

Tsukimichi

Moonlit Fantasy

I



Author

Kei Azumi

Illustrator

Mitsuaki Matsumoto



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ORIGINAL STORY: Kei Azumi | ILLUSTRATION: Mitsuaki Matsumoto

TRANSLATION:
MITTT LIU

LIGHT NOVEL EDITING:
JASMINE THONE

COVER DESIGN:
ALVIN ROJAS

PROOFREADING:
BRUCE LAMB

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Author
Kei Azumi
Illustrator
Mitsuaki Matsumoto



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Prologue

The day began like any other. I woke up, ate breakfast, and made my lunch. I headed straight to school and went to archery club. After school, it was back to the archery range, and then I goofed off with friends the whole way home. I slipped into the bath as soon as I got home, ate dinner with my family, and took some time to relax. I spent most of the long autumn evening reading or on the internet before heading to bed. That was it—a very normal, very straightforward day in my totally unremarkable life.

“How am I not in bed at home, then?” I wondered aloud.

Instead, I was here, though I had no idea where “here” was. It was dark, and after inching over the floors and walls with my hands, I figured I had to at least be in a room somewhere. The most unsettling thing about the place was the way the walls glowed softly, making me feel as though I was somehow under a vast, starlit night sky and boxed in at the same time.

Obviously, this was not my bedroom. There wasn’t any furniture here, let alone any doors or windows. All I could do was sit in a corner and try to remember what happened to bring me there.

“You seem rather at ease.”

“?!”

A voice? No, there was no sign of anyone there except me, and no sign of the voice’s source.

“Rather than wail or tremble, you rationally assess your situation and contemplate your dilemma, all the while remaining vigilant to unseen threats.”

The voice was low and elderly.

It doesn’t sound like they want to introduce themselves...

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Would you believe me if I claimed to be God?"

"Nope."

I'm confused, not stupid.

"A shame. As you may have surmised, you will soon be sent to a new world, from which there shall be no return."

"Wait wait wait... What?!"

Is he even listening to me? And what's this about a different world now?!

"Once you arrive, you must receive your mission from the one in charge. Now, if you wouldn't mind giving me a thumbs-up to confirm you understand the situation."

"Yeah, right!"

I started shouting, but I felt justified. None of this made any sense whatsoever.

"You do not consent? Odd... I was informed you had already agreed..." The voice trailed off uncertainly.

I agreed to this somehow? Fat chance!

"This is the first time I've heard *any* of this!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "Sure, everyone's heard of other worlds, but nobody's stupid enough to believe in them! How could I just accept it?!"

"Hmm... You seem earnest. My apologies."

"Don't just apologize, I wanna go home! Now!"

"Of course."

The voice seemed reasonable, at least. If it told me now that there was no way to go back home, I would've totally lost it. Worse, if it said I was dead or something, then I'd have no choice but to be reincarnated into another world—but since I could remember falling safely asleep in my own bed, that didn't seem very likely.

Either way, I'm really glad I dodged that bullet.

"Er... I'm truly sorry, but your sisters... Hmm..."

The voice seemed to be muttering to itself, but I'd already heard all I needed to.

I take it all back. This bodiless asshole just crossed the line!

"What was that?!"

"Hm? I was simply thinking that if you were ignorant to all this, then your sisters must have—"

"Yeah, right! Look, if you lay so much as a finger on Nee-san or Mari, I'll rip you in half!"

I had two sisters—Yukiko was three years my elder, and Mari was two years younger. They both acted perfectly normal before I went to bed. I couldn't believe either of them knew about this nonsense, and if the voice said something like one of them had to take my place, there'd be hell to pay.

"But are you not Makoto, eldest son of the Misumi family?"

"How do you know that?"

"I was informed the Misumi children were all aware of this," the voice muttered unhappily.

For a mysterious, magical kidnapper, it was at least trying to keep my well-being in mind, which was a relief. I took a deep breath.

Right, I don't even know the voice's name.

"Um... Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Ah, of course. I must have forgotten. My apologies for my rudeness. I am known as Tsukuyomi."

"Tsukuyomi, huh... Wait, like *the* Tsukuyomi?!"

"You have heard of me? What a coincidence."

"Of course, I have. You're Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto of the Three Divine Children, right?"

“Exactly, though I am far more minor of a deity than either of my siblings.”

Even if he wasn't as popular or well-known as the other two, the famous Amaterasu and Sunanoo, he was still a big name. I was a big fan of mythology and bits of history related to it, so I was knowledgeable enough to know how major of a deal this was.

“So, Tsukuyomi-sama, how do you know my family?”

“You truly know nothing, it seems... Very well.”

With that, the deity explained the situation to me in all the detail I could ask for. It was all so sudden, but the gist of it wasn't too complex.

Basically, my parents weren't native to Japan, but came from an alternate world. That was a bit of a shock, since that meant I'd been from another world, in a sense, my whole life. That would explain why I'd never met any relatives aside from my immediate family. I was told my grandparents passed away early and my parents had cut ties with everyone else, but I never considered there was a whole separate world in play.

Due to some troubles in said other world, their deity had made a contract with my parents, where they agreed to offer up the one thing most precious to them. That, apparently, was the source of all my current troubles.

Is that god evil or something?! That's an awful price to ask! Is that kind of stuff normal over there?

Apparently, my parents were in so much trouble they had to accept the terms anyway.

I thought back to me and my siblings' upbringing. We were all taught not only all manner of household skills, but some form of martial arts as well. It wasn't hard to imagine that was all preparation for suddenly waking up in some weird fantasy land.

And Mom, Dad? I'm not sure archery will do me that much good... Though I guess I was always too weak to put any more useful combat training to use.

Dad was a fantasy novelist who specialized in writing incredibly realistic stories, but I never thought he was chronicling his own experiences. There were

a few poignant descriptions that stuck out to me even now, like the taste of dragon steak and how it felt to sleep on a barn floor, but I was convinced they were just homages to retro RPGs. My parents' world was apparently a fantastic place of swords and magic, so it certainly matched Dad's writing.

Anyhow, the gist of the problem was that someone from my world had to go to balance things out—and luckily, I'd get a special power-up to sweeten the deal. Due to some interworld interaction, most people from my world wound up being incredibly powerful over there.

Tsukuyomi-sama explained that living in my world was quite the ordeal. Mana—the building blocks of any classic fantasy world—was commonplace, and every human from Earth had it. There was a sort of outside pressure on our world preventing that power from manifesting, however, and most people's mana was sealed deep within our bodies. Most people couldn't even detect mana as a result. There were a lucky few who realized this power to break through the pressure to manifest supernatural phenomena, but they were incredibly rare. Said pressure was apparently very physically taxing as well, making it extremely difficult to survive on Earth at all. That was all news to me.

