term contracts.

It wasn't relevant to me, so I had never looked into the details.

Lisa turned to her husband once more, her gaze piercing. "So? What will you do? Since our daughters are here, I think staying put would be a reasonable choice."

Rembrandt, having regained some of his usual composure, gave a short answer.

"No, I'll head to the Merchant Guild."

Lisa looked skeptical. "The guild? You were just there a few days ago, weren't you? And given the current chaos, I doubt you'll get any meaningful response from them."

I nodded. She was right.

With everything going on, the Merchant Guild must be in complete disarray. And since I had no intention of stepping in to shield them from the consequences of this situation, it wasn't exactly ideal for the Rembrandts to be there either.

"That's true. It's not as if the Rotsgard Merchant Guild has much experience dealing with situations like this. An external assault? They've probably never had to handle something of this scale before." Rembrandt adjusted his coat before looking at Lisa. "I, on the other hand, lived through multiple battles back in Tsige. I've even taken command during emergencies. If nothing else, I can at least help mitigate unnecessary losses."

What?

I blinked.

This is the same man who was completely unraveling over his daughters just moments ago, right?

Where did that panic-stricken father go?

Rembrandt turned his gaze from Lisa back to me.

"If you say you'll be guarding the academy, then I have no reason to worry about my daughters," he stated calmly. "Besides, I know the guild's representative here. We're not strangers."

Lisa's lips curved slightly as if she had caught on to something.

"Oh, the representative here… Ah, it's Zara, isn't it?" she mused. "That explains why you were so insistent on visiting the guild alone the other day."

Zara.

Right. That was the name of that representative.

I hadn't forgotten him… Not that I wanted to think about him either. Just remembering his face was enough to make me sigh.

Rembrandt cleared his throat. "A-Ahem. That's not important right now. What is important is that I do what I can. This is the city where my daughters live, after all. And there's no harm in helping the Merchant Guild—it's mutually beneficial."

So that's how it is. He's heading to the Merchant Guild, then.

"I suppose there's no helping it," Lisa sighed, shaking her head. "In that case, I'll go with you."

"W-Wait, Lisa! Th-There's no need for you to come along!" Rembrandt stammered.

His gaze darted back to his wife, and suddenly his earlier confidence was nowhere to be found.

Busy man. Always getting worked up over something.

Lisa hadn't lost her cool at all. "No, I'm going," she declared firmly. "I believe I'm more accustomed to handling dangerous situations than most at the guild. Besides, I would like to extend my greetings to Zara-san as well."

"Ugh… Y-Yes, well, if you insist, Lisa…" Rembrandt muttered hesitantly. "But still…"

Still? Rembrandt seemed extremely reluctant to have his wife accompany him. Could it be that having his wife there would be… inconvenient for him?

No, that wouldn't make sense.

I highly doubted that Rembrandt was fooling around, especially not in the same city where his daughters were studying. It was painfully obvious that he was head-over-heels in love with his wife.

Maybe there's some history between Lisa and Zara?

Whatever the case, it was none of my business. What mattered right now was that the two of them were heading to the Merchant Guild. So ensuring their safe passage—even just part of the way—was my responsibility.

With that in mind, I scanned the area. The general seating had already emptied, leaving only our group behind. However, the VIP section still had several important figures present. That meant calling for reinforcements here would be a bad idea.

"Raidou-dono, I'll be leaving my daughters in your care," Rembrandt said with a weak chuckle. "I'll do what I can. Though, in the end, all I'm really doing is taking advantage of the chaos to build some goodwill." His smile was tiring, but his resolve remained firm.

He's a tough man, no doubt about that. It was obvious that he was still worried sick about Shifu and Yuno, yet he was forcing himself to focus on what he could do.

Lisa placed a hand lightly on his arm. "Then we shall be off. Excuse us."

Just a second.

I quickly wrote out a message and held it up before they could take another step.

"Please wait. I'll go with you part of the way."

I wasn't about to let them walk into the city alone; at least I could take them to the edge of the arena. From there, I would have warriors from the Demiplane take over escort duty. These were among the few people who actually supported me—I wasn't going to let them become collateral damage in this chaos.

The couple exchanged hesitant glances. They were suspicious of my insistence, but ultimately accepted my offer.

I sent a telepathic message to Tomoe, instructing her to teleport Eva and Luria somewhere safe. Tomoe nodded, and I turned away, following Rembrandt and his wife.

We exited through the spectator stands and into the dimly lit corridor leading to the arena's exit. As we walked, I wrote out another question.

"Are you both on good terms with the representative?"

Rembrandt let out a small sigh, rubbing his temple as if searching for the right words. "Good terms… That's hard to answer. If nothing else, you could say we're tied together by fate."

Lisa, however, wasted no time in contradicting him outright.

"Back in the day, they had their shops right next to each other and spent their time constantly competing to see who could outdo the other," she explained casually.

"Lisa!" Rembrandt shot her a look of exasperation.

"Oh, don't act so defensive. It's not like this is some big secret," Lisa replied smoothly, unfazed by his reaction. "Honestly, the two of you were so ambitious back then, it was like watching walking embodiments of greed and ambition in nice clothes. You were two of a kind."

Rembrandt…? That *competitive?*

It was hard to picture, given the composed and calculating businessman I knew now.

Still, this revealed more than I expected. Rembrandt and Zara weren't just acquaintances—they had history.

One was a powerful ally and one of the few hyumans I could truly rely on in this world.

The other was an opponent who refused to understand me and was one of the most difficult hyumans I had encountered here.

Thinking about it like that… the contrast is almost ironic.

I quickly wrote a response. *"I must admit, I wouldn't have expected Zara-dono and Rembrandt-san to be so similar in the past."*

"You met with him yesterday, didn't you?" His voice held a knowing edge. "Judging by your reaction, I'd guess he had some words for you."

Sharp as ever.

I sighed to myself. He knew Zara well enough to guess what had happened just from my reaction.

"It seems I was too inexperienced to notice the growing friction between myself and those around me." I deliberately worded my response vaguely, not wanting to worry him unnecessarily.

Rembrandt exhaled heavily, shaking his head. "I had mentioned you and your followers to him in advance. It seems I failed to convey things properly."

"There's no need to apologize. The fault was mine. My handling of the situation was inadequate."

Lisa let out a thoughtful "hmm" before glancing at her husband. "Or perhaps you simply didn't explain it properly to Zara-san?"

"It wasn't my place to divulge too much of Raidou-dono's personal information. I simply felt that some discretion was necessary, Lisa." Rembrandt's voice lowered slightly. "But… if my intentions weren't conveyed properly, then I can only assume that the man treated Raidou-dono rather poorly."

I let out a wry smile, shaking my head as I wrote my next words.

"Unfortunately, I was not treated as a merchant. It was embarrassing."

Rembrandt let out a dry chuckle. "That man… He's got a kind side to him, but he's terrible with words. Sometimes, even the people he genuinely cares for misunderstand him."

If he treats everyone like that, of course, people will misunderstand him.

Lisa let out a soft chuckle, though her words were edged with sarcasm. "Unlike you, dear, who would rather stab someone from behind without saying a word, Zara-san at least tries to handle business in a more direct manner. Though I do agree that his lack of tact hurts him quite a bit."

Rembrandt let out a mock sigh, shaking his head. "Lisa. I can hear the malice in your tone. I simply did what was necessary to succeed, that's all."

Yeah. Merchant life isn't all about playing fair.

Hearing their casual back-and-forth, I realized something—I had been too soft. Compared to how they had maneuvered their way through the business world, my approach had been naive.

No wonder I kept getting dragged into problems.

A sudden wave of doubt crept in.

Can I handle this world as a merchant?

Pushing the thought aside, I scribbled a response. *"From what you're saying, it sounds like you've known each other for quite some time."*

"Oh, yes. A long time. Even my butler, Morris, knows Zara well. Unlike him, though, I eventually realized that my family mattered most and stepped away from being fully invested in business. Meanwhile, Zara's still unmarried, and his entire life revolves around trade." Rembrandt let out a slight chuckle, though there was knowing in his gaze. "Perhaps he's lost his touch. Or perhaps he was displeased that I was following behind you, Raidou-dono. So, it sounds like he handled things poorly."

I hesitated for a moment before writing my next words carefully. *"He told me that it was too soon for me to be doing business here, and that I should go back to Tsige and let you train me properly. He*

also mentioned that he wouldn't interfere if I tried to restart my business there."

Rembrandt's eyes narrowed. "Oh? That's what he said? Given your reaction, I half-expected him to tell you to run back home with your tail between your legs and rely on your connections."

He does know Zara well.

The truth is, I was toning it down a bit for Rembrandt's sake. Zara's words had sounded a lot closer to "Crawl back home where you belong, you talentless nobody."

"Ah… Looks we're at the exit already," Lisa said with a sigh. "Raidou-sama, we'll take our leave here. My husband and I can manage the rest of the way. Take care of our daughters, will you?"

Rembrandt nodded, his usual confidence back. "I may not look it, but I can handle myself. You don't need to worry about us, Raidou-dono. Also, I'll be sure to clear up any misunderstandings with Zara regarding you and your company."

That's not really what I wanted, but I guess it was inevitable that I vented a little.

I let out a soft sigh.

I always end up relying on Rembrandt-san more than I should…

I stopped just before we stepped out of the arena into the daylight ahead.

All right. Time to summon their escort.

"Wait just a moment," I told them. *"I'll assign you two escorts. I chose to go with you this far because doing that in the arena would have been too conspicuous."*

"Escorts?" Rembrandt said. He and Lisa blinked in mild surprise.

She glanced around. "Followers of yours? But all of them stayed back in the stands, didn't they?"

I activated a mist gate. A swirling veil of fog materialized at my side, dense but oddly weightless, like a living haze. Through it, two figures emerged.

The moment they stepped through, their outlines sharpened, revealing two lizardfolk, their pristine scales shimmering. The

Rembrandts' gazes locked onto the creatures with a mix of shock and awe.

It wasn't just their sudden appearance. It wasn't just that they were clearly non-hyuman.

What was most surprising about the two creatures was their poise. These were not wild beasts. Their controlled presence, the way they stood with silent discipline, radiated not savagery but intelligence and purpose.

"As you can see, these are summons under my command," I wrote. *"They're extremely reliable. Please take them as your escort. Publicly, you can claim that they were summoned through magic or a tool at your disposal, whichever is more convenient."*

"R-Right… You did mention before that you could use summoning magic," Rembrandt muttered, finally breaking the silence. "I never imagined it would be this seamless. I have to admit, this was… surprising."

"They understand the common language, so feel free to give them direct verbal commands. The one with the spear is Kuuga, and the one with the bow is Ganmu."

At my introduction, both lizardfolk immediately knelt, their heads slightly bowed in a show of respect. Lisa exhaled softly, tension visibly easing from her shoulders.

"Ah… They can understand speech? That's a relief," she said. "Raidou-sama, I appreciate this. Truly."

Rembrandt nodded firmly. "Yes, I appreciate this as well."

"Please, take care. I'll see you both later."

With misty lizardfolk as their escorts, I had no doubt they would reach the guild safely. That handled, I turned on my heel, heading back toward the arena.

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“What’s the situation?” I asked no one in particular when I stepped back into the arena.

The battle hadn’t started yet.

Onstage, what used to be Ilumgand had swelled to twice its original size, its faintly glowing humanoid form now eerily distinct. While its bloated, daruma-like body had slimmed down somewhat, it was still grotesquely abnormal, like a poorly sculpted giant.

In its massive hands, it clutched one of its teammates—or at least, a pulped mass of flesh that used to be a teammate. Even from a distance, it was obvious that the person was long dead.

What’s more, the giant’s mouth was stained black with congealed, dripping blood; so much that I could see it even from where I stood.

I didn’t need an explanation to understand what had happened.

Tomoe spoke first, her voice calm yet edged with distaste.

“That thing started moving. Before anything else, it started by filling its stomach. That was when your students got back. That’s the situation, Young Master.”

So, it devours people like it’s nothing.

Ilumgand had no remnants of hyuman consciousness left. Whether someone was controlling the creature before us, or it was just acting on instinct, I couldn’t say.

On the stage, Jin and his team had taken up battle stances, their gazes locked onto the grotesque form that used to be Ilumgand.

Yet…

I could sense hesitation.

Fear.

Perhaps the sight of their fellow students being eaten had rattled them.

“The academy *still* hasn’t sent anyone to help?” I asked, scanning the field.

Shiki answered this time. “They’re just arriving.”

On cue, a group emerged from the hallway that led to the other waiting rooms. There were about ten of them, all clad in striking violet armor and walking in rigid formation. The ten-man squad moved into position behind Ilumgand and raised their staffs, their voices overlapping as they chanted.

Were they competent combatants? Or was the damage throughout the city worse than expected, forcing the academy to just send support mages instead of actual fighters?

I didn't know.

Based on first impressions…

They'll be completely useless.

They'll be swallowed up in an instant.

If this is all the academy can muster after seeing what Ilumgand's become… then the defensive capabilities of both the academy and Rotsgard itself must be pretty low.

That wasn't a good sign. I needed more information on how the rest of the city was doing.

"Tomoe," I said, turning to her, "why don't you check on the damage around the city—just a rough estimate is fine."

Tomoe nodded immediately. "Leave it to me. I'll have the dwarves and forest ogres investigate." Without another word, she activated Telepathy, sending instructions to the employees of the Kuzunoha Company.

Just then, the battle onstage began. Jin and his team remained on standby in a defensive stance, assessing the situation before engaging. The Purple Coats, as I'd decided to call them, were the ones to make the first move. As expected, they were all mages, each wielding a staff and chanting incantations.

Tomoe turned to Shiki and spoke in her usual commanding tone. "Shiki, you assist as well. With your magic, you should be able to assess the damage from here, correct?"

Shiki nodded. "Of course. I'll do what I can."

No argument. No hesitation. As a former undead lich, Shiki was especially skilled in earth magic, which he would likely use to map

out the situation from a distance.

Both earth and wind magic were effective for surveying and detection work. The reason was simple—both elements had an abundance of physical contact points. Wind could interact with the atmosphere, while earth could manipulate the terrain. Using those, a skilled caster could essentially "touch" a vast portion of the environment. The only exception was underwater situations, where water magic reigned supreme for detection and reconnaissance.

With Tomoe and Shiki handling recon and the Kuzunoha staff now in motion, the overall situation would become clear soon enough. For now, I decided to observe and reassess our options. Sitting down in a nearby seat, I rested my chin in my hand and watched the battlefield unfold.

Mio, standing beside me, let out a bemused sigh as she began narrating. "My, my. What are those mages thinking, getting that close to the enemy?"

I followed her gaze. The Purple Coats had moved in dangerously close to Ilumgand before completing their incantations.

This can't be the academy's entire combat force… can it?

It made little sense for them to only have these ten mages. If that was the case, then stronger reinforcements should have been on the way.

Unless…

… There was some truth to that rumor I'd heard—that the academy had redirected all its defense funds because it considered its mission to be "unrelated to combat."

There are a lot of foreign dignitaries here for the academy festival. They must have planned for contingencies like this.

Each guest would have their own personal guards, and some may have even brought a considerable private force for protection. The question was—would that be enough?

If not, we would have to step in. As much as I wanted to avoid unnecessary involvement, letting the city fall into ruin wasn't exactly an option either.

If I intervened personally, it could make future negotiations with the demons much more… complicated.

"How interesting… That creature is nullifying three of the four basic elements." Mio folded her arms, watching intently. "For something that's nothing more than a failure mashed together from hyumans, it's quite the specimen. Whether this was an intended transformation or merely a byproduct of its mutation… remains to be seen."

I followed her gaze back to the arena, narrowing my eyes.

Three of the four?

Earth, water, fire, and wind were considered the four basic elements because mid-tier and higher elemental spirits existed for each, and they were the most widely used forms of magic.

Sure enough, Ilumgand was completely negating earth and wind spells before they even hit. Water magic was absorbed, seemingly converted into its own strength. Fire magic at least made contact, but wasn't particularly effective against it.

For something that looks like a grotesque pile of flesh, it's surprisingly resistant.

Then, suddenly, the power of the Purple Coats' spells skyrocketed.

Yet, I hadn't seen anyone casting enhancement magic on them.

It shouldn't have been possible for their attacks to increase so drastically in power without external influence.

Wait.

A possibility clicked into place in my mind.

"A blessing," I muttered. "Huh."

A so-called divine miracle, granted to all followers of the Goddess, at least, in theory.

By invoking her name before battle, one could receive a blessing, a temporary divine augmentation that amplified their natural strength. When both combatants called upon her, the blessing was bestowed upon the more devout and "beautiful" believer.

For non-hyuman followers, however, the blessing was… inconsistent.

Sometimes, it worked. Sometimes, it didn't.

In other words, this was just another convenient system that ensured hyumans held the advantage over other races.

That damn Goddess.

During her long sleep, her blessing was unavailable, leaving hyumans to rely on their own strength. But now that she was awake again, her divine boost was back in full effect, restoring the hyumans' unfair advantage.

How absurd.

Mio let out a sigh, shaking her head sadly. "It certainly looks like a blessing… but simply increasing their attack power won't do much in this situation. There already aren't enough hyumans who can wield effective fire magic. Without it, this will only… Ah, yes, as I suspected, they've only made things worse."

I turned my attention back to the battlefield just as Ilumgand let out a deafening roar, its grotesque form shaking the air. Then, with terrifying speed, it whirled around and charged straight at the Purple Coats. Instead of weakening, it had become even more active.

So, for now, Ilumgand will have its hands full with the academy's forces. That gave me a little time to think.

How do I use this chaos to my advantage?

The demons had put a lot of effort into this. They had spread the drug, taken precautions, and ensured that the process went undetected until it was too late. This meant that, whatever the aim of this plan was, it must have been very important to them. That was why Rona had kept it a secret from me.

I want Kaleneon. But I can't just let this chaos continue unchecked.

So… how should I act? How much should I act? The thoughts wouldn't stop bouncing around in my head.

Tomoe's voice broke my train of thought. "Young Master, I've got some information for you. There are around fifty of those

monsters spread around the city. They're actively targeting and destroying both the primary teleportation formations and the secondary auxiliary teleportation formations. So far, the damage is still relatively contained, but there have been similar incidents reported in some of the surrounding cities too. There are also minor disruptions in Telepathy. This area's stable for now, but the interference appears to be spreading inward from the outer cities."

Wait, so Tomoe already assessed Rotsgard and *the cities around us? That was fast.*

I nodded, then turned to Shiki. "What's the situation inside the city?"

"Not good. It seems Rotsgard was even more complacent than I had assumed. Not a single creature has been defeated yet. Some locations have managed to at least slow their destruction, but…" Shiki let out a sigh of disappointment.

Wow. Not even one? That's… rough.

If they all had similar resistances to Ilumgand—negating magic, absorbing water, and reducing fire to a minor annoyance—then students and mages were at a severe disadvantage. This wasn't just a crisis. It was going to be an absolute humiliation for the academy.

Then again, Rotsgard had known nothing but peace for centuries.

Compared to Tsige or the scattered bases in the Wasteland, this city had practically no sense of urgency at all. Shiki's report made it clear—I would have to step in somewhere if we wanted to contain the situation before it spiraled further out of control.

"Young Master, those fools have been completely annihilated." Mio's voice was tinged with boredom. "They barely even resisted. At that point, they might as well have been served up on a platter."

Seriously? I glanced back at the battlefield.

The Purple Coats were… gone. I'd expected them to at least put up a good fight, given that they were all mages, but this was beyond pathetic. If they had just kept their distance and launched attacks

from afar instead of charging in like idiots, maybe they wouldn't have ended up as monster food.

"Did Jin's team help at all?" I asked.

Mio exhaled sharply. "They did, but their fighting style was… a mess." She shook her head. "They aren't moving like they did in the tournament. They're hesitating."

So even Jin's team was struggling. That wasn't what I expected. From what Eris had reported, they had handled monsters well during training.

So, what's the problem now?

Screw it. They need orders.

I stood up taller, getting ready to give instructions.

They're still students.

This was an unprecedented battle. It was natural that they wouldn't be able to react as smoothly as they did in a controlled arena setting. There was nothing to be ashamed of—as long as they lived through this. If they hesitated too long, though… they would end up just like the Purple Coats.

"Honestly," Mio scoffed. "I was just considering giving them some credit, but then they went and let me down."

Oof. That stings. For some reason, Mio's critique felt like it was directed at me.

She turned to Shiki next, crossing her arms. "Shiki, you've been too lenient with them, haven't you?"

Shiki raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

"Look at them. They're relying too much on one single skill, a single spell, a single attribute. *That's* why they're struggling. That's the mark of a weak hyuman." Her gaze went a shade darker. "During the team battle, they showed what they were capable of—leveraging their strengths, working together, adapting. But this? This is a disgrace. You should've trained them to fight with a broader perspective."

Mio's words were harsh, but they made sense.

Except… why does this still feel a bit personal?

"Huh?"

Leverage strengths in a broader perspective…

I hesitated, running her words through my mind again, this time applying them to myself.

What was I good at? Magic? Defense? Languages (apart from the hyuman language)? That last one had already proven useful many times over.

What about my combat abilities? I avoided flaunting my power because I hated showing off, but…

Am I limiting myself by avoiding it?

There were so many ways to use my abilities strategically… yet I never considered them outside of emergencies.

Maybe it's time I rethink that.

I had always believed that business should be conducted fairly and openly, without relying on force. That belief had shaped how I operated—I even refrained from selling intangible powers as products, despite knowing that such a business model would be incredibly profitable for us.

With my abilities and the Demiplane's resources, we had an overwhelming advantage over other merchants. It even felt unfair sometimes, like we were cheating.

But what exactly is *fairness?* Could I really live my life clinging to pretty ideals like that? Something was clicking into place in my mind.

Violence was just another tool at my disposal—just like money, influence, or knowledge. Was there any reason to keep it hidden?

Even if we didn't use it directly, just establishing that we had the capability would be enough to make us a threat.

After all, other merchants used their national ties to pressure competitors. They leveraged their positions to crush new entrants into the market. Those were perfectly acceptable business tactics.

So why was I the only one holding back?

Using every resource available—connections, influence, money, and even force—shouldn't be considered unfair. If anything,

excluding violence but using all the rest felt unnatural.

Sure, it had a worse image, but that didn't mean it wasn't useful.

For instance, like dealing with an immediate threat.

I turned my gaze toward the VIP section.

A lot of people were still gathered there, including the headmaster, who was probably giving orders telepathically. It wasn't hard to guess what he must be feeling—his forces had been wiped out instantly.

If I stepped in now to save the high-ranking nobles and influential figures, the reputation of my company could drastically improve.

"Young Master, is something wrong?" Tomoe's voice pulled me back to the present. "It seems your students are about to engage in battle."

I took a breath, making my decision. "Mio, Shiki. Give Jin and the others instructions. If it looks like they're about to be wiped out, step in and assist."

"Eh?"

"What?"

Mio and Shiki both blinked at me, completely caught off guard.

"Hm? Did you not hear me?" I asked, glancing at them in confusion.

"No! I've got it!" Mio responded instantly.

"I understand," Shiki said with a nod. "I will only provide guidance up to the last possible moment, allowing them to gain experience."

With that, they both took off at a sprint toward the stage's edge, leaping over the railing and landing at the side of the arena.

I'd made a promise to Rembrandt that none of my students would die. But at the same time, Lisa's words echoed in my mind.

Experiencing defeat—that overwhelming sense of helplessness—could serve as a valuable lesson for them. This wasn't like the Lesser Dragon hunt, where I'd arranged a sneak attack to push them

forward. This was a direct confrontation, and they had to face their limits head-on.

Maybe that would carry an entirely different meaning. Not that I had any right to talk—I had taken far too many shortcuts in battle ever since arriving in this world.

I turned to Tomoe. "Tomoe, come with me."

"All right," she replied as she stood up straight. "It seems you've settled on a course of action."

"Yeah. As the official stance of the Kuzunoha Company, we're going to focus on protecting the city while staying in the background."

"I see." Tomoe folded her arms, waiting for further instruction.

"I need you to deploy Lime and Mondo. Their priority is citizen rescue. If evacuations aren't enough to stabilize the situation, I'll leave it to your judgment to engage the monsters directly."

"Okay, one last thing. You're allowing me to decide when to strike?"

"Yes. I trust your judgment."

She gave a firm nod. "Thanks. And where shall we go?"

I glanced up toward the VIP section. "We're going to help the guests. You and I will play the part of heroes today."

"Ah. So, you intend to win favor among the higher-ups of all these different nations."

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Tomoe gave me a look that said she knew exactly what I meant.

If we were going to make the Kuzunoha Company known, then Tomoe was the best possible figurehead. After all, I was just a merchant and temporary instructor—but she was my bodyguard and right hand. With the right impression, they wouldn't forget our name anytime soon.

It was a simple plan: carrot and stick, aid and intimidation.

Treating violence as a resource would open up lots more options to us. This was so easy, it almost felt ridiculous.

Stay calm. Think ahead. Be prepared.

Like walking into a test I had studied for, I steeled myself and strode toward the VIP section.



"Pardon my intrusion."

A clear, resolute voice rang out through the VIP section, where confusion reigned. Plush carpets lined the floor, and lavish decorations were carefully arranged—this section was a far cry from the general admission area.

So, this is the VIP section, huh?

Tomoe's voice carried effortlessly, drawing the attention of every dignitary in attendance.

"Who are you?! Do you not know that unauthorized people are forbidden from entering this area?!" a voice bellowed, his face contorted with outrage.

The headmaster.

Although I'd seen his face in portraits before, I'd never met him in person, so it took me a moment to recognize him.

"This is an emergency," Tomoe replied calmly. "Please forgive our intrusion. It seems the guests have yet to evacuate to safety, so I've come to offer my assistance, however humble it may be."

At that moment, I noticed her glance briefly at another woman.

She was quite young, with the elegant, dignified look of nobility about her. The heir to a noble house, perhaps… or even a princess?

Wait. A princess? And someone Tomoe might recognize…?

Could she be the imperial princess of Gritonia, I keep hearing about—Lily?

If so, we had a serious big shot in our midst. But from what I'd heard, Princess Lily was traveling with the hero. It didn't make sense for her to be here alone.

Maybe I'm mistaken…

Just then, I felt an all-too-familiar gaze on me from behind. I turned to find a silver-haired young man leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed casually, and lips curled into a smirk. As I stared, he uncrossed his arms to give me a small, lazy wave.

Damn weirdo.

Right. That guy's here too.

If he was around, then maybe there'd been no need for us to rush in and help. If he started running his mouth about us, we'd be in a world of trouble.

He didn't seem inclined to do so. Instead, he simply crossed his arms again and turned his gaze toward Tomoe.

Taking the wait-and-see approach, huh?

I still don't get what he's thinking or what his intentions are. I guess I should be relieved that he's not interfering…

As I scanned the room, I spotted two more familiar faces—the high priestess and… right, Sairitsu from Lorel. So, they'd all come to watch the tournament as well.

The high priestess wasn't particularly conspicuous, as she was among several other figures of significant authority.

Given that the highest-ranking clergy member from Rotsgard's temple is that priest over there, the people around her must be from the Grand Temple of Limia—perhaps even its highest officials.

Meanwhile, the people from Lorel stood out more. Apart from Sairitsu, there were quite a few of them. Their defining feature? Dark, sun-kissed skin.

I guess that must be a common trait there.





Noticing my gaze, Sairitsu offered a brief, polite smile.

"First, state your name! I have no idea who you are!!!" the headmaster roared.

Well, fair enough. No matter how frenzied the situation was, an unfamiliar person barging into the VIP section area wasn't exactly something that would be welcomed.

"This is my oversight," Tomoe said smoothly, offering a small bow. "My name is Tomoe. I'm with the Kuzunoha Company, Headmaster-dono. And this here is my master, Raidou-sama. He cannot speak freely, so I ask for your understanding as I introduce him instead."

The headmaster's eyes narrowed as he repeated our names under his breath. "Tomoe… and Raidou…"

I stepped forward and wrote a speech bubble for all to see. *"It is a pleasure to meet you, Headmaster. My name is Raidou, and I serve as a temporary instructor here. Given the emergency, I wanted to see if I could be of any assistance, however late my arrival may be. I ask for your forgiveness in this intrusion."*

Since Tomoe had already introduced me, this was mostly a formality. Even so, I retrieved the identification plaque that proved my status as a temporary instructor and presented it to him.

The headmaster's eyes flicked between the floating text, me, and the plaque.

"Writing magic… Ah, so it's you. Indeed, you do seem to be Raidou, the temporary instructor."

His rigid expression softened slightly, though wariness still lingered in his gaze.

Tomoe smiled as she gave a respectful bow. "I'm pleased you understand."

The headmaster grunted. "You mentioned offering your assistance, but how do you intend to do so? As far as we know, there are still monsters roaming the city. Leading everyone to safety will not be a simple task."

“Headmaster-dono,” Tomoe asked, her tone light yet firm, “I assume you’re aware of a few locations deemed safe for emergencies?”

“Of course. We have designated places for situations like this. Sorting information and giving orders in a danger zone would be pure folly,” he added, as if this were obvious.

Tomoe’s lips curled into a knowing smile. “Then, please envision the entrance to one of those locations. I shall use teleportation to send everyone there safely.”

A stunned silence followed.

Then—

“Teleportation? Did you just say *teleportation*?!” The headmaster’s voice cracked in disbelief. “You intend to transport this many people to a location you have never been to? Absurd! Such a spell is impossible! Don’t spout nonsense at a time like this!”

I was reminded how easily we’d taken teleportation and telepathy for granted. Both required highly advanced magic and techniques, far beyond what most people understood.

Take telepathy. The range and usability of the standard communication magic in this world were leagues behind what we had access to. Like a cheap walkie-talkie versus a modern smartphone. Still, in large cities, communication magic was somewhat developed, and mages capable of using it were highly valued.

Teleportation, on the other hand, was even less accessible. Normally, it required a dedicated facility, an absolute fortune in resources, and multiple skilled mages just to make a single trip possible. And even then, it wasn’t a freeform spell—it was always tied to preestablished destinations. More importantly, a mage could only teleport to places they had personally visited before.

So, no matter how clearly we explained it, there was no way anyone would believe that we could use teleportation as easily as we did.

Tomoe, of course, was entirely unfazed by the headmaster's dismissal.

"But you see, it is possible," she replied lightly. "That said, I do understand your skepticism… Hmm," she said, resting her chin on one hand, and I knew she was considering how best to prove it.

Then…

"Ahaha! Now this is interesting! Absolutely fascinating!" A sudden burst of laughter interrupted the conversation. "It's true that mages capable of such a remarkable teleportation technique are exceedingly rare."

The voice belonged to Luto, who had cut into the conversation with his usual nonchalant demeanor.

"Fals-dono," Tomoe greeted him politely, while the headmaster turned to Luto with a face full of suspicion and annoyance for being interrupted.

Luto ignored him. "Tell me, Tomoe. Why don't you teleport me first? Let's see… how about over there, in that section of the audience?" He gestured casually toward a spot in the stands. "As long as I can picture it clearly, you should be able to do it, correct?"

Ah, I see. He was pretending to be an outsider while offering himself as a test subject. *Clever.*

Tomoe must have caught on as well, since she showed no signs of hesitation.

Well, considering he was the head of the Adventurers' Guild, he did enjoy a certain level of public credibility.

"But Fals-dono…" the headmaster began, his tone still wary.

Then another voice entered the conversation. "Headmaster, isn't that an excellent suggestion? I'll bet Fals-dono here has interacted with more adventurers than anyone else up here. If there's anyone suited to evaluate the validity of Tomoe's claim, it would be him.

"Besides," the young noblewoman continued, "should we not at least consider the goodwill of those who have come to assist us in this emergency? To dismiss them would be unwise, would it not?"

The headmaster stiffened slightly.

Oh?

So, it *was* Princess Lily. Even the headmaster, as stern as he was, couldn't easily refute her.

I wasn't sure why she was backing up Luto's suggestion, especially since she also acknowledged the value of Tomoe and me coming here to help.

What a stroke of luck! There's no way we're not taking advantage of this momentum!

"Ah, Princess Lily of the Gritonia Empire. Your kind words are most appreciated," Tomoe told her with a respectful nod. "Now then, Fals-dono, was it? Please, step into this mist."

The moment she spoke, a dense cloud of fog, large enough to engulf a person, materialized in the air next to her.

Luto whistled in amusement. "Oh? I see more fog forming over there as well. Looks like they're linked. Well, let's see if this oddly convenient spell is the real deal."

Pointing toward another section, Luto strolled forward without hesitation and disappeared into the swirling fog. A split second later, he emerged from the exact location he'd pointed to.

To me, this was just a day in the life. But to the nobles watching, it was anything but ordinary.

When Luto turned toward the guest area and waved, gasps of shock and murmurs of astonishment rippled through the section. Even Princess Lily's eyes widened, and she covered her mouth with her hand in disbelief. The regal figure near her and his attendants were also visibly shaken, their gazes flickering between Luto and Tomoe as they tried to process what they had just witnessed.

Then, Luto casually walked through the mist on the other side and reappeared with us. "Incredible!" he declared with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Truly remarkable! I've never seen a spell this flawless! If I had to guess… the secret must lie in that unusual sword at your waist. Is that it?"

Huh?

What the hell is he talking about?

The power Tomoe had used was purely her own—her innate ability as a dragon. Her katana had absolutely nothing to do with it. And Luto knew that. Why was he deliberately making such a wild, off-the-mark assertion?