In short, Earth was a barren wasteland, where the gods were unable to reach the people even if they wanted to. That meant that in a world free from such limits, I could use my strength to an extent that would be impossible at home. It was like taking off a bunch of weights I didn't even know I was wearing—but apparently, I was still mortal as ever, and I could die just like normal. That didn't bother me too much, though.

That's a nifty perk, considering I've just been living life normally.

At some point, we wound up talking about our families. He was sandwiched between an older sister and younger brother, both of whom were far more famous and more eccentric than him.

"I'm so sorry for yelling," I apologized sincerely. "It sounds like you've had a rough time of it yourself, Tsukuyomi-sama."

"Why, I am simply thrilled you understand! I have not felt such relief in centuries! Though it seems you have had your share of familial hardship yourself."

He was surprisingly sympathetic as a fellow middle child. It was unusually hard—people kept on saying how lucky I was to have a pretty older sister, or such a cute younger sister, but I could only see them as my siblings. Honestly, “compliments” like that annoyed me to no end. Tsukuyomi-sama was the only one who seemed to understand me.

I’m gonna say it right here and now—if there’s a church to Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, I need to join it! Tsukuyomi-sama for life!

“Still, I can’t believe it’s that hard, just growing up on Earth,” I admitted. “And why hasn’t that goddess you mentioned showed up yet?”

“It is the harshest of all worlds,” he re-asserted. *“For denizens of other worlds, it is akin to living at the ocean’s darkest depths, or in a sea of roiling magma.”* He paused. *“She is rather late, is she not?”*

That’s... honestly not the comparison I thought he’d go for.

Tsukuyomi-sama had appeared before me so I could see him as we were talking. Instead of appearing as a wizened old guy, he took the form of a charming young man with immaculately groomed white hair. He was notably taller than me and dressed very smartly by my world’s standards. We had sat down at a coffee table to enjoy a bit of tea as we waited for the goddess he identified as an “overseer.” My new world had a single absolute goddess and a collection of guardian spirits, Tsukuyomi-sama explained, and the goddess we were waiting for was supposed to be at the head of it all.

Why isn’t she here yet?

While we waited, the god had me sign a few complex-looking contracts, and even though I didn’t know the exact details, I made sure I agreed with the general overview. I didn’t have much choice, though—if I didn’t go, one of my sisters would get dragged there instead.

It was an uncomfortable decision, and not one I made easily. The biggest drawback was that I wouldn’t be able to play video games—there were no consoles in the new world, and apparently, I wasn’t allowed to take one with me, no matter how much I asked. I’d have to go totally cold turkey. Perhaps even worse, though, was that my computer back at home had a bunch of games on it that nobody under 18 should even know about, and if my family found

out, there'd be hell to pay. Tsukuyomi-sama tried to be polite about it and not say anything to stress me out too badly, but the damage was already done.

I even asked if someone else from my world could go instead—someone not in my family. I knew it was an irresponsible and all-around shitty thing to ask, but I wasn't going to pretend to care if some stranger disappeared off the face of the Earth instead of me or my sisters. It felt even worse saying it aloud. Tsukuyomi-sama denied me outright, of course, so I decided to bite the bullet. I was the most expendable of my family, I reasoned, in a revelation that surprised even me.

I just wish I could do something about all the embarrassing stuff from when I was a kid before I go, and maybe all that porn while I'm at it! I know I'll never see them again, but if my family ever sees that shit, I don't know what I'd do! I can imagine it now...

"Oh, my... I had no idea he was interested in any of this..."

"How could any child of mine be so disgraceful?!"

"God, I can't believe I had a creep for a little brother... Was he looking at me like that this whole time?!"

"Onii-chan was so dirty!"

Noooooo! Anything but that... ANYTHING!!! Just thinking about it makes me wish I was never born!

"Be at ease," Tsukuyomi-sama reassured me with an understanding smile, the absolute Chad that he was. *"I shall erase your foibles of young manhood—all untoward games, books, or other products shall be swiftly cleansed from the Earth under my direct supervision. Your hard drive shall be pure once more, I swear."*

He gets me... He really gets me! As far as I'm concerned, he's not some minor god—he's the one and only!

I was a little surprised he even knew what a hard drive was, but at this point I didn't care. I had nothing but gratitude for his benevolence.

I decided to change the topic a little, bringing up something I'd been dying to know. "So, I get stronger in this new world, right? I can use magic too?"

"Indeed."

"Do I get any other perks or abilities? Like the kind the protagonist might get in a light novel, maybe?"

I probably didn't need anything if I had enough magical talent, but a guy could dream. It was one of the most common fiction tropes out there, and I'd jump at the opportunity to pick up a superpower. Everything up until now was strangely light-novel-like, after all, and the new world would probably be crawling with elves, dwarves, and beastkin, not all of whom would be friendly, and I could use a little something to level the playing field. It'd be a good failsafe, at the very least.

"Of course."

"Really?! What do I get? What kind of powers can I have?"

It never hurts to ask, after all!

"That, I cannot tell. You must see for yourself upon your arrival in your new world. I have but the most general of notions now, and while I would like to advise you more upon your arrival, I will be unable to contact you whatsoever once you leave this space."

"Okay... So, you can basically give me whatever power strikes your fancy, but I'm a blank slate right now?"

"Not quite—though the reason lies more with me than it does you."

"Huh?"

"I told you that I reign over the moon and the night, but the precise nature of my power is more indistinct. As such, your 'blank slate,' as you phrased it, can only be filled with an aspect affiliated to my own. I shall grant you as much power as I am able, but your own aptitude shall change how it manifests."

He gestured for me to come closer to him. I sat beside him, and he rested his hand on my forehead. Something strange began to flow from his palm through

my body, gushing from my forehead to the back of my neck, then down my spine and throughout my body.

Is he giving me my powers now?

“Wow... I think I’m full of something now, at least. Is this the source of my power?”

“How very astute... You may master control of your abilities more swiftly than I thought, at least from a theoretical stance. Now you need but strongly envision your power in order to manifest it—for instance, as energy emanating from your hand.”

I flourished my hand dramatically, but nothing happened. He chuckled in amusement.

“I must stress that it will not work here, however, as this space is an extension of your home world. As you are being sent by contract, you shall no doubt receive strength from the resident goddess as well. It would not be right to make you leave empty-handed after uprooting you from your home, after all.”

There was a somewhat pained look on his face as he bowed in apology.