I seriously don't get how this guy thinks… Is this just another one of his weird habits?

I stole a quick glance at Tomoe, wondering if she'd be too confused to keep up the act. But—

She just chuckled. "Fals-dono, your keen eye is truly terrifying. Indeed, this sword possesses powers that enable teleportation without incantations. Naturally, it does have some limitations, but it's useful in times like these."

What? Tomoe, what the hell are you saying?

Not only did she roll with Luto's nonsense, but she even referred to her katana as a sword—a mistake she would have corrected instantly if anyone else made it.

As I stood there utterly baffled, Tomoe and Luto exchanged knowing grins.

What the hell is going on?

Naturally, all eyes turned to Tomoe's "sword." Seeing their curiosity, she gestured subtly toward the shorter blade at her waist, her wakizashi.

"Unbelievable…" the headmaster murmured.

Teleportation was an extremely advanced form of magic. Even among mages, being able to use it individually was enough to earn great acclaim. Ema had recently started to grasp the Demiplane's mist gate teleportation, but even she still struggled after using it.

That was why meticulously designed magic circles existed—to replicate teleportation, reduce strain, and make the process more manageable.

And yet, now, they were being told that a mere sword possessed this power, with no incantations.

The powerful figures from each nation were now fixated on Tomoe's wakizashi, *Shirafuji*.

Please don't let this turn into another diplomatic mess.

Why the hell were Luto and Tomoe pulling off such an elaborate charade? It was just inviting more trouble!

"Well then, everyone," Luto said, sweeping his gaze across the room. "Shall we take them up on their generous offer?"

So, he's guiding the conversation in our favor, huh?

I still had no idea whether or not this guy was an ally, but at least for now, he seemed to be on our side.

Then—

"Yes. Fals-dono speaks wisely," Princess Lily said, glancing for a fraction of a second at Tomoe before continuing. "Raidou-dono, we are deeply grateful for your courageous actions. I vow that this debt shall be repaid… upon my name as Lily of the Gritonia Empire. What say the rest of you?"

What was that about?

From what I'd heard, they hadn't parted on particularly good terms. Yet, she too had supported Tomoe's suggestion.

Does she hold some kind of lingering sentiment toward her?

In any case, Lily's declaration triggered a domino effect. One by one, people stepped forward to accept our aid—clerics from the temple, representatives from the Lorel Federation, and even a noble who I figured was probably from Aion.

Even the headmaster, who was now leaning on the shoulder of a woman who looked like his secretary, gave his reluctant agreement.

Wait… when did that happen?

And why the hell are you leaning on her like that?

I was pretty sure he hadn't been doing anything strenuous in the last few minutes, so…

Isn't this just blatant harassment?

Finally, there were just five people left in the VIP section. "I'd suggest you hurry," Tomoe called out to them.

But all five remained frozen in place.

Huh?

"I shall stay. It is my duty to witness everything to the end."

"I shall"? That sounds like a king speaking.

I followed the voice to see the man gazing intently at the stage, where that monstrous thing that used to be Ilumgand was still locked in battle with the students.

"Father, but that would—"

"You must go."

"Your Majesty, I cannot leave. That is my son standing there!"

The delegation from Limia, huh?

So, this man was the king of Limia, which would make the young man beside him a prince. The other two, judging by their poised stances and disciplined demeanor, were a kind of knight assigned to protect the royal family.

Well, that makes things complicated.

They weren't just concerned onlookers—they were directly involved in this mess. What to do…?

Still, priority number one was evacuating everyone else.

I turned toward Tomoe, but she spoke before I could. "Young Master, I shall take these people to the safe location as per the headmaster's guidance."

I nodded. That was exactly what I'd intended.

Tomoe conjured a new mist gate—this one much larger than the one she had made for Luto's demonstration.

"Then I shall entrust this sword to you, Young Master. I leave the rest in your hands."

"Hey…?!" Before I knew it, I was holding her wakizashi.

What the hell am I supposed to do with this?!

For a moment, I stared at the weapon in my hands before looking back up at Tomoe. She merely flashed a cryptic smile before stepping into the mist and vanishing.

Shit.

So now it's up to me to convince the Limia delegation to leave?

But I don't even know how to address a king properly…

For now, I'd just start with an apology and go from there.

"I have never had the pleasure of speaking to a king before, so I may act improperly. I ask for your forgiveness in advance."

The king regarded my floating text with a measured gaze. "Raidou, was it? You handle written communication quite skillfully. That, too, is a form of magic, I presume?"

"Yes. I cannot speak the common language, so I communicate this way. Allow me to formally introduce myself—Raidou, temporary instructor at the academy and representative of the Kuzunoha Company."

"I am already aware."

"You know of our company?"

How?

What possible reason would the king of Limia have to be informed about a small business in Rotsgard?

The king's sharp gaze shifted to one of the men beside him. "Is that not correct, Hopleys?"

Hopleys stiffened, his face betraying his shock.

"The merchant company you have been investigating… it was the Kuzunoha Company, was it not?" the king continued. "And its representative, the temporary instructor known as Raidou?"

The young man who might have been the prince nodded. "We have already confirmed as much, Hopleys-dono."

Wait… what?

Was something already in motion without my knowledge? Had the royal family uncovered part of Ilumgand's schemes?

"I expect an explanation, Hopleys. Your son, Ilumgand, has undergone a grotesque transformation, and a disaster has befallen this entire city. What is the meaning of this?" Despite his calm tone, the king's words held undeniable gravity.

Tension gripped the air, and the king's quiet yet commanding tone made it even heavier.

Hopleys swallowed hard before hastily responding, "Y-Your Majesty. It is true that I indulged my son's curiosity and had this instructor investigated. I also… made some financial arrangements

to influence the tournament's proceedings. However, I swear, I had no hand in this catastrophe! Ilumgand is my son, my prospective heir. I would never conspire to turn him into… that thing!"

His voice wavered with desperation as he pleaded his innocence.

The king was silent for a moment before speaking again. "Then tell me, Hopleys—why was Ilumgand so interested in Raidou?"

"I do not know," he replied. "I truly know nothing!"

Yeah, well, I'd like to know that too.

Why did I have to be investigated or treated like an enemy? All I did was step in when Ilumgand was harassing Luria. Was that actually enough for him to fixate on me so obsessively?

Was that unbearable humiliation for a noble?

If that were the case, I would never be able to understand their reasoning, no matter how hard I tried.

Hopleys continued to insist on his son's innocence before the king, but—

"We shall discuss the details once we return home. However, the disgrace you have brought upon our nation today will not be overlooked."

"Ugh." Hopleys lowered his head in defeat. I wondered if he would ever recover from this.

"Raidou, you are a merchant, yes?" the king continued. "And a temporary instructor at this academy… Then I assume the ones fighting on that stage are your students?"

"Yes," I answered. *"They are students who have taken my class. We have not known each other for very long, but they are indeed my students."*

The king's eyes narrowed. "How long have you been teaching them?"

"Less than half a year."

"Half a year…" he echoed, surprise in his voice. "Then, were they already this strong before?"

I shook my head. *"No. I originally did business in Tsige, and I taught my students some of the combat techniques used by adventurers there. It seems to have suited them well, allowing them to grow considerably. Of course, they also have undeniable natural talent."*

The king's eyes stayed locked on the battlefield as he kept speaking. "Tsige, you say… Now that you mention it, the adventurers brought back by the hero fought similarly. I don't think you're lying."

Adventurers from Tsige in Limia? If that was the case, then Limia must have had a fair number of high-level adventurers.

If the adventurers the hero had recruited were skilled enough to venture into the Wasteland, they must have been quite the formidable force, and a considerable asset to Limia.

Still, I didn't expect the hero to have gone all the way to a remote place like Tsige.

"Your Majesty, please allow me to escort you to safety. There is no guarantee that enemies won't appear here."

"No need. With the mentor of those remarkable students standing beside me, I feel quite at ease… Tell me, Raidou, can you wield that sword?" His gaze fell upon the wakizashi I was holding.

He's asking if I can use teleportation with it, isn't he?

Damn it, Tomoe. This is getting complicated.

So, I just needed to act as if this wakizashi allowed teleportation. *That should be fine, right?*

"Yes, I can use it. Both Tomoe and I can wield its power."

"Then would you take me there?" The king pointed toward the seating area near the stage. "If Ilumgand hears the voices of both his king and his father, there may still be a chance of bringing him back."

The prince paled. "Your Majesty! You must not! It's far too dangerous!"

It was a completely reasonable concern. But the king remained composed.

"A noble of Limia has brought harm upon this academy. If I do not step forward to contain the damage, our standing will suffer. Wouldn't you agree, Hopleys?" he asked, turning to the man in question.

Hopleys flinched, his face twisting with unease, but he nodded reluctantly. Facing his grotesquely transformed son must have been the last thing he wanted, but he had no choice.

"Of course, risking one's life is not the only way to demonstrate responsibility. But there are moments when such a display is necessary," the king continued. "And as things stand, Hopleys and I are the only ones who can address this now."

Finally, the prince relented.

"Raidou-dono, is it possible for you to teleport us there?"

So, I'll be their escort for a while, huh?

"It is possible. Shall I teleport all five of you there?"

I raised my hand and gestured roughly toward where the king had indicated. The prince gave a firm nod, while the knights remained silent.

So, they just follow orders without question? It must be tough.

Well, Shiki and Mio are over there, so even if something happens, it won't be a problem.

I adjusted my grip on the wakizashi, focused on maintaining the act. Next, I created a fog cloud identical to the one Tomoe had conjured earlier, and a second cloud appeared down in the stands.

All right, all set.

The king stepped forward. "We shall see this through," he declared in a steady voice. "We will not forget this, Raidou."

It would have been odd to let go of the wakizashi, so I simply bowed my head in response. With my left hand holding the scabbard and my right gripping the hilt, the pose must have looked rather awkward.

One by one, the knights, Hopleys, the prince, and finally the king himself stepped into the mist—

And vanished.



I turned my gaze toward the audience. There, standing quietly, were the nobles I'd just teleported—watching the battle onstage with solemn expressions.

The headmaster, plus representatives from Gritonia, the Lorel Federation, Limia, Aion, and the Grand Temple… We had evacuated some very powerful people.

Since I had introduced myself as the representative of the Kuzunoha Company, I knew that both my name and the company's would spread across the nations in the weeks to come. If everything went well, I might even turn the backing of those merchants who had been trying to crush me into a force that would instead pressure them into submission.

This maneuver… might not have been a bad choice at all. The thought made me smile.

"All right, time to go."

I stepped through the mist, heading toward the Limia delegation. For a moment, I paused, my gaze drifting down to the wakizashi.

Maybe Tomoe and Luto had just wanted to hide the true nature of our teleportation ability. But still, why put on that whole act?

Well, it wasn't my place to question it. If Tomoe had decided on this course of action, I'd let her handle it.

As I stepped out of the mist and rejoined the Limia delegation, I immediately addressed the king. *"I apologize for the delay. I hope I did not keep you waiting too long."*

"No need to worry… Still, that was remarkable teleportation. My country prides itself on possessing the most advanced teleportation techniques among the hyumans, yet I have never encountered a spell of such refinement. It was so natural that I barely perceived the transfer." The king's tone grew thoughtful as he continued, "I would like to discuss this in detail when we have time, but for now, our focus must remain on this battle. No matter the outcome… we must see it through to the end."

His final words, heavy with meaning, were aimed directly at Hopleys. The man stiffened, his expression tight.

"Tch," went the king.

Hopleys bit his lip, trembling at the king's words. He didn't need to consider diplomatic consequences to understand Ilumgand's fate. The king had already accepted whatever end awaited Hopleys' transformed son.

Even Shiki had said that reversing Ilumgand's condition might be impossible. Expecting hyuman knowledge to find a cure would be far too optimistic.

"He no longer seems to possess any trace of his former self. He rampages like a true monster." The prince's voice was heavy with sorrow; he must have known Ilumgand well. Then—

"Raidou." Hopleys' voice was strained as he suddenly addressed me. His eyes burned with unrestrained, almost resigned hostility.

What the hell do you expect me to do? I only stopped him from bullying Luria.

"What is it?" I wrote my response as calmly as possible.

"Your store deals in many kinds of medicine, does it not?"

"Yes. Our primary business is in medicinal products."

"Is there… no potion that could restore my son?"

His words carried no hope—just desperation.

I kept my answer neutral, borrowing the logic Shiki had previously shared. *"I apologize, but this is the first time I've ever seen such a transformation. I believe the chances of our medicines being effective are very low. Even at a glance, this appears to result from a complex ritual involving multiple potions and catalysts. Reversing it would likely be extremely difficult."*

Hopleys didn't respond, but his face conveyed everything—anger, sorrow, regret, frustration. Of course. His son was about to be killed, and as a noble, he had no choice but to accept it.

"This is a remarkable battle, indeed. Ilumgand, the one who crushed the academy's elite Purple Coats, is now struggling against these students."

"However, the battle appears evenly matched. Is this not too great a burden for the students?"

The king and the prince were watching the fight with the calm objectivity of spectators.

Just then, the king's gaze sharpened. "Raidou, the two standing at the side of the stage giving instructions—are they associates of yours?"

Sharp as expected.

"Yes. The man is assisting with my lectures at the academy—his name is Shiki. The woman is primarily my bodyguard—her name is Mio. Both have been with my company for a long time and are people I deeply rely on."

"Yet, they do not appear to be engaging in the fight," the king noted with a raised eyebrow.

"The students have chosen to fight and resolve this matter themselves, so I instructed them not to interfere unless absolutely necessary. Should the situation become dire, they will step in—but for now, they are only providing guidance. Besides—"

A furious outburst suddenly cut me off. "My son is *not* a stepping stone for your students!!!"

Hopleys' voice was thick with rage, his glare on fire with resentment. Even I was surprised by the intensity of his anger, but I let it pass and continued my explanation.

"Besides, there is a faint hope that Ilumgand-sama, seeing his classmates, might bring him back to his senses. For some reason, he seems to bear a grudge against me, so if I were to confront him directly, that possibility would be even slimmer."

"Hah! How transparent!" Hopleys gritted his teeth.

Well, yeah, even I know it sounds like a flimsy excuse.

"I see. You have shown such consideration for the nobles of our country! That thoughtfulness is much appreciated… Is it not, Hopleys?" The king let out a small chuckle.

"It is nothing more than an idea. I have no concrete evidence to support it."

Even as Hopleys trembled with anger, I turned to the king and bowed my head, subtly diffusing the tension.

Meanwhile, the prince was muttering under his breath. "A battle of ebb and flow… The victor remains uncertain."

The king looked at him. "Joshua, even you cannot predict the outcome?"

Joshua? So that's his name. I knew so little about Limian royalty. I had no clue what kind of standing this prince had within the royal family.

"Yes," Prince Joshua continued. "There is something I find curious… Why are they only using fire magic? Furthermore, isn't it strange that every mage in their party can wield fire?"

Okay, so neither the royals nor the nobles watching the fight have much experience with combat tactics. Their expertise must lie primarily in politics.

The king stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm… Raidou, can you explain?"

Would it be appropriate for me to answer so directly?

There were two knights standing by as his guards—if it was a question of battle strategy, wouldn't it have been proper to ask them

first? But then again, now that the king had addressed me, deferring to the knights would probably have been disrespectful.

It was better not to overthink it. Answering honestly was the safest course of action.

"Raidou, do not hesitate. Explain."

All right.

"First, as you can see, Ilumgand-sama's body has undergone a drastic transformation. Its resilience and endurance have increased to an absurd degree, making this battle a war of attrition. Its defense, durability, and sheer power have forced the students to remain cautious, preventing a swift resolution. Additionally, it appears that Ilumgand's transformation has a strong magical component."

"Magical component?" the king echoed.

"Yes. At present, Ilumgand-sama is resistant to all elements except fire." I decided not to go into detail about absorption, resistance, or outright immunity.

The king's gaze sharpened. "So, he nullifies three entire elements?"

"Fortunately, all the students fighting—including Jin Rohan—have been trained in wielding multiple elements. Since fire is the only effective attribute, they've adjusted their tactics to use it. Non-elemental attacks could also work, but they consume a significantly higher amount of mana. So, their current strategy is the most efficient choice."

Prince Joshua's eyes widened. "Everyone has learned multiple elements? Then… you've trained them to wield magic beyond the attributes they were born with?"

The way he spoke was so refined that he presented more like a royal butler than a prince. *Honestly, given my status, he should be treating me the same way the other nobles did.*

"Yes," I replied. *"That's why they've managed to mount an effective offensive."*

Joshua nodded but pressed, “Then why can they not finish the fight?”

“Because of the attribute limitation, they can’t utilize more intricate techniques. Fire magic, by nature, has fewer options for control-based spells, which makes it more suited for raw power and self-enhancement. What’s more, Ilumgand-sama is actively absorbing mana from all the hyumans around him, including his comrades. His increased mana capacity has nullified any weakening or disruption spells attempted so far. On top of that, his body’s regenerating from injuries to some extent. If they don’t land a decisive blow soon, this fight may drag on indef—”

I was cut off by a pained cry from Hopleys. I wasn’t sure how I’d missed it, but a major attack had landed. The massive gray figure knelt on one knee, its shoulder mangled where an arm had been torn clean off.

An arm?

They were still trying to subdue it rather than kill it outright.

From what I could tell, Mio had stopped offering advice and was simply watching the battle unfold. Shiki, on the other hand, seemed prepared for healing but was watching from a distance.

Jin and his team were visibly exhausted. Even from here, I could see the exhaustion of battle on their faces.

At this point, attempting to subdue it seems unrealistic…

And then—

The very thing I feared happened.

Ilumgand’s severed arm regenerated.

Shit. This might break their morale.

The crowd could barely believe their eyes.

“Unbelievable! He regrew that arm instantly?!” Joshua exclaimed.

“Regeneration… That’s… impossible,” the king muttered, his composure broken for once.

“Ilum… You… What have you become?!” Hopleys gasped, his voice a mix of horror and grief.

Before panic could spread among Jin's party, someone stepped forward, taking an assertive stance with their sword.

Mithra.

He hadn't had a chance to participate in the previous group fights. Was he eager to prove himself?

Good. Stepping forward at this moment to rally morale is a smart move. With their stamina fading, it was vital that they didn't lose their fighting spirit.

Even though Mithra must have been exhausted, he was still holding his ground, skillfully parrying Ilumgand's devastating blows and countering the attacks from the myriad swords embedded in Ilumgand's massive right arm.

Then—

"*Young Master,"* came Shiki's voice in my mind.

What is it?

The good thing was that everyone in the Limia delegation was focused on the stage, which gave me enough breathing room to have this conversation without drawing attention.

"*What's wrong?"* I asked. *"Did something happen?"*

"*Yes, two things,"* Shiki replied.

"Go on."

"First, it seems unlikely that the students will be able to neutralize this creature. Moreover, the fact that their opponent used to be their classmate is preventing them from fully committing to the fight."

"So, they might not finish it off?"

"Yes. If the objective were elimination, it could be accomplished swiftly with a strike to a vital point. I've already determined the exact location—it's the spinal cord. However, incapacitation alone may prove too difficult for them."

"I see. If it becomes impossible, step in and neutralize it yourself."

"Understood. Now, for the second issue, one of those creatures has infiltrated this area. It might pose a threat to the audience, so I

would be on your guard."

"Damn. Got it. Thanks for the warning."

So, something's coming here too?

I needed to stay within a safe distance to protect these people.

From the front row of the second level, the Limia delegation continued watching the battle unfold.

Ilumgand… Is there even a point in neutralizing it if there's no guarantee it can be healed?

Then—

Suddenly, the two knights of Limia tensed. I turned to the battlefield, assuming something there had changed, but nothing seemed different.

The king and Hopleys stood closest to the arena fence, while the knights, Prince Joshua, and I stood slightly behind them.

Then—

"Heads up!" shouted one of the knights. "Something's coming!"

Both knights immediately drew their weapons and sprinted past me, toward the rear of the arena. They must have been using detection magic, because for a moment, I couldn't see anything.

Emerging near the entrance leading from the audience seating to the corridors, a gray mutation revealed itself.

Hmm, this thing looks completely different from Ilumgand.

Its two grotesquely oversized legs took up more than half of its body, unnaturally muscular and developed. Above them was—no, not a torso—just a huge head.

Its gaping mouth was shaped like a beak. But more than that—its maw was stuffed with rows of jagged fangs, like some nightmarish fusion of a toucan and a predator. Even from this distance, I could have counted each sharp tooth.

Its large black eyes were like a horse's, protruding from the sides of its head as it scanned its surroundings.

If that wasn't disturbing enough, writhing tentacles sprouted from the top of its skull, like oversized strands of hair given life and moving erratically.

Absolutely disgusting.

The knights had probably rushed forward to prevent a battle from breaking out too close to the king.

Makes sense.

In that case, I should also move forward—

"*Giiiaaagghhh!!!*"

What?

The battle hadn't even begun yet. How was there already a scream? My eyes widened in disbelief.

The mutant was already in melee range.

Its explosive acceleration had propelled it forward in an instant, closing the distance with terrifying speed. Those grotesque legs weren't just for show—they granted it absurd levels of mobility.

The closest knight had no time to react.

With a sickening crunch, the creature bit clean through his side, shredding his armor and sending a spray of crimson mist into the air. His scream of agony barely registered before another followed—

The second knight, still in shock, barely had time to look up before the tendrils atop the creature's head lashed out like spears.

The thick parts of the knights' armor withstood the piercing attack, but they were severely deformed, hinting at massive internal damage. As for the areas where the armor was thinner—such as around the neck and the inner thighs—the tentacles had pierced through effortlessly.

That… could be fatal. I could heal them if I used Realm, but the spell's area of effect would include the mutant as well. Not to mention, loosening my magic concealment could expose things I don't want seen.

Tch.

Still, I had to protect the three people behind me. It wasn't the best option, but it was all I could do under the circumstances.

The creature shifted and crouched slightly, its birdlike maw turning toward us. The thick muscles in its powerful thighs tensed and expanded.

Oh, it's not just dashing—it's going to leap.

Sure enough, like a bullet, the creature launched itself straight toward us.

All right. I'd better take it down before it gets any closer.

I stepped forward to intercept—

A figure rushed past me.

Joshua?!

"Father! Get to safety, please!" The prince had drawn a thin, ornate sword—a blade that looked more like an accessory than a weapon. And yet, he was charging straight at the incoming mutant.

Are you an idiot?!

This was bad. If the prince got injured, it would be a huge problem. I sent out a telepathic message.

"Shiki, sorry—I need you here. We have casualties in the audience. Get over here and see if you can help. Mio, stay where you are and keep protecting the students. Do not *let any of them die!"*

The two knights were probably beyond saving. Still, if anyone could perform a miracle, it would be Shiki.

Even though I had referred to them as casualties, I wasn't sure if they had already stopped breathing. Given the sheer brutality of the attack, however, survival seemed impossible.

On the plus side, there didn't appear to be any other enemies. As long as I could stop the one currently attacking, this situation would be under control.

With that in mind, I rushed after Joshua.

The mutant was already upon him.

I won't make it in time.

My body couldn't accelerate to top speed fast enough. I needed magic.

Using my mana, I extended an invisible hand between Joshua and the incoming creature. *With Realm still concealing my presence, no one else should be able to see it.*

The hand caught the full force of the monster's charge. Then, with a flick of my wrist, I sent the creature flying away from the prince.

At last, I reached him. Scooping him up, I shielded him from the monster's view as I carried him toward the seats, diving between the rows to take cover.

Damn it. That pushed me a little too far from the king.

I had sent the mutant flying quite a distance, far enough that it wouldn't be able to attack again for a minute—but I needed to finish it quickly.

First, I turned to reassure Joshua. *"Your Highness,"* I began, *"my apologies for the abrupt action. Please forgive the disrespect. I will handle—"*

But before I could finish, I noticed a strange sensation in my hand.

Huh?

I instinctively looked down in surprise.

Joshua's face was frozen in shock. Had he been injured in the impact? Or had his clothes gotten caught on something? The fabric around his abdomen had torn quite a bit, revealing…

And my hand—

My hand was resting just above that area.

Wait. What?

Why… is this so soft?

Because—

What…?

My brain refused to process it.

Then, in a quiet but urgent voice, Joshua—no, *she*—spoke. "Details later… Please, protect my father first!"

Her face was burning with embarrassment. I jerked my hand away immediately, scrambling to put some distance between us.

Okay, I had definitely just messed up, but— Focus! The mutant comes first!

Luckily, my earlier attack had been effective—the creature was still stumbling around, dazed.

I closed the distance while keeping the creature in check with Bridt. It was a non-elemental Bridt—fired with no incantation and released by hand, making it far from lethal. But the attack had enough power to halt the creature's movement until I could get close.

Without wasting another second, I gathered mana into my right hand and punched the mutant square in the face. The impact sent it hurtling backward, taking out chairs, fences, and other assorted obstacles as it tumbled away.

Good. That should get the king out of immediate danger.

Non-elemental magic typically had less raw power than elemental spells of the same level. But judging by the effectiveness of my earlier attack, this thing could be taken down with Bridt alone.

I uttered a brief incantation, mimicking the motion of notching an arrow, then fired off a white Bridt. The arrow-like projectile struck the mutant directly in the beak, launching it even further back before pinning it against the audience stands like an execution by crucifixion.

Since I wasn't sure what kind of attacks it was capable of, I had sacrificed some power for range. But—

It seemed I didn't need to worry. The creature's body suddenly bulged and bubbled from the inside out, violently expanding…

Then—

Boom!

The explosion scattered pieces in every direction.

Phew. That was a little nerve-racking, but I took care of it.

I exhaled in relief and glanced over to see that Shiki had already arrived and was tending to one of the knights. *Good. If he's treating him, that means he still has a chance.*

Shiki wouldn't waste magic on someone beyond saving.

I really hope this whole "Joshua" thing doesn't turn into another problem…

Sigh.

Avoiding eye contact as much as possible, I helped the "prince"—who was still curled up on the ground—back to where the king was standing.

All right, that's one crisis resolved…

Just as that thought crossed my mind… a piercing scream unlike anything before erupted from the stage.



Abelia

"Abelia, I'm heading upstairs to treat the injured knight," Shiki said as he turned toward me, his tone calm but firm. "Don't push yourself too hard. When I get back, I'll handle him."

I knew he was trying to be considerate, acknowledging how much trouble we were having against what had once been Ilumgand.

"Mio-dono, I'll leave them to you for now," he continued, shifting his attention to her.

Mio gave a small nod, her expression composed. "Of course. If Young Master's calling for you, then hurry along. There's nothing to worry about here."

It was a brief exchange, but enough to make my frustration boil over.

Hearing it from behind me only made me angrier at myself. I wasn't living up to their expectations. Worse still, their tone made it painfully clear—this wasn't even a genuine threat to them. Not to Shiki. Not to Mio. Not to Raidou-sensei.

Whatever Ilumgand and I once were to each other doesn't matter right now. Even if that past was affecting my movements, just a little.

I wasn't the only one hesitating. The others were struggling just as much. If this had been a regular lesson, the fight would have already been stopped, and we'd all be getting a stern lecture. That was how poorly we were performing.

The reason was obvious.

This wasn't just some random monster we were fighting; our opponent had once been a fellow student.

We kept calling out to Ilumgand, hoping desperately that it would snap out of it. But it didn't respond in any way that made sense. And yet, we couldn't bring ourselves to kill it either. So, we had only one option: Focus our attacks on nonlethal areas.

That was why I'd severed its arm earlier. A half-hearted, pitiful attempt at battle.

Unfortunately, to it, that injury meant nothing.

It let out an enraged, bestial roar, but then its entire arm just *regenerated* before our eyes. And without even looking at its arm, it lunged at us once more.

If Mithra hadn't stepped forward at that moment, we would have been swallowed by our hesitation and torn apart, just like the Purple Coats. I needed to be grateful to him—

I stood at the rear, watching the battlefield, while my comrades at the front risked their lives, literally using their bodies to shield us from Ilumgand's attacks.

This is frustrating.

This new Ilumgand was far stronger than us. It wasn't strength it had earned through relentless training as a hyuman—it was power gained through a monstrous transformation.

Whether or not it could return to its former self didn't matter. What mattered was that Ilumgand had surpassed me once again.

After taking Raidou-sensei's lessons, I finally believed I had grown stronger than Ilumgand. I thought I had surpassed the person who had always seemed so far out of reach.

A part of me wanted to scream in rage and charge at it, fists swinging. But that was the worst possible thing I could do. It would throw the entire party into disarray.

Besides, I couldn't bear the thought of Shiki—no, of everyone—seeing me lose control like that.

For now, the smartest thing to do was to endure and wait for Shiki to return.

Mio, the only one who had stayed behind with us, showed no intention of lending us a direct hand. She had already made her expectations clear: *"Figure the rest out yourselves."*

She was nothing like Shiki in that regard.

Fortunately, she had shared crucial insights—the nature of Ilumgand's attacks, its weaknesses, and the most effective element to use against it. She confirmed when our assumptions were correct and offered subtle clues when we were wrong.

The Purple Coats were the academy's proudest, strongest unit. They were the best the city of Rotsgard had to offer. And yet they had been annihilated and devoured. It hadn't even been a struggle.

There were four reasons we were still holding our ground against the monster that had wiped them out: Shiki's healing magic, Mio's advice, the equipment Sensei had provided, and the blessing of the Goddess.

Without those advantages, we wouldn't have lasted a second.

When we invoked the Goddess's blessing, for some reason, both Shiki and Mio had given us… peculiar looks.

Regardless, if we had continued fighting while burdened by hesitation—without healing, guidance, or enhanced equipment—we would have been wiped out long ago.

We had spent countless hours in Raidou-sensei's lessons drilling the very coordination and strategic thinking needed to overcome

power gaps like this. *And yet, look at us now—what a pathetic display.*

"Dammit!!!" Jin's voice rang out, raw with frustration. "I've had enough of this…!"

Jin was kind.

Even now, he wasn't aiming for Ilumgand's vital points—he was still trying to incapacitate it. Deep down, he still saw that thing as a senior student at the academy.

Dual-wielding and overwhelming his opponent with relentless attacks—that was Jin's current style.

Strike before getting struck. That was the way of battle he aspired to.

Even his movements lacked their usual sharpness. His swordplay, normally fast-paced enough to consume his opponent's every move, wavered. Against a foe with such monstrous regeneration, dulled blades meant nothing.

Especially when that thing was coming at us with every intent to kill.

"Fire isn't exactly my strong suit, but…!" Izumo gritted his teeth as he unleashed a spell. He was struggling too.

His usual tactics—disrupting the enemy's movement with wind magic, obstructing their vision, and striking while maintaining high speed—weren't working. Every wind spell that came close to Ilumgand was scattered before it could take effect.

It wasn't resistance. It was outright nullification.

Even spells cast at its blind spots lacked the firepower to deal significant damage. Ilumgand's natural fire affinity was absorbing too much of the impact.

At this rate, Izumo would be better off falling back, planting his feet, and focusing on casting stronger, more concentrated attacks. But instead, he was burning through his mana at an alarming rate, forced to rely on an element he wasn't proficient in.

Izumo had never been the type to last in prolonged battles—his mana pool just wasn't that deep. It was no wonder he was already

showing signs of exhaustion.

"Not done yet! I'll hold him!" At the front lines, Mithra braced himself, refusing to give an inch. I had to admire his unwavering resolve.

No matter how strong his will, the moment our healing magic ran dry, Mithra's situation would turn critical. With Shiki gone, taking every hit was an incredibly dangerous gamble. But if he didn't hold the line, our entire formation would collapse.

"This guy just doesn't let up!"

"Any time I try to land a decisive hit, it blocks it! This is a pain in the ass!"

Daena and Yuno continued their attacks, weaving speed and deception together in a nonstop assault. But their endurance had long since reached its limit.

Ilumgand might have lost its intellect when it transformed into a monster, but its instincts had sharpened. It blocked every crucial strike with unerring precision. Yuno's and Daena's battle styles, built around explosive bursts of speed, were completely unsuited for prolonged combat. At this point, Yuno would be better off falling back and switching to her bow. The moment either of them faltered, a single blow would be the end of them.

"*Seft, Aloste… Eda, Clai*." Beside me, Shifu wove a high-powered fire spell.

She was the one who could deal the most effective damage to Ilumgand. Between her magic and Mithra's defense, they were our lifeline. Put simply, victory hinged on Shifu's remaining mana.

I see it now.

When you stepped back and observed the battle with a clear head, the truth was obvious. If we wanted to win without any further outside help, incapacitation was no longer an option.

It was time to strike a fatal blow.

Normally, Jin would be the one to make that call and rally everyone around the strategy. But right now, he couldn't do it. For

all the frustration he had spat toward Ilumgand before, I knew what he was thinking now. He wanted to save Ilumgand.

Jin's kindness was both his greatest strength and his greatest flaw. Would he ever change before we graduated?

No. He won't.

A small, bitter smile tugged at my lips.

I already had a plan. Standing there watching the battle unfold, I'd had the chance to run through every possibility multiple times. Each time, I arrived at the same conclusion.

If we were going to kill it, now was the time. We could do it. If I hesitated and it became too late, *that* would be the real mistake.

I refused to accept defeat just because we had someone to heal us afterward.

Especially against this, the thing that had abandoned its mind, its identity—everything—just to become a monster, and that wouldn't stop dragging me and my friends into its nightmare.

After all that, after everything—is that how it will end?

A high-pitched clang sounded as Jin's swords clashed directly with Ilumgand's right hand—no, against the sword that had become half-merged into its monstrous limb, the blade Ilumgand had once taken pride in.

In a straightforward contest of strength, Jin would be overpowered. He knew that. So, before it could happen, he let the impact carry him backward, launching himself away to minimize the damage.

Ilumgand didn't pursue him. Instead, it opened its mouth wide.

It's about to cast a spell.

But its way of channeling mana—it was strange. Unfamiliar.

No… wait.

A split second later, an awful sense of déjà vu crashed upon me.

No, this isn't the first time! This is—!!!

"Everyone, put up barriers! It's about to roar…!" I shouted, immediately casting a defensive shield.

My range wasn't enough to protect the frontliners, but at least I could cover the rear guard.

The memory of being cornered by a Lesser Dragon surged back into my mind, unbidden and unwanted. My body reacted instinctively, deploying the exact countermeasure I had devised back then.

That was one of my worst traumas.

Ugh, this fight keeps dredging up nothing but bad memories.

Just as I feared, a monstrous bellow erupted from Ilumgand, shaking us to our very bones. It had the same effect as the dragon's roar—pure, paralyzing intimidation. Jin, Mithra, Daena, and Yuno all froze in place, as if bound by invisible chains.

In that moment, the last traces of my hesitation… melted away. The technique must have forced Ilumgand into temporary stillness as well. It wasn't moving.

I'm not Jin.

If the choice was between losing my comrades or killing Ilumgand… *I'll kill it.*

I won't let this end in some half-measure, a compromise that leaves us all at risk.

"Shifu, can you imbue that spell into my arrow?" I asked calmly. "I know enchantments aren't your strong suit, but—"

"What? No way! The spell's already finished casting!" Shifu balked, her face twisting in surprise. Then, as if realizing what I was thinking, she added in shock, "Wait, are you talking about that thing Shiki did before?! You can't! That's a reckless method—if it even works, it'll explode in under ten seconds! That's only possible for him because he's Shiki!"

She stared at me, utterly dumbfounded. But Shifu's response was just the confirmation I needed.

"Ten seconds, huh? That's all I need. Izumo! You can still move, right?"

"Ugh… yeah, somehow. Thanks for the barrier earlier," groaned Izumo, a smirk playing on his lips despite his exhaustion. "So, this is

your trump card, huh? For some reason, this reminds me of my grandma's pocket—always full of random candy and who-knows-what."

He was still standing. That was all that mattered.

"Save the jokes. Can you boost my speed?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can, but shouldn't we focus on covering everyone else—"

I shook my head. "You know we don't have the luxury for that anymore, right…? I'm going to finish this."

"What?!"

Their faces tensed in shock. I ignored it.

"Look, it's moving again!" I shouted. "If it lands a direct hit while they're still paralyzed, even Mithra might not survive!"

"B-But—" Izumo hesitated.

"So, you're just going to take this all on yourself?" Shifu said sharply. "Then I'll finish it instead. I'll make sure my next spell lands…"

She was willing to do it. But I knew Izumo's hesitation was out of concern for me—that I would be the one to carry the weight of this kill.

That won't work.

"No." I shook my head. "Its magic resistance is too damn high right now. Neither a physical nor a magical attack alone is going to be enough—we need both, and they have to be powerful."

Shifu's last shot had only landed because she had a clear line of sight. That was how she'd managed to sever its arm. But right now, I couldn't count on that. Even if she could fire a spell of the same magnitude, there was no guarantee it would hit its vital points.

And this time, the frontliners were frozen in place. They weren't allies anymore—they were obstacles.

Shifu's biggest flaw had always been her accuracy. That wasn't usually an issue, given how overwhelmingly powerful her spells were. But this time, it mattered.

"S-She's right," Shifu hesitated.

"That's why *I'll* do it," I pressed on. "If we're going to land both physical and magical attacks in one strike, my arrow with a forcibly imbued spell is the best option. Don't worry, the odds of success are decent enough. So… let me at least look cool in front of Shiki-san, okay?"

My joke was probably completely out of place in this situation. But I held Shifu's gaze, my expression serious, silently pleading for her cooperation.

Suddenly, my body felt lighter.

"Ahhh, screw it!!!" Izumo shouted, his voice on the verge of breaking. "I'll draw its attention until I'm completely out of mana! Abelia, it's all on you now! Ugh, damn it! Even if Sensei's around to deal with the aftermath, this is such a pathetic way to go down…!"

His face was almost tearful as he cast his speed enhancement spell on me. Then, without hesitation, he turned and unleashed a relentless barrage of attack spells at Ilumgand—wild, unrestrained. It was clear he'd collapse from mana exhaustion the moment he ran dry.

"Okay," Shifu said at last. "When Jin can't act, you take command, Abelia. That was the rule, wasn't it?"

"Thank you, Shifu," I said, nodding.

With those words, the dense, concentrated power of her completed fire spell surged into the tip of the arrow in my right hand.

Impossible? Yeah, right.

Of course, she could do it. I knew she could.

I had trained alongside her, chasing the same goal. I knew exactly how many steps ahead she was. There was no way this was beyond her ability.

It would hold.

Ten seconds, guaranteed.

I ran.

With Izumo's desperate cover fire raining around me, I sped up, rushing forward at full speed. At the exact moment I had planned, I

pushed off the ground, launching myself into an impossibly high jump.

Reaching the peak of my leap, I activated a levitation spell. A soft force lifted my body further, letting me soar higher into the sky.

Ilumgand lifted its gaze, staring up at me.

Just like I expected. It doesn't even think about dodging.

It was too used to tanking attacks head-on. Too confident in its ability to withstand anything.

You truly trust that defense of yours, don't you? But right now, there's nothing to shield you from me.

An aerial strike.

I had done it countless times before. For some reason, though, Raidou-sensei always looked surprised whenever I did.

"How nimble," Raidou-sensei had once remarked, straight-faced, through one of his speech bubbles. Coming from someone with perfect aim, it felt more like he was mocking me than complimenting me.

Still, in certain situations, shooting while midair was a valid tactic. It wasn't always the best choice—after all, staying airborne meant exposing yourself to attacks. But in the right conditions, it worked. And these were the right conditions.

Shifu's previous attack had already revealed the limits of Ilumgand's supposedly invincible defense. Even if it tried to block with both arms, my arrow—now imbued with a raging magical force—would pierce through it with ease.

That's why—

What—?!

My breath hitched as my eyes caught something unthinkable—something I had never accounted for.

Ilumgand's severed arm, the one that had been left in a bloody heap on the battlefield, was now gripped in its left hand. And Ilumgand was winding up to throw it.

You're kidding. It's going to hurl that thing at me?! Who the hell would expect something like that?!

Before I could react, a sudden voice rang out, "*Nameless children of the earth! Aid me!*"

Shifu!

I hadn't expected any more support from her—after all, she had already imbued my arrow with magic. But I had forgotten: She still had spirit magic.

Earth wasn't particularly effective against Ilumgand, but she had a plan. From beneath her feet, several arms of solid earth shot forward, grasping at Ilumgand's legs.

It was an infuriating fact that fire and non-elemental magic were the only types of magic that could manifest properly near it. Everything else barely worked, if at all. So, Shifu had adjusted. Rather than trying to cast the spell near it, she activated it from her position and extended it toward it.

Binding magic was usually cast directly at the target's feet to catch them off guard. This was an unconventional method, but it worked.

For a few seconds, the dirt-encrusted hands clutched at Ilumgand's legs, halting its movements.

Only for a few seconds, and then it shattered them effortlessly.

That brief interference was enough to change the trajectory of its throw. That was all I needed.

Thank you, Shifu.

The arm still slammed into my side, sending a dull, jarring shock through my ribs. But I didn't flinch. With steady hands, I nocked my arrow.

That… feels painful. Good thing I came prepared for this.

Just in case something went wrong during my descent, I had primed a pain-numbing spell in advance. I released it now, a little earlier than planned. I refused to look. If I saw how bad it was, I might hesitate. Instead, I focused my gaze on the unstable arrowhead—its surface writhing with barely contained magic. I aimed directly at the forehead of the mutant below, who was still staring up at me.

No hesitation.

There was no time left. If the spell surged out of control before impact, it was all over. My consciousness flickered. Maybe it was the pain, or maybe the numbing spell was dulling my awareness. Time felt slow, distorted.

This isn't just magical enhancement—it's full magic infusion.

This was nothing like the enchantment techniques we had learned. It was an aberration. A method far outside the bounds of standard magic theory. It had far too many downsides. And yet, Shiki performed it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

It was precisely because of those risks that I could wield power on an entirely different level.

I wanted to bring Ilumgand down.

I *needed* to surpass Ilumgand.

Without hesitation, without fear, I had to take the next step forward.

I had to land this shot.

So—lend me your strength.

Not just Shiki's. There was one more person I pictured in my mind.

Not that I could ever hope to reach their level.

Nevertheless, I let their image fill my thoughts. Two figures—the strongest I knew. Right now, they were my guiding lights.

"I will hit my mark!!!"

That's what you always said, right, Raidou-sensei?

Summoning every ounce of strength, I unleashed my red arrow. Perhaps the gods took pity on me—perhaps my efforts bore fruit.

The mutant raised its arms in an X shape, desperate to block. But it wasn't enough.

The arrow drove straight into its crossed arms, piercing through both. And then, just as I had intended, it tore through the forehead behind them. Past bone. Through the vulnerable flesh of the neck. And deep into the vital point beyond.





It… hit…

It's over.

A faint voice reached my ears, and I shifted my gaze toward the sound. A man stood in the spectator stands, looking down at us with a face twisted by grief.

That man was, without a doubt, the head of the Hopleys family of Limia.

Ilumgand's father.

And… my— I didn't finish the thought.

I had come to the academy because I'd been invited, because I'd wanted to escape the tedious life of a remote imperial village. I'd wanted nothing to do with troublesome affairs. And yet, here I was.

Why did it have to end this way?

The words "cruel twist of fate" drifted through my mind.

But, ah, whatever.

Because now, everything was—

I can't… think properly.

A strange, hollow relief filled my chest, tinged with just the faintest trace of loneliness.

The moment my body acknowledged the battle was over, the tension that had held me together snapped. The levitation spell collapsed. With it, the numbing spell faded— A searing agony erupted from my side, wrenching a short, involuntary scream from my throat. I clenched my teeth, barely holding back another cry as my body gave in to gravity. The sensation of falling, of pain, of complete exhaustion swallowed me whole.

A fraction of a second later, the explosion roared. A deafening blast. A blinding flash of light. And beneath it all— A hideous scream, stripped of any lingering humanity.

That was the last thing I heard before my consciousness slipped away.



"Hey there, Tomoe."

"Luto, is this really all right? The head of the Adventurer's Guild appearing in a place like this?"

Luto chuckled, shaking his head. "No problem. And it's not Luto—it's Fals while I'm here."

"Hmph," Tomoe scoffed. "Well, you did lend us your assistance. I suppose I can humor you."

After evacuating the guests—excluding the delegation from the Kingdom of Limia—to the shelter, under the headmaster's guidance, Tomoe stationed herself at the entrance, ostensibly to guard it.

In truth, she stayed there because it was a convenient position. She could keep an eye on the guests while discreetly issuing telepathic orders to the Kuzunoha Company staff. Additionally, since Makoto had yet to decide how to handle the influential figures gathered here, it was best for her to minimize her direct interactions with them. Staying outside the shelter helped her avoid unnecessary entanglements.

"So, what's the situation?" Luto asked with a tilt of his head. "Tell me what you know."

“The monsters are running rampant, doing as they please,” Tomoe replied, crossing her arms. “I doubt this will be resolved in a day or two. This incident will leave deep scars on the city.”

“Hmm, no, no. Not that,” Luto said, waving a hand dismissively before leaning in with a knowing smirk. “I meant—you know, Young Master. Did you ask him what you wanted?”

Tomoe flinched, her expression momentarily stiffening.

“You’re adorable, you know that?” Luto teased, his grin widening. “I don’t know what exactly you were hoping to hear, but did you get your answer? Or did you only get him to talk because you were drunk?”

“Silence!” Tomoe snapped. “In the end, I didn’t need such an absurd elixir to learn something of what lies in Young Master’s heart. For now… that’s enough.”

“Oh? So, you got nothing out of it? What a waste. That particular brew, you know, builds up resistance. Give it a month and it’ll stop working altogether. You might as well drink it again while it still has some effect.”

“One doesn’t need to drink to excess to enjoy alcohol,” Tomoe said flatly, crossing her arms. “I won’t deny it was an interesting experience, though. Honestly, of all things, I didn’t expect this nonsense from you.”

“I can’t help but be curious. What kind of path he plans to take…”

“I have no intention of growing too familiar with you,” Tomoe sighed. “However, it’s true that I’ve owed you a few favors lately. I’ll tell you this much—after all this, Young Master will finally realize just how many paths are open to him.”

“Huh. I see.” Luto narrowed his eyes at her, an amused yet thoughtful glint in his gaze. “You people sure are full of secrets. But does this mean you’re finally going to interfere with the world?”

There was excitement in his voice. Curiosity. But beneath it all was wariness.

Tomoe simply shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Oh, come on,” Luto scoffed, waving a hand dramatically. “You could at least give me a little more to go on. Like, maybe he’ll join up with Limia’s hero and become a symbol of hope for the hyumans. Or maybe he’ll align with Gritonia’s hero and accelerate the madness over there. Or how about seeking refuge under Lorel’s Sage cult and living out his days in peace? He could even break Tsige away from Aion and claim it as his own.”

“You sure have a knack for spinning wild theories.”

“Well then… maybe he should march straight into the Goddess’s temple, bow his head, and become one of her devout followers. That would be one way to integrate into this world, wouldn’t it? He has tried to fit in with hyumans before, after—”

Tomoe’s expression darkened as she cut him off. “That’s a secret.”

The sharpness of her tone said it clearly: This conversation was over.

Unfortunately for her, Luto wasn’t done. His next words carried an edge, deliberate and probing.

“Of course, if he finds hyuman society too twisted to accept, he could always side with the Demon King and destroy it instead.”

Tomoe glared at him with disgust. Luto gave a soft chuckle. “Scary. But, you know, without even realizing it, Young Master is in a position to decide the very outcome of this war. If you ask me, he underestimates the power he holds. If he truly felt constrained, wouldn’t he have acted already?”

Tomoe maintained eye contact and spoke firmly. “Young Master has his own experiences and values. In his way, he’s quite stubborn. He won’t accept anything unless he sees it for himself. And we—” She paused, her gaze momentarily distant before refocusing on Luto. “We have our own considerations to make as well.”

“Values? His personal values?” Luto repeated, tilting his head with obvious interest. “Now *that* is something I’d love to know more about.”

Tomoe remained silent.

“Ah, not this again.” Luto sighed and shook his head. “You know, that’s kind of unfair. All right then, how about a trade? Just one piece of information—I don’t need everything. In return, I’ll give you something valuable. This conversation is feeling like slow torture, you know?”

Tomoe narrowed her eyes. “Hmph. Depends on what you want to know.”

“So, there is a chance? Great. The thing I’m most interested in—you might remember me mentioning it before—is whether he’s on the verge of changing. What do you think?”

Tomoe’s brow twitched slightly as she looked down, remembering a conversation they had shared back in the thick of summer, shrouded in the cover of night.

“That, huh?” she murmured. “I suppose a little wouldn’t hurt.”

Raising her head, she met Luto’s eager gaze and gave a small nod of acknowledgment.

“For real?!” Luto’s face lit up with genuine excitement. “I mean, yeah, I can tell he’s changed a little since then. But I wanted your opinion—someone who’s been watching him up close.”

Tomoe exhaled before speaking. “I’ll say this first—there haven’t been any dramatic changes in his mindset. Young Master still hasn’t decided what place he wants to carve out for himself in this world. However, in terms of ability? He has completely awakened. If you were to fight him now, I’d have no concerns about watching from the sidelines. That’s how much he’s grown.”

“Really?! I mean, back when we first met, he could’ve at least kept up with me. That doesn’t sound like that big of an improvement.”

“I said we could watch comfortably, didn’t I? Let me be clear—if you fought him head-on, well… you might manage a scratch. But that’s all it would be. Let me put it plainly—there wouldn’t even be a fight.”

Luto just stared at her. He was usually full of theatrics—an amused, self-assured smirk never leaving his face. But now, for the

first time, that expression was gone, replaced by a rare, unfiltered silence.

As she continued, Tomoe's voice had a sharp, final tone. "I'm not sure what lofty heights you're looking down at the world from, or what thoughts run through that mind of yours. But let me give you one piece of advice—when it comes to Young Master, keep your hands to yourself. If he truly reaches the stage you call 'awakening'… even the highest of dragons, no matter how many you stack together, will be like lizards beneath him."

Luto had no witty comeback, no playful remark.

Just stillness.

Before he could recover, Tomoe struck once more. "Now then, what about this 'valuable' piece of information you had?"

Luto let out a small sigh, then answered, "The hyumans' trump card is on the move." He shrugged lightly before adding, "But if he's grown that powerful, maybe you have nothing to worry about."

"Their trump card… Ah, the Dragon Slayer? Supposedly the strongest hyuman?"

"The Dragon Slayer? You mean Sofia?" Luto rolled his eyes. "Please. That girl is just the highest-leveled adventurer currently registered with the Guild. Sure, she took down Lancer, but that alone doesn't make her the strongest. Being the Dragon Slayer and being the strongest aren't the same thing."

"Then who?"

"The one second only to the heroes in the Goddess's favor. This generation's successor, apparently, they turned out well."

"This generation's…? You mean it's an inherited title?" Tomoe frowned as the gears turned in her head.

"Oh? I guess you wouldn't know about them." Luto's lips curled into an amused smile. "A special lineage of hyumans, wielders of an element that not even the Goddess can control. She's been preoccupied lately, but it seems she's finally starting to take this seriously. Not that it's surprising—she's only dealing with the mess she made for herself, after all."

Tomoe crossed her arms, mulling over the information before giving a slow nod. "Hmph. Well, I'll take the information as a courtesy. If you're done, you should head back. The longer we stand here together, the more trouble it'll bring… And I may have been a little too generous with my answers already. Make sure you handle the teleportation incident properly, won't you?"

She waved her left hand in a "shoo" gesture.

Luto chuckled at her bluntness. "Understood. It's a rare chance to earn Makoto's gratitude, so I'll do my job properly. I'm more familiar with handling hyumans than you lot, after all. I'll report back once everything's settled—to Young Master, of course."

"Hmph. Just so we're clear, you're not getting my sword. And if you're even thinking about interfering with my teleportation techniques, forget it," Tomoe warned.

"Naturally. You can trust me. Oh, and one last thing—even though none of the nations seem to have caught on yet, you should dial way back on eavesdropping through telepathy. Honestly, you people are ridiculous. I can't even have a conversation with Makoto in peace." Luto shook his head in exasperation before gesturing vaguely. "Your telepathy and teleportation magic are way ahead of the rest of the world. If the various nations ever got access to them, just imagine how much longer the demon-hyuman war would drag on."

With an exaggerated shrug, Luto turned and placed a hand on the door of the shelter. As he had told Tomoe earlier, once inside, he would resume his role as Guildmaster Fals, behaving accordingly.

Tomoe remained where she stood, silently watching him go.

"Drag on, huh…?" Tomoe muttered, watching the door close behind him. "So that bastard is well informed about the demon side too. I have no interest in this 'hyuman-demon war,' but if he's stirring things up, I almost feel sorry for them."

She let out a sigh, rolling her shoulders. "Now then… when should we begin our counterattack? For now, we'll continue aiding

the evacuation… That should serve as a justifiable cover for a few more days."

Now alone, she resumed issuing instructions to the Kuzunoha Company. Even while speaking with Luto, she had been sorting through the steady stream of telepathic reports coming in.

Updates from subordinates. Intercepted communications between nations. And on top of that, the intelligence she had gathered personally.

Tomoe cross-checked the information, carefully calculating the right moment to act.

They had already abandoned their empty storefronts. The buildings were just structures now—no longer worth protecting. There was no need to cling to them when they could be replaced anytime.

At that moment, Kuzunoha employees were scattered throughout the city, guiding panicked civilians toward safer areas. The company had compiled a list of places untouched by the rampaging mutants—as well as locations already established as shelters—and used that data to direct the evacuees.

As reports continued to flow in, additional shelters were set up. Just an hour earlier, they had secured permission from the demi-human slums, adding those to the list of evacuation sites.

Though the chaos showed no signs of subsiding, neither Tomoe nor her company displayed the slightest hint of disarray.

Even amid an unfolding crisis, they moved with perfect precision.

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"So, he's already become that strong, huh… Makoto-kun," Luto murmured to himself, leaning against the wall inside the shelter.

Though Tomoe's words had surprised him, the sensation that lingered most was excitement. He felt no despair. No fear.

“If things keep going this way, you might truly become capable of taking down the Goddess,” he mused, a smile playing on his lips. “You always claim to be unlucky, but looking at her current situation —paralyzed, powerless to move freely—I’d say you’re actually incredibly fortunate.”

His voice was barely a whisper, but the sheer delight in it was unmistakable.

“You’re the best, Makoto-kun. It doesn’t matter how—it doesn’t matter what form it takes—but I want to witness the full extent of your power.”

A quiet chuckle escaped him, and his eyes gleamed with something almost reverent.

“Someday… I hope to stand beside you, my beloved ideal, and gaze upon the same horizon.”

His ecstatic murmur held a disturbing remoteness, an untouchable quality.



Abelia, huh.

So, she's the one who killed Ilumgand.

I had Shiki tell them not to push themselves too hard. And from what I saw of the fight, it was clear the students were hesitating. Their attacks lacked conviction. But considering their abilities, it made sense—they were strong enough to hold their own, but not so overwhelmingly strong that they could fight without second-guessing themselves. That in-between state is what caused their hesitation.

Abelia Hopleys.

Hopleys.

So, is she truly connected to Limia's Hopleys family?

I had asked her about it once before—casually, just in passing—but she hadn't given me an answer, so I didn't press the issue. If she didn't want to talk about it, I wasn't going to force her. After all, I was just her instructor. It wasn't my place to dig into their family lives.

In any case, it was because of her that my students had defeated Ilumgand.

That was enough.

Still, keeping the right distance from students is tricky.

If I were to evaluate Jin and the others' performance from a teacher's perspective, as simply a battle, I couldn't give them a passing grade.

Had they fought with the intent to kill from the start, they wouldn't have exhausted themselves like that. With both Mio and Shiki providing support, they could have ended things quickly and efficiently.

But they hadn't.

They hesitated because they wanted to save Ilumgand. Given their current level of skill and experience, that was nothing more than an arrogant wish. I know I was being hard on them, but it was the truth.

Unless some miracle beyond comprehension occurred, there was no way to win without killing Ilumgand.

That said, this was probably the first real battle of their lives. A fight where they had to wager their own survival. And they made it through. That, at least, was worth celebrating. There was no point in nitpicking and ruining their moment.

These were the thoughts settling in my mind as I alternated my gaze between the grotesque, gray mass of flesh that used to be Ilumgand and the exhausted students collapsed on the ground.

"Young Master, I managed to save one of the knights. However, the other had already passed away by the time I arrived. There was nothing I could do," Shiki stated calmly.

At least one of them made it… I owe him for that.

"Understood. Thank you for your efforts," I wrote. *"I'd like you to go back to the students now."*

"As you wish," he responded before turning to give a polite bow to the king of Limia. Without another word, he headed toward where our students were resting.

Facing the king, I wrote, *"I was unable to save one of your knights. My deepest apologies. Furthermore, Ilumgand-sama met such an unfortunate end… I cannot express how sorry I am."*

"Raidou, you need not trouble yourself over this," the king replied evenly. "Even saving one life is a blessing. You have my gratitude for rescuing both the prince and my knight. And, of course, for vanquishing that monster."

The prince…

Ah…

A strange sensation returned to my hand—the memory of that moment.

That will cause problems for me later.

It wasn't my fault! There was nothing feminine about that "prince." But when his clothes had been shredded in the fight, even the fabric wrapped around his chest had torn away, leaving him completely exposed right as my hand had…

What kind of accident was that?!

I had no right to laugh at Tomoe for mistaking a man for an enemy back at the Wasteland base.

"You're too generous," I replied.

"Your students fought well," the king of Limia continued, nodding as he looked in their direction. "Even my royal guards would have struggled against such a foe, yet they brought it down—seven against one. I would take them all into my service if I could. Of course, that goes double for you, Raidou. You dispatched a creature that even my elite knights couldn't handle, and you did it effortlessly."

"If I may, Your Majesty, the mutant I faced was far weaker than the one the students fought," I wrote. *"Please, they're the ones who deserve your praise. As you can see, this was a grueling battle, yet they fought with all they had. I am sure that hearing words of recognition from Your Majesty will be a great encouragement for them."*

"Hmm." The king stroked his chin pensively. "Did you say weaker? To my eyes, there was little difference between them… If that is true, then perhaps Ilumgand was enhanced in some way before this incident…"

This was Rotsgard, but Ilumgand—both perpetrator and victim in this tragedy—was the son of a Limian noble.

People from all over the world had gathered here today for the academy festival.

If they were trying to narrow down the culprit, they were going to have a hard time. But for Jin and the others, this was great news.

Getting what was essentially a preapproval offer from the king of Limia—one of the Four Great Nations—was huge.

Limia wasn't just powerful; it was also blessed with a far better climate and terrain than Gritonia. If someone asked me which of the four major countries I'd choose to live in, I'd probably pick Limia. Find a region governed by decent nobles, and life there would be comfortable.

They're going to be thrilled.

Going from Rotsgard Academy scholarship students to knights or magicians in Limia's royal forces? That was about as elite a career path as they could get. Maybe, aside from the Rembrandt sisters, the entire group would end up in Limia.

I shifted my gaze toward Lord Hopleys. He had dropped to his knees in front of the remains of his son, frozen in shock. I couldn't blame him.

"Raidou-dono," a voice called out.

I turned to see Prince Joshua looking at me.

"There is something I would like to discuss with you," he said, calm but firm. "It can wait until after this crisis is settled, but I do hope you'll be able to make time for me."

Is this about… that?

"Of course, Joshua-sama."

I had absolutely no intention of bringing up what had just happened, but… *Yeah, this is going to be a problem.*

Anyway—

Now that this area was secured, I needed to contact Tomoe and arrange for these people to be taken somewhere safer, where the other dignitaries were gathered.

So far, I hadn't received any emergency reports. Things seemed under control for now, but I still wanted a detailed update.

I had half-expected the misty lizardfolk to send me some kind of troublesome report about the Rembrandt couple's situation, but… nothing. Not a single thing.

That's just like Rembrandt-san. He's probably handling the whole lizardfolk bodyguard situation smoothly with the guild.

I could have summoned something more hyuman-looking—a gorgon, an arach, or even a forest ogre. But since I'd already shown the misty lizardfolk to Rembrandt, Shifu and Yuno would probably find out about them eventually. And if the sisters knew, it would only be a matter of time before Jin and the other students also heard about it.

It's way easier if they all just assume that the only summons I can use are Blue Lizards. Explaining every single one of them would be a pain.

Well, I do have personal reasons for that decision.

That could wait. First, I needed to get the Limian royals and the other people to safety.

"Staying here could result in another attack," I wrote to the king. "*Please, evacuate to a secure location along with the other dignitaries. The matter concerning your country in this situation has been resolved."*

"But do you think it's right for us to hide in safety while the citizens of this city suffer?" he challenged.

Still determined to take the lead in resolving this situation, huh?

"The headmaster of the academy is already there—he's also the governor of this city. He and his people are protecting it. Having capable individuals issuing precise instructions from a secure position will help stabilize the situation much faster. In the meantime, we intend to focus on leading the evacuation efforts. Though we're not accustomed to situations like these, we will do our utmost to assist."

"Evacuation efforts? With your level of power, wouldn't it be better for you to assist in subjugating the enemy?"

Yeah, I figured that's what you'd say next.

Fortunately, I was ready for that question. *"Of course, if the need arises, I will. However, as we saw earlier with the deployment of the mage battalion, if the academy is focusing its forces on the extermination effort, then evacuation and rescue operations will likely be left undermanned. That is where we intend to assist."*

The king listened quietly before muttering something under his breath. It sounded like "… similar. Just like when they first descended…" but his voice was too quiet to catch clearly. More importantly, it felt like the key part of his sentence had been deliberately left vague.

Was that meant for me? Or was he just talking to himself?

Either way, I should probably confirm it.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, could you repeat—"

"No, don't worry about it," the king interrupted. Then, after a brief pause, he nodded. "I see. It seems we would only be a burden if we insisted on remaining here."

He's not going to tell me, huh.

Well, at least he agreed to the evacuation. That was good enough.

"Joshua?" the king called.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the prince replied.

"There's no telling if it will be in time, but have our forces stationed at the border move toward Rotsgard. They should also bring relief supplies—we will certainly need them. Handle the arrangements after the evacuation is complete. As for the headmaster's permission, I will secure that myself. You focus on relaying our reports to the kingdom through telepathic communication."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the prince responded, nodding. "The closest unit is Hopleys' territory's forces stationed at the southernmost part of the kingdom. I will establish a telepathic connection as soon as we reach a secure location."

As he spoke, he cast a brief glance toward the head of the Hopleys family. However, the man gave no reaction, as if he hadn't even heard their conversation.

Is he okay?

"Raidou," the king called, bringing my attention back to him. "It's a bit of a bother, but I'll need you to handle the teleportation. And while you're at it, lend a hand to the man standing there like a statue."

"I will," I assured him.

I contacted Tomoe telepathically to confirm the location, then conjured a thick fog to connect from where the king stood to where she was waiting.

I glanced toward Shiki and Mio. They were speaking with Jin, Abelia, and the others—probably discussing the battle.

With how exhausted they look, there's no way they'll be able to help with anything tomorrow, or probably even for the rest of this week.

Considering the possibility that all the mutants rampaging through the city were originally hyumans—just like Ilumgand—it was probably best to keep them from fighting any more. It would be safer to send them to a shelter and let them rest.

Besides, I had my agreement with Rembrandt-san. Pushing them too hard wouldn't do any good. At the end of the day, they were still students—inexperienced and unprepared.

Stepping away from them, I looked toward the fallen figures of the Purple Coats—Rotsgard's elite forces.

So, these guys were the main fighting force against the mutants…

There could have been stronger units somewhere, but if they didn't have enough people capable of handling this, the situation would drag on for a while.

I quietly watched as a wounded knight stumbled forward, taking mental notes on what would come next. Then, I watched the king and Prince Joshua step into the mist and disappear.

Now then…

I turned my gaze to Lord Hopleys. He was gripping the railing, staring silently at the twisted remains of his son.

Reaching for his arm, I spoke in a low, steady tone.

"Lord Hopleys, my apologies. Please allow me to assist you. I will take you to a safer location."

"Don't touch me!!!" His voice exploded in rage, and he violently slapped my hand away.

His shout was loud enough to draw the attention of everyone on the stage. Eyes full of shock, curiosity, and confusion bore down on me.

I raised my hand, palm open, to signal that everything was fine. Then, I waited for Lord Hopleys to stand on his own.

I got that his son had just died. But why was he glaring at me with unmistakable hatred as he staggered unassisted into the mist?

Did he inherit his son's grudge or something?

Joshua's words suddenly resurfaced in my mind: *"It was rampaging like a monster, as if there wasn't even a trace of its former self left."* Or something along those lines.

He also said Ilumgand was no different from a magical beast.

And then there was that final scream, lost within the explosion's roar*: "I… I just wanted to apologize…"*

Yeah. This is something I'll probably never tell anyone.

It's not like I'd magically learned to understand mutants after hearing them a few times. But still… I understood the meaning behind that last scream.

If he had someone he wanted to apologize to that badly, then why the hell didn't he just go and do it?

He could have sent a letter, used telepathy, met them in person—whatever it took. Instead, he let things spiral into this. For just a moment, I felt the faintest twinge of sympathy.

I shook the feeling off as I saw Mio rushing toward me.

There's no point in thinking about an apology that was never directed at anyone specific. If no one even knows what it was for, it

doesn't mean a damn thing.

"Young Master! Are you okay?!" Mio questioned frantically.

I nodded once to reassure her.

Limia's king and prince were in Tomoe's hands now—she'd handle things as she saw fit.

Luto was with them too. The important people had their roles to play, and being on the other side of that mist was where they needed to be.

"I'm fine," I told Mio. *"But things here are… well, kind of a mess."*

Although the students had won, their mood was far from celebratory. If anything, the atmosphere here felt heavy.

Especially around Abelia, who looked utterly drained. And on top of that, she seemed to have been wounded on her side.

Although Shiki had already healed her, her armor and clothes couldn't be repaired, making her injury easy to spot. But the exhaustion on her face wasn't from the battle itself, nor from the fatigue of injuries. Thankfully, Shiki was with her, and Abelia adored him. If anyone could get her to talk, he could. And I knew that he would pass on whatever he learned to me.

Mio let out a gentle sigh. "It was close. When the frontliners were paralyzed by the roar, I was about to step in, but Abelia managed. Attaching an already completed spell to an arrow… Honestly, she and Shifu both take some reckless chances. I suppose they were imitating Shiki, but for that girl? It was a fifty-fifty chance of blowing herself up."