“Don’t worry—if anything, I’m grateful. If I’d turned you down, then one of my sisters would be dragged here in my place, and I’d spend the rest of my life regretting it.”

“What a kind soul you are, Makoto-dono... Ah, here she is!”

“Finally. It feels like we’ve been talking for a long time... Not that I’m complaining.”

“And you are certain you wish to only leave these?” he confirmed, holding the two letters aloft. *“I can leave a message in their dreams, or even record a message if you wish for them to hear your voice.”*

“I’m positive,” I confirmed.

I wanted to leave my family something so they would at least know where I was going, and while Tsukuyomi-sama was more than generous in offering means of last contact, I decided on letters in the end—one for my parents and one for my sisters. My parents probably only needed the bare minimum

explanation, but I didn't know if I should tell my sisters the truth about what was happening. If my parents wanted to tell them, that was up to them.

I also asked again if there was anything I could take with me to the new world, and while electronics and the like were off-limits, I was allowed to bring a few things. I had a couple notebooks and writing utensils—mechanical pencils and ballpoint pens weren't allowed, but I could bring wooden pencils and a fountain pen. I wanted to bring some food as well, but that turned out to be another hard no. It seemed there were more rules on interworld crossing than I thought.

As I checked my belongings one last time, however, I realized that I was starting to become transparent.

“Whoa, what?!”

Tsukuyomi-sama furrowed his brow in irritation. *“What? That foolish girl would take you without so much as a word of greeting to me? What is she thinking?!”*

It was nice to know that was a normal part of the transfer process, at least—I might've started crying from shock otherwise.

“My apologies! The goddess you are about to meet is a little... no, extremely eccentric. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive her many shortcomings.”

Even at the very last moment, he was as thoughtful and considerate as possible—an incredible feat considering all the people he had to deal with in a position like his. It had to be a hard job.

I nodded at him and smiled. He helped me find my resolve, and he spent a great deal of time on me that probably would've been better spent on someone more important. He had eased my fears more than I could say, and I was confident that no matter what, I could face this more unusual goddess without any issues.

※ ※ ※

I think I might've spoken a little too soon.

“How is this whole room platinum...?”

I looked around the room in awe. Everything was flashy and silver, to the point where my eyes were already hurting.

“Oh? Here already, I see.”

A voice—it had to be the Goddess.

“That old coot Tsukuyomi’s been getting weaker and weaker... Guess I should expect as much, looking after a masochistic little world like that.”

It might be the Goddess?

“What, just because we haven’t met in a while that geezer thinks he can get away with sending a man my way? He must be getting senile, ahahahaha!”

Is that the Goddess? Probably.

“There were two whole girls who were exactly my type, too... He could’ve at least picked one of them. Good thing I have a backup plan, I guess.”

That... that had to be the Goddess? Maybe?

“Oh, relax... Now, Misumi, right? Your parents made a contract with me, which is why you’re here now.”

This had to be some kind of sick joke.

“Basically, our world got itself a little messed up when I wasn’t looking. The racial power balance is totally broken, and now the hyumans are in a little bit of a pickle. The demons and lesser spirits are kind of having a field day.”

When she wasn’t looking...?

“That’s when I remembered the contract. You hyumans can make offspring in a single ni—er, really quickly, so I thought I could boot you in there and help rebuild the population, y’know?”

Did she just try to say ‘in a single night’?

“But you, you’re really their kid? Hold on... I knew it, the other two daughters are good looking! You, on the other hand... Ugh, no can do. Guess I should make sure, though.”

T-Tsukuyomi-sama? I don't think I can do this.

"Eww, you're their kid by blood?! How'd that happen?! Talk about an ugly duckling! You haven't got a drop of swan in you! You're ugly by ugly standards!"

Watch it! I can and will bite you if I have to!

I heard her sigh. *"Like we could give you any power at all. Could you just get lost already? I'll throw up if I have to look at your fugly face a minute longer."*

I was so beside myself with anger that I felt perfectly lucid, somehow. I'd never met such a self-centered person in my life. How could she drag me all the way here, only to badmouth me like that? It felt like my chances would be better with the kind of high school girl who never thought about anything but fads and had the attention span of a lobotomized goldfish.

"..."

Dammit, I don't even know where to start tearing into her!

I found my mouth flapping open and shut without anything coming out.

"What're you gawking like that for? You're too dumb to speak, is that it? I'm the one and only Goddess, and I'm a virgin, and your being here is, like, blasphemy. What if you breathe too hard on me and get me pregnant or something?"

I couldn't believe my ears.

This is the Goddess? Nope, I can't do this. No way I can live in a world run by this psycho. I wanna go home! Please save me, Tsukuyomi-sama! I seriously can't do this!

I heard the Goddess sigh. *"Well, I guess you're here... I wish there was an option to just send you back."*

"H-How dare you?!" I finally managed to say. *"You're the one who dragged me out here! The least you could do is not insult me!"*

"Ugh, how barbaric! You finally prove you're smart enough to talk and you start spewing shit? Even your voice sounds like trash! I was going to help you out a little, but you just changed my mind!"

“I what?!”

“Don’t worry, I already have another hero or two lined up for my world’s little saga. You can just, I dunno, sit in a corner or something and don’t touch anything. I’m so glad I have a plan B.”

What’s that supposed to mean?! She can’t just do this! I willingly gave up my world, everything I knew and loved, for this?!

“I guess we’re a lot closer to the ground now, so you wouldn’t die if I just dropped you from this height... Ugh, why are humans from your world so hard to kill? You’re like little cockroachs.”

I hadn’t expected her to talk so openly about killing me off, especially so soon after meeting me. This had to be baseless nonsense—I refused to believe I did anything to deserve this treatment.

“Oh, and one more thing—don’t you dare get your filthy mongrel seed all over my beautiful little people, okay? No marriage either, obviously. Nobody needs to see that.”

I tried not to listen. I’d heard way more than enough already.

“Right... I really hate giving you anything, but I guess I can let you have Comprehension. See, we can compromise—just don’t mess anything up, like we agreed.”

This was too bad to be a sick joke.

Are gods supposed to be this stuck-up? I guess Tsukuyomi-sama must’ve been something special, or else she’s just extra bitchy. I really hope it’s the second one...

“Hey!” the Goddess snapped. “Mako-whatever! Are you listening?!”

I didn’t know why she was so against remembering my name, but it was better than her insults from earlier.

“What?” I replied flatly.

I didn’t even try to be polite, but I felt that was understandable. That’s right, I was justified in all this.