"A direct magical infusion, huh? That explains the explosion. That was something else…"

Imitating Shiki…

Infusing a weapon with a completed spell did cause an explosive increase in power, but the duration was incredibly short.

Shiki had mentioned before that he could only maintain it for a few minutes at most. For Abelia or Jin? Even less.

It was quite inefficient, a fundamentally different technique from elemental enhancement. Unless someone was determined to strike with a magic-infused weapon, it wasn't worth the cost.

Still, at my students' skill level, using a trump card like that was tempting.

According to Shiki, the best use of that technique was to trick an opponent into underestimating its power by making them mistake it for a standard enchantment. For him, it wasn't a trump card.

For Shifu and Abelia to be able to pull it off… That was impressive.

If the spell detonates before impact, it's completely useless. That's a massive drawback.

So, yeah, reckless.

I walked up to the exhausted frontliners.

"Sensei," Jin muttered, lifting his head as he noticed me.

"You did well, Jin."

His face twisted with conflicting emotions. "I… I thought I didn't care about Ilumgand. If anything, it pissed me off. But when it came down to killing it… I just… couldn't…"

So, he hesitated when the moment came. This was something he had to come to terms with on his own.

It was ironic. The students had no trouble cutting down magical beasts, but when it came to a former hyuman, they hesitated.

Maybe I only find that strange because I can communicate with monsters.

"It was a hyuman once," I wrote calmly. *"It's completely normal to feel that way. Don't push yourself too hard—just rest for now."*

My words sounded like shallow comfort, but hopefully they would keep Jin from spiraling into self-loathing.

His head snapped up, and when he spoke, his voice was filled with frustration. "Are you saying we were just dead weight out there?!"

If I were being completely honest, the thought had crossed my mind. But I wasn't about to say that now. Instead, I gave him

another reason.

"No. You're still students. There's no reason for students to be fighting on the front lines. That's someone else's job."

Whether or not they were reliable was another issue entirely.

The academy city had a military force, and while they had been caught off guard, they would gather more intel. The headmaster and other influential figures would eventually come up with strategies to deal with the mutants.

"But we can fight!" Jin argued, clearly unwilling to back down.

All right. Time for some tough love.

"After just one battle, you're this tired—and you still think you're ready for more?"

Jin's expression soured. Maybe the adrenaline from the fight had clouded his judgment, making him feel stronger than he was.

Still can't objectively assess his limits, huh?

If the second mutant that had appeared in the stands had targeted us instead of jumping straight onto the stage, someone in their group would have died.

None of them had even mentioned it…

Did they not notice it?

That was bad.

Physically and mentally, they were so overwhelmed that they hadn't registered the presence of another enemy. That alone proved they needed rest, not more combat experience.

If they had to fight multiple mutants, they wouldn't stand a chance. Even if they were weaker than Ilumgand, if three mutants showed up, their abilities could still get someone killed.

"Jin," I asked, *"were you willing to kill Ilumgand to stop it?"*

"Ugh…"

"You wanted to bring Ilumgand back."

His breath caught, his eyes widening in shock.

"That's what you truly feel, isn't it?"

Jin's lips trembled. "Sensei, are you saying you would have made a different choice? Am I… too naive?"

His words were weak, uncertain, like he was trying to justify his hesitation.

"If it came down to either you or Ilumgand, I would have killed it without a second thought. Simply put, you all matter more to me than it did. Abelia probably thought the same thing. That's why she acted. If you regret your hesitation, then you can work on it during the rest of your time at the academy. But for what it's worth… I think it's one of your strengths."

It worked against him this time, sure. But Jin's compassion is part of what makes him who he is. Cold, ruthless judgment just doesn't suit him.

Jin clenched his fists, his voice barely above a whisper. "How can you call it a strength when it puts everyone in danger…?"

Huh. That's rare. He's badly shaken. But he doesn't need to be overthinking this right now.

"You can reflect on that later. Right now, focus on getting some rest. That's an order—from your instructor. The city isn't the only place affected. We've gotten reports that mutants have appeared in the surrounding towns as well. This situation might not end anytime soon."

Jin's eyes widened. "What?! What the hell is going on?"

"For now, just join the other students in the evacuation shelters and rest. Even if you want to fight, it won't matter if your body can't keep up." I let that thought settle before shifting my gaze.

"Shifu. Yuno."

The Rembrandt sisters, who had been quietly listening, perked up at the sound of their names.

"Raidou-sensei," Shifu murmured, stepping forward.

"Sensei," Yuno echoed.

"Your parents are safe. I assigned them highly capable guards, so there's no need to worry. Now, be good students and follow the evacuation orders."

"Understood." Shifu's lips pressed together.

She must feel the same way as Jin. That same frustration.

Yuno, however, frowned slightly before speaking. “We’ll evacuate. For today.”

This girl is quite a handful. She wants to say she’s ready to fight, huh?

Shifu wasn’t exactly convinced either, though at least she wasn’t as blunt about it as her sister. I had already told Jin, but they were students. They didn’t need to be forcing themselves into this fight.

The others were no different—obviously exhausted, yet their eyes still burned with an unnatural sharpness.

Are they still running on a battle high?

Whatever the case, getting them to rest was the top priority. The Limian king’s gracious offer could wait for another day.

Then there was the issue with the prince. If I had to interact with the Limian royals again, I wanted to do it carefully. The last thing I needed was one of them getting carried away and making things worse.

All right, time to move.

“Shiki, Mio. Take the students to the evacuation site,” I ordered. *“If necessary, you can stay there overnight to guard them.”*

“Eh?! Um, what about you, Young Master?” Mio asked, her tone immediately suspicious.

“I’m going to check in with Tomoe about the situation. I’ll leave these kids to you.” Without waiting for further objections, I turned and headed back to the spectator stands, conjuring a mist gate to the shelter where Tomoe was stationed.

How long is she planning on sitting back and watching all this unfold?

If I got caught by the noble delegation, it would be a massive hassle. Better to slip in, get what I needed, and leave before anyone noticed I was there. *Maybe I should check on the store while I’m at it.*



Ah…

I collapsed to my knees.

"We can rebuild it later. It's not a problem. That's why we removed the store's signboard and abandoned the building."

That was what Tomoe had casually told me when I came to ask about the situation. Before I even realized it, my feet had brought me here.

Now, I was on all fours, staring at the shattered remains of what had once been the Kuzunoha Company's store.

My first store. The first business I ever owned.

I had left so much of it to my employees, let things fall into place with an almost careless confidence. And yet, somehow, it had worked out.

Seeing it now, reduced to rubble, I felt a massive weight on my chest.

There was nothing valuable left inside, and losing the building doesn't mean we lost the land rights.

Tomoe's reasoning was solid.

All the important stock had been safely stored in my extradimensional warehouse. And if our store had been the only one

left standing amid the destruction, it would have drawn unnecessary suspicion.

The building itself had been secondhand, and it had been renovated quickly. If I asked the eldwar, they could probably rebuild it from scratch in under three days.

Even so…

Thinking about it logically couldn't contain the heavy sigh that escaped my lips. It couldn't change the fact that I felt like crying.

Both neighboring buildings had been completely wrecked. Across the street, smoke was still rising from a pile of rubble.

Yeah, yeah.

It made sense that it had been destroyed.

It was only natural.

I could guess what had happened here. Some mutant must have shown up in this area by sheer bad luck.

Their behavior patterns were unclear, but if they were primarily targeting teleportation arrays, then the general damage to the city's buildings shouldn't have been too severe.

There wasn't a teleportation array anywhere near my shop, so a part of me had hoped—just a little—that the store would still be standing.

Haaaaaaaaah…

Maybe this was the world's way of telling me to start fresh.

If I don't take this positively, I might cry.

All right. Time for a fresh start.

"This place has been reduced to nothing but rubble," I muttered. "If the thing that did this is still around, I wouldn't mind taking care of it myself…"

The impact marks looked like they had been caused by fire. Either something blazing had slammed into the shop, or something on fire had charged straight through it.

A mutant with fire attributes, maybe something like a boar or a rhino?

I tried to imagine the culprit, but even the two mutants I'd already encountered shared no common features aside from their ashen color.

It could be something completely unexpected.

Still, I scanned my surroundings, just in case. The area was eerily quiet. It looked like the evacuation had already been completed.

Nothing left to do here. I should probably head to the student shelter. It wouldn't be strange for a temporary instructor to be there, and it's the safest choice…

Huh?

I heard something.

I stood still, straining my ears.

Yeah. I definitely heard something.

Screams, and they were close.

That direction…

Straight behind the store.

Wait—

The red-light district?

Evacuating civilians was the Kuzunoha Company's top priority. And if the thing that trashed my store had moved toward the red-light district…

This might be my chance for payback.

Not taking the time to think about it, I switched my armor's configuration to prioritize speed.

The street behind the shop was so littered with debris that it looked like an obstacle course. I darted through it, weaving past the wreckage, and broke into a sprint toward the source of the screams.

Why are the demons using mutants to attack the academy city? I wondered as I ran.

If these creatures just rampaged on instinct, their tactical use would be limited. But if the teleportation arrays were being targeted, that meant someone had control over them.

So, how much of this situation was orchestrated by the demons?

Ilumgand's transformation—why had it happened at that exact moment? Although it'd caused quite a bit of panic, it'd been taken down relatively quickly, before it had time to do any real damage. *If the demons can't fully control the timing of these mutations yet… then what if the distribution of those drugs and accessories had a different purpose?*

If so—

Who was behind this? And why?

I was still turning these thoughts over in my head when I reached the source of the screams.

Sure enough, it was the red-light district.

The damage here wasn't as bad as in other parts of the city. But from one specific corner, I could hear loud shouts coupled with the sound of destruction.

There.

I headed toward the commotion without hesitation, only for something to come flying at me from a shattered window.

A rock?

The chunk of stone—which looked like it once belonged to a furnace or fireplace—came hurtling toward me at considerable speed but never touched me.

Roughly a meter before reaching me, it was repelled by my magic and crashed harmlessly to the side. A few more followed. Same result. None even grazed my jacket.

I stopped in front of the building. The screams were coming from inside.

Stepping forward, I entered the brothel.

Didn't think my first time in an establishment like this would be under these circumstances…

Ahem. Excuse me.

Then I saw it.

"Not the one who trashed my shop," I muttered in disappointment. "A… squid?"

This was far from the kind of mutant I'd been expecting. My tongue clicked in irritation. It was a squid—or at least something very close to one.

It had eight tentacles, but two were unnaturally long, with hands at the tips. The other six supported its body as it stood upright. But overall, it just looked like a pale, almost white squid, though with a heavier shade of gray.

A tentacle monster attacking a group of women in a brothel… That's a pretty niche interest…

A lone woman was standing her ground against it, holding nothing more than a small blade, not even a proper weapon. *Brave.*

Behind her, the other women huddled together, some crying, others too paralyzed to move. Most of them were wearing barely-there dresses, and now those outfits were even more disheveled. I had no idea where to look.

One of them had only wrapped a torn curtain around herself, so she had to have been completely topless before that.

Please. Have mercy.

As soon as I stepped into the room, the situation shifted. The squid-thing twitched, slowly turning its focus to me, its long, hideous limbs writhing.

Had it been throwing those chunks of stone while fending off the women at the same time? It had attacked me the moment I approached the building, so it had probably sensed me before I even stepped inside.

That means it might have some kind of special ability.

Still, this was good. The fact that it had turned its attention to me meant more of the women would survive.

Unfortunately, judging by the thick smell of blood in the air, at least some had already been killed. And this probably wasn't the first building it had attacked. The woman with the tiny blade had likely kept more from dying.

At least there are survivors. That's something.

"Help!!!" one woman screamed as she became aware of my presence.

That set off a chain reaction—suddenly, they were all crying out for rescue in shrill, frantic voices.

All right, all right, I get it.

I needed to be careful, though.

If I went all-out in here, the result would be disgusting. I had already seen what happened when I crushed the bird-mutant back at the arena. The last thing I wanted was for this room to end up covered in scattered tentacle chunks.

"I'll take care of this thing. Please, head outside for now—I'll guide you to a safe location once it's done."

The moment I wrote, the woman with the knife tensed. Her grip on the blade tightened as she responded, "Boy, this thing's strong. I appreciate the help, really, but… I'll handle it. You focus on getting the girls out of here."

"Boy"?

She called me "boy"?!

Not only that, but she had just completely dismissed what I said, treating me like some inexperienced kid who needed to be told what to do. And on top of that, her words were pure self-sacrifice.

Yeah. That's not happening.

At least the other women had started moving toward the exit. Some were still too terrified to respond properly, but instead of abandoning them, the others helped.

They have a strong sense of camaraderie.

I weighed my options. Leading the women outside or taking down the mutant squid. Which one was easier for me?

Obviously, the latter.

If anything, it would be better if this woman took charge of the evacuation. She was clearly capable, and the others trusted her. As I came to that conclusion, the mutant seemed to sense my intent. It twitched, shifting to strike—

I casually tossed a rock at it.

It was just a small chunk of debris I'd picked up from the floor, thrown in reaction to its movements.

It froze.

Interesting. So, it has at least enough intelligence to recognize a threat.

"Boy, stop!" the woman snapped. "This thing is dangerous! It's already killed multiple people right here! I may not look like much, but I used to be an adventurer. Out of everyone in this room, I know the most about combat! That's why—"

Oh? A former adventurer?

There weren't many active adventurers living in Rotsgard. A retired one working as a courtesan (probably) was unexpected.

"Well, I'm an active temporary instructor at the academy," I informed her. *"The others would feel a lot safer if you stayed with them. I'll be fine. I'll join you soon, so please go outside."*

She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing me. "An instructor? At the academy…? Hah. Then you might be more useful than an ex-adventurer like me. Are you sure about this?"

I was about to respond when—

The squid mutant hurled something at me.

Another piece of debris?

It was starting to feel like a childish rock-throwing contest—

Except this time, it didn't look like a rock.

Of course, the projectile never reached me. My magic barrier stopped it effortlessly.

But the woman's eyes widened in pure horror.

I followed her gaze and realized—

Oh. That's… not a rock.

It was a severed hyuman head. Even if she had been a beauty in life, no one could admire a bloodied, lifeless head.

Damn it.

"No need to worry," I wrote with a smile. *"Why don't you wait outside, somewhere open. I'd appreciate it if you could guide*

anyone who's still inside the other buildings to safety. I'll lead everyone to the evacuation site once this is over."

The woman exhaled anxiously, sizing me up one last time. "Guess I have lost my edge if I couldn't even gauge the strength of someone standing right in front of me…" She shook her head. "That thing's got insane regeneration. I've wounded it several times, but it just keeps healing back up. Be careful."

"I appreciate the intel."

She paused for a moment, then gave me a small, wry smile. "I owe you one. Don't go dying on me, Sensei."

Satisfied at last, she turned back to the others and quickly took charge, leading them out with calm, efficient commands. And just like that, it was down to me and the squid.

Okay, that was stressful.

Not the fight—just standing there, talking while surrounded by a crowd of scantily clad women. It was a different kind of pressure from the kind you get when going to a noble's party.

Even the woman I had been talking with was wearing a short, wine-red dress with plenty of exposed skin. And to make matters worse, she had torn parts of it to move more easily, leaving things like her entire thighs completely bare.

Yeah. That was… distracting.

Shaking off these unnecessary thoughts, I turned my full attention back to the mutant.

"Sorry, but a lot of the women around here are valued Kuzunoha Company customers. They buy our energy tonics all the time. Can't have you killing them off now, can I?"

The squid made a strange, wheezing noise—*schk-schkk*—but there was no sense of language to it. Unlike Ilumgand, it wasn't capable of speech.

No question, he had been an outlier.

Whatever. Let's get this over with.

Focusing, I gathered magic into my right hand.

Regeneration, huh?

That just meant I had to outpace it. I adjusted my chant, shaping Bridt to prioritize rapid fire. A white sphere of light, about the size of a baseball, formed in my palm, and I leveled my hand at the squid.

That was my signal.

Instantly, a stream of Bridt bolts—each about the size of a crossbow quarrel—began shooting out from the sphere, slamming into the mutant one after another.

It was trying to block with its oversized, handlike limbs.

It didn't matter.

I kept firing.

Slowly, the thing began to retreat. And in the end, the squid was pinned against the wall, completely immobilized under a barrage of light projectiles.

I kept firing.

No mercy.

Even as the squid writhed and convulsed, the barrage didn't stop. Then, something changed. Its head began to swell, bloating well beyond its original size in unnatural, irregular pulses.

Not regeneration. This is the end.

I began the chant for an earth spell. The floor trembled as a thick wall of stone shot up, sealing the mutant off all the way to the ceiling. *No way in hell am I getting hit with flying bits of exploded mutant.*

Maybe if I had struck a vital point, I could have avoided the full-body detonation. Ilumgand had at least left behind something vaguely recognizable. But searching for just the right spot was too much effort. Better to hammer it down with neutral magic until its regeneration failed—then just let it explode.

A few seconds passed.

Then—

Splat!

A wet, disgusting sound.

I dispelled the wall.

Yep. Nothing left but a white gelatinous mess smeared across the floor and walls. No movement. No remaining life signs. And an absolutely atrocious smell now filled the room.

Good. Done.

I took a deep breath—bad idea—then quickly stepped outside.

The moment I emerged, I was met with a flood of eyes.

Damn, that's a lot of people. Easily nine-to-one, women to men. And more were still gathering. Some had collapsed in relief; others held on to each other, crying. For them, this was a miracle.

All right. Now, where to take them…?

Considering the size of this crowd, the best option was the slum district—the one with the demi-human settlement that Tomoe had listed as a shelter location. I also happened to have some familiarity with the top people in that area, thanks to the company's dealings. And right now, Aqua, the forest ogre, was stationed there to keep watch.

It wasn't exactly close, but it had plenty of space and no reported mutant outbreaks. They could easily take in this number of people without issue.

Once everyone was accounted for, I'd lead them there.

The trip would take a while, but that was fine; Tomoe had already said this would be an observation period for the next few days.

Might as well use the time effectively.

For the time being, we'd keep evacuating civilians while dealing with any mutants we encountered. Our employees were scattered across different evacuation sites, assisting however they could. Given that, we probably wouldn't all regroup until this whole mess was over.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes! You're safe—thank goodness…! Wait, did you kill it?" The courtesan from before rushed over, looking genuinely relieved. Of course, she was still dressed in the same eye-catching outfit, which was a challenge to ignore.

"Yes," I replied. *"There's no guarantee there aren't more around here, but that one's dead. Seems like more people will be joining the evacuation."*

"Amazing," she murmured. "I knew academy instructors were something else, but that thing… It didn't seem like something one person could take down, and in such a short time…" She sighed, glancing back at the group of courtesans. "It all happened so suddenly. As you can see, we even had customers in the middle of it. You probably know, but a place like this doesn't exactly have set business hours. So, Sensei, is the evacuation site far from here?"

Wait. They operate during the day too? I thought this kind of place was a strictly nighttime business…

"The slums are the closest option. Given the number of people, it's also the best choice. Even moving at a careful pace, it should take about twenty minutes."

"The *slums*?! You mean the one full of demi-humans?" Her face twisted in shock. "Is it safe to take people there?"

Her reaction was unsurprising. Most hyumans viewed the slums as dangerous havens of crime and instability. But honestly, I found the demi-humans way more straightforward and decent than most hyumans. People let their biases cloud their judgment. Their fear of the unknown made them imagine the worst.

"Fortunately, someone I know is in charge there, and I've already arranged for them to take in evacuees. I run a trading company, so we have ties to the area."

"A trading company?" She blinked, then suddenly snapped her fingers. "Wait a second… the Kuzunoha Company! That's you, isn't it? Raidou-san, was it?"

I had meant to reassure her, but somehow, she'd latched onto something else entirely. I didn't know which of my employees she'd dealt with, but I did know that courtesans frequently visited our shop.

"That's right. I'm Raidou, the company's representative."

"Huh, so you're the one." She gave me a confident smirk. "The guy who sells that miracle energy drink, right? I've never been to your shop myself, but I've definitely benefited from that stuff a few times."

"Thank you for your patronage." I bowed my head politely.

I hadn't expected her to have used one of our products before.

Our energy drink had gained decent popularity, and a significant portion of its buyers were people in the nightlife industry. Then again, since this place operated during the day too, maybe "nightlife" wasn't even the right term.

Still, it's an incredibly demanding job—physically exhausting, with unpredictable hours. That must be tough.

That thought made me bow a little deeper.

When I looked up, the woman was staring at me, visibly surprised. Then she let out a quiet chuckle.

"Heh. You're an odd one, Sensei. Then again, I guess that makes sense. The head of such a strange trading company would be a bit different. Well, either way, it doesn't matter where we're going. As long as someone's willing to take us in, that's all that matters. Give me a moment, will you? I'll convince everyone so we don't have any trouble when we get there."

"Odd"? What part of that was odd?

Tomoe had already assigned people to manage potential disputes between the demi-humans and evacuees, but if they were prepared ahead of time, there'd be even less to worry about.

"I appreciate it," I told her. *"The academy has already started taking action, so this situation should be resolved soon. I appreciate your patience for a little while longer."*

"Of course. And thanks for going through the trouble. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself—name's Estelle."

"Raidou. A pleasure."

About ten minutes later, once Estelle had finished speaking with the others, we set off toward the slums.

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"Shiki, take the students and go ahead," Mio ordered as they prepared to leave the arena.

"Hm? What about you, Mio-dono?" Shiki frowned, glancing at her with mild confusion.

"I just remembered something I need to take care of," she replied dismissively. "You're more than powerful enough to escort them to the evacuation site, aren't you?"

"Of course," he admitted. "But do make haste in joining us."

"I'll catch up soon enough."

With that, Mio turned on her heels and made her way back toward the arena platform.

What lay before her was no longer a person or even a beast, just a lump of lifeless flesh.

"I'm rather adept at regeneration myself," she murmured to no one in particular, her voice carrying a quiet, almost contemplative tone. "Maybe that's why I can still sense your presence."

The moment she spoke, the mass of meat twitched.

"How pitiful," she mused, watching the lump begin to stir. "Even though your core was thoroughly destroyed… That sheer, tenacious life force is worthy of some praise."

As if in response to her words, the flesh squirmed violently, taking on a vaguely hyuman shape. The mockery of a hyuman. Unlike before, it no longer emanated the overwhelming force of life.

And yet, it still thought of itself as alive.

The lower part of what resembled a face bulged, splitting into what could only be described as a mouth. Above it, two spots trembled, before splitting open into crude, horizontal slits.

From within those gaping wounds, eyes stared back at her.

"It's only a fragment, but I remember. You… You're with Kuzunoha, aren't you? Am I… still alive?"

The words, distorted and wet as they were, unmistakably belonged to the former hyuman.

Mio's gaze sharpened. "Oh my, you can still speak? I didn't expect any of your personality to remain intact."

"I am… Ilumgand Hop—"

"You *were* Ilumgand Hopleys," she interrupted coldly.

A deep silence hung between them.

"I was used, wasn't I?" Its voice dripped with bitterness. *"How pathetic. To be turned into such a disgraceful spectacle… to shame my own house…!"*

Mio said nothing, simply watching as it continued.

"Drugged, turned into a monster, and even then—I lost." A hollow, rattling sound escaped its maw. *"Heh… How pathetic."*

"Yes, truly."

"The violent urges, the uncontrollable emotions… It's as if they were never there."

"Of course. The core that drove you has been destroyed. You're no longer a nobleman of any sort, just a hunk of flesh carrying the remnants of a once-proud name."

Mio had already deduced why the former mutant had regained a semblance of clarity, though she saw no reason to share that detail. Instead, she simply observed, her sharp gaze studying the abomination's behavior.

It continued muttering about being Ilumgand Hopleys. Mio offered the occasional response—sometimes acknowledging its words, sometimes ignoring them.

"But, in this body… in this form, I can no longer live as I once did." Its tone was oddly resigned. *"If I continue to exist like this, my family will bear the consequences. Their burden will grow heavier, and the people of our territory will suffer for it."*

Mio smirked. A dead man still fretting over noble responsibilities. How ridiculous.

"It doesn't matter," it continued, unfazed by her mockery. *"I don't know how long this body will last. So, at the very least… I'll die after fulfilling my last wish."*

Dragging its heavy, disfigured body, it began moving toward Mio.

Its facial structure, though shifting closer to something hyuman, was still a horrendous semblance of what it once was. The features were misaligned, stretched unnaturally in a way that would unsettle anyone who looked upon it. The severe burns from Abelia's attack had left its skin blistered and raw, adding to its horrifying appearance. Even calling it a demi-human at this point would be an insult to both words.

"Oh my, but that body of yours isn't quite as fragile as you seem to think," Mio noted. "Are you planning to live as Ilumgand Hopleys in that form?"

The malformed face turned slightly, as if regarding her from the corner of its misshapen eye.

"Is that so? I can survive?" A strange, wet chuckle escaped its twisted lips. *"That's useful to know. I spoke of fulfilling my wish, but fear not—I have no intention of pursuing Ironclad or Luria anymore. Strange, isn't it? I was obsessed with her once. But now, I find my ideals matter more to me than any lingering affections."*

Mio frowned slightly. "Hm? Ironclad? Luria?"

The flesh-puppet ignored her, going on as if she hadn't spoken at all.

"I will fight. If I encase myself in armor, I can hide this wretched form. Even if I can no longer chase my ideals under the sun, at the very least, I can still serve. I can still become a shield for Hibiki-sama. Knowing that makes even this shameful body seem… worthwhile."

"*Hibiki?*" Mio's eyes narrowed. "Did you just say Hibiki?"

"*Yes,"* the creature affirmed. *"The hero who descended upon Limia. As long as she exists, the demons can and will be vanquished.*

She will create a world where every hyuman fulfills their purpose and chases their dreams in peace."

Mio blinked, processing its words before letting out a small, amused hum. "Oh, the hero. How disappointing. Then she must be a different Hibiki from the one I know. A shame… Sharing a name with a fool is quite unfortunate. So, the hero in Limia is called Hibiki, is she?"

"That's right," he replied, shifting his weight. *"Do you know someone with that name? Well, I suppose in a place like Lorel, a name like that wouldn't be too uncommon. It's not impossible… But regardless, this is farewell. We will not meet again."*

Without another word, the flesh-thing began to move past her.

"Oh my, how unexpected."

Mio's voice was soft with delight.

"I had merely intended to dispose of some filth," she continued, taking a step forward. "But if the personality remains intact… Well, this is a fortunate development."

"What?"

"Yes," she mused, smiling to herself. "After all, now this becomes punishment rather than mere disposal."

In that moment, the creature instinctively turned—

And collapsed.

Its body crumpled to the ground with a heavy thud, its attempt to support itself utterly failing.

It tried to lift its head, its distorted gaze shifting toward her. Then understanding dawned within it.

"My legs…!" it rasped. *"What… what did you do?"*

It wasn't hard to deduce. The method remained unknown, but the result was unmistakable.

Both legs—severed cleanly below the knee.

There was no blood, no exposed flesh that pulsed with agony. It didn't scream in pain. It seemed it no longer even felt pain. Yet the shock was evident in its voice.

“What did I do?” Mio’s voice was light, conversational. She took another slow step forward. “Why, I told you, didn’t I?”

Another step.

“This…”

Another.

“… is punishment.”

“Tch…!” Its remaining limbs squirmed in a sluggish attempt to pull away.

“I have no intention of harming you… or your master, Raidou! Why—”

Mio’s smirk deepened as she loomed over it.

“And?”

“And?!”

“Yes.” Mio’s tone was cold. “You caused no small amount of trouble for my Young Master. You insulted him, you opposed him, and you dared to hinder him. I understand what it is you wish to do now. But your atonement remains undone.”

“Atonement…?” the mangled creature rasped.

“Yes, atonement. And it’s quite simple, really.”

Mio took another step closer, her heels clicking softly against the ruined floor.

“You harbored enmity toward Young Master, sought to stand against him, and even lashed out at his students in the end. And now? You’re no longer even hyuman. You are nothing more than an ugly pile of meat.”

The creature remained silent, its features unreadable.

“You have not atoned at all,” Mio continued. “You simply lost. You died. But then—oh, how fortunate—some miracle has allowed you to return, and even better, with your memories intact. Your soul, your core, was utterly shattered… and yet here you are, still able to speak and pretend to be a person.”

She let out a soft chuckle. “It’s almost funny. You lost the most crucial part of yourself, and yet, you persist. A mockery of life. How fitting.”

"I… But I no longer—" The remnants of Ilumgand Hopleys faltered.

The hatred it had once carried toward Raidou, the contempt it had directed at Jin and the others—it was gone.

Why?

Why had it behaved in such a loathsome manner?

It had become the very nobleman it despised, embodying their arrogance and foolishness.

Even if it had not been in its right mind, the shame of it was unbearable.

"Your defeat? Your current state?" Mio smirked. "Neither of these is punishment for your idiocy. They're merely the consequences." She watched him for a moment, her black hair blowing gently in the wind. "But perhaps… perhaps this so-called miracle you received wasn't a gift but a duty. A duty to atone."

"What are you saying…?" Ilumgand's distorted form trembled. *"Even if that were true, I have nothing left to offer as atonement. But if an apology is what you seek, then I will bow my head to Raidou and his students. I will—"*

"Your life will suffice."

"—?!"

"An untimely death—how fitting, wouldn't you say? It's hardly enough to be called true atonement, but considering this miracle… I will allow it." She smiled once again. "You should be grateful, Ilumgand. At the very least, you will die dreaming of the wish you failed to fulfill."

A violent tremor ran through the creature—not from fear, but from the sheer presence of the woman before him.

Mio laughed.

It was a beautiful sound.

So carefree.

So enchanting.

And yet—

To the mind of Ilumgand Hopleys, it evoked a terror unlike anything it had ever known. A fear so absolute, so consuming, that it made its very being tremble.

"Gh—!"

A dull, forceful impact struck its body.

Its vision dropped to its abdomen. A gaping hole had been carved straight through it. Its mind reeled, unable to process the reality of it.

Its gaze flickered toward Mio—toward the two delicate fingers still pointed in its direction.

"Impossible… My body… It should have high resistance to magic…!"

"You *have* grown quite sturdy," Mio remarked, her tone light, almost admiring. "I was planning on erasing you with a single strike, and yet… To think you even possess resistance to dark magic. I suppose that, too, must have been granted by this miracle of yours —so that you may fully experience your atonement."

"Raidou…" the flesh-creature rasped, its voice tinged with desperation. *"Does he hate me that much?! Is this because I hated him first?!"*

Another impact.

This time, a perfect hole was carved through its chest. Ilumgand gasped—though not in pain, for it could no longer feel pain. Rather, it was in sheer, dawning horror.

Mio chuckled, shaking her head. "Oh, how precious you are in your foolishness."

She took a step closer, heels clicking softly against the stage.

"You believe Young Master sees you as anything more than a pebble he kicked aside?" She smirked, her eyes gleaming with cruel amusement. "Your existence is worth so little to him that even your death failed to warrant his notice."

Ilumgand's mind reeled. *"Then… why… why are you—"*

It simply couldn't comprehend it.

If this wasn't what Raidou wanted, then why was she, his subordinate, doing it?

Mio tilted her head to one side. "Because I refuse to forgive you."

"What—?"

"If Young Master had commanded me to save you, then perhaps I would have been inclined to do so," she continued, her voice laced with quiet amusement. "But he did not. If anything, he instructed Shiki to neutralize you… but that was before you died."

"But… but he gave that order… So why—!"

It was then that it truly understood.

This was not a battle. It never had been.

From the moment Mio had decided its fate, there was never a path for it to escape. Even its miraculous rebirth had been rendered meaningless.

The two holes in its body—the ones that stubbornly refused to heal—were proof of that.

It had lost. Not just the fight but its very existence.

Mio's smirk widened as she watched the realization come to it.

"But you see," she said, her voice as smooth as silk, "Young Master didn't care whether you lived or died. That's why he said nothing."

Another step forward.

"Your life held no value to him."

Her crimson eyes gleamed.

"And that is why I can so easily erase this little miracle of yours."

She smiled sweetly.

"I can't… die. Not here… not without reason… even if this life was merely borro—!"

A third impact. Its abdomen.

A fourth. Its chest.

And finally—two pale fingers pointed at its misshapen, barely hyuman head.

More dull echoes reverberated through the empty stage. No one bore witness. No one heard. And that was just how Mio liked it.

She had never needed an audience for this. For her, justice didn't require acknowledgment—only execution.

By the time she turned away, the thing that had once been Ilumgand Hopleys was utterly eradicated.

She took a few steps toward the exit, preparing to follow Shiki and rejoin their Young Master—

She halted.

Something flickered in her mind. A fragment of their conversation.

"Limia… Hibiki…"

"Poor thing. To be called by the same name as a so-called 'hero'… What a misfortune for her. Ah, should I suggest she take up cooking instead, next time we meet?"

Mio smiled. A black-haired girl from Limia. That Hibiki, she remembered.

But the thought held no weight. Her true priority was always singular—

To return to her master.



Three days had passed since it all began.

The academy city was still in chaos.

The outbreak of mutated creatures—I could only assume it was the work of demons—had been unfolding since the first day, yet we still had no idea what their intentions were.

I spent the first night in one of the designated evacuation points—the demi-human slums. Later that night, I slipped away for a short while and met up with the others in the Demiplane. We exchanged information, but there was nothing particularly new to report. The only thing worth mentioning was what Tomoe told me—Luto had apparently taken some kind of action regarding the Merchant Guild's teleportation routes.

On the second day, the situation took a turn for the worse.

Two major developments stood out.

The first was the complete breakdown of the city's communication network.

Information from neighboring cities had stopped coming in, and any messages we sent out went unanswered. We had no way of knowing if they were even reaching their intended destinations.

Even within the city, telepathic messages barely got through unless the sender and receiver were practically next to each other.

At best, someone highly skilled in telepathy could send a message one or two kilometers. If both sender and receiver were exceptionally talented, they might extend the range to three kilometers—but beyond that, communication was impossible. Worse yet, the interference was getting stronger.

Considering the sheer size of Rotsgard, this was a major handicap.

We had effectively become an island, cut off from the outside world.

We had, however, been able to trace the interference back to a series of magical devices—an alarming number of them—planted throughout the city. Shiki had taken the lead in investigating this, and what he uncovered was disturbing.

I even got to see one of the devices up close.

It was surprisingly small—about the size of a half-liter plastic bottle—and cylindrical.

The devices seem to have been planted long before this whole incident even began—inside building pillars, buried under floors, even placed underground in various locations across the city. According to Shiki and Lime, they had given off no reaction before activation, making them undetectable. The two had apologized for failing to find them sooner.

Honestly, expecting them to uncover inactive devices would have been asking too much.

When I heard the report, I couldn't help but be impressed by the demons who set all of this up. They must have spent a ridiculous amount of time planting these things all over the city. *They really stuck with it, didn't they? Kind of admirable, in a weird way.*

I pictured a massive domino setup.

A part of me wanted to knock them all down at once—watch the whole thing collapse in one satisfying chain reaction. But for now, I held back.

Demon-style telepathy still worked fine. The interference only affected the general telepathic network used by hyumans. That meant we could communicate freely, while everyone else remained cut off.

Tomoe, her expression unusually serious, told me to resist the urge to destroy the devices, at least for now. She had a point. We were the only ones who could still coordinate, which gave us a major tactical advantage.

Of course, I wasn't going to go around smashing things for fun. What was I, some kind of destruction-obsessed lunatic? The very idea was insulting.

Meanwhile, the mutant outbreak was getting worse.

People in the evacuation shelters had started transforming, so the danger was now inside the very places people had fled to for safety.

It also confirmed something else: Quite a few evacuees had taken the drugs distributed by the demons.

Had they been handing them out to anyone they could? Or had they targeted specific people? Either way, the sheer number of cases made one thing clear—this wasn't just some mindless act of chaos. It was a direct, calculated attack on the academy city.

Stress must have been another factor. Being trapped in an evacuation shelter for days was enough to wear anyone down. Some of the affected people had lost their grip, and that mental instability had triggered mutations like Ilumgand's.

The fact that we couldn't rely on telepathic communication only made things worse. No information, no coordination—just growing anxiety and fear.

At noon, I called my followers together for a quick meeting. We decided to identify and isolate anyone carrying accessories that emitted a similar wavelength to Ilumgand's necklace.

The chances of them mutating next were too high to ignore.

To prevent the situation from spiraling even further out of control, we issued an order to the evacuation center staff: Confiscate

those accessories immediately.

At the very least, we could keep the damage contained within the shelters.

On the first night, I was able to get some information about the Rembrandt couple's safety and the general situation of the Merchant Guild from the misty lizardfolk that were assigned to them.

By the second day, the guild had begun taking action. They gathered bodyguards and mercenaries with experience fighting monsters and formed units to eliminate the mutant threat. Instead of staying on the defensive, they took the offensive. According to the reports, the Rembrandts had a powerful influence on that decision.

The guild representative, who had initially seemed aggressive, proposed a strategy where the newly formed units would protect the guild members, including merchants, employees, and other affiliates. Whether this was a reaction to the damage done to their businesses, their goods, and even the merchants themselves—or if this was simply the man's true nature—I couldn't say for sure.

Unfortunately, in the city's more chaotic areas, those shops that had withstood the attack were now being looted.

During our nightly debriefing, we estimated the number of remaining mutants within the city at around eighty. However, there had also been fresh outbreaks in evacuation centers where Kuzunoha employees hadn't been stationed. Some shelters had even been wiped out entirely.

They must not have had anyone capable of fighting.

The academy, meanwhile, had done nothing to reinforce the evacuation sites. Their entire focus was on eliminating existing mutants, so if new ones emerged within a shelter, those inside had no way to defend themselves.

Had the demons planned this far ahead?

Were they actually aiming for complete destruction?

From the academy's side, the Purple Coats and some instructors had formed squads and were moving under orders from the headmaster. They'd managed to take down several mutants, and

though the overall number of incidents was still rising, the tide seemed to be gradually turning in our favor.

Once a proper countermeasure was established, our efficiency in eliminating them would increase.

As for reinforcements, aid from various nations—including military forces—was set to arrive in the surrounding cities by tomorrow and reach Rotsgard the day after. However, since telepathic communication was still down, we had no way of verifying their progress. This was all assuming they were still following the plans established on the first day.

At one point, a high-ranking official summoned Tomoe for a private discussion. They proposed using teleportation magic to transport supplies and soldiers.

Yeah… after seeing teleportation that convenient, it's no surprise they'd ask.

Tomoe handled the conversation, with Luto standing by her side.

She spun a very convincing explanation about the magical restrictions on long-distance teleportation, making it sound impossible to implement.

Had I been in her place, I probably would have just nodded along and agreed.

According to Tomoe's narrative, that wakizashi had some kind of usage restriction. Once it was fully activated, it couldn't be used again for a while. Forcing it beyond its limit could even risk breaking it.

I see… so if you blame the tool instead of the person, you can get away with a lot.

I was honestly impressed by her improvisation. *I guess that's just a skill you develop when you've been alive for centuries.*

Anyway, it looked like things would finally start moving forward today.

Once this whole mess was over, we'd have to deal with the Merchant Guild, Prince Joshua of Limia, and whatever other trouble

awaited us next.

Even so, it was still better than the last few days of just waiting around, unable to act.

Unlike the evacuees, I could still use telepathy. I wasn't under immediate threat, and I could move freely between here and the Demiplane. And yet, even I was starting to feel the strain of this stagnant situation.

"Yeah, that should do it."

I leaned back, stretching my arms.

"Feels like a long entry for just three days, but I guess this is fine. Not like anyone else is ever going to read it."

I had left out quite a bit, but if it served as a rough record for myself, that was enough.





I'd been keeping a journal every day since I arrived in this world. Honestly, I was a little surprised at myself for sticking with it for so long.

After setting my pen down, I stretched my arms wide, then stepped out of the room the demi-humans had prepared for me in the slums.

"Oh, Raidou-san," came a voice to my right. "It's been quiet today. No incidents so far."

Turning toward the speaker, I found myself looking at a cat standing upright—about the same height as a hyuman.

His fur was surprisingly thin, making him fit into the demi-human category, but his face was almost entirely feline. Absolutely adorable. *Cats are justice.*

Unfortunately, he didn't end his sentences with "nya." That was a bit of a letdown, but I could live with it.

The cat was the leader of this slum. Back when Kuzunoha had provided medicine to the demi-humans living here, I'd built a decent rapport with him. Most of our communications were handled through the forest ogres, Aqua and Eris, so I only spoke with him directly from time to time.

Apparently, he was also a regular at my store.

Being from the slums didn't necessarily mean he had no money. He wasn't wealthy, but he made enough to scrape by.

"Good morning," I greeted, stepping closer. "It looks like things have settled down a bit between the hyumans and demi-humans. That's good to see."

"The conflict hasn't been as bad as I feared," he replied, his tail flicking lightly behind him. "Though, I suppose the dangers outside still have people too scared to fight among themselves."

He gave me a strained smile. Clearly, the relationship between hyumans and demi-humans had its complications.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with all this," I said, crossing my arms. "As for the situation outside, all we can do is hope things start looking up."

“Please, don’t worry about it.” He waved a paw dismissively, though his expression remained tense. “The actual issue is those creatures—some of them are incredibly difficult to sense, and that makes them a real threat. And with so many hyumans taking refuge here, we can’t afford to let our guard down, even for a moment. These days have been stressful, and I just want them to be over already.”

“Yeah… same here,” I muttered, exhaling slowly. “If nothing else, I hope this whole mess makes the hyumans of Rotsgard rethink their stance on you all.”

“That’s unlikely,” the cat said, his ears twitching slightly. “They’re the race blessed by the Goddess, and the rest of us are meant to serve them. That’s their belief—the foundation of their faith. Deep-seated ideas about one’s place in the world don’t change so easily. For a little while, some hyumans might try to offer us charity out of guilt. But sooner or later, most of them will go right back to their old ways.”

His name was Bowle. He was still young, but he carried himself with the wisdom of someone far beyond his years.

“Out of sight, out of mind, huh?” I murmured.

“Hm?” Bowle tilted his head.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” I replied casually.

“If you say so,” he said with a small nod. “Lately, we’ve been thinking about ways to turn our abilities into a means of livelihood. If even 10 percent of the hyumans we worked with during this crisis maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with us, then this whole ordeal won’t just be an unpleasant memory. At least, for us.” He offered a subtle smile, and I found myself oddly soothed as I watched him for a moment.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I said. “Today, Aqua, Eris, and I will head out. I’ll leave a few people here, so if anything comes up, just let them know.”

“You’re going outside?” Bowle’s ears twitched, and his whiskers quivered in surprise.

"Yeah. You take care," I said with a little wave.

Talking with Bowle had not only eased my nerves, but it had reminded me of just how great cats are.

A smile still playing at my lips, I stepped out of the half-collapsed building.

"Aqua, Eris. We're heading to the academy." I sent the telepathic message not as a request but as a direct command.

Almost instantly, two shadows materialized in front of me, so fast that they could have stepped out of a ninja tale.

"Good morning, Young Master. Today, we move to the offensive, correct?" Aqua inquired.

"Good morning," Eris chimed in. "No mutant presence detected in the vicinity. All clear."

The way she said it, like she was reporting a job well done, made me a little suspicious. I trusted her not to lie in situations like this, but still…

"Got it. Thanks for the hard work," I replied, brushing off my doubt. "After we meet with the headmaster, we'll be joining the mutant extermination unit."

"Shiki-sama and Mio-sama will be joining us as well, correct?" Aqua asked.

"A powerful lineup," Eris added, nodding to herself.

"You two just focus on staying hidden and keeping an eye on my surroundings," I instructed. "If anything happens, just send me a message."

"Understood," they both said.

Before the other nations' forces got involved, we needed to make our presence known. That was the main reason we were joining the extermination unit.

Anyway, my priority was safety. If a fight could be avoided, I would avoid it.

The plan was simple: Stay alive.

If I died—as unlikely as that was—I might end up dragging everyone living in the Demiplane down with me. For that reason,

defense was my top priority.

Maybe my approach would change if I fully understood the connection between myself and the Demiplane, but for now, I wasn't taking any risks.

After receiving my orders, Aqua and Eris vanished once more.

All right, time to get moving.

"Oi! Kuzunoha's boss!"

"—!"

Who?

A voice called out just as I started toward the exit.

"Kuzunoha's boss" was a name I often heard from people taking refuge here, but when I turned around, I saw a familiar figure: the woman I'd met at the brothel.

"Ah, good morning, Estelle-san. You look well," I wrote.

First, she called me "boy." Then, it was "Sensei." And now, it was "boss." I didn't think I'd ever met someone who changed the way they addressed me so frequently.

Come to think of it, she might have been the one who started the whole "Kuzunoha's boss" thing. She was the type to adjust her words based on how she perceived a relationship.

"Morning," she greeted with a smirk. "That's a pretty stiff way of saying hello. You don't need to be so formal with the likes of me, y'know. Makes me feel like I should be polite back."

"Apologies," I replied. *"It's just my nature."*

Honestly, this was just how I acted toward hyumans in general. I defaulted to keeping my interactions strictly businesslike.

I'd told myself I was trying to integrate into hyuman society, but the truth was, I had no intention of getting deeply involved.

What even is *this feeling…?*

"Huh. Well, whatever," Estelle muttered, eyeing me with mild curiosity. "Oh, right. I called you over 'cause I wanted to ask—those accessories we confiscated yesterday, should we keep collecting more if we see 'em today?"

"Yes, that would be best. They might be one of the causes behind this whole incident. We won't know for sure until the academy investigates further."

"Got it. I'll take care of it." She nodded, then cocked an eyebrow. "So, you're heading out today?"

"Yes. Things have settled down here in the slums, so I'll be heading to the academy to check on the students and assess the state of the city."

Estelle let out a small huff, crossing her arms. "The fact that you can say that so casually is impressive. Not that it's my place to tell you, but listen—you only have one life. Overconfidence and arrogance will just shorten it. So be careful out there."

"I appreciate your concern. I'll leave things here in your hands," I wrote with a soft smile.

"And one more thing," she added with a smirk. "Once this whole mess is over, I'll let my boss know about you. You'll probably get a reward. Might even open up some profitable opportunities for you down the line."

"Ah, well, I only run a small business, so I'm not sure how many opportunities there would be… but please pass along my regards."

The boss of a brothel, huh? That screamed mafia or yakuza to me. Was it okay to get involved with people like that?

Well, as long as I brought Tomoe or Shiki along, I'd have some backup in case anything happened.

I gave her a small bow before heading to the slum's entrance, where I told the armed demi-humans guarding the gate that I was heading out.

Then, I stepped onto the street.

Even though only a few days had passed, the city had already fallen into ruin.

If I focused, I could hear battle in the distance—shouts, screams, the wails of those who had lost something… or someone.

This was a state of emergency, and yet, I was already getting used to it.

The unease spreading among the people stemmed from two things:

1. Not knowing what was going on.
2. Not knowing when or where they might be attacked.

It wouldn't be surprising if panic erupted at any moment.

But me? I had information.

I could still use telepathy to keep tabs on things, and Aqua and Eris constantly updated me on the locations of the mutants and the academy's forces. I could avoid any unnecessary encounters and move strategically.

Because of that, this situation didn't inspire any fear in me.

Now that I was taking a more active role, I might even run into Jin and the other students, or Rembrandt from the Merchant Guild.

Rather than being worried, I felt… oddly upbeat.

They must have already heard about the king of Limia praising me, thanks to Shiki. It would be fun to see their reactions firsthand.

With each update from Aqua and Eris, I adjusted my route, avoiding mutants and panicked hyumans alike, steadily making my way toward the academy.

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"Temporary instructor Raidou! How dare you be absent from the academy in a time of crisis?!"

"My apologies," I responded evenly. *"I was informed by my followers that the headmaster was actively engaged in eliminating the mutants. With that in mind, I took it on myself to gather unharmed personnel and assist in evacuating civilians."*

"Absurd! The civilians are irrelevant! This situation will be resolved once the mutants are eliminated! Why should you, even as a temporary instructor, waste your time aiding their escape?! You're supposed to follow my orders!"

The moment I arrived at the academy and entered the shelter where the headmaster and other dignitaries had taken refuge, I was greeted with a barrage of furious yelling.

"Yes. I acted of my own accord," I admitted calmly. *"Given the current state of telepathic interference, I was unable to report sooner. That's why I have come here directly."*

The shelter was located beneath the academy's central courtyard, and it was said to be far better fortified than any other shelter in the city.

Rather than mass evacuation, its design prioritized strategic functionality. Various monitoring devices had been installed to track external conditions, making it more of an emergency command center than a shelter.

Several adjacent rooms had been set up as living quarters, where the instructors and a select number of essential personnel were staying. The space was compact but efficient—quality over quantity.

Naturally, they had secured high-level telepaths, allowing a constant flow of commands and updates between the scattered units across the city.

Here I was, being yelled at in the middle of all this.

The headmaster's rage was ferocious, veins bulging as if they might burst at any second. His relentless string of insults was even harsher than the Merchant Guild's representative's, showing no signs of stopping.

This time, I wasn't the least bit shaken.

Back in my meeting with Zara, I might have been caught off guard, but now, I knew exactly what needed to be done. There was nothing to panic about.

I even had the mental capacity to think, *Wouldn't it be better to take this argument somewhere private? You're just getting in everyone's way.*

"Two of the cities close to us have gone completely silent! We have no idea what's happening there! Do you understand?!" the

headmaster shouted. “This is the worst disaster in the history of this city! And yet—you—*you*—!!!”

Yeah, I get that, but…

How much did this old man expect from one temporary instructor?

Sure, I was technically part of the academy’s forces, but was that enough to warrant this level of outrage?

There was no way he believed that just because my students could fight decently, their instructor had to be strong enough to single-handedly wipe out all the mutants.

Well, I could do it, but still.

If he was this furious about my absence, then the Purple Coats were probably suffering severe casualties and exhaustion, despite whatever victories they’d achieved. I hadn’t received a detailed report on their situation yet—I’d have to ask someone later.

Some instructors had probably died before they even made it to the academy, and I imagined others had already fled the city.

The ones who ran wouldn’t be able to complain if they were fired on the spot, but knowing this man, he’d probably spit on the graves of the fallen too.

I was relieved that it was Tomoe standing beside me.

If Mio had been here… calming her down would have been a nightmare.

Since I wanted to check in on my students, I had Mio and Shiki waiting at one of the dorms. They’d reported that a few mutants had appeared in the area, but they had handled everything discreetly and without issue.

They’d even secured samples and sent them to the Demiplane. Apparently, they had managed to gather five bodies already—more than enough for analysis.

“Headmaster,” a firm voice interrupted. “Raidou not only ensured our safe evacuation, but he also braved the dangers outside to return to the academy. Please, that’s enough reprimanding.”

The headmaster’s rage abruptly halted.

“Princess Lily… and Sairitsu-sama…” he muttered, blinking in surprise.

I turned to see the two of them standing side by side.

“Headmaster,” Sairitsu added gracefully. “I must also request that you set aside any questions about his actions for now. Our priority should be resolving this crisis.”

So, she was standing up for me too. With these two stepping in, the headmaster finally started to back down.

“Of course, I understand that,” he grumbled, adjusting his posture. “However, as the head of this academy, I cannot simply ignore such reckless behavior…”

Oh, please.

He hadn’t been thinking about anyone but himself when he’d evacuated. If I remembered correctly, he had even leaned on his secretary’s shoulder for support—and now he was trying to act like a responsible leader?

Princess Lily and Sairitsu were far more composed than he was.

Was it because the battle situation wasn’t looking good? Or was this his true nature?

Could it be one of those cases where someone had average ability but was skilled in political maneuvering?

If he were just someone who held a prominent position but lacked the ability required, maybe I’d feel some kind of kinship with him.

No, that isn’t it.

It was more like revulsion toward someone too similar to myself. I had zero desire to help him. And zero intention of getting dragged into a power struggle.

“Would you not reconsider, for our sake?” Princess Lily pressed.

“We humbly ask for your understanding,” Sairitsu added, bowing her head.

The headmaster clicked his tongue and scratched his head in frustration before reluctantly sighing.

"If you two insist… Fine." He turned his sharp gaze back to me. "Temporary instructor Raidou."

"Yes?"

"You will oversee eliminating the mutants in Rotsgard's northeastern district. You may use the employees of your merchant company, if necessary. Understood? Now, prove yourself and clear your disgrace."

Wow. Not just help, but take full responsibility?

That's a pretty big request to throw at me so casually.

With a nod, I responded, *"I will do my best to meet your expec__"*

But the headmaster cut me off. "When those useless students wake up from their slumber, you can use them as well."

"Of course." I clenched my teeth at the completely unnecessary remark.

Jin and the others weren't incapacitated. Even Amelia's injuries had been completely healed by Shiki on the day of the battle.

One day of rest was more than enough for them to move again.

The headmaster probably didn't know the details, but it was Mio and Shiki who'd decided to put them to sleep, not because they were weak, but to prevent unnecessary recklessness from both the students themselves and some overzealous instructors.

I had approved of it too. As the headmaster walked away, I gave a small bow.

Northeast, huh?

And just like that, I'd been assigned to the Merchant Guild's problem area. It was probably a high-priority district.

If they were entrusting it to us, that meant the academy's forces were completely occupied elsewhere—must have been tied up in protecting critical academy facilities.

Yeah… Things aren't looking good at all. I've kept Tomoe waiting for quite a while now.

With that thought, I turned to her. Noticing my gaze, she gave me a slight nod.

That was all.

Huh? It was out of character for Tomoe not to throw in some kind of snarky remark.

Ah, but Princess Lily and Sairitsu were still here. That explained it.

"Princess, Sairitsu-sama—thank you both," I wrote.

"There's no need for thanks," Princess Lily replied with a soft smile. "You saved my life—quite literally. The Empire's hero should also be on his way here, but we've seen no signs of his arrival. I feel terrible for the people of this city. Last I checked, telepathic communication was still working, but we've received no further updates…"

Her expression turned somber.

"You have my gratitude as well," Sairitsu added. "Had we been able to maintain telepathic contact on the first day, the wyvern unit carrying reinforcements and supplies would have been scheduled to arrive by tomorrow."

I see. So that's why Tomoe said we'd be making our move today—because Sairitsu's wyverns were meant to arrive tomorrow.

"Please don't worry," I wrote. *"I'll do everything in my power to ensure that neither of you is harmed in Rotsgard."*

"How reassuring, Raidou." The smile returned to Princess Lily's face. "I'd very much like to speak with you before I return to the Empire. Would it be acceptable for me to send for you when things settle down?"

A princess from a country with a hero, huh?

Limia's king had been heavily influenced by its hero.

Was she the same?

She was treating me, a mere merchant and commoner, with a certain level of familiarity, which made me wonder—was it possible that she, too, had been influenced by a Japanese person?

One thing was for sure: She was someone used to wielding immense power. A single misstep in a private audience with her could be catastrophic.

"Of course. I would be honored to visit, if I'm able to bring Tomoe along," I wrote.

"I see." Princess Lily paused for a moment, then smiled again. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Good.

With Tomoe there, I wouldn't have to worry about awkward silences.

"Raidou-dono," Sairitsu said next, her voice filled with concern. "These mutants are so formidable, even the academy's elite are struggling against them. Please be careful."

"Tomoe will be with me, so there's no need to worry. She is incredibly strong. But I appreciate your concern, Sairitsu-sama."

"You're bringing her with you?" Sairitsu's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"The headmaster did say I could use my employees. Tomoe's a reliable follower."

"Indeed," Sairitsu agreed with a nod. "Thanks to her presence, I've been able to spend the past few days without worry. I shouldn't keep you any longer. Lord Raidou, may fortune be with you."

"Thank you… Let's go, Tomoe."

"Of course," Tomoe replied, following behind me.

Stepping out of the underground shelter, I was momentarily blinded by the brightness outside.

There had been sufficient lighting inside, but it couldn't compare to the natural light of the outside world.

As my eyes adjusted, I quickened my pace toward one of the student dormitories that had been turned into a shelter.

"This is a good start," Tomoe remarked as she walked beside me. "Now, let's get Mio and Shiki and wrap this up quickly."

"Yeah."

"You handled yourself well against that headmaster," she added, amused. "And the unexpected support from Princess Lily and Sairitsu was quite the boon. Also, telling the princess that I'd be accompanying you at our future meeting was a wise move."

"I don't know why, but I felt weirdly calm through all of that," I admitted. "*Maybe it's just because I already knew what I needed to do. Once we start clearing out the northeast district, I want you to tell me exactly how you explained teleportation to the guests."*

"As you wish," she acknowledged.

If anyone was going to slip up, it would be me, so I needed to review and reinforce the story to ensure consistency.

"You and Luto worked out the plan," I told Tomoe, *"so I'm looking forward to seeing it play out."*

I was sure there were some brutal aspects to it, but I trusted they wouldn't do anything to harm my position.

If I were going to exercise power, I had to embrace it fully and get used to it.

"Leave it to us. For now, Young Master, focus on how you're going to handle the Merchant Guild. Your composure at the academy was commendable. I expect the same moving forward."

"I'll do my best."

There was no avoiding it now—since I was assigned to the northeast, I would inevitably run into him.

No use framing it as an unfortunate encounter.

Instead, I chose to think of it as a chance to see Rembrandt again.

It was a promising start.

Later, people would remember this third day as the turning point of the counterattack.

Along with that, they would remember the role the Kuzunoha Company played in it.

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The atmosphere inside the student housing was no different from any other evacuation site. The spacious lobby was packed with

students. Some were outside, others were busy with different tasks inside the dorm, but overall, fatigue hung heavy in the air.

Jin and the others—still asleep—were in the same area where the wounded were being treated. That was where Shiki and Mio were.

As soon as they saw me, they got up to move toward us, but I gestured for them to stay put as Tomoe and I approached them.

"Good work, Shiki, Mio," I greeted them. *"The students seem completely exhausted."*

"Young Master," Shiki greeted with a bow. "After a few students turned into mutants yesterday, none of them have been able to return to their rooms. Today, they're all under extreme stress."

"It was boring," Mio muttered, arms crossed. "Every single one of them just kept repeating the same nonsense, like a bunch of broken toys—'Is this place really safe? Are we really okay here?' Over and over again."

"Mio, be more mindful of your words." I shot her a look. "*This is their first time experiencing something like this. Of course, they're going to be scared."*

"I-I apologize," she mumbled, averting her eyes. There weren't many people here who still had the energy to complain, but it was better to avoid unnecessary resentment.

"Well, that will change after today," Tomoe remarked. "You two are ready, yes? We're moving out."

Both Shiki and Mio nodded in response.

"Then, can you wake up Jin and the others? I want to speak with them before we head out."

"I already woke them a short while ago," Shiki replied. "They're still sluggish, but I didn't want them to be half-asleep when speaking with you."

Efficient as always, huh?

Thinking about it, it was more practical to wake them before I arrived.

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"Over there." Shiki pointed across the lobby. "They're getting a health check. They should be done soon."

"I see. Then all of you stay here and be ready to move at a moment's notice. I'm going to talk to them for a bit."

After getting nods from my followers, I made my way over to the familiar group of students. They were speaking with a white-coated physician who looked every bit like a school nurse.

"It's been a while, Jin. Everyone," I greeted them.

"Sensei!"

Wow, that was perfectly synchronized.

"You were asleep for two days. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine now," Jin replied, rolling his shoulders and stretching his arms. "I had no idea we were out for two whole days… but physically, I feel great."

"What's been happening?" Izumo asked, glancing around uneasily. "The city still doesn't seem back to normal…"

"I haven't been able to reach my family," Daena added with concern. "Sensei, do you know anything about them?"

Questions came at me from all directions.

Rather than dumping all the information on them, it was better to clarify what needed to be done first.

Also… didn't Daena have a wife and kid…? Are they safe?

"Calm down," I wrote, holding up a hand. *"Even if you're awake, your body isn't at full strength yet. And let me be clear—rushing into action today would be nothing short of suicidal."*

The group fell silent.

"There are still a lot of mutants out there. The situation hasn't been resolved. The academy's forces are actively working on eliminating them, meaning students are still heavily restricted from moving around outside. You're lucky to be alive—so stay put, don't do anything reckless."

I scanned their faces.

Yeah. Those three are definitely up to something.

Daena and the Rembrandt sisters looked far too ready to move.

"No, you three."

"—?!"

That confirmed my suspicions. I hadn't even called them out by name, yet they visibly stiffened.

"Shifu, Yuno—your parents are safe. You can rest easy and stay here a little longer. Daena, I'll look into your family's situation. But whatever you do, do not *act on your own. Stay calm."*

Even after reading my speech bubble, the three of them still looked dissatisfied.

"You've probably heard from Shiki already, but the king of Limia personally praised your efforts. You don't have to recklessly throw yourselves into danger. Right now, what matters most is keeping a level head and acting rationally."

"But the city is still under attack, isn't it?!" Jin asked.

Jin… seriously?

He was raring to jump into the fight.

"Do you truly want to go out there?" I asked, meeting his gaze.

"Yes," he answered after a moment. "We can help. We fought Ilumgand, didn't we?"

"And what happens if, while you're out there, this place gets attacked? What if more mutants emerge inside this dorm? Every single student here would be slaughtered."

They all froze, tension rippling through them.

"Yesterday, while you were asleep, another mutant came out from among the students."

I could see them grappling with that reality, realizing that even within their own ranks, the threat still lurked.

"We're under orders from the headmaster to eliminate the mutants in the northeastern district. That means we'll be leaving this place unguarded." I let my words sink in. *"Jin… knowing that, do you still want to go?"*

He didn't respond.

"I want all of you to stay here and protect the other students."

Jin bit his lip.

"I'll be taking Shiki and Mio with me, which means this place will be left vulnerable."

In reality, Aqua and Eris would still be watching over the dorm, but they didn't need to know that.

"I'll stay," Jin finally said, his voice barely audible.

"Hm?" I prompted, watching him carefully.

"I'll stay here!" he repeated, louder this time. "If we work together, we can handle it. No—we *will* handle it."

"That's the spirit. I'm counting on you." I gave him a nod of approval. *"If you do a good job, I'll make sure the king of Limia hears about it. See you later."*

As I turned away, I sent a telepathic message to my hidden guards: *"Aqua, Eris. I need you two to watch over the dorm. If Jin and the others leave, follow them."*

"Understood."

"Got it."

With that settled, I quickly rejoined Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go. Shiki, I need you to handle detection for the area."

Then, since the topic was sensitive, I sent my next request via telepathy. *"And… could you also check on Daena's wife and kid for me later? I completely forgot about them."*

"I've already confirmed their status," Shiki replied. *"They're hidden at the arena where I stationed an arach. Eva and Luria are with them too."*

Wow.

I was genuinely impressed.

Lately, my perspective on the powerless had been shifting. I used to believe that all people were equal, regardless of their strength or abilities—that every hyuman life held intrinsic value.

That belief hadn't vanished. I still didn't blame anyone for being weak.

On the other hand, I had started to feel that it was only natural for the powerless to be trampled by violence. If they had chosen to

spend their time on something other than growing stronger, then wasn't it just the consequence of their priorities?

Wasn't that their decision?

I had begun to care less about lives that were lost because of it. But I knew it was a twisted way of thinking.

Who am I to talk?

I was just a kid with no talent aside from shooting a bow. And yet, these thoughts wouldn't stop. Sometimes, I found myself unnerved by my own perspective.

That was why I felt genuine appreciation and surprise at how Shiki, who definitely numbered among the strong of this world, had taken the initiative to protect Daena's family.

It was a relief.

"All right, let's move. First stop—the Merchant Guild."

It had been two days, but the Rembrandt couple were still alive and well. Their misty lizardfolk guards had done an excellent job.

With the extermination of mutants as a gift, I headed back to a place where, just a few days ago, I had experienced one of my most bitter encounters.

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Extermination.

That was the only way to describe our journey to the Merchant Guild. I hadn't given any specific instructions about neutralizing the mutants, so as Tomoe walked beside me, Mio and Shiki trampled through the creatures with effortless brutality.

It was a total massacre.

"Feels like we're ripping their jaws off," I muttered without thinking.

"Ah, so you mean, 'under the judgment of the Goddess of Vengeance,'" Shiki responded immediately, catching me off guard.

Why the hell does he know that? And worse, his interpretation is completely wrong.

"A goddess?" Mio perked up, clearly noticing a different meaning for the word.

I sighed. "Shiki, Kalashnikov doesn't refer to a goddess. It's the name of the designer of the AK-74, a rifle used for revenge, not divine punishment."

"Ah, I see." Shiki nodded. "I had assumed it was the name of a goddess."

I shook my head.

Among the recreated books in my memory, there were quite a few manga. However, I hadn't expected Shiki to be the type to read them.

"Mio," I added before she got any ideas, "this has nothing to do with *that* goddess, so don't worry about it."

"Hmph." She looked disappointed but didn't press further.

"I don't know what's keeping her so busy," I continued, glancing at Tomoe. "But according to Luto, she's got her hands full with something."

"I don't know the reason either," Tomoe admitted. "But it seems she has no time to concern herself with this situation."

This whole incident was significant, though. Her mind was even more unreadable than Rona's.

As we continued chatting and clearing out mutants, we quickly arrived just short of the guild's entrance. Our kill count was fifteen mutants so far.

According to Shiki's detection, a Merchant Guild unit was currently engaged in battle with a few of them. However, the guild itself hadn't suffered a direct attack.

Since we were officially assigned to extermination, we hadn't avoided confrontation—anything that came our way, we simply obliterated.

By now, I figured there should only be a handful of mutants left in the area.

"Shiki, how many are left?" I asked.

"Six," he replied, "not counting the ones currently engaged in battle."

"More than I expected," I muttered, glancing toward the guild. "Are we going to get to the guild first?"

"It seems so," Shiki confirmed.

"Young Master," Mio spoke up, eagerly shifting beside me, "if you want, I can take care of them now."

"Thanks, Mio, but we're fine." I gave her a small nod, subtly calming her bloodthirst before continuing toward the guild.

As I walked, a random thought crossed my mind.

What the hell is the Goddess's actual name, anyway?

If she was acquainted with Tsukuyomi-sama, then maybe she had a well-known name, one I would recognize.

I really don't want that.

If she turned out to be a goddess with a good reputation, that would be incredibly disappointing.

"Young Master," Tomoe suddenly spoke. "The lizardfolk are waiting to greet us. Rembrandt's with them as well."

"Tomoe, I'll let it slide for now, but stop calling him by name without an honorific." I sighed, then turned to Mio. "And, Mio, when we meet the guild representative, do *not* do anything. Understood?"

"Leave it to me," Tomoe assured with a light smirk.