“Like I was telling you, Comprehension makes it so you can talk to monsters and demons, not just people. That means you can live a nice little life with some goblins or orcs, okay? Stay away from everyone else, especially humans. Now go on, get out of here!”

“Would it kill you to be more polite—Wh-Whoa, what?!”

All of a sudden, it felt like I was in freefall.

“Ugh, you sound even worse when you’re yelling like that! Hey, nymphs, you had better scrub this place spotless as soon as this little roach is out! I couldn’t stand it if he spread them about in here!”

That’s rude! I’m not actually one of those... those b-bugs! Even they’re just trying to mind their own business!

It would’ve been nice to part on better terms, like “I’ve loved you ever since I first saw you, but I had to be mean to you to stay a goddess! Sorry!” Maybe something with a few more tears, like “Oh, Father (or something?), why must you subject me to your cruelest trials?” If she’d said something like that, I could’ve forgiven her... but that was even more impossible than what really happened. She didn’t hesitate to condemn me, not for a second.

What a shitty goddess—you know what, no, I’m not going to call her that ever again! This whole thing sucks, dammit!

Tsukimichi Chapter 1

The glittering chamber around me rapidly faded away, replacing itself with open air. The sky around me was freezing cold and disconcertingly dark.

Hahahaha! That bitch of a goddess dropped me! She really dropped me!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!”

The knifelike wind made my eyes water, but I tried to check the ground beneath me. It was a barren wasteland of some sort, without any discernable features. All I could tell for sure was that I was at least as high as one of those mega skyscrapers, and there was no way I’d survive the fall. I didn’t care how sturdy I was supposed to be in this world, I’d be smashed to smithereens.

I’m not going to just die here, am I? There’s gotta be some way out of this!

I looked around me for options—open sky around me, ground far beneath me. That was it. I was officially fucked.

Mom, Dad, thank you for giving birth to me on Earth. I’m glad I wasn’t born in a world ruled by a psychotic murder-goddess. Forget being blessed at birth, I’d get cursed to death for sure. Yuki-neesan, Mari, hopefully you’ll be safe with me over here. I only got to spend less than eighteen years with you all, but I consider it an honor to be your son. Er, and brother, I guess, as the case may be. Dammit, I can’t even say my final goodbyes without messing up...

I closed my eyes and braced for the end, hoping it wouldn’t hurt...

Thank you for reading *Tsukimichi: Moonlight Fantasy*. I hope you enjoyed—

“... dono... Mak... Makoto-dono!”

“I guess I’m hearing things now... I only wish you were the god of this world instead, Tsukuyomi-sama...”

“Get ahold of yourself! Makoto-dono, can you hear me?!”

He’s the real thing?! I thought he couldn’t contact me in this world!

I heard the god sigh. “What a travesty... I heard your entire conversation. I must apologize, I had no idea she would react with such horrific violence.”

“Tsukuyomi-samaaaaaaaaaa! I missed you so, soooooo much!!!”

I was sobbing, but I didn’t even care.

“While such a trifling fall would merely hurt you, I cannot abide by such a crime!”

“Wait. The fall won’t kill me? This fall?”

I was still a dizzying distance above the ground, though maybe I was just seeing things in slow motion as my life flashed before my eyes.

“Think of it as a fall from a second-story window onto a soft mattress. You would feel the impact, but suffer no lasting harm.”

“Whoa...”

I’m stronger than I look, I guess. Yay me! Just how rough is living on Earth compared to here, anyway?

“Your training on Earth hardened you to such trifling damage. Otherwise, the impact would be somewhat greater—a second-story fall without a mattress.”

“Huh... I guess all that training and archery paid off, then.”

“Nonetheless, I can understand the horror of your predicament. Allow me to remedy the issue... Though there is something more important I must tell you.”

From the hesitation in his voice, I could tell he wasn’t looking forward to telling me. I had a question of my own, though.

“I thought you couldn’t contact me in this world?”

“Ordinarily, no—I shall no doubt be sleeping off this strain for centuries.”

“What...?”

I had no idea why he was trying so hard for me, but it clicked soon enough. This was what a god was supposed to be—or at least, what I hoped they were.

A soft white light enveloped my body, and I could feel my descent rapidly slow. He was serious when he said he'd help.

"You recall how long it took for that goddess to arrive, yes?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

"That miserable fox betrayed my trust... She took advantage of the bridge between the worlds to abduct two innocents from your home world!"

She WHAT?! First attempted murder, now kidnapping?! Not even a goddess should get away with that!

My stomach sank. "Wait... Don't tell me the two people she took are—"

"Rest assured, your family is safe—though one abductee seems to be close to you. I was far too preoccupied to notice... They may even be someone you know."

I didn't know anything about the rules of gods or anything, but from the stress in his voice, it seemed the Goddess had committed a big faux pas.

"I shall no doubt slumber soon, and I fear I shan't reawaken within your lifetime. I have, however, asked several other deities I know to deal with this issue. Regardless of the number of worlds she has forged, such a crime must not be tolerated. She must be punished."

His voice began to drift away, getting less and less distinct. It was clear he'd spent a lot of energy on our exchange.

"What about the people who got kidnapped?!" I shouted desperately. "Are they okay?!"

"Yes—both have been safely summoned to a castle, it seems, and have already made amicable contact with other humans. I... I must inform you that the Goddess has blessed them with great boons, however."

Wow. Talk about playing favorites.

"I understand how you must feel. Now, as you have no remaining means of contacting Earth, I know I am in no position to request a favor. However, I must ask that you treat the other two humans of your world kindly, as peers of another world."

Man, he's so nice.

"Even though they're getting spoiled by that dumb goddess?" I asked.

It didn't sound like they'd need my help at all.

"You are stronger than both of them in terms of divine power and mana alike. The blood of proud humanity flows through your veins, and any attempt to compare them to you would be futile." He paused for a moment before adding, "I must remind you that the power I received from my progenitors, not to mention the strength I have accrued over all these years, is quite impressive. A sham of a goddess could never surpass my own blessing."

By "progenitors," I figured he meant his parent gods, Izanami and Izanagi.

That's nice and reassuring.

"That, then, is the crux of the matter. Now that the Goddess herself has robbed you of your rightful herodome, there is no need to show mercy—I shall condone any actions you deem fit on my name as Tsukuyomi. Now, Makoto Misumi, a new world lies open before you! Go forth, and secure your freedom with your own two hands!"

Man, is he pissed! Tsukuyomi-sama's the best! I was planning on doing that anyway, but now I've even got his stamp of approval! Woohoo!

The moonlight seemed almost warm now as it slowly carried me down.