"Of course," Mio muttered, arms crossed. "Even if he's being attacked by monsters, I won't lift a finger."

"Mio," I deadpanned, narrowing my eyes. "If he's being attacked, help him."

She averted her gaze. "Fine."

That's even worse!

The moment I saw Zara, the guild representative, standing beside Rembrandt, I felt a wave of dizziness and nausea wash over me.

My heart rate spiked. Without a doubt, this man was second only to the Goddess in making me uncomfortable.

Still, avoiding him wasn't an option. After all, today was an important day for the Kuzunoha Company.

Steeling myself, I stepped forward to meet them.

"It's been a while, Representative, Rembrandt-san. I'm relieved to see you all safe. The telepathic interference delayed my arrival, but by the headmaster's orders, I'm here to eliminate the mutants in the northeastern district."

Rembrandt responded first. "Good to see you safe, Raidou-dono." But before I could react, he stepped forward and pulled me into a sudden embrace.

"Are my daughters safe? They haven't been dragged into battle, have they?!" His voice, though quiet, carried a deep, desperate urgency.

His breath tickles!

"Rest assured," I wrote. *"Your daughters have not stepped onto the battlefield. And just as I assigned protectors to you and your wife, I've also placed reliable guardians with them. They're safe."*

He finally let go, creating a bit of distance between us. Since he had spoken privately, I made sure my reply was only visible to him as well.

Considering the circumstances, two days without proper contact with his daughters must have been agonizing for him.

Shifu and Yuno are truly loved, huh?

Even if it was Rembrandt-san, I wasn't exactly thrilled about being hugged by another man.

"It's been a while, Raidou," Zara spoke up, his face etched with exhaustion. "Seeing you here means your shop survived. If I recall correctly, it was somewhere around the middle of the main street, right?"

Ugh. Even his voice made me uneasy.

"No, it's been destroyed," I answered. *"There were no casualties among my employees, and no loss of goods. However, we did stay in an evacuation shelter, so I don't know the store's condition now."*

"I see." Zara exhaled, rubbing his temple. "Some shelters were infiltrated by mutants and completely wiped out. I'm relieved to hear that your people were safe."

What? "Relieved"?

That was not what I expected to hear. I'd assumed he would be furious, just like the headmaster. Was he too drained to lash out? Even so, he wasn't the type to break this easily.

Zara was a man with an unshakable core—at least, that's how I had always seen him. Could an attack on a mere city change him this much? Or was this all just an act? Had Rembrandt-san done something?

No, that wouldn't make sense. There was no need for that in this situation. Wearing down an ally would only backfire.

Then again, this was Rembrandt—he could very well be setting this up to extract more compensation later.

Since the Merchant Guild handled commercial insurance, maybe he was angling for a bigger payout from a higher authority—either the guild's upper management or the city itself.

"Haha, surprised by how different he seems from last time?" Rembrandt chuckled, seeing through my thoughts. "He's never experienced an attack like this on the city before, so of course, he's exhausted. And besides—" He glanced toward the two imposing figures nearby. "Right now, with Kuuga-dono and Ganmu-dono standing guard, he can't afford to act too aggressively toward you. Isn't that right?"

Zara flinched, his mouth twitching as he struggled for a retort.

"Sh-Shut up!" he snapped, clearly rattled. But after a moment, his expression sharpened, and his voice took on a more familiar edge. "That aside, with creatures this powerful under your command, shouldn't you have wiped out the remaining mutants already? Why did you only start acting now?"

Ah. There it is.

I had been waiting for that question. Though his demeanor was weaker than before, his sharp, probing gaze had returned.

"Oh, and I forgot to mention," Rembrandt suddenly added, "I told him, and only him, that those two are under your command. I figured it would make negotiations smoother. Apologies for acting on my own."

That was fine.

As long as he'd only told the guild representative, it wasn't a problem.

"The academy's forces were focused entirely on extermination," I explained. *"I was at the coliseum, and after a series of events, I relocated to one of the evacuation shelters. However, even those shelters were under threat, and it became clear that we couldn't rely on the academy for swift action. Acting on my own judgment, I prioritized coordinating with my company's employees to evacuate civilians and secure the safety of the shelters. Once things had settled, I went to the academy, where the headmaster assigned me to this extermination effort."*

"I see." Rembrandt's expression darkened slightly.

Did he take that to mean that Shifu and Yuno still aren't safe?

Noticing his reaction, I decided to continue. "On my way here, I also saw evidence of looting. How much damage has the Merchant Guild been able to assess?"

"We took this guy's suggestion," Zara responded, jerking his chin toward Rembrandt, "and started assessing the damage, exterminating mutants, and securing uninjured civilians at the same time. We still don't know the full extent of the losses, but most merchants have already written off their shops and inventory."

He ran a hand through his unkempt beard—he hadn't even shaved and looked years older than when I had last seen him.

"The real problem is that we don't have enough manpower," he continued. "We have money. Plenty of it. But we've hit a hard limit on available adventurers and mercenaries. With each death, our forces shrink further. And with no way to properly communicate with the outside, we're completely out of options."

Zara had no experience with handling large-scale combat situations, so trying to maintain rational decision-making under this kind of pressure must have been extremely tough for him.

In that sense, having Rembrandt stationed here might have been the best possible arrangement.

"Tch, what a troublesome man," Rembrandt sighed, shaking his head. "I keep telling him that there's nothing to worry about because we have Raidou-dono here. That this situation isn't even a real crisis. And yet, he won't listen. Why, just last night—"

"Pat! Shut your mouth!" Zara suddenly barked.

Huh?

Pat?

Oh.

He's talking to Rembrandt-san.

I vaguely remembered seeing that name before—probably on some paperwork.

Patrick Rembrandt.

So Pat was short for Patrick.

Since I never addressed people by their first names, it took me a second to figure out who Zara was talking about.

"Well, that's the state of the Merchant Guild for you, Raidou-dono," Rembrandt remarked. "This man is still holding it together, but many of the merchants inside have already descended into complete hysteria. It's not a sight worth witnessing, nor is there any reason for you to meet them."

There was zero sympathy in his tone—just cold, blunt truth.

I think I'm seeing a new side of Rembrandt-san…

"I'm just glad I made it in time," I replied.

"I had considered enlisting your two warriors for mutant extermination," Rembrandt continued, "but no matter how much I insisted, they refused to do anything beyond guarding us. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands—I stepped outside myself to gauge the situation… only to be dragged back

immediately.” He sighed. “I could already tell forcing the issue would be pointless, so I gave up.”

Ah.

That made sense.

I had only ordered Kuuga and Ganmu to protect him and his wife.

They had strictly followed those instructions and avoided unnecessary engagements—a testament to how seriously they took their mission.

They weren’t the most flexible, but they were reliable warriors.

“Following your advice, I will not enter the guild,” I decided. *“I’ll continue with the extermination in the northeastern district. If you can establish communication, feel free to call back any mercenaries still in the field.”*

“So even this level of danger doesn’t count as a real threat to you?” Rembrandt muttered, his expression shifting to genuine surprise.

“We’ve already taken care of about fifteen mutants on the way here.”

As expected, both Rembrandt and Zara froze in shock.

Ignoring their reaction, I turned to Shiki. *“And in this area?”*

“Nine remain,” Shiki responded, having anticipated my question. “There have been no new mutations detected so far.”

I nodded in thanks before shifting my gaze back to Rembrandt.

Yeah. He’s definitely more reliable than Zara.

“That’s the situation right now. The academy has already identified items that may be triggering mutant transformations. I’ll leave one of my followers here to assist with collecting them. I appreciate your cooperation.”

“Tomoe,” I then wrote, turning to her.

“W-Wait?! Me?” she stammered.

“You know the most about what’s going on here. Can you make sure there are no further outbreaks within the shelters? Rembrandt-

san, I'd appreciate your help as well. And you too, Representative Zara."

"Of course I'll help," Rembrandt replied without hesitation. "You will as well, won't you, Zara?"

"Yeah," Zara muttered, rubbing his temples. "If it means stopping mutants from forming inside, I'll do anything I can."

Huh. He was remarkably compliant.

Maybe I could actually hold a conversation with him in this state.

But, as Bowle had mentioned earlier, once the crisis passed, people were just as likely to forget everything.

This was probably a rare, temporary version of Zara.

"Then we'll take our leave. Once the extermination is complete, we'll come back."

"Raidou!" Zara called out, his expression serious. "We've lost consistent contact with our squads. If you come across any of them and they haven't received return orders, please deliver them directly."

"Will do."

Wow.

He had changed significantly.

Not that it could be helped, I guess. As I turned to leave, I cast one last glance over my shoulder.

Tomoe, clearly disgruntled, was being led away by Rembrandt while muttering complaints under her breath.

Sorry, Tomoe.

I had debated between leaving her or Shiki, but since the topic of teleportation might come up, she was the better choice.

Mio would have been too dangerous.

I made a silent apology to Tomoe in my heart. I'd finish up quickly and come back for her. *Also, I should probably check in with the academy after noon.*

Oh. That's a good idea…

"Mio, Shiki." I motioned for them to come closer.

The two, who had been walking slightly ahead, turned and returned to my side.

"The mutants that are left, if we include those in combat, there are nine, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Shiki confirmed.

"All right, then. The three of us will take care of the ones already in combat, and for the rest… let's turn it into a competition between you two."

"?!"

"If it's a tie, then tonight's dinner will be Mio's choice, and tomorrow's dinner will be Shiki's. But if one of you wins, I'll grant the winner one request—as long as it's within my power to fulfill."

"Are you serious?"

"Y-You can't go back on this later, right, Young Master?!" Mio demanded, now unusually excited.

Huh?

I hadn't expected them to bite so hard. *Maybe I should clarify the conditions before things get out of hand.*

"Of course," I nodded. "But the request has to be something I can actually do, and it has to be done right there on the spot. For instance, if you wanted to hear about my old world, I'd set aside a full day for it. If you wanted to cook together, I'd gladly do that too."

"I have no intention of making any underhanded demands," Shiki assured me smoothly.

"I completely agree," Mio added with an ominous smirk. "Young Master, prepare yourself."

Wait.

Something about Mio's tone set off alarm bells. Her words were short, yet somehow the beginning and the end completely contradicted each other.

Unlike Tomoe, these two had been working nonstop as my bodyguards, so I was offering this as a bit of stress relief…

But I might have just made a huge mistake.

As Shiki led us toward the battle site, unease crept up my spine.

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"You were awfully quiet back there, Zara."

"I thought you'd mellowed out, but I take it back," Zara muttered, his voice rough with frustration. "What's this nonsense about them being 'the strongest in the city'? That wasn't just the strongest in the city—that was something else entirely!"

"I wasn't lying," Rembrandt replied, an amused smile on his lips. "Fact is, they *are* the strongest here. In Rotsgard… and Tsige."

His tone was noticeably different from when he spoke with Raidou. With Raidou, he had presented himself as calm, composed, and gentlemanly—using the polite pronoun "watashi." But with Zara, he had switched to an informal and rugged manner of speech, using the more masculine "ore." Their long-standing personal history was obvious.

Zara scowled at his old acquaintance, eyes sharp as daggers, but Rembrandt effortlessly brushed off his glare, completely unfazed. For anyone else, facing Zara's intensity head-on would have been terrifying. Rembrandt, however, remained relaxed, either taking it as an old friend's banter or possessing unnerving mental fortitude. And with just the right touch of sarcasm, he fired back, mocking Zara by placing Rotsgard and Tsige in the same category—two cities with completely different dynamics.

"The Kuzunoha Company is a black box," Zara muttered in growing frustration. "We've gathered a decent amount of information, but nothing conclusive. We don't even totally understand why they've attracted so much attention from various nations. Even the supposed combat capabilities of their members have remained a complete mystery. So, after evaluating all this, I assumed that meant they had little to show in the first place."

“And then this happens.” Rembrandt chuckled, amused by his friend’s struggle to comprehend the situation.

“They left the academy with only four people—four—and strolled all the way here unscathed, chatting casually as if they were on a leisurely afternoon walk.” Zara shook his head, gripping his temples. “Meanwhile, our best-equipped mercenary squads suffer casualties and severe injuries every single time they go out. Those four didn’t just survive—they acted like they were out shopping at a street stall!”

“Hahaha…” Rembrandt’s chest rumbled with laughter. He was enjoying every second of Zara’s disbelief.

Zara ignored him and pressed on, his voice rising. “We’ve barely managed to kill four mutants in three days—and that was with over fifty mercenaries working together! And them? Fifteen mutants? They talked about it like it was nothing, as if they took a casual detour to wipe them out on the way here!

“And then he says, ‘Somehow we established communication.’ If communication were that simple, we’d already have supplies flowing into the city!”

“Aah, yeah. That’s true.” Rembrandt nodded absentmindedly, as if Zara’s rant was mere background noise.

“That kid Raidou—the one who was terrified when I yelled at him—how the hell did he walk in here with that calm, smiling face?” Then his voice lowered to a whisper. “What the hell *are* they?”

Rembrandt sighed theatrically. “All this sweat, huh?” He smirked. “Good grief. You’re the one who’s gone soft, haven’t you? Where’s the Zara who crushed the Thief’s Guild and took over their gambling dens? Where did that ruthless bastard go?”

“Don’t lump this in with business,” Zara snapped. “In the end… there’s only so much we merchants can do against people we can’t even reason with. What the Kuzunoha Company is doing isn’t even merchant activity anymore. To me, Raidou and those monsters of his don’t seem all that different.” His eyes darkened. “Why the hell are people like that in an academic city? Who are they really, Pat?”

“You know the answer already.” Rembrandt chuckled. “A simple traveling merchant, selling medicine. He registered at the guild in Tsige, set up a shop here, and is still a fledgling businessman, nothing more.”

“Pat, quit screwing around.”

Zara’s glare turned into a full-blown scowl, his eyes burning with fury.

“Well,” Rembrandt continued, “his attendant, Tomoe-dono—she’s over Level 1,500. And that black-haired woman we just met, Mio-dono? Same story. Then we have Shiki-dono, also one of Raidou-dono’s subordinates. I don’t know his exact level, but I’d wager it’s quite high as well.”

He gave a casual shrug. “And, of course, Raidou-dono himself is probably around the same.”

“Fifteen hundred?” Zara froze, his voice hoarse. “You’re joking. What the hell are you talking—?”

“Oh, whoops. Did I let that slip?” Rembrandt mused. “I guess it’s supposed to be classified information at the Adventurer’s Guild. Of course, in Tsige, it’s an open secret. But in other cities? It’s hardly even discussed. I believe the Guildmaster’s name was Fals-dono, correct? I hear he and Raidou-dono are well-acquainted.”

Rembrandt leaned in slightly, lowering his voice to a dangerous whisper. “You… won’t go blabbering about this to anyone, will you? After all, who knows what might happen if you did?”

“Y-You bastard,” Zara stammered, his entire body trembling. “You tell me all this and then—!”

His hands curled into fists at his sides, but his anger was undercut by sheer, gut-wrenching disbelief.

At his first meeting with Makoto, Zara had barely held himself together—even exhausted, he had forced himself to maintain an air of authority as the guild’s leader. That was his pride.

Beneath that, he had been rattled to his core. He was no fool.

He understood the situation as a merchant.

The city was under attack by monstrous beings that required teams of elite mercenaries and ex-adventurers just to stand a chance against them. Each day, the number of survivors dwindled. And so did their remaining forces—every battle chipped away at their manpower.

Kuuga and Ganmu, the two monsters that Rembrandt had brought with him, stood guard, one at the guild entrance, the other protecting his wife inside.

They were so trusted by the other evacuees that some people even prayed to them out of gratitude. Yet they refused to fight, and they wouldn't even allow the Rembrandts to leave. They were an immovable defensive force—nothing more.

Even with these powerful bodyguards, the evacuees were under immense stress. The lack of telepathic communication only made it worse; the sense of isolation was suffocating.

No question about it—this was the worst crisis Rotsgard had ever faced.

And yet…

Zara couldn't shake an unsettling realization.

To an outsider, Makoto and the Kuzunoha Company's actions could be seen as selfless heroism—as if they were simply good people risking their lives for the city's sake. But the moment he thought about it critically, it became clear: Their behavior was unnatural. Something was deeply wrong.

Rotsgard's strongest forces—the academy's elite squads—had been wiped out effortlessly.

Even the seasoned mercenaries the city had hired reported that the mutants were too powerful, that the risk far outweighed the pay.

It was clear, both from the mounting casualties and the state of the city, that these assessments were correct. And yet…

Fifteen mutants.

It was an absurd claim—one Zara wanted to dismiss as a blatant lie. But he couldn't.

Because deep down, he already believed it.

They had walked from the academy to the Merchant Guild, barely acknowledging the danger around them. To Makoto, this was nothing worth mentioning, but to Zara, it made the Kuzunoha Company feel like a force completely beyond his understanding.

A once-insignificant little business had become an enigma. Something that refused to fit within the logic of his world.

Rembrandt shook his head, still amused.

"Hmph. You only see Raidou-dono from the surface, with none of the real context. That's why you're so confused. If you'd just change your perspective a little, you'd see that he's one of the easiest people in the world to deal with." He sighed dramatically. "I had expected better from you, Zara. I'm disappointed."

Zara's face twisted in frustration.

"That brat doesn't even understand the basics of business!" he snapped. "Anyone would be furious hearing him spout his naive nonsense! And *you*—you should've taught him the fundamentals properly back in Tsige! This is on you too! And above all!" He hesitated before continuing, but the final words escaped involuntarily. "With that kind of ridiculous power…"

"Why doesn't he use it more actively?" Rembrandt's voice, suddenly serious, cut through the air.

Zara immediately fell silent. Because that was exactly what he had been about to say.

After a long pause, he finally admitted it, his voice weak. "Y-Yeah."

"I wouldn't know. If you're that curious, ask him yourself." Rembrandt shrugged. "Though… he did seem a little different this time. Maybe that's because you were here."

"Why the hell did he even want to get into business?"

"I told you already—ask him yourself. Besides, you were criticizing his lack of business fundamentals earlier. Did you mean that?" His tone dripped with amusement as he locked eyes with Zara.

Zara found his friend's expression so unfamiliar that he could have been looking at a different man.

"Of course I meant it," Zara snapped. "Even from a brief observation, I could tell. He doesn't understand basic etiquette toward fellow merchants, he doesn't establish relationships before starting anything, he doesn't assess market trends to set prices properly, he doesn't negotiate unique supply chains with the Guild in advance, and he barely knows how to maneuver within our industry. There are so many things he should be doing, and yet, I doubt he even understands half of them. To him, business is nothing more than 'selling good products at lower prices'—that's the extent of his worldview. He only ever looks at the *customer*. How the hell is a merchant like that supposed to survive in this world?"

"Selling good products at lower prices. Isn't that the core principle of commerce?"

"He's too naive! That's not how the real world works!"

"It works just fine." Rembrandt's casual confidence sent a visible twitch through Zara's jaw.

"Did you take one too many hits to the head during all those gang wars in Tsige?" Zara muttered.

"We both became merchants with that exact same mindset, didn't we?"

Zara let out a bitter laugh. "Yeah. But the moment you actually start doing business, you realize how silly that is. You learn real fast—that kind of thinking doesn't work."

"Why not?" Rembrandt's question was almost innocent—childlike, even.

"Because to break into the market, you can't just stick to ideals. You have to be smart about it. Money buys lives. Money kills people. If you can't accept that, you'll never make it big. Commerce isn't some dreamland of ideals. It's reality."

"True. But that only applies to us."

Zara's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What are you getting at?"

Rembrandt smiled thinly. “Tell me, Zara—how many merchants could negotiate properly after seeing Tomoe-dono’s and Mio-dono’s power firsthand? If you had to sit across the table from all four of them, how much could you twist their demands in your favor? Even using your best tactics?”

“I can handle that,” Zara muttered, averting his gaze.

“If you get on his bad side, everything you hold dear—the entire city—could be wiped out in an instant. If he even suspects betrayal, you have no idea what kind of retribution he might unleash.” Zara flinched, but Rembrandt continued, his tone like that of an older brother guiding an ignorant sibling. “Of course, if he ever asks, I’d be more than happy to teach him about business; I’d support him however he needed. But right now, I don’t see any reason for that. He’s a merchant who doesn’t care if adventurers die in the Wasteland, but he does care about people suffering from sudden illness or curses, and that’s why he sells good medicine at affordable prices. That’s his principle. And, frankly, I think he’s already an incredibly valuable man. Trying to control him would be a mistake. Taking a high-handed approach with him? Even worse.”

Zara’s expression twisted; he knew that the last part was directed squarely at him. “You think you can bend commerce through brute force?” he scoffed. “That kind of twisted logic won’t hold up. Neither the temples nor the nations would allow such a thing.”

Rembrandt smiled. “Wouldn’t they, though? If they realize that giving him free rein is far more beneficial than trying to bind him, the answer changes. It’s like a Greater Dragon that leaves its lair every so often and wipes out a village. Or a rampaging spirit, blocking off entire coastal routes or major trade roads. These are natural disasters—things that just happen from time to time. But do nations or temples march out to fight them? No. At best, they pray. Everyone just waits for the disaster to pass because that option causes the least casualties in the long run.”

Zara clenched his teeth. “You’re comparing the Kuzunoha Company to a force of nature?” he spat. “That’s ridiculous.”

Rembrandt’s smirk deepened. “A Level 920 adventurer slays a Greater Dragon, and people praise them as a Dragon Slayer. Now, consider the Kuzunoha Company—two warriors above Level 1,500, plus two more of equal standing. Tell me, Zara, do you think there’s much of a difference?”

Zara’s breath caught, and he said nothing. Rembrandt let his voice drop an octave. “Did you know? If someone’s too powerful, they don’t just destroy cities. They can actually build them.”

Zara stiffened as Rembrandt chuckled, his eyes gleaming with something between admiration and dark amusement. “It was fascinating to watch. Even considering Tsige’s unique position, the results were spectacular. Since the Kuzunoha Company got there, Tsige’s development has skyrocketed. In a few years, it will be one of the greatest cities in the world. Mark my words.”

Zara swallowed hard. For the first time in their long friendship, he felt a deep, instinctive fear toward Rembrandt—not because of the man himself, but because of what he had just revealed. Rembrandt had climbed to power using money and every trick in the book. Yet here he was, speaking so casually about something far beyond even his reach.

If Rembrandt’s words were true… If Sofia, the legendary Dragon Slayer, had been Level 920… then the Kuzunoha Company wasn’t just strong. They were beyond comprehension.

Even as his beliefs crumbled, Zara still clung to what remained of his common sense.

“Impossible. It’s impossible, Pat. No matter how unchecked and reckless one merchant company might become, eventually, the Goddess’s judgment will fall upon them. Won’t it?”

Rembrandt gave a dry chuckle. “That is, if it even reaches him. I, for one, am betting it won’t. That’s why the Rembrandt Company will never withdraw its support from Kuzunoha, no matter what anyone says. I can’t imagine a mere business dispute would be

enough to make a god move… but even if it did, I wouldn't change my bet."

"Such arrogance…"

"If one is to carry out their ideals without compromise, then a little arrogance is just what they need. Anyway, that's what I've come to believe recently. That it's better to crush anyone who gets in the way, to push aside the leeches who try to stake a claim to power. I was never able to go that far myself, but Raidou-dono will. Though… I suspect his arrogance isn't intentional. It comes from ignorance. And that's exactly why I won't interfere. I just sit back and watch him do as he pleases."

"At this rate, it may not even be normal business anymore."

"What's wrong with that? If he goes beyond what we know as business… if he creates a new kind of organization and truly erases disease and curses from the world, then why not? If he's determined to accomplish an unprecedented feat, it wouldn't be so bad to stand beside him. Zara, listen carefully. Raidou is not the kind of man who lets the people on his side suffer losses. If you still insist on looking at it from your perspective, then he's the greatest money-making opportunity you'll ever find."

"Even if it means betraying hyumankind… the Goddess herself?"

Rembrandt met his gaze, eyes glinting. "Why not? What's wrong, Zara? If money is king, and profit is justice, then isn't betrayal just another part of business?"

"Pat. But that's—"

"Fuhaha…" Rembrandt laughed quietly, shaking his head. "I know, I know. If I truly believed that, then in these last twenty years, I should have profited off of war. It's stupidly easy to make a fortune if you have enough capital and connections—and yet, you never touched it. You chose to stay in an academic city, far from war. And me? I chose the wilderness. Not Limia, not Gritonia, but Tsige. Well, nowadays, Tsige brings in more profits than a war ever could, but that just proves our limits. No matter how much we talk about

greed, neither of us was willing to profit off the slaughter of nations."

Rembrandt let out a deep breath, his grin laced with madness. It was unclear whether he was laughing at himself or the absurdity of his own words. "The war… taught me that kindness is worthless in the end. For that, I'm grateful."

"That one, huh? You've gone senile, Pat. This war isn't over yet. And no matter how much you put on that face and talk about gratitude, all I hear is hatred. Well… I can't say I disagree. My brother and his wife died in that war." After a short sigh, Zara muttered bitterly, "I lost everything. I'm alone in the world now."

A brief silence filled the room. The two men gazed out the window, out at the cityscape that evoked memories of past battles, their thoughts drifting back to those days.

Turning back to Zara, Rembrandt spoke. "Yeah, that's right. After that, we learned the hard way that the only things we could rely on were ourselves and money. We threw ourselves into business, desperate to survive. And after everything, I managed to take root in Tsige, while you built your foundation here in Rotsgard."

"That's why it irritates me so much when I see someone like Raidou," Zara said with a sigh. "And… there's something about him, something I can't quite put into words, but it's unsettling. It's not just about strength. He feels like… an entirely different kind of being from us."

"Unsettling, huh? I see. You have your way of thinking, and I won't argue with that. But if you're going to get involved, you'd better do it soon. This is just some friendly advice, from someone who's walked the same painful path as you."

"You… I still can't bring myself to acknowledge him like you do…"

"You should come to Tsige sometime. If you see what's happening there with your own eyes, you might change your mind. Oh, and I'll even have one of my daughters show you around. Consider it a special favor."

Rembrandt chuckled to himself, recalling the rapidly evolving frontier city—his own nest, which was changing at an astonishing pace.

"Shifu-chan, huh…? She has grown into a truly beautiful woman," Zara muttered with a relaxed smile.

Rembrandt's face lit up with delight. "Oh? Now that's interesting. I don't recall mentioning Shifu's name. So, the moment I said 'special favor,' you just assumed I meant her? Ahh, I see, I see. Because she looks just like Lisa, your old flame, huh? How pathetic, Zara. Still clinging to old regrets, are you?"

"What?! I—I didn't mean—"

"Oh, don't even try to play innocent now." Rembrandt's grin stretched wide. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? Hah! You dirty old man! And to think I wouldn't suspect my dear friend of anything inappropriate—yeah, right! The way you used to gawk at Lisa was downright indecent, you pervert!"

"Gah— Pat, what the hell are you doing?! This is hardly the time for this!"

Ignoring Zara's protests, Rembrandt suddenly threw his arms around him, locking him into a tight hold. Whether it was a joke or something more serious, no one could tell.

From a distance, the other merchants and guild members watching them likely assumed it was nothing more than two old friends messing around. But whether Rembrandt had intended to lighten the mood or not… only he would ever know.

Thirty minutes later.

As the last of the returning mercenaries straggled in, Zara caught sight of Makoto, looking exactly as he had when he first arrived at the guild. Not a single hair out of place. Not a hint of exhaustion. As if the entire hunt had been nothing more than a casual errand to him.

"The Kuzunoha Company, huh…" Zara muttered under his breath.

The moment that whisper left his lips, Rembrandt burst into laughter—a loud, unabashed cackle that echoed through the guild.

Makoto, watching the exchange from a short distance away, simply tilted his head, staring at them with a puzzled expression.



"Yes, we've completed our patrol without issue. There may still be a few mutants hiding somewhere, but the Merchant Guild has agreed to take over the investigation of major facilities. We can continue our operations, but do you have any new instructions for us?"

"P-Please hold for a moment… Thank you for waiting. You're to proceed to the northwestern district and continue the extermination mission while also investigating the cause of the communication interference. You're to return to headquarters at sundown to report your findings."

"All right, I'll pass the message on."

"Acknowledged. Regular check-ins will no longer be necessary. Good luck."

Leaving the northeastern district, we regrouped with Tomoe at the Merchant Guild, where I had Shiki handle our scheduled report back to the academy's command center in the underground shelter. Since I couldn't be the one speaking directly, I had him deliver the report and take our next assignment. Of course, I'd been listening in the entire time, so I already understood what was expected of us without needing a debriefing.

"The northwest, huh?" I said to Shiki. "That means heading straight west… That district mostly consists of lower-income

residential areas and the few artisan workshops in this city, right?"

"Yes. Judging from the areas assigned to us, it would seem that the academy intends to reclaim its own facilities and the wealthy districts on its own. They probably want to secure as much support from the upper class as possible. At this point, the headmaster's downfall is inevitable, yet he fails to realize that merely bringing Young Master to his side would instantly turn the situation to his favor. His scheming for his position could be easily deterred by such a move alone. Instead, he's so shaken by the collapse of his so-called elite battle units—likely built purely based on magic power statistics—that he can't even manage his usual political maneuvering. Pitiful."

Shiki's analysis was thorough, and it made sense. So that's why the headmaster had been in such a panic…

"So, they don't want us making too big of an impact, huh?"

"I suspect that once we finish with the northwest, they'll have us join a joint operation with the Purple Coats."

I sighed and shook my head. "They should just use me properly as an academy instructor, even if I'm only temporary. Instead, they're tiptoeing around like I'm some loose cannon. I mean, sure, I mention the Kuzunoha Company from time to time, but I've never bad-mouthed the academy. If anything, at this rate, the headmaster's going to get all the credit for figuring out the cause of the mutations."

"Indeed," Shiki agreed. "If we were to claim responsibility officially, it would only create unnecessary problems. Given that Kuzunoha's already seen as a mysterious and unknown entity, there's a chance we would be suspected of being the masterminds behind the entire incident."

Shiki paused, and when he next spoke, his voice carried a sharper edge. "However, the headmaster's approach is utterly misguided. If he had the power to resolve the situation himself, that would be one thing, but as it stands, his methods are ineffective. All it would take is a single request—made in front of a dignitary or any

influential figure—for your support. That alone would turn the situation in his favor." His eyes flicked toward me, calculating. "I also heard from Tomoe that you were yelled at."

I let out a wry chuckle, rubbing the back of my neck.

Sure, I'd mentioned Kuzunoha here and there, but everywhere I went, I made it clear I was an instructor first. I'd also stated explicitly that I was following the headmaster's orders. There was no way my involvement would have damaged the academy's reputation.

Far from tarnishing the academy's image, I just wanted the Kuzunoha Company to leave a good impression. If that happened to benefit the academy as well, I wouldn't have complained. If anything, I agreed that they should at least maintain some level of presence.

They don't want us to stand out too much, huh…?

"Young Master, we've finished retrieving the ornamental accessories suspected to be the key to the mutations," Tomoe announced.

"Good work, Tomoe," I congratulated her. "Any issues on your end?"

"None at all!" she said enthusiastically, clearly relishing the praise. "I just took a few precautions to be sure that certain merchant associations don't try to stir up trouble once they regain their footing. Everything has been handled appropriately."

I raised an eyebrow. "Precautions?"

Tomoe smirked. "I bestowed food, water, and blankets upon the Merchant Guild representative—Zara, I think it was? I told him, 'Here, hand these around as charity.'"

I blinked. "That's… supposed to be a deterrent? And wait, was that food from the Demiplane?"

"It's much less complicated for the relief efforts to be attributed to the Merchant Guild rather than having the Kuzunoha name attached," she explained smoothly. "This way, it benefits them, and at the same time, I had the representative 'agree' to mention our company's name in passing."

A knowing glint flickered in Tomoe's eyes.

"As for the food, water, and blankets, we had all of it purchased from nearby towns over the past few days. While we had surplus, there was no need to give them the Demiplane's provisions out of pure generosity." She paused, then added, "However… I did mix in a small amount of fruit—an unmistakable signature proving that the supplies came from us."

I sighed. *She even went shopping for this…?*

"What? All I had to do was put some random forest ogres to work. Given the situation out there, we couldn't afford to let any other merchant companies use this as an opportunity for self-promotion. This level of action was necessary to ensure that we stood out the most, while still keeping things balanced."

Well, she's nothing if not reliable.

"Let me know how much you spent later," I said, exhaling slightly. "But still, I'm surprised that the guild representative agreed to those conditions so easily."

Tomoe smirked, her eyes gleaming with self-satisfaction. "No unnecessary prying, and in exchange for distributing the supplies, he had to mention the Kuzunoha Company's name. That's all. In return, he instantly secured a large supply of food, water, and much-needed bedding—all for free. Even if he weren't a merchant, the logical choice would have been clear. No hyuman, no matter their title, can ignore that kind of bargain." When she finished speaking, she chuckled to herself.

Was it really that simple…?

I had always seen Zara as the type who negotiated every single deal with counterdemands. I couldn't imagine him giving in that easily, no matter how desperate he was.

Unless… Rembrandt-san stepped in?

Perhaps the words of an old friend had nudged Zara into accepting Tomoe's terms.

"Young Master," Tomoe suddenly spoke up. "It truly wasn't a difficult negotiation."

"Are you a mind reader now?" I muttered.

Tomoe smirked. "Your face says more than enough."