"I pray... we will meet again... perhaps in another life..." his voice drifted off.

"I hope so, too!" I eagerly agreed with my god.

The Goddess? Who's that poser?

As I drifted to the ground, I was absolutely giddy with joy—and perhaps more crucially, full of hope for my new life.

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Dead, barren ground extended around me as far as the eye could see. The only things disrupting the horizon was the occasional pile of boulders.

Seriously? I'm getting so tired of this... This is the third day already. You think I'd see something, anything new by now.

It was painfully empty, and I'd been walking toward a slightly bigger pile of rocks on the horizon to keep myself occupied. I barely even slept. I just kept walking. Worse, the rock pile I was aiming for looked no bigger now than it did when I first landed, and the thought I could be just imagining that distant shadow nearly broke me several times. Nothing happened, nobody came, and there was no life in sight.

That's almost impressive. No people, sure, but no animals either?

There wasn't anything edible-looking either. Occasionally I spotted small bunches of sickly, wheat-colored grass, but I didn't dare put it in my mouth. I would've preferred starving to choking down that straw. The only reason I was moving at all through my piercing hunger pains was probably thanks to my new superhuman body, since I would've had to stop walking ages ago otherwise.

I tried to use the power I gained from Tsukuyomi-sama several times, but it always failed... more or less. No matter how hard I tried to envision the energy in my hand like he said, nothing came of it. I could feel something happening, like some unseen energy was gathering there, but I couldn't get any further than that. No amount of sticking that power into the ground or swinging it through the air in front of me seemed to do anything. The best results I got were from placing a rock on my open palm, then channeling the energy. All it did was shudder a little. I couldn't control the movement at all, but it was at least proof I had some kind of power.

Jeez, what's there left to try, even? This means it won't help me get out of this place, at least.

It was a precious gift from Tsukuyomi-sama, so I knew—or rather, hoped—it would be useful later, but I needed to do a lot more experimentation to figure it out first.

More pressing, though, was the heat. I could see the heat haze in the air in front of me as I walked, but it was at least a little better than the icy frost that gathered on the stones at night. It was a death sentence for a normal person, but again, I was lucky to not be a normal human. I was making decent progress

toward the rocky peak, though, and surely something would happen once I reached it... I hoped. I didn't know what I'd do otherwise.

I've heard nothing but the wind and the sound of my own footsteps for three whole days! Shouldn't at least SOMETHING happen?!

"Right... I'm not the hero or anything. I'm just an ugly little duckling," I muttered sullenly.

I was lonely, and I'd been talking to myself more and more. I sullenly looked back up to the distant mountain and hoped that there would be people there.

I wonder what the two heroes are doing right now? I bet they're being fawned over by some king, eating all kinds of delicious food... But here I am.

I looked back behind me at the dusty, hard ground, marked only by my trailing footprints. The pattern was interrupted only occasionally from when I started running toward mirages formed by the heat haze. I'd travelled a long way from where I first landed, all the while hoping I'd see some sign of civilization, but to no avail. There was nothing to see. The wastes were totally and completely empty.

"...!"

That was why, when I caught that whisper of a voice on the wind, my entire body went on high alert to an extent it'd never been before in my life. I froze in my tracks, cupping a hand around my ear and straining for another sign of the voice. I cleared my head as much as I could, determined not to miss a whisper. I had to know.

Where? Where's that voice coming from?

"... e... ody...!"

"There!"

My eyes flew wide open. There was no mistaking it. I almost wished there was some kind of accompanying discovery sound effect. I could feel my empty stomach roll at the potential of food. Then, with more energy and desperation than I'd managed to muster prior, I ran toward the voice.

"H-Help me!"

The voice was clearer now, emanating from near a rock pile some distance away.

“Glady!” I shouted back.

I’ve never been so excited! I’ve got so much tension right now, my gauge’s full and I’m ready to fire off a special!

Finally, the crier’s form became more distinct—another perk of my new and improved sight. My vision had been nothing special on Earth, so this was another pleasant surprise. What I saw ahead shook me a little, but I didn’t slow down. The anthropomorphic pig was a lot less intimidating than the two-headed wolf snarling at it, but I was glad to see any sign of life at all.

I’ve seen flying pigs and three-headed dogs before in games, so who cares? This isn’t the weirdest thing I’ve seen lately, and I’m literally superhuman now!

The pig was the one who’d cried for help, and they resembled the orcs I saw in fantasy media from time to time. It was being attacked by the wolf, meaning the two monsters probably had a falling out or something. I didn’t have to even think about who I was siding with—the pig was the only reason I found the pair at all, and I wasn’t about to forget that debt.

Both monsters seemed to notice me, and they watched warily as I kicked up dust running at them. That was a relief—the orc(?) would be safe as long as the wolf’s attention was on me.

“Who are you?!” the wolf barked roughly. *“Go away! Now!”*

All I could hear was howling, but somehow, its words made sense to me. That was a surprise, but since I’d heard the orc’s cries in a similar way, I was determined not to let that bother me—at least not right now.

“Hey there!” I called out to them. “I’m Makoto, a human! Nice to meet you!”

Finally, I was in range. I used the momentum of my run to spring forward, aiming a flying kick at the wolf.

“Hiyaaaaaaaaa!!!”



I was only hoping to knock the doggo away so that I could buy the orc(?) some time, but—

“Wh-What speed!” the wolf cursed, a fraction of a second before I made contact.

Those were its last words, as my foot plowed straight through it.

Huh? That... That was a monster, right? I know I was sprinting, but I just kicked it with my normal old sneakers. I can't have actually done that!

My feet hit the ground and I stumbled a few steps forward, trying to stop. Slowly, I turned around to assess the damage.

“Uhh... Ew. That's just nasty.”

There was gore everywhere. The front half was splattered wetly across the rocks, and the intact back half was sprawled lifelessly on the ground. I couldn't imagine what could cause such damage under normal circumstances, short of getting smashed by a semitruck at maximum speed. I had to look away.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

I had no idea that would happen, and I still couldn't believe it, but I didn't have the stomach to get a closer look.

My wandering gaze met that of the orc's(?). Their eyes were full of horror, much worse than when the wolf was sizing them up. Normally, I'd be a little put off by their appearance, but I felt oddly fine. The encounter with the Goddess was a harsh lesson in judging books by their cover, and I wasn't about to pull that same shit. Still, it was clear I'd messed up just a little.

I can talk now, though—we can talk! Ah, conversation, what a wonderful thing! The foundation of all communication!

My heart began to race with anticipation, and I tried not to look too awkward as I turned to the pig monster.

“Uh... Nice to meet you.”