She folded her arms proudly. "That Zara guy has people he needs to protect, but he's short on supplies. He has no way of knowing when this crisis will end. While the situation's improving, without telepathy, he can't accurately assess what'll happen if we withdraw our support. And then—right in front of him—I laid out an abundance of food, enough to feed those on the verge of starvation, as well as blankets for those who had been sleeping in rags and scraps. Then, I just left the choice to him.

"When you hold the fate of starving people in your hands," she said with an amused little grin, "negotiations become incredibly easy."

"So that's all it took, huh?" I rubbed my temple. "Wait—hold on. You presented the food in front of him? Are you saying you used teleportation in front of Zara?!"

That's bad.

Hadn't we carefully crafted a whole story about how teleportation was highly restricted? That it had limitations and drawbacks? And now she was just… casually pulling supplies out of thin air in front of a major guild leader?

Zara was in a position where he could easily have connections to the academy's guests—or worse, the royals.

"Did you seriously do that?!" I pressed when Tomoe didn't answer right away.

She blinked. "Didn't you already tell him we handle our supply chains through teleportation?"

"That was before we came up with the whole 'wakizashi limitations' story!"

"Okay, that's fine," Tomoe said confidently. "After all, those supplies were requested from the Kuzunoha Company and then distributed through the Merchant Guild. We just cooperated—reluctantly—for the sake of the residents. If anyone were to start

whining about where the supplies were suddenly teleported from, the Merchant Guild would bear the responsibility, not us.

"In fact, we weren't even the ones who stacked the food in front of him—it was the lizardfolk. At most, Zara now knows there are more misty lizardfolk than he thought. However, the esteemed representative was more than happy to accommodate my 'request.'" A sharp gleam entered her gaze. "Of course, it's just a verbal agreement, but for him to go back on his word now… well, *if* he dares, then I must admit he has some real courage."

I frowned. "B-But still…"

Even knowing that she had thought everything through, I couldn't shake the unease.

Tomoe exhaled, then smiled knowingly. "Besides, Young Master… secrets are only difficult to keep because the ones holding them actively try to conceal them."

"Huh?" I blinked at her.

Isn't it obvious that a secret needs to be hidden?

"Instead," she continued, "it's much easier to let the other party conceal it for you."

Yeah, I'm not following.

"Luto will probably use a similar trick when he plays his diplomatic games. The important thing is to make the other party believe that they have to pretend not to know."

"Eh?" I was getting more lost by the second.

"To put it *simply*," Tomoe went on, like a teacher indulging a slow student, "there is no difference between something no one knows and something only those in high positions know—but have to act like they don't know."

That explanation just made my brain hurt.

"So… you're saying that instead of us trying to hide something, it's better to make it an open secret?"

Tomoe gave me a look of mild disappointment. "Not quite, but you're getting warmer." She then shrugged. "Luto's already placed

our teleportation ability into a plausible framework—when he's done, I'll explain more."

So… not quite right but not wrong either?

I should probably try to understand at least a little more before then.

"All right. For now, let's get back to the hunt. If I remember correctly, Lime and Mondo are stationed in the northwest sector."

"Indeed. At this rate, there may not be any prey left for us by the time we arrive. I was hoping to unsheathe my blade for the first time in a while, but sadly, I may have to wait for the next opportunity. How jealous I am of Mio and Shiki…" Tomoe sighed dramatically, then suddenly narrowed her eyes at me. "Speaking of which, Young Master… Mio seems to be in unusually high spirits today. Would you happen to know why?"

Following Tomoe's gaze, I spotted Mio walking ahead of us, stepping so lightly she was almost bouncing.

"Oh, that," I replied. "I had her and Shiki compete—to see who could take down more mutants."

Tomoe raised an eyebrow. "Oh? So… I take it Mio won?"

"Yeah, four to two. The rule was that once one of them engaged a target, the other couldn't interfere, but it still ended up being a close match."

"Hmm…" Tomoe frowned slightly. "I see… but even so, her excitement seems rather excessive for such a victory. I fail to understand."

I rubbed my chin. "Hmm… maybe it's because I promised that the winner would get to ask me for a favor?"

Tomoe's expression changed instantly. Her usual calm demeanor vanished, replaced by a face of genuine shock and outrage.

Uh… should I not have said that?

"Wh-What's the matter, Tomoe?" I asked cautiously.

"Young Master—*What* is this ultra-luxurious prize?! I was *not* informed of this!" Tomoe's voice rose with each word, her eyes blazing with an intensity I rarely saw.

Ultra-luxurious prize? Now she was just exaggerating.

"Well, I left you in charge of handling the guild, so…" I trailed off, hoping we could skip this conversation. "Anyway, time to go."

Right—focus on the job. We needed to head out soon.

"Wait! Young Master! This conversation is not over!!! In fact, it's barely started! Where do you think you're going?!"

"The northwest sector," I replied. "We can walk and talk—just keep your voice down!"

"I demand a proper explanation! Even if I'm satisfied, I refuse to be satisfied! In other words, my request should also be considered, should it not?! Young Master?!"

Why does this feel like it escalated way too quickly?

Still, I supposed this was better than being stiff with tension. With Lime and Mondo handling the northwest sector, I doubted things had spiraled out of control.

If we paced ourselves, we could be back at the academy by nightfall.

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"All right, he's coming your way, Mondo!"

"Got it!"

The sound of crumbling stone echoed through the battered street, revealing patches of bare earth underneath the once-pristine pavement.

A thin, wiry man shouted a warning as he sent a gray, grotesque creature hurtling through the air. The monstrosity, a massive spherical body with a single oversized eye, was far larger than either of the two men, but the dark-skinned warrior—Mondo—stood firm, catching the creature effortlessly with one hand and completely absorbing its momentum.

For a brief moment, the mutant hung suspended, frozen in his grasp.

Then—

With a decisive slam, Mondo drove it into the ground. A faint glow spread across its body… and in the next instant, the monster was gone.

In its place stood a towering broadleaf tree, its vibrant green leaves rustling faintly in the breeze.

Mondo was a forest ogre, one of the ancestral races of the elves. And this was his ultimate technique, Tree Execution.

A deadly, absolute finisher, turning a living being into a tree in a single, inescapable strike. A technique so terrifying that it had once shaken even Makoto, the master of the Demiplane himself.

"Greening up the place one step at a time, huh?" Lime quipped, stepping up beside Mondo.

"That's the eighth one. There are still quite a few left—we're not making as much progress as I'd like."

"Can't be helped. We're keeping a low profile while we do this. Oh yeah—got word from Anee just now. The big guy's on his way here too."

"I see." Mondo exhaled, his expression shadowed. "I've caused my master far too much trouble already. Facing him now, after all this, is…"

"You're talking about the Aqua and Eris duo, huh? Well, calling them a duo doesn't quite feel right, since Eris is the one carrying all the weight. Still"—Lime smirked—"for all his complaints, the boss doesn't actually hold a grudge, y'know? If he did, you forest ogres wouldn't all be living in the Demiplane now, would you? Face it, he's already forgiven you. Probably having fun with it, even."

Mondo let out a sigh of relief. "Hearing you say that takes a weight off my shoulders, Lime. In that case, at the very least, I want to show him some results worth his expectations. Let's keep going."

"Obviously. You and me, we're the perfect rivals, aren't we? Climbing the ranks of the Demiplane together—I'm not about to let you get ahead of me."

Lime grinned, rolling his shoulders in anticipation.

“Yeah… At one point, I thought I had a shot at the top spots, but then the gorgons and the wingedfolk joined the mix, and I plummeted down the ladder.”

“Yeah, petrification and flight? That’s almost cheating. Your Tree Execution got outright banned, but even those two should have some restrictions in place. I figure if they tweak the rules, we’ll climb right back up.”

“Exactly.”

Lime and Mondo had long since completed the evacuation of the nearby residents and had successfully guided the artisans to safety.

On the second day, they’d managed to contain the emergence of mutants from the shelters, limiting it to a single case. The retrieval of the necklaces—those likely responsible for triggering mutations—had also been carried out swiftly.

Mondo’s pent-up energy from being away from the Demiplane for so long and Lime’s efficient leadership had proven to be a formidable combination.

Now, on the third day, with the order to go on the offensive, they had begun clearing mutants and securing the shelters—not in a flashy way but effectively nonetheless.

This district had no other combat forces present.

The three shelters in the northwest sector had been successfully defended using Lime’s connections and Mondo’s lethal technique. They had maintained constant communication and procured supplies through teleportation, ensuring that everything ran smoothly.

The three shelters in this district had been strategically placed close together, allowing for efficient defense even with a small team. These shelters had more space and a relatively lower population density, making them easier to secure and manage. The refugees here felt safer and more at ease than those in other shelters.

By contrast, the shelters in the northeast sector, where the Merchant Guild had taken in large numbers of evacuees, were bursting at the seams and stressing everyone out. The overcrowding

there was one of the factors pushing Guild Representative Zara to his limits.

Thanks to their swift evacuation efforts and strong defense, Lime and Mondo had become well-trusted among the artisans and low-to middle-class residents.

For some people, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they had developed a dependency on them.

The name of the Kuzunoha Company had sunk deeper into their hearts than Makoto realized.

"Still," Mondo muttered, arms crossed, "what's the end goal of whoever set these things loose? If they knew that Young Master was in this city, they would have realized this plan was doomed to fail. The interference with telepathy, the mutants popping up here and there… With how methodically they've executed this, I find it hard to believe they didn't foresee the outcome."

"Beats me." Lime shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand demon logic. But whatever the case, our job is simple—we're here to be the boss's hands and feet. If there's anything we need to know, they'll tell us. And let's be honest, the big boss and the others would never recklessly put the Demiplane or us in danger. In fact…" He let out a chuckle. "They'd go out of their way to stop us from doing anything reckless ourselves. You should've seen the extra lizardfolk that got called in. The moment they heard the news, they practically exploded with excitement."

"Yeah, I get it." Mondo nodded, his expression firm. "I felt the same way as the misty lizardfolk. We finally got a chance to fight, to prove ourselves." He glanced at Lime, a knowing glint in his eye. "Lime, that wish you mentioned before… I hope we'll be able to pass it along to Young Master soon."

"That's up to Tomoe-anee," Lime replied with a smirk. "That was the deal, after all. But, hey, I'm in no rush. At least I already got this much time. No reason to get impatient."

He exhaled, and his gaze drifted off into memory.

Mondo grinned and slapped Lime on the back. “Then, how about we clear out one or two more before the boss gets here? Let’s make our brothers back in the Demiplane jealous.”

Lime chuckled. “Hell yeah.”

The two warriors widened their search radius, scanning for mutants still lurking in the area. Carefully, they selected their targets, keeping a safe distance from the shelters to ensure no harm would come to the refugees.

By the time Makoto and his group arrived, they had already transformed several more creatures into silent, leafy welcome gifts for them.

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The dorms.

Normally, it was a space for students to live, relax, and unwind from their academic responsibilities. But the mutant crisis had turned it into a shelter, and the place’s usual lively atmosphere was gone.

With Mio and Shiki away accompanying Makoto, the anxiety inside the building had risen noticeably. Though Jin Rohan and the others had woken up and were trying their best to fill in, they were nowhere near the level of deterrence that Mio and Shiki provided. Even those who had witnessed the battle against Ilumgand hesitated to fully trust Jin’s group. For most students, their only reference for Jin and his friends’ strength was the tournament, and that wasn’t enough to ease their fears in a crisis like this.

Meanwhile, Aqua and Eris, the two forest ogres assigned to guard the dorm, lay sprawled on the roof of the building, staring at the sky and enjoying what little peace they could find.

“What’s wrong, Eris?” Aqua asked, lazily turning her head toward her partner.

Eris clicked her tongue. “Aqua. This is bad. The headmaster’s lost it.”

Aqua sat up instantly. “What do you mean? Nothing unusual’s happening near the dorm.”

“He’s planning to use those kids. Word must’ve reached him that they woke up… Probably.” Eris turned her head slightly, eyes narrowing.

“And where exactly are you getting this from? I don’t see anything strange.”

“It’s hard to explain. Spiritual intuition? A sixth sense? Some kind of… something? Anyway, I can feel the headmaster and his lackeys heading this way. And they’re not coming to talk about the weather.”

“Great.”

“So…” Eris sat up, crossing her arms. Her lips curved into a mischievous grin. “What do we do? If the students get dragged outside, then we’ll have to follow. And that means no one’s left here to guard the dorm.”

“But Young Master’s orders were to protect those seven students,” Aqua pointed out. “The other students? They’re just a bonus.”

Eris’s smirk widened. “Fufufu. Lucky for you, I have a brilliant idea.”

Aqua gave her a flat look. “Fine. I’ll hear it.”

“My ultimate technique! With it, we can completely ‘protect’ the dormitory!” Eris declared with a grin.

Aqua’s expression immediately stiffened. “H-Huh?! You can’t mean—you want us to use *that?!*” She jumped to her feet, visibly shaken. “N-No way. Absolutely not!!!”

It was clear Aqua had some very bad memories associated with whatever Eris was proposing.

“But if we do this, everything is solved in one go,” she continued nonchalantly. “I checked earlier, and the dorm has plenty of food. Sure, there might be some scuffles over supplies, but no one’s going to starve. They’ll just be stuck inside for a while. No big deal.”

“I refuse! Absolutely not!” Aqua shouted, spinning around and plopping down on the roof with her back to her comrade.

“I have a feeling Young Master will be mad,” Eris mused.

“He definitely won’t!” Aqua snapped back. “Never again! I refuse to suffer that humiliation a second time!”

“Boooo. We don’t have much time, though,” Eris sighed dramatically. “Oh well, guess I’ll just do it myself.”

“Wha?! Wait, you can do it alone?!”

“Of course, though I don’t have enough mana, so you’ll have to lend me some.”

“Wha— I— Whaaaaaaa?!” Aqua let out an incoherent wail, her mind scrambling between resistance and confusion.

Eris grinned victoriously. “Hehe, I knew you’d agree. Now, gimme the mana.”

Aqua shot her a glare filled with pure, unfiltered resentment. “You’ll pay for this later…”

Despite her protests and her better judgment, she stepped closer to Eris to transfer her mana. Mana transfer was a rare and difficult process, requiring an unusually strong affinity between the two people involved. The reason Aqua and Eris made such a formidable team, despite their mismatched heights and personalities, was that they were compatible enough to perform this transfer seamlessly.

But the moment the mana began to flow, Aqua’s body jerked violently.

“Ah—! My body—?!” she gasped.

“Fufufuuu,” Eris giggled. “Now, let’s begin.”

“Wait—*What?! No!*”

The instant their mana connected, Eris hijacked Aqua’s body. Her limbs moved against her will, twitching unnaturally as if she were a marionette on strings.

“Come on nooow. Let’s hold haaands,” Eris cooed, reaching for her arm.

"*Don't mess around with me!*" Aqua roared, her voice filled with sheer desperation. "*Eris! Eeeeeeriiiiiiis!!!*"

Eris, completely ignoring her cries, twirled her around like a dancing puppet, leading her into a bizarre, nightmarish waltz under the dim afternoon sky.





"Shine, my heart's diamond!"

"Move, damn it! My body! If I can't move now, then when?! Move, move, move—!!!"

The instant Aqua's desperate plea echoed through the air, a brilliant light erupted from her body.

Eris's eyes widened. "Wait, don't tell me—*Cocyt*— Huh?! B-Body override?!"

Aqua ripped her arm free, breaking the forced connection with a sharp, sweeping motion. Their hands, which had been clasped together like a sealed shell, snapped apart.

Freed from Eris's control, Aqua whirled around, eyes burning with pure rage.

"Eeeeriiiis," she growled, voice dripping with vengeance.

"Uh-oh." Eris straightened. "Look, see? That felt kind of nice, didn't it? But! More importantly, we seriously don't have time for this. We need to put the barrier up here, now—trust me. It'll absolutely be worth it."

"*Who do you think made me this mad in the first place?!*"

"All right, all right! This time I'll do it alone, okay? It's all for Young Master, Aquaaa!"

Aqua groaned through clenched teeth, torn between wanting to strangle Eris on the spot and acknowledging that her instinct was usually spot on.

And this time… Aqua could feel it too.

The academy headmaster was headed straight for the student dormitory. Her low snarls of frustration continued, but at least she managed to stop herself from lunging at Eris.

"Haaaah…" Eris sighed dramatically, clutching her stomach. "Solo mode… is so lonely."

"*Shut! Up!*"

"All right, time to get serious!" Eris declared, lifting both hands to the sky before dramatically clasping them together over her head.

"Now behold, the ultimate secret technique of the Cygnus constellation—my master, Ca—*oof!*"

Before she could finish her absurd incantation, a brutally fast punch slammed straight into her stomach.

"Shut up and stay down, you absolute *moron*!" Aqua snapped, her fist still buried in Eris's gut. "The incantation is already done! Stop throwing in useless catchphrases! *I'll finish the spell myself!!!*"

Eris let out a muffled groan, glaring at Aqua in aggrieved silence. Completely ignoring her, Aqua focused her mana and unleashed the final command.

"It's done! *Cocyt*—no, forget it! *Frozen Prison of the Flower Tribute*!"

"Mmmmph!!!"

A massive surge of magic erupted atop the student dorm's roof, its energy swirling like a living tide before taking on a powerful water-based attribute.

Above the two forest ogres, three distinct circular crests materialized in a vertical alignment, each bearing a unique design.

Aqua raised her right hand, releasing an emerald-green light that shot forward, piercing through the crests one by one. As the energy ascended, it briefly halted midair, holding its position for a fleeting moment.

Then, without warning, dozens of radiant beams descended toward the ground—a barrage of light streaking downward in a precise formation.

One by one, the beams speared into the earth, forming a perfect cage around the dormitory. In mere seconds, the gaps between them were sealed with a thick layer of ice, encasing the entire building within an impenetrable frozen barrier.

The entire process had taken only an instant.

It was an immense and extraordinarily powerful spell, one of the highest-tier techniques that Aqua and Eris could cast. Under normal circumstances, this level of magic would never be used for simple defense.

Thanks to Eris's over-the-top theatrics, here they were. Meanwhile, Aqua collapsed on the spot. This was not an act—she

was genuinely exhausted.

Eris, completely unbothered, clenched her fists and dramatically lamented her situation.

"Attacking me in the middle of my introduction?! Have you no mercy?! No sense of romance, Aqua?!"

Aqua, visibly drained, shot her a tired glare.

"Young Master himself told me to do that if you ever tried anything weird!"

"Wait, what?!" She lunged at Aqua, but her exhausted companion merely flopped sideways.

"Besides," Aqua groaned, "I don't care what you were about to say, but I'm pretty sure that name was wrong."

"Don't sweat the details!" Eris huffed, waving a hand dismissively. "The solo version of the technique starts with Aurora! That's how it's supposed to be! There are plenty of techniques with names that change depending on the situation! What matters is the flow! First, you say Cocytus—pause for dramatic effect—then, you raise the tension and hit the final line with enthusiasm! Floral Tribuuuuuute!!!"

"Young Master… please… I can't keep being this idiot's brake system all on my own…"

"If you were going for a direct translation, it should've been something like Frozen Hell of Floral Offering or Icy Inferno instead. You don't ever think ahead, Aqua."

"Yeah, yeah," Aqua said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Unlike Eris, whose obsession with strange languages was borderline unsettling, Aqua's knowledge of kanji was limited to what little she had picked up out of curiosity.

In Lorel, Eris was a highly valued scholar, possessing rare expertise in ancient scripts and foreign linguistics.

She had a habit of casually slipping in obscure terms—often baffling even Makoto, who would engage in comedic back-and-forth with her over it.

This had been going on long before Aqua met Makoto, Tomoe, or became involved with the Demiplane.

Still, between kanji and katakana, neither option had been particularly dignified—but considering Aqua's effort, it was impressive she pulled it off at all.

As Aqua finally caught her breath, Eris nonchalantly spoke up.

"Hey."

"Yeah, yeah."

"So… how are we supposed to get out of here?"

"Oh."

A perfectly reasonable question from Eris. The mighty warriors of the forest ogres—Aqua and Eris. Trapped within the very ice prison they'd created.

Just like Jin Rohan and the rest of the students, they were now effectively under house arrest.

Meanwhile, somewhere else, Mondo had undoubtedly just looked to the sky in exasperation.

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Mondo caught sight of the distant glimmer and immediately rushed forward, positioning himself in front of me.

The direction—it was near the dorms… Then, without hesitation, he dropped into a full-force, diving prostration.

Ah. That thing… That's their doing, isn't it…?

Seeing the massive structure of ice, I instantly understood why Mondo had thrown himself to the ground in apology. But it was clear that this wasn't his fault.

We had just finished sweeping through the northern district and were about to return to the academy. When I contacted the shelter to report back, that's when I was informed of the situation at the dorm.

Apparently, the building had been suddenly engulfed in ice, leaving everyone inside completely inaccessible. Not only that, but communication had been entirely cut off, and they had no available forces to deal with the situation.

The person on the other end of the telepathic link was visibly shaken, clearly unprepared for something so utterly outside their expectations.

Originally, Mondo wasn't supposed to accompany us back to the academy. But the moment he heard what had happened, he immediately asked if he could come along.

The northern district had already been cleared of mutants, and as long as we kept an eye on potential stragglers from other areas, Lime could handle things on his own. He even insisted it wouldn't be a problem.

Seeing no reason to refuse, I agreed to Mondo's request.

I see. So that's why he had a bad feeling about it.

I recognized that ice pyramid too. As a test, I tried sending a message to Jin, but, as expected, it was blocked. The same for Aqua and Eris.

Yep. This is definitely those two.

"A perfectly isolated barrier." I remembered Eris boasting about it with a ridiculous sense of pride before.

It was absurdly sturdy, requiring an immense amount of effort to break through, whether by brute force or magic.

Even when facing off against either Tomoe or Mio, it could hold up for quite some time, meaning it was a formidable piece of work.

Well… it stopped being "perfect" literally the day after she first showed it off.

Despite the grand claims, there was a fatal flaw in the design.

Of course, I hadn't said anything at the time.

After all, Aqua had already suffered enough humiliation—having been tricked by Eris into wearing a frilly, embarrassing costume, performing that utterly meaningless dance, and even chanting their ridiculous "ultimate move" speech in sync.

What was it called again? Cocytus something-or-other?

The tall and reserved Aqua had been forced into that nonsense, while the small and energetic Eris had gone all in, fully enjoying herself.

Yeah… between the two of them, the one who has to match the other's energy is always the one who suffers more.

But anyway. That's not the issue right now.

I let out a small sigh before addressing Mondo, who was still groveling on the ground in regret.

"Mondo, this isn't your fault. I'm sure Aqua and Eris had their reasons."

As I spoke, I glanced toward the distant, ice-covered dormitory, where a group of people were already making a fuss.

"If anything, this works out better for us. The students are unarmed, weak, and difficult to coordinate in an emergency. Having them locked safely inside isn't necessarily a bad thing."

I turned to Shiki. "There's food inside, right?"

He gave a small nod. "There is. Enough for a few days. If they don't stress-eat, they'll be fine. And even if they do waste rations, they're not going to starve to death in just a day or two."

Tomoe folded her arms, smirking slightly. "Indeed. After all, there exists a certain someone who went three days without food, walked endlessly, and still managed to fight a dragon after a single modest meal."

Oh. Right. That's me.

I groaned inwardly. *Why does she always bring this up?*

"Tomoe, don't remind me of that."

I shook my head, refocusing on Mondo. "Anyway, that's the situation. So don't beat yourself up over it. Now, come on, get up."

Mondo slowly lifted his face, but his expression was still tight with frustration.

"Young Master… I'm truly sorry! I swear, those idiots will receive *harsh* punishment for this!"

I sighed as I watched Mondo struggle with his lingering sense of responsibility.

"That part's up to you," I said, shaking my head. "For now, we need to head back to the academy. Either way, we can't even talk to those two right now. Mondo, could you return to Lime's position? We'll take care of this mess."

"But Young Master—!" Mondo protested, unwilling to back down. *So serious…*

I waved a hand dismissively. "We're still deciding whether to break the barrier or leave it as is. Just leave it to us for now. I mean, from an outsider's perspective, it does look really impressive. Who knows? Maybe even Luto's scratching his head over it right now."

Tomoe chuckled. "Kuku, indeed. That one may be more surprised than we expect. Mondo, if that's the case, then we'll reward the forest ogres later. I'll leave punishing those two in your hands, like Young Master mentioned, but make sure the rest of your kin receive a suitable reward as well. Of course, this is still tentative."

Mondo hesitated, still looking genuinely guilty, but then bowed deeply. "Your generosity is greatly appreciated, Tomoe-sama."

"Umu. Now, off with you. Go back to Lime and leave this to us. All of you should rest and prepare for tomorrow."

Mondo cast one last, uncertain glance at the ice dome before bowing once more. "All right, if you'll excuse me."

"Yeah. Good night," I said with a nod, and Mondo turned on his heel and disappeared into the fading twilight.

Watching his retreating figure, I found myself reflecting on how much he had changed.

Back when we first met, Mondo had the reckless energy of an untamed beast, a rowdy brute who relied on raw strength and his own brand of self-confidence. Now, though, he carried himself like a seasoned warrior—a shift as dramatic as a bandit turning into a disciplined ninja.

Maybe it was because everything he once believed in—his pride, his absolute faith in his abilities—had been utterly shattered. After

losing so completely, maybe he found something else to hold on to.

Or maybe… Only he knows for sure. I took one last look at the shimmering ice formation under the sunset sky before moving forward once more.

"So, what's the verdict?" I asked after a few moments. "Do we break it? Leave it?"

Mio crossed her arms and wrinkled her nose. "I say we leave it. That thing is absurdly durable and too much of a hassle to deal with. And besides…" She frowned. "It doesn't even taste very good."

What does that have to do with anything?

Ignoring Mio's odd remark, Shiki nodded. "I concur. Depending on the situation at the academy, they may try to force students into battle."

Tomoe placed a hand on her chin, gazing at the icy dome with mild amusement. "Agreed. We'll just tell them it can't be broken in just a day or two and leave it at that."

Okay, so Mio, Shiki, and even Tomoe all agree we shouldn't destroy it.

But if Aqua and Eris had just wanted to protect the dorm, they could have activated the barrier after stepping outside… So why stay inside and lock themselves in?

There had to be some other reason behind their actions. I'd need to ask them about it later.

On the plus side, I knew we could trust the two of them to take good care of the students inside.

"All right, we'll leave it and ask them for their reasons later," I decided.

Shiki nodded. "That would be best. Tomorrow, we'll finish liberating the rest of the districts and keep distributing aid. It's still unclear which nation will send reinforcements and supplies first, but once we hand over the relief operations, our work here will be done."

I glanced at him. "What about the reconstruction?"

"That can be handled by the eldwar, the forest ogres, and Lime. It's within their capacities," Shiki answered smoothly. "Beyond that, it all depends on how Luto chooses to settle things. If I had to guess, I would say he'll deliberately pit the nations against each other and then leverage your accomplishments in this crisis to negotiate favorable terms…"

Tomoe frowned. "That would be like him, all right."

"So that means our next immediate issue is the summons from the Merchant Guild?" I sighed. I was not looking forward to that conversation.

Tomoe appeared unbothered. "Hmm, well, that depends. Rembrandt doesn't seem too eager to take action, and if that Zara fellow is as weakened as he looks, we might actually get through it without much trouble."

"Zara-san, huh…?" I sighed again. "He might be weak now, but from what I've heard, he's a real hard-ass when he's at full strength. I doubt he's as easy as you're making him sound."

Despite my skepticism, Tomoe remained completely at ease, clearly enjoying herself as she recalled something.

"Given how things stand," she mused, "if word spreads—from somewhere—that this was the work of the demons… then the Merchant Guild might suddenly find a great deal of interest in securing our teleportation services for future emergency logistics."

She smirked as she added, "Oh, and they already seem to know my level, as well as Mio's. I wonder… who let that slip?"

She rather enjoys this kind of thing, doesn't she?

"Wait… So, you're saying they'll want to keep us around as their go-to disaster response supply chain?" I asked, piecing it together.

"Quite so," she confirmed with a grin.

I recalled Zara's complaints—how the Guild had plenty of money but no goods to buy.

Would he be so quick to rely on us…?

For some reason, I still couldn't shake the feeling that Zara wouldn't be that simple of an opponent.

Then, Mio suddenly spoke up, her voice as cold as the ice surrounding the dorm.

"If, even after all this, they still try to pressure us… perhaps it would be best to replace him entirely, Young Master."

I blinked. "Mio, that's…"

She folded her arms, unapologetic. "Anyone who accepts a helping hand, only to stab the one who offers it, doesn't deserve to be dealt with fairly. Kindness should be met with kindness. Betrayal should be met with annihilation."

That's one way to look at it…

"This incident will finally force the hyumans of this city to understand the reality of their war against the demons. Neither the academy nor the Merchant Guild will be able to continue as they were," Shiki stated matter-of-factly. "However, I believe this shift will ultimately work in our favor, Young Master."

Yeah… that makes sense.

This kind of large-scale attack was bound to hammer the truth into people's heads—they were at war.

Wait. So that means…

"You're planning to leak that the demons were behind this, aren't you?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

Shiki shook his head. "No, the academy will discover it on their own. We've made some… adjustments to the accessories we recovered. Once they examine them, they'll serve as irrefutable evidence."

"We made sure it was obvious enough," Mio chimed in with a smirk. "Even if the investigators are total imbeciles, they'll figure it out by the day after tomorrow and submit their report."

They both grinned as they confirmed my suspicion.

So, they set this up to unfold exactly as it has…

But—

"Wouldn't that also put us in a bad spot?" I frowned. "The Merchant Guild rep already suspects us of having ties to the

demons. If it turns out they were behind this, wouldn't that just make us look even more suspicious?"

It wasn't like I had any real connection to the demon race, but I did have a history with Rona. People would quickly draw conclusions.

Shiki smirked knowingly. "Young Master, how much credibility do you think that accusation will have in a few days? That claim was never based on evidence in the first place. And now, in the eyes of the public, our reputation has been solidified. We risked our lives to evacuate the citizens, helped the academy fight back, and exterminated countless mutants. *We* are the undeniable heroes of this battle. Anyone trying to label us as traitors now will find themselves ridiculed by the very people they claim to be protecting."

"I see."

It was a simple but brilliant strategy.

Even if some still distrusted us, their voices would be drowned out by the overwhelming gratitude from the people we saved.

"And if there's still a Merchant Guild fool scheming against us," Tomoe added, her grin widening, "we can always leak that very accusation to the public ourselves. The spectacle would be quite… amusing, wouldn't it? Kukuku…"

Her low chuckle sent a chill down my spine.

It was the laugh of a corrupt magistrate or maybe a ruthless black-market merchant.

Tomoe, you're enjoying this a little too much…

Still, I couldn't deny that they'd thought this through from every angle. All three of them—Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki—were incredibly reliable.

As we continued down the road, the academy finally came into view.

At this point, we've eliminated about half of the mutants in the city…

Tomorrow.

And the day after that.

What kind of existence would I, and by extension, the Kuzunoha Company, hold in this city once everything was over?

I wouldn’t have to wait long to find out.



The academy was in an uproar.

The reason, of course, was the sudden appearance of a massive ice structure.

Tomoe had decided to check in on Luto, so I sent Mio and Shiki along with her, asking them to buy some time while I handled things here. They could easily merge into the chaos afterward.

Meanwhile, I had slipped inside the frozen structure and was trying to find Eris and Aqua. I was certain Eris was the main culprit behind this mess.

The students were buzzing with excitement and confusion, but since this barrier wasn't harmful to our side, I wasn't concerned.

Still, I had no intention of dealing with a swarm of curious students, so I contacted Eris through telepathy, pinpointed her location, and headed straight there.

They were on the roof.

Why the roof?

I landed lightly beside them and got straight to the point.

"So, why did you need to use a barrier like this to seal off the building?" I asked.

Eris slumped forward, drawing circles on the rooftop with her index finger.

"You're cheating, Boss…" she muttered weakly.

I had even greeted them with a casual "good job" before asking, and yet here she was, sulking like a kid who got caught red-handed.

Instead of answering, she just looked up at me with an expression full of betrayal.

"Ahem, Young Master…" Aqua spoke up hesitantly, still looking worn out from the ordeal. "I had suspected it before, but… just how did you manage to get inside?"

She stood perfectly straight, her posture so rigid and disciplined that it was almost unnatural—in stark contrast to Eris, who had collapsed into a human "orz" pose beside her.

Aqua had become much more serious after our training camp. Having to deal with Eris on top of everything else must have been exhausting. *Maybe I should assign one more person to them to help balance things out.*

Then again, who could possibly handle both of them at the same time?

Even among the forest ogres, this duo stood out.

I glanced at Eris, who was still sulking in her "orz" pose, and then back at Aqua.

"The way I got in? Eris probably already figured it out," I said with a shrug. "But it looks like it'll take her a while to recover from the shock, so I'll just ask you in the meantime. Is that okay?"

Aqua blinked, still looking stiff and uncomfortable. "Uh… yes, Young Master. What is it?"

"If you used this barrier on the student dormitory… why are you two still inside?" I tilted my head as realization dawned on me. "You can't get out, can you?"

"Ugh," Aqua groaned, her face twisting into an expression of sheer embarrassment before she fell into an awkward silence.

So, it was just an accident, huh?