“Eeek! I-It talks!”

Wait, I failed right off the bat? This isn't fair! That's just stupidly restrictive for an encounter this rare! Man, I wanna give up.

"I'm not strange or dangerous. I'm gentle and kind. You understand that, right?"

They fervently nodded yes for a moment, then changed their mind and started shaking no.

I don't follow. Is that normal in this world?

I assumed that they were at least close to human intelligence since they were walking on two legs and everything... Though assuming a pig was smart on the grounds they were walking on their hind legs was a stretch. I must've been losing it.

"Nobody who can kill a lizhu so easily can be gentle or kind!"

Ah, makes sense. I wouldn't believe me right now either.

They were calmer and more rational than I'd assumed they'd be, and I even caught them muttering uneasily about the brutality of my accident. Therefore, I decided to see if a little intimidation might work.

"Okay, then... I'm strong! Way stronger than you!"

"Eeeeeeeeeek!!!"

The orc(?) made itself small as possible, quivering uncontrollably with its hands raised as if to keep me at bay. It was more than a little surreal. My experience with game orcs, at least, lead me to believe they'd take well to a show of strength, but that was clearly not true.

"Relax," I told them, raising my hands in a show of surrender. "Sure, I'm strong, but I'm here to save you. Okay?"

That seemed to be a better approach, not to mention I wasn't the intimidating, dominating type at all.

"You were calling for help, right? That's why I came here and saved you. See? I'm a friend."

They slowly turned back to look at me, the quivering of their piggy body subsiding.

“RReally?”

I met their gaze and nodded.

Good, that argument’s working. Now I just need to keep working that angle.

At that point, they seemed to realize something, and they went back to cowering in terror.

“H-How is a hyuman talking to me?! Are there hyuman Tamers, too?!”

Tamer? The hell’s a Tamer?

As for the reason why, Comprehension was literally the only good thing a certain god-tier bitch gave me. That implied most people couldn’t understand monsters then.

Dammit, what a useless ability! I can barely make humans understand me properly, and now I can be misunderstood by monsters too!

“Oh, come ON! I am not a Tamer! I’m lost! I saved your life! End of story!”

“...”

At that, the monster paused to consider my words. They were still shaking, but not outright cowering like before, which was an improvement.

I wish they weren’t so scared of me, though... I’m pretty scared myself.

“...”

I waited for the monster to arrive at their conclusion. Any life the conversation had was now utterly gone.

“I-I understand,” they finally said.

Yes! Thank you! Arigatou! Xie xie!

“Thank you for saving me.”

Finally, a real conversation! Great!

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” I told them. “So, might I ask if your home is close to here?”

I decided to try to be more polite, since I finally realized I was being a little blunt. I didn't care if they lived in a town, village, or even a cave, I just wanted someplace with cover from the elements to rest in.

To my dismay, however, they weakly shook their head.

"Y-You're not lost, too, are you?"

Again, a weak shake of the head.

"See, I've been lost for three days," I explained. "Do you know which way I can go to see humans?"

To my dismay, that was another no.

Oh, god, it keeps getting worse! This is the scene where things finally get better, right? How is the situation not getting better?!

"No hyuman villages are near here," they told me. "This is the Edge of the World. Nothing survives here."

The Edge of the World? I seem to remember that Goddess mentioning something about sitting in a corner somewhere... Don't tell me she sent me here on purpose?! Seriously, that's just cruel!

"I was heading to the God-Mount, as a sacrifice to the great Shen-sama."

"Shen-sama?" Living sacrifices? Did I just trigger a quest? This smells like a boss battle, and I haven't even hit the first town yet.

Tears welling in eyes, the monster began to tell her story—yes, *her* story, though I honestly couldn't tell her gender before. It turned out she really was an orc, a type that lived on high ranges called a highland orc. Every six months, her village sent a young female orc as a living sacrifice to a being called Shen, that lived on their holy God-Mount. Without the sacrifices, their village would be choked in impenetrable fog, and their crops would all wither and die.

Man, highland orcs are cool... No plundering or raiding, and they're smart enough to build a whole society around hunting and farming. They're practically the same as humans, appearances aside. More importantly, it looks like I went and hit a bunch of flags... Sent to another world? Check. Save an (orc) girl from a monster attack? Check. The girl's going to get sacrificed to some monster?

Check. At this rate, all that's left is to kill that Shen thing and save the village from their horrific rituals...

It all pointed to one thing—a big, fat love interest flag.

Dammit, now I can't save her village even if I wanted to! There's no way I could avoid her romance flag then!

I wasn't one to judge by looks, as I said, but I at least wanted my girlfriend to appear human. Orcs might be close enough by some standards, since I didn't care if she wasn't human, but that was splitting hairs. Sure, I'd been through my share of... “experiences”... and I wasn't trying to wax poetic on biases or prejudices or anything like that. Granted, she didn't smell as bad as I thought an orc would. She smelled like flowers, a delicate aroma that reminded me of someone I...

No! Bad me!

My “experiences” obviously included women who weren't human. Elves and other fey, for instance, were a given, but also animal girls with those fluffy ears and super-soft-looking toe beans. There were elementals in human form, too, plus more varying kinds, shapes, and sizes of demons and devils than I could count. I was even fine with robot girls, as long as they were hot. I was very flexible! I just drew the line at orcs. It wasn't racism or anything, but she needed to have a human face, and I absolutely, positively wouldn't—no, I *couldn't* bend on that. In all my “experiences” and in everything I played, I had never, not even once, seduced an orc.

Of course, all my “experiences” are from games, but those are just as valid as real life, and that doesn't change that I'll never ever bang an orc!

“Sorry, but I just can't.”

She blinked at me in confusion. “Um... Can't what?”

Shit. I didn't mean for that to slip out.

“I-It's nothing! Nothing at all! Hahaha, please forget I said anything!”

She still looked a little confused, but smiled readily enough (or at least, it resembled a smile).

"Please, let me thank you properly for your help. Your name is Makoto-sama, isn't it?"

She actually remembered my name through all that? I guess the least I can do is forget she was startled when I talked, then.

All things considered, she was quite smart and polite. I felt another pang of regret that she was a pig, instead of a cat girl or a dog girl or something.

"Yeah, I'm Makoto," I replied. "I'm seventeen. Nice to meet you."

"My name is Ema. So, you're seventeen too?"

Dammit, she's even the perfect age! If not for the whole orc thing, this entire questline would be perfect!

The Goddess had told me not to marry anyone in "her" world, but I didn't give a rat's ass what she said. Besides, Tsukuyomi-sama already gave me permission to do whatever I wanted.

"Up ahead is the last site I need to purify myself at before the God-Mount. Please, come with me and rest a while."

There's a rest stop? Man, she's nice.

There was a chance she was just trying to secure my protection until the site, but I didn't mind. The lizhu wasn't exactly threatening, and I felt I could take out a second one if it appeared.

"Great, thanks."

With that, we began to walk together toward the God-Mount.

The more we talked, the easier time I had understanding her, as though the static blurring her words was slowly fading. It made small talk a lot easier, and we chatted almost the whole way to our destination. Ema-san told me all about the festivals that were held in her village in their more peaceful days, and she was so cheerful it was hard to believe she was walking to her death. As soon as we started talking about the current state of her home, however, her expression darkened. They lost two young female orcs every year—of course their village wasn't doing well.

What do I do when we hit the rest stop, then? Going with her to beat the master of the God-Mount would start my romance quest with her for sure... She's nice, my age, and it sounds like she's the chieftain's daughter, so she's probably loaded. Jeez, why can't she be human? She's such a good girl! If only she was a beautiful princess who got cursed or something... But then again, we're supposedly so far from any human settlements that there's no chance of that.

"Look, over there!"

Ema-san pointed ahead of us to a cave with a notably artificial-looking entrance. Even the supports around it and the chiseled path leading inside made it clear there were human (or human-like) hands on it.

"Could you please wait out here for me?" she asked. "I have to explain about you to the sentries before you come inside."

"That makes sense."

Even if I saved Ema-san's life, I was nothing but a strange human to the sentries with no way of proving who I was or where I was from. They'd sooner attack me than trust me, and for good reason. I knew enough about her to trust she'd argue my case as best she could, and she'd make sure they'd know I was no enemy of the orcs. They at least shouldn't charge out of the cave and try to kill me—and if they did, I'd have enough of a head start at this distance from the entrance that I could escape.

As soon as Ema-san disappeared inside, I considered my next move. She was a good orc, and the first person I'd had an actual conversation with in this world. I could even call her my first real ally, in a way. I wanted to help her, but not if it triggered some kind of romance flag—and I still didn't know how strong this "Shen-sama" monster was. From the way things were going, though, I wouldn't be surprised if they were final-boss-level strong. Honestly, if this were a game, it'd be the kind of cult classic only played by hardcore masochists.

If I was able to get enough information, then I could just slip out of the caves before Ema-san or her companions knew what was happening and beat "Shen-sama." All that mattered was that she made it out okay, and with that done, I could just disappear. With the village's safety secure, she'd be free to return

home. Not only that, I didn't necessarily have to slay the boss, either—I believed we could talk things out and come to an arrangement without resorting to violence.

“Yeah, that should be enough. It's the least I can do to repay her...”

As I came to that conclusion, Ema-san emerged from the cave with a smile. Apparently, her negotiations were a success.

I know what that Goddess said, but maybe I'll play the hero just this once.

I was led inside the cave and sat on the stool they offered to me. The orcs in the room were occupying themselves lighting the old hearth with puffs of fire from their palms, with others levitating suits of bulky metal armor as if lifting weights. I knew this was a fantasy world, but the sight was still startling.

So that's magic... I wonder if I'll be able to cast stuff like that one day.

“Is something the matter?” Ema-san asked. “I don't believe there's anything unusual here...”

I pointed at the nearest magic-casting orcs. “That's magic, right?”

“Y-Yes, it is. Those are basic magicks we use in everyday life—though humans refer to them as spells, I've heard.”

Don't ask. As long as it's magic, the name doesn't matter.

“You can use it too?”

“Of course!” she replied. “I happen to be one of the many casters in my village. Though, unfortunately, I'm not very athletic, so I'm unable to fight as well as the others.”

“Huh... Can I ask you something? Could you please try to teach me magic?”

She blinked at me in confusion. “You... can't use it?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“And you were all alone in a waste like that?!”

“Yeah... Pretty awful, isn't it?”

She sighed deeply and shook her head. “You're a wonder, Makoto-sama.”

She finally agreed to teach me the basics, and I had secured my first magic teacher.

“Go on now, try it.”

I did as Ema-san told me, focusing hard and repeating the incantation she taught me.

Incantations were words that converted one’s mana into different types of elements of magic, and in effect created a ‘key.’ Then, at the end of the incantation, it would be used to open a ‘door’ from which it could act on the physical world, resulting in magic. That was all a metaphor, of course, and there were no real keys or doors involved, but it helped to demonstrate how magic worked. The incantation was different from the orcs’ language, but I could hear and interpret it as I would any other words, and I was able to use it without difficulty.

Ema-san told me to muster all the mana I could into the words, but I decided against it. Tsukuyomi-sama told me that I had a huge amount of mana now, and if my physical abilities were any indication, there was a very real chance I could hurt someone.

The first spell Ema-san introduced was one of the most basic ones, known as Bridt. It was regarded as the foundation of all offensive magic, and while it could be of any element, we were starting with fire. This version of Bridt could also be used to start fires, but despite the size of the cave, we were still underground, and I didn’t want to risk it on the off chance I made it too big. I didn’t want to suffocate on the random chance things got out of hand, so I stuck to the damaging variant.

I don’t know for sure if I can even use magic, but better safe than sorry, right?

“Bridt!” I shouted.

A strange sensation assailed my body from all sides, and immediately afterward, a small puff of flame formed just in front of my palm. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it flickered and vanished.

“Wh-Whoa! Was that magic?!” I cried out in shock.

I’d done what I was told, but I still wasn’t expecting it to be so easy.

Wow... Real magic!

Ema-san seemed taken aback by my work. “Y-Yes, that was the first phase of Bridt, certainly. I wasn’t expecting you to manage it on your first attempt...”

Maybe that’s thanks to me understanding Incantationese, or whatever they call it? Still, that was me casting! I never thought this day would really come! This kind of thing happens in games all the time, but real life? Haha, hahahahahaha!

It was all I could do to not start laughing maniacally.

“... But you must envision it as a projectile,” Ema-san continued. “It’s only a proper Bridt if you can launch it toward a target.”

Her words instantly brought me to my senses.

Right, I forgot that part. Once I’ve got this fire one down pat, I’ll see if I can master the other elements, too... Wait, I should focus.

“All right, let’s give it a go!”

I finished the incantation once more, ending on the final note of Bridt. I could feel that weird something again—mana, if I had to guess—but I didn’t know how to describe it. Now I understood what Ema-san meant when she said it was easier to feel it than understand it. I was completely lost during that part of her explanation.