It must be a daily struggle dealing with Eris. I sighed and looked back at the still-defeated figure drawing circles on the roof. "So, it was Eris's fault, wasn't it?"

"N-No! I just… acted without thinking…"

"So, in other words, you got caught up in Eris's recklessness," I summarized.

"Auuu… Y-Yes, something like that," Aqua admitted, looking utterly defeated.

"Well, at least there's no real harm done inside the dorms… just that you two geniuses are stuck in here now." I sighed and patted Aqua on the shoulder. "Good work, anyway. Anything you need to report?"

I wasn't too worried—internally, the dormitory was still completely fine, but externally… that was a different story.

The problem wasn't just the absurdly excessive amount of mana poured into this barrier—it was also that Eris had so proudly named it "Cocytus," which was ridiculously ominous for what was supposedly a defensive barrier.

I was pretty sure Cocytus was the name of a frozen layer of Hell in some mythology.

Did Eris know what it meant when she named it that? Or was it just one of her usual nonsense acts?

Either way, it wasn't a good name. And the worst part? If someone carelessly got too close from the outside… they'd find out exactly why that name was fitting.

I had already seen it happen.

The academy was known for advanced magic research, so hopefully, nobody would be stupid enough to touch it… But if they did?

They'd be frozen solid.

Actually… was it even fair to call it "frozen"?

It was more like… instant crystallization. I had seen it firsthand when a highland orc got too close. The moment his arm brushed the barrier, half of it turned pure white in an instant.

His instincts kicked in fast enough that he severed his arm at the elbow before the effect could spread.

But the severed arm? It shattered into something that looked like glittering diamond dust, dissolving into nothing… An insanely terrifying experience.

Aqua, who still looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear, gave me a nervous nod. "N-No, Young Master. We have nothing in particular to report…"

But then, Eris suddenly snapped back to life.

"Wait, wait, there totally is!" she blurted.

Looks like she's finally recovered.

"First, stand up before you start talking," I said, crossing my arms.

She groaned dramatically as she rose to her feet. "Hmph, failure is the mother of success. Next time, I'll do even better."

"Sure. Now—what was it you wanted to report?"

If I stopped to react to every single weird comment Eris made, we'd never get anywhere. So, whenever we were in a hurry, I had learned to just ignore her and move on.

She pouted for a moment, but then nodded and got to the point. "I think the mastermind is somewhere in the fancy district where all the big-shot noble houses are."

"Oh?"

"The mutants' movements get weirdly organized sometimes, so I got curious and set up a net to catch any patterns. It paid off."

"Eris, I don't recall hearing about this," Aqua interjected, looking a little alarmed.

"That's because you were busy handling my share of the work. Thanks for that, by the way. Much appreciated."

"Ugh… grrr…"

"Go on," I urged, cutting in before their back-and-forth could drag on.

"Yes, sir!" Eris saluted. "So, somebody over there is using a special tool or something to command them. It's not perfect, but the mutants are definitely getting orders."

"Orders for the mutants?" I muttered.

"And they're gathering over there, you see? Process in action!" She pointed in the direction of the city's wealthiest district, where the academy was focusing most of its defensive efforts.

By contrast, we—meaning Kuzunoha—hadn't been focusing much on that area.

If our goal was just winning favor, wouldn't it make sense to cater to the wealthy first? I hadn't questioned it, but maybe I should ask Tomoe later.

Anyway, this was new information. If someone was giving orders to the mutants, we needed to check it out.

Still… Eris's information-gathering skills were pretty damn impressive; in fact, it felt like they were getting even sharper.

Seriously, what the hell was "process in action"? I decided to let the weird phrasing slide for now.

"Good work, Eris. That's a big help."

"Such generous words. But really, this is just an emergency measure to ensure that Young Master's precious students don't fall into the headmaster's hands. Hardly a burden at all." Then, tilting her head, Eris added, "That said… could you forgive Aqua for the whole barrier mishap?"

This is what I get for thanking her, huh?

Eris was truly impossible to pin down.

"I'm not mad," I sighed. "If you want, I can get you two out of here. I'll take you with me."

"I-I think we'll stay here for now," Aqua interjected, looking uneasy. "I'm worried about the students, and… we should probably stay until the barrier wears off…"

Oh, I see. She doesn't want to go outside because of Mondo.

Aqua must have caught on to something in my words earlier. *Though honestly, if she leaves, Tomoe's probably already handing out rewards to the forest ogres right about now. That could be fun in its own way.*

Most likely, it's… the yellow thing, right?

Well, whatever.

I was feeling a bit drained too, and if Eris wanted to stay here, I wouldn't push the issue. Even if I thought it was a pretty bad move.

"All right. Your choice," I said with a shrug. "I'll head back out, then."

"Thank you for your hard work, Young Master," Aqua said, bowing. "If you could… please send my regards to my mentor?"

"No chance."

"How… unreasonable…" she muttered, shoulders slumping.

Leaving Aqua and Eris behind, I stepped out of the barrier. Next, I needed to meet up with Tomoe and the others, see the headmaster, and… then what?

"Raidou-dono, are you just getting back now?" As I made my way toward the academy, a voice called out from near the courtyard shelter.

Huh? Well, that's unexpected.

"Sairitsu-sama," I wrote. *"Maybe it's just me, but… you look a bit tired. Are you all right?"*

"How embarrassing," she sighed. "You must be far more exhausted than I am, yet here I am…"

"We and the headmaster are doing everything we can to resolve this incident. Please bear with us just a little longer."

"Of course," she said, then let out a soft sigh. "It's just… being cut off from outside communication like this has left me more rattled than I expected…"

"That's completely understandable." My response was polite and noncommittal—or at least, it should have been.

And yet, suddenly, Sairitsu's gaze grew sharp enough to pierce straight through me.

"Raidou-dono—no, Raidou-*sama*. I get that this incident is already being resolved, not by the academy's efforts, but by another force working in the shadows. As for who's pulling the strings, I already know that, and I'm rather sure Princess Lily does too. Even the king of Limia is not blind to it… The only exception is Aion's eyes. Meanwhile, the Rembrandt Company—the one presence here that

could have stood apart—has already been absorbed into your fold, hasn't it?"

So, the higher-ups have already figured out that we've been working behind the scenes. Guess I shouldn't be surprised.

Should I just ask them not to interfere? No, if I handle this the wrong way, it might just create more problems.

Sairitsu continued, her voice carrying both curiosity and caution. "I've come to understand the power of the Kuzunoha Company, even if I've only seen a fraction of it. Whether or not you're a Sage, Raidou-sama, I cannot begin to imagine how you gathered such formidable individuals and built an organization like this. I must ask—have you awakened to the supernatural power said to dwell within those of your kind? Or is it simply that you possess exceptional business acumen and charisma?"

I raised my hand and began to write my response. "*You overestimate me. I'm no Sage, and the fact that I've found myself in this position is nothing more than pure luck.*"

Sairitsu studied my words for a moment, then exhaled lightly. "I don't intend to press you for an answer now. However, I must inform you that, at the suggestion of Fals-dono, head of the Adventurer's Guild, a formal discussion about the Kuzunoha Company is to be held. There, the Lorel Federation intends to officially recognize you and your organization in a positive light."

"I appreciate that."

A gracious offer; if that was all she had to say, no complaints from me…

But her piercing stare had yet to soften, which meant there was more.

"And now, Raidou-sama, I ask this on behalf of Limia, Gritonia, and Lorel," she continued.

Wait, three of the Four Great Nations? Why… does this sound like a threat? No—this is a threat.

"This incident… The role the Kuzunoha Company has played in bringing about its resolution has already been significant. I

understand that asking for more is an unreasonable request."

"Please, go ahead."

"We would like to request that you restore communication via telepathy as soon as possible. Should you succeed, we would like to offer our gratitude in whatever form you deem suitable. And of course, the Kuzunoha Company's name will never be mentioned. Any accusations or inquiries will be completely buried."

Restoring telepathic communication, huh?

I see.

If I wanted to, I could do it immediately, but before that, I need to check with Tomoe—it'd be bad if I moved ahead without confirming first.

A noncommittal response would be the safest bet.

"I cannot make any promises," I wrote, *"but I will make every effort to restore it as soon as possible."*

Sairitsu studied my words for a moment before giving a nod.

"I see… No, thank you, Raidou-sama. I'll pass that on. My apologies for keeping you for so long," she added, lowering her head in a graceful bow.

I reflexively returned the gesture, then with elegant, measured steps, she turned and walked toward her retinue, who had been waiting at a distance.

So, she cleared the area just to speak with me in private, huh? That's considerate.

If telepathic communication were restored, we would be able to track the exact locations of the relief supplies coming from various countries.

That alone was reason enough to do it.

Not to mention, bringing back telepathic contact would ease the stress of the refugees, who had been struggling in isolation. Now that the relief goods should be arriving soon, there was less of a reason to maintain the disruption.

Honestly, I also *wanted* to restore it.

I decided to bring it up with Tomoe, maybe phrase it as, "If possible, I'd like to do it," and see how she reacted.

That conversation took more out of me than I expected, I realized. *Negotiating with Sairitsu is exhausting in an entirely different way than dealing with Eris.*

If I could have had my ideal life, I would just eat, practice archery, collapse from exhaustion, sleep, and repeat.

But instead, I found myself stuck in a world where everyone was playing these endless games of debts, favors, and political maneuvering.

My head hurts just thinking about it.

Seriously—thank god for Tomoe and Shiki.

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"That's one hell of a barrier." Luto whistled, eyeing the shimmering defenses before him. "And this is just from that demi-human girl? Honestly, I'd rather not fight you lot."

Tomoe chuckled. "Heh. To think something as simple as magic could surprise you, Myriad Colors-dono. Truly delightful, fufufu."

"This is the first time I've seen such a strong and aggressive barrier," Luto admitted, crossing his arms. "If I tried brute force, it'd take a whole day. But if I wanted to analyze it properly? Three days, at least. There's never a dull moment around that guy."

"Oh? So, you mean to break it, then?"

"Of course not. I'm curious, sure, but if I can't finish analyzing it in a few days, it's not worth it. And if I have to resort to brute force, I'll need to go back to my original form. If I rampage around in my dragon form, this whole mutant uproar will seem insignificant. More importantly, it'd overshadow your presence, wouldn't it? So no, I'll pass. I won't get in Makoto-kun's way."

"Hmph. We wouldn't mind adding Dragon Slayer to our titles. If anything, it carries more prestige than being the Saviors of

Rotsgard."

"Spare me the trouble. So? It all ends tomorrow?"

"That's the plan. Once the relief supplies arrive, we'll take care of the remaining nuisance and be done with it."

Luto arched an eyebrow. "A nuisance, huh? And what about Makoto-kun?"

"If we tell Young Master now, it could send him down the wrong path," Tomoe murmured, crossing her arms thoughtfully. "I mulled it over, but in the end, we decided to handle it ourselves, without getting him involved."

"Mm, I see."

"It's a messy business. The ones lurking in the shadows weren't just demons, after all. The Demon General Rona, huh? No matter how this plays out, she was aiming for a certain outcome. But until Young Master builds up a little more worldly experience, people like her will only be poison to him."

"Makoto-kun told her to pull back her forces, right?" Luto asked, tilting his head.

"Indeed," Tomoe confirmed. "Whether he meant the demon race as a whole or just her subordinates, I didn't press him for details. But knowing Young Master, he probably meant it vaguely enough to include everything. Meanwhile, Rona is twisting his words to suit her personal narrative."

"In that sense," Luto mused, smirking as he imagined the boy in question, "Makoto-kun is a lot like Mio-chan. Too kind—or maybe just too careless."

He wasn't the type to engage in complex wordplay, weaving intricate meanings into his speech. If someone agreed to his request, he took it at face value—they were his ally, simple as that.

That kind of person was easy to deal with. But also, dangerously naive.

Because when they did act, they tended to swing to extremes.

Luto understood all of this, yet he still found Makoto fascinating.

Because to him, Makoto seemed like the kind of person who would stir everything up beyond recognition.

Tomoe exhaled, leaning back in her chair. “He’s spent his whole life training his body, drawing his bow, and making that the center of his existence. He’s oblivious to the kind of malice that thrives out in the real world.”

Luto raised an eyebrow. “So that’s why you’re putting off rescuing wealthier survivors? Because you think they’d be a bad influence on Makoto-kun?”

“No, that’s just my decision. If their numbers dwindle, the reconstruction will go more smoothly. Besides, if they were dissatisfied enough to start rioting, letting them vent a little now will prevent bigger problems later.”

“So that’s why you’re turning a blind eye to where those demi-humans have been going.”

“The demons have allies beyond their usual blue-skinned kind. I just think it’s a little too soon for Young Master to see that. Mio will take care of it tonight.”

“Oof. Cold. You’re not even giving her a chance to explain herself or hide?”

“Someone who blindly hates hyumans is of no use to us. I have no intention of playing guardian to the demi-humans, and neither does Young Master.” Tomoe’s voice remained steady, indifferent.

As she went on speaking, she revealed more and more things Makoto wasn’t aware of. Such as the unnatural movements of the mutants—something that Eris had noticed, and so had Tomoe.

She had already identified another force meddling with the mutants. And judging by her and Luto’s conversation, they even knew it was a woman.

If they investigated, they could probably find out all the details. Hell, they might have already known.

But neither of them chose to pursue it.

Tomoe had decided to resolve things quietly, without informing her master, and she was grateful that Makoto had trusted her to

handle this situation.

"Besides—" Tomoe started to add something, then abruptly stopped, her lips pressing into a thin line.

Luto immediately caught on. Telepathy.

He didn't interrupt. Instead, he simply watched her face. A moment later, she frowned.

Bad news? Luto's curiosity was piqued, but soon, her expression smoothed over, and she continued her silent conversation.

A few minutes later, she let out a quiet breath.

"Who was it?" Luto asked, tilting his head.

Tomoe exhaled through her nose. "It was Young Master."

"Makoto-kun? Huh, what did he say? Did something happen inside the barrier?"

"You're as nosy as ever. It's nothing major. He just almost touched that demi-human's tail, that's all."

"Hmm… so he noticed too?"

"No, it seems Eris said something to him," Tomoe muttered, clicking her tongue. "Tch, what a busybody."

Luto chuckled. "Well, I'm a little curious myself. About that demi-human who made the barrier."

"And he asked whether it'd be fine to restore the telepathic link."

Luto's eyes widened slightly. "He actually asked for permission? He's the master—he could've just said, 'I'm putting telepathy back, deal with it.' Maybe he's being considerate because he left everything in your hands?"

"Maybe," Tomoe admitted. "There's no issue anymore, so I told him it was fine."

"Wait, what?"

Tomoe frowned. "What do you mean, what? Is there a problem with restoring telepathy? You should be glad. We're about to see quite the fireworks show—personally crafted by Young Master himself."

“Ah… yeah… Right now, huh… Haha…” Luto rubbed the back of his neck, forcing a chuckle.

“You’ve been letting me do all the talking, Luto. You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

“Hiding? Not really. You just never asked.”

Tomoe tapped her chin. “You don’t seem particularly troubled… yet you did make that grim face earlier. And now you look intrigued. Luto. What exactly are you hiding?”

“You’ll find out soon enough once telepathy’s back up. But, Tomoe—”

“Hmm?”

“Fate… might actually exist,” Luto murmured, his voice unusually solemn.

He nodded to himself several times, as though accepting some great realization that only he could bear.

Tomoe sighed at his theatrics, then turned her gaze in the direction where Makoto was. She let her eyes drift to the sky, waiting.

“Luto. It’s Young Master,” Tomoe said suddenly.

“Hm?” Luto followed her gaze.

Tomoe pointed upward.

A golden sphere, tinged with a soft yellow glow, soared into the sky. It hovered above the city for a moment… then exploded.

Light burst apart into an uncountable number of threads, raining down over the entire city and beyond, some curved sharply, while others shot straight down like spears.

There was no time to react. The threads passed right through both Luto and Tomoe… through everything.

Luto’s breath hitched at the sensation.

Tomoe, on the other hand, merely chuckled. “One strike. Young Master truly is the type to master a single craft to its limit.”

Luto lowered his arms, which he’d reflexively crossed in front of him. “Wait… that was—did he just take out the demons’ interference devices?”

“Mm-hmm. He didn’t have to destroy them. Disabling them would’ve been enough to restore telepathic communication. There were a number of ways to do it without destruction. Looks like that’s the approach he took.”

“All of them, huh?”

“Most likely,” Tomoe replied, glancing around. “There doesn’t seem to be a follow-up attack, so I’d say that was all of them.”

“The demons spent months setting this up, you know.”

“What a waste of effort,” Tomoe said dryly.

The two of them remained like that for a while, gazing up at the night sky.





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“Hey, Eris. So, how did Young Master even get in here?” Aqua asked.

“Tsuu,” Eris muttered, still sulking.

“Tsuu?”

“He used a broken rule called Earth Dragon.” Tracing kanji with her finger, she let out a dramatic sigh.

“He summoned a dragon?!”

“Nope. Something even worse.” She slumped her shoulders. “He’s proven that digging is the ultimate strategy. Like a mooole.”

“Wait, didn’t you say this was a perfectly isolated barrier or something?” Aqua asked with surprise.

“I didn’t expect that method,” Eris grumbled. “He dug pretty deep. Like a driiill.”

“I’m never helping with this technique again. As far as I’m concerned, this spell is dead from today onward.”

“I could cry.”

Makoto’s technique—the one he’d used to remove the interference devices—had shot into the night sky like fireworks, but thanks to the barrier blocking their view, they hadn’t even gotten to see it.

Aqua and Eris sat there, completely dejected.



This is absurd…

Sairitsu, the de facto overseer of Lorel's sacred rites and a woman of significant political influence—one of the "important people" in Makoto's view—felt a cold sweat trickling down her cheek.

She had just learned the result of that gentle golden light that had briefly illuminated the sky.

A crisis in the academy city had affected even the surrounding cities, likely causing the large-scale interference in telepathic communication.

By now, Sairitsu had deduced that the incident was almost certainly the work of the demons. Given their vastly superior knowledge of magic compared to hyumans, she had expected that resolving the situation would be extremely difficult.

Or rather, she had expected that—until now.

So, this… is the result of his simple "I'll give it a try, if I can"?

He promised to keep it discreet, and all he asked for in return was a thank-you. Just a vague, casual agreement… and yet, he effortlessly achieved something so far beyond common ability.

With power like this, Raidou is undeniably a Sage—one of overwhelming strength, even among those in history.

The fact that both Limia and Gritonia have already taken notice of him is annoying… but at this point, I need to seriously consider

how to bring him into our fold.

Sairitsu had many methods to attract, trap, and keep people under control. Some involved irresistible offers. Others relied on fear or pain. She had no shortage of options.

At this moment, she completely discarded any method that would displease Raidou.

She now comprehended the danger of underestimating him.

Ideally, I'd bind him to us through emotion. If I try to force him under my control, he might just rip this entire country apart. I need to pique his interest first, lure him to Lorel.

Step one: Invite him in a way that seems natural. Step two: Let him learn about past Sages, so he feels a sense of connection. Step three: If I can get him to consider our nation his second home… that would be ideal.

Still, I need to take it slow. Keep the invitations casual for now. No, before that, I should prioritize limiting his exposure to other nations as much as possible.

She still didn't know how the demons had deployed something as simple yet terrifying as telepathic interference on such a scale.

Whether the large-scale telepathic interference had been achieved through some fundamental demonic law beyond hyuman understanding or through a meticulously laid-out, time-consuming strategy—it didn't matter. Because there was someone who had shattered it effortlessly, with just a handful of people.

The Kuzunoha Company and its master, Raidou.

Sairitsu had severely underestimated both its scale and capabilities.

An overwhelming combat ability that rendered the mutants completely irrelevant.

Knowledge vast enough to dismantle the demons' schemes as if they were child's play. Not to mention, just days ago, she had witnessed another of his assets—Tomoe's terrifying teleportation blade.

Everything considered, the worst-case scenario was clear: Raidou had the potential to destroy entire nations.

Provoking him recklessly would be the height of foolishness. Yet hesitating and allowing him to be taken in by another country would be equivalent to handing over Lorel's future.

As she reassessed him, Sairitsu experienced an unsettling dizziness.

He appeared humble.

Even if one deliberately underestimated him, the level at which he carried himself was shockingly low for someone of his power.

That meant that nobles, influential merchants, or anyone with a shred of authority—those prone to arrogance—might look down on him. They might even treat him with disdain.

The mere thought of what would happen if one of them insulted him gave her pause.

And then there was the matter of his fondness for demi-humans.

He actively employed them. If he deeply bonded with a particular group, what would happen if the Kuzunoha Company decided to use its power for their sake? Imagining such a scenario made her want to collapse in bed and pretend none of this existed.

Without a doubt, such an event would lead to the birth of a demi-human nation on par with the Four Great Nations.

The idea of a fifth major power—one not ruled by hyumans—was not just a joke. It was an unthinkable nightmare.

Many of the past Sages refused to discriminate against demi-humans. That alone makes this a real possibility. Ideally, I'd dismiss it outright—but if the worst happens and he sides with the demons…

Sairitsu forced herself to stop thinking because she had just envisioned a scenario in which a demi-human-led unification of the world felt like the lesser catastrophe.

A world ruled by demons.

Demons who dared to challenge the gods themselves.

This was nothing short of the end of the world.

The Kuzunoha Company was a double-edged sword—no, worse than that. It was a blade sharp enough to cleave entire nations apart.

This is the worst… It's like I've been forced to play at a rigged roulette wheel, where one pocket is labeled "apocalypse," and I have to keep playing forever.

Feeling a wave of dizziness that reminded her of anemia, Sairitsu pressed her right hand to her forehead. Her fingers touched damp skin. Cold sweat clung to her, an unmistakable reflection of her current state.

"Sairitsu-sama! There you are!" a breathless voice called urgently.

Sairitsu quickly turned to face the approaching figure. "Has something happened?"

"Yes, it's an emergency! Please, return to the shelter at once!"

"An emergency?" she repeated with a look of confusion. "But tonight, the only thing scheduled is Fals-dono's proposed meeting. Did something—"

"No time! Please hurry!" the subordinate insisted, cutting her off.

She felt a flicker of irritation at his rudeness, but the urgency in his tone made her swallow it. If one of her people was willing to interrupt her so abruptly, then something must have gone terribly wrong.

Without further question, she quickly followed him toward the courtyard shelter.

The moment she stepped inside, the atmosphere hit her.

When she had left earlier, it was calm. But now, it felt as though she had stepped back into the chaos from the first day of the incident.

This isn't normal…

The shelter buzzed with anxious voices, orders being barked out, and the restless movement of people.

Her subordinate had already disappeared into the crowd, leaving her with no immediate explanation. For a moment, Sairitsu regretted not stopping him long enough to obtain a clearer answer.

Something serious is happening.

The only report she had received so far was that the wyvern unit would arrive by early morning. That aside, there had been no other warnings. But if telepathy had just been restored, then another nation might have received urgent new information.

And if that were the case, she had a very bad feeling about what kind of news it might be. As she walked deeper into the commotion, she caught sight of several figures she rarely had the chance to see so unnerved.

The king of Limia himself was there, issuing orders in a harsh, clipped voice. His son, the prince, moved swiftly at his side, coordinating with a knight who had barely survived.

Nearby, the princess of Gritonia was speaking to her retainers. Her voice was direct and efficient, but beneath her controlled exterior, Sairitsu sensed something rare: irritation.

To an ordinary observer, it might not have been noticeable. But Sairitsu was exceptional at reading people, and right now, she was certain that these rulers had been shaken.

Standing on the sidelines wouldn't give her the answers she needed. Without hesitation, she stepped forward and addressed them directly.

"Limia, Gritonia," she called out. "May I ask what's happened that it brings forth the representatives of two great nations?"

Sairitsu's calm address was met with two severe expressions.

The king of Limia's and Princess Lily's.

What they both shared was urgency.

"Sairitsu-dono," the king of Limia began, his voice tense. "I need to ask you something immediately. Where is Raidou?"

"I'd like to know the same," Princess Lily added. "Where is he right now?"

Sairitsu flinched at their intensity but answered calmly. “I met with him just a short while ago, not far from here. As I told you both, I had requested that he investigate the telepathic interference.”

Soon after that conversation, telepathic communication had been restored. Just thinking about that sent a shiver down her spine.

For days, telepathy had been entirely blocked—an occurrence that likely required a sophisticated and well-organized effort to reverse.

Yet Raidou had overturned that in an instant. If he had always been capable of such a feat, why had he done nothing before now?

The answer was clear.

Because he and his people could choose to be ruthless when necessary.

Every time she saw a different side of him, Sairitsu felt the shadow of fear grow deeper in her chest.

“As expected,” the king murmured grimly. “If they could accomplish this, then why did they not act before? No. We agreed not to dwell on that for now. What matters is that finding him will take too long. Our best option is to wait at the shelter entrance—he will return as soon as he receives word.”

“I’ll accompany you, Your Majesty,” Princess Lily stated, her tone unreadable.

The king, his son, and Princess Lily all turned toward the exit to leave.

Sairitsu, who had yet to hear a single logical explanation, couldn’t stand it any longer. She quickly caught up to them. Her instincts told her they weren’t just aware of the situation—they were directly involved.

“Your Majesties,” she called out firmly. “Please, explain what has happened.”

The king of Limia turned slightly, revealing a downcast expression. “An attack.”

Sairitsu inhaled sharply. “An attack?”

“The demons, Sairitsu-dono,” Princess Lily explained.

Sairitsu furrowed her brows in disbelief. “Yes, I also believe the mutants in this incident were created by them, but—”

“No,” the king interrupted. His next words struck like a hammer.

“The royal capital.”

“The imperial capital.”

Sairitsu felt deeply affected by their words, unable to respond verbally.

The advance of the demon army—a crisis that shook the very foundations of the world.

Limia’s king sighed. “I understand all too well that provoking Raidou is a foolish move. But this time, we have no choice—we must ask him to wield that sword of his, even if it means forcing his hand.”

“I agree entirely, Your Majesty,” Princess Lily responded diplomatically. “Their teleportation is an overwhelming advantage, but if this request damages their relationship with us, that would be… quite inconvenient.”

“My, how ominous,” Sairitsu interjected with a smile. “Are you saying, Princess Lily, that you see them as a threat?”

Lily turned toward her with a keen expression. Did she take that as mockery?

“Sairitsu-dono,” Lily said flatly, “I’ll be blunt—this is not the time for political games. The moment we sat down to discuss their fate in secret, we became accomplices in this matter. Do not forget that.”

Sairitsu’s breath caught for a split second.

“The Imperial Princess is right,” the king of Limia agreed sternly. “You still don’t understand the gravity of this situation, Sairitsu-dono. Listen carefully. The army leading the attack is commanded by a demon. And the cities under siege…” His next words were profoundly impactful. “… are our capitals. My royal capital.”

“And my imperial capital,” Lily added darkly.

Sairitsu’s expression changed in an instant.

“The High Priestess! Even Lady Chiya is—?!” Her voice rose before she could stop herself. “Your Majesty, what is happening?! The fact that the demon army has advanced this far is one thing, but for both the hero and the High Priestess to be engaged in battle?! That makes no sense! Where is the kingdom’s military?! How could they allow the enemy to infiltrate this deeply and still fail to evacuate the hero’s party?! This is—this is unforgivable negligence on the world’s—”

“Silence!” Lily’s voice cracked like a whip.

Sairitsu fell silent, her body rigid. But the intensity in her eyes remained as she glared at Lily.

For her—for Lorel—the High Priestess was an irreplaceable presence.

Even under normal circumstances, Lorel was not particularly fond of Limia. The fact that their beloved priestess had been staying in another nation for so long was already a source of discomfort.

But now, hearing that she was fighting for her life in a capital under siege? It was no wonder Sairitsu had lost her composure.

Even her current political stance—choosing to align herself with Gritonia’s princess rather than the King of Limia—was partly influenced by this issue.

Lily took a slow breath, regaining her composure. “Listen carefully, Sairitsu-dono. The imperial capital is facing multiple simultaneous invasions. The forces leading each attack all appeared at once.”

Sairitsu narrowed her eyes. “Teleportation?”

“Most likely. We are still dealing with the situation as we speak. The same’s happened in Limia.”

The king grimaced. “Our Star Lake region spotted a black mass moving along the shore—an entire army advancing toward us. They are, at this very moment, on the doorstep of my capital.”

His fingers clenched into fists, his voice carrying a rare note of unease. “I do not understand. How many trump cards do these demons hold…?”

“The entire war strategy needs to be reassessed,” Lily stated firmly. “Stella Fortress is supposed to be an impenetrable stronghold, yet the demons have split their forces and are attacking both the kingdom and the empire simultaneously. If we misread their intentions, the consequences could be fatal.”

She turned her gaze toward Sairitsu. “That’s why I say, if you think we’re pushing too hard in our negotiations with Raidou, step in and smooth things over. It’s a perfect opportunity for Lorel—you’ll earn political credit with him and with us. A win-win situation, wouldn’t you say? We take the risk of souring his opinion, while you improve yours.”

“I don’t care whether it’s through persuasion or force,” the Limian king interjected. “No matter what, he must send me back to my capital immediately via teleportation.”

“I feel the same,” Lily added. “I need to return to the imperial capital and take command. I cannot allow the hero’s forces to become isolated.”

Sairitsu felt a strong sense of urgency herself.

If Chiya died…

Lorel had no successor for the High Priestess. If she fell, the nation would lose its spiritual foundation.

If Limia and Gritonia were both crippled, then the next frontline states in this war would be Aion and the Lorel Federation.

If both crises stacked together—if both Limia and Gritonia fell—there was no predicting what would become of the world.

Sairitsu’s voice rose in sudden realization. “Could it be that… the entire mutant incident was a distraction?!”

The words sent a chill through the air.

The king of Limia exhaled heavily. “It’s hard to believe it was a complete coincidence.”

Lily’s lips tightened. “I want to believe it was chance that so many VIPs gathered here this year… But as soon as news of an attack on the academy city spreads, of course, every nation will start sending troops and supplies.”

“A feint, then,” Sairitsu murmured.

“As a distraction, it has certainly accomplished its purpose,” Lily admitted.

Both the king of Limia and the princess of Gritonia nodded grimly.

“The demons tricked us into believing they were turtling in Stella Fortress,” the king muttered. “So, we let our guard down, thinking any reinforcements we sent would delay our attack timeline. And in doing so, we fell right into their trap. Unbelievable.”

“Still,” Lily mused, “not everything about this is bad.”

Sairitsu gave her a questioning look.

“At the very least,” Lily continued, “this proves the Kuzunoha Company and Raidou aren’t spies for the demons. That is a small but significant confirmation.”

“It’s a minor consolation,” the king agreed. “But I do feel some relief. If Raidou were aligned with the demons, he would have had no reason to restore telepathic communication this soon.”

The three most powerful representatives walked together, continuing their discussion without pause. Their attendants struggled to keep up with them. By the time they reached the shelter’s entrance, they had already settled on their next course of action.

Each second felt like an eternity. A king, a princess, and a high-ranking official—all leaders of great nations—stood together, waiting. And the man keeping them waiting? Raidou.

At last, he arrived at the entrance to the shelter, responding to the summons from the academy city. By his side stood Tomoe and Shiki, his two loyal followers, and Fals, the head of the Adventurer’s Guild.

The moment Raidou appeared, the three rulers spoke at once.

“Raidou. We need to talk,” the king of Limia said urgently.

“It’s extremely important,” Princess Lily added, her voice taut.

“We apologize for pressing you again so soon, but—” Sairitsu began, trying to maintain some decorum.

Raidou stopped in his tracks, blinking in mild surprise. For a moment, he looked bewildered. But in the next instant, he stepped forward, his face smoothing into polite neutrality. Without hesitation, he bowed deeply in front of the gathered rulers. His followers mirrored his gesture.

As the three leaders took turns explaining the situation, Raidou's expression began to shift. At first, he simply listened, but as the weight of their words sank in, his features twisted.

The rulers assumed they knew what they were seeing. They thought they were witnessing hatred—rage toward the demons.

They were wrong.

Raidou—Makoto Misumi—wasn't reacting to the demon invasion itself. His mind was processing two completely different realizations.

First, the two Japanese individuals he had always assumed he would eventually meet… he might never get the chance to see them now.

Second, Rona's scheme in this city had been nothing more than a distraction. The real attack had been elsewhere all along. The pieces clicked into place. His stomach twisted—not out of fury but uncertainty.

The long night stretched on as the weight of war settled upon them all.

Back Matter

Author: Azumi Kei

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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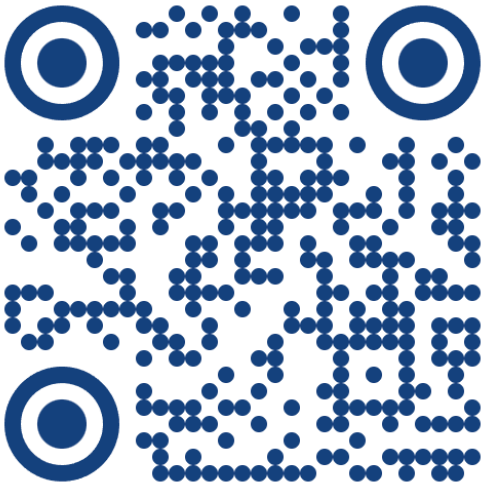
Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of Tsukimichi Moonlit Fantasy Volume 8! We hope you've enjoyed Makoto’s continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

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