The fire appeared again, but this time, I focused on maintaining the flame and shaping it into a sphere. I imagined it soccer ball size, and with one hungry flash, it grew to that size and obediently took its form.

“Amazing,” Ema-san breathed. “One quick lecture, and he can already manage so much...”

Man, it feels good to surprise her like this.

She glanced at the sentries standing watch, and they obediently placed one of the boulders that lined the room some distance before me, like a target. They didn’t have any issues in moving the hefty stone, despite its weight, but I wasn’t surprised that orcs were so strong.

Let’s see... The distance is a little less than twenty feet.

Ema-san met my eyes and nodded, giving me the go-ahead to fire. I strongly envisioned the bullet colliding with the boulder and willed it to go. The fireball obediently soared from my palm, smashing into the rock. Hot wind blasted throughout the cave, and a storm of dust and debris burst from its earthen face... or so I would've said, but it was nowhere near that intense. It was a warm breeze and small cloud of smoke, at most.

When the smoke finally cleared, only a pile of scattered rubble remained where the boulder once was. It seemed like a decent amount of force, enough that I wouldn't be too worried in a fight if I couldn't one-shot whatever I was up against.

I turned back to Ema-san. "So, was that a proper Bridt?"

"Y-Yes...?"

From the terror on her face, just like when we first met, I got the impression I'd done something pretty big.

Man, magic is fun! I wonder if there's anything else I can pick up now? This has got me feeling one hell of a new-hobby rush!

"Can you teach me anything else?" I asked. "Just the incantations should be fine."

I'm ready!

"Well... Let me get what else I know together. By the way, I assume you can detect mana okay?"

"Uh... I think so? Mana's that funny-feeling-whatever energy I felt when casting, right?"

"Exactly. I must admit, you're picking this up at a genius rate."

"It was just like you said it'd be. All I had to do was try it, and everything clicked."

She had all the qualities of a great teacher, no doubt about it.

"Might I ask if you can feel the mana flowing through your own body?" she asked.

“Huh?”

I took a moment to focus inward. Most of what I felt was that mystery divine power that I got from Tsukuyomi-sama, but now that I knew what I was looking for, I could feel a different power circulating in small but distinct currents throughout my body. It was identical to the energy I drew from the air moments ago. The feeling was hard to get ahold of, like trying to grab a stream of water, and I couldn't imagine how it played into the bigger picture of my body or my power.

Man, what a weird feeling.

“I think I can feel it... So, this is all my mana?”

“My, to think you have such control of mana, on top of being so physically strong... Perhaps you'd be a good candidate for the Magic Swordsman job.”

“Job?”

Hold up, is this world a game, or isn't it? It sounds like they've got a whole class system.

“Yes. You're bound to be rather high-level too.”

And now with the levels... I guess I'll have to adjust to this world's new laws. If this place runs on RPG mechanics, though, I probably got EXP from that lizhu or whatever it's called. I didn't get any loot or anything from it, though...

“Uh... Maybe?” I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

When I introduced myself to Ema-san on the way to the cave, I wound up lying quite a bit. I didn't want her to pity me, after all, given all I'd been through lately. Instead, I just told her that I woke up in the middle of the Edge of the World with no memories or knowledge of who I was. I technically didn't have any memories of this world, though, so it wasn't completely a lie, but that didn't make lying to her any easier on my conscience.

She held a sheet of paper out to me. “You can at least tell your level with this.”

“What is it?”

“Let’s call it strength-gauging paper for now, though it can only give general values. A hyuman dropped it here a long time ago.”

Hyuman? Wait, does she mean a human? I’ve heard that word several times already...

For the time being, though, I decided to look at my level, or whatever the paper did.

“So how do I use it?” I asked her.

“Hold onto it tightly.”

“Right-o.”

I did as I was told, and the white paper began to rapidly dye itself aqua-blue.

Ema-san’s eyes widened. “What? That’s not possible.”

What, is the color bad or something?

I looked around to find the other orcs looked just as confused.

“I-Is there something wrong with blue?” I asked nervously.

“Well...”

“Go on, say it. I can handle the truth.”

My mind was made up. It was just a number, after all, and it’s not like it mattered in the first place.

“You’re Level 1.”

... Right, I need to ask about hyumans. Haha!

The next morning, Ema-san was preparing to depart for the God-Mount.

I could finally feel the rich mana in the air, and for the first time I knew for a fact that I was in a new world. It was a fresh, relaxing feeling, to the point that I almost forgot about the previous day’s horrible reveal.

That can’t be right... It just can’t.

If I was high-leveled already, it made sense that killing that lizhu wouldn’t net me a level-up, but if I was really Level 1, I should be Level 2 by now. That, or the

dog was a lot weaker than I thought. Ema-san even confirmed that I'd won the fight.

Maybe you don't get EXP for sneak attacks in this world? Or maybe since I'm cheating by being so strong, I'm somehow outside the level system altogether?

There wasn't any point to thinking about it now, though.

"All right, let's do this."

As I left the cave, I handed a letter to one of the sentries with a message to Ema-san on it. It was short, simple, and to the point.

I'll deal with Shen-sama somehow. I probably won't make it out alive, so forget you even met me and go back to your village. Thank you for everything.

I threw in a little more padding and explanation, but that was the gist of it.

To think I can not only speak, but also read and write this world's languages so easily... Man, what a cheat code.

I almost felt grateful to the Goddess—but if even I got this much, her chosen heroes must be omniscient or something. This meant that once I finally made it to human civilization, I could make a living trading between the humans and the non-humans. I still needed to make money, after all. I managed to get a peek at a map of the area after Ema-san taught me magic, so as soon as this Shen-sama or whatever was dealt with, I'd be heading right toward the closest humans.

Said settlement was a great distance from the cave, and it was supposedly full of adventurers keen on striking it big on rare materials that could only be found in the Edge or warriors looking to hone their skills. It was a week's journey if I went at top speed, and no more than ten days even if I ran into trouble along the way. There were several monster settlements and forests along the way, but I was hoping that I could talk my way out of fighting anyone as I went.

I was able to walk for three days without food and could still move afterward, so I wasn't too worried about that. I estimated I could make it about five days maximum before I'd need to eat. The orcs were generous in giving me some rations, but since food had to be scarce in the Edge, it had to mean a lot. I had to not waste a crumb.

My head full of thoughts of the journey ahead, I circled about another pile of rubble and finally took in the largest mountain in the wastes once more.

The God-Mount, huh... Here I come.

I released as much of my internal mana as I could muster and went over the incantations I'd learned in my head. Ema-san was a little too busy after our little lesson, so she didn't have time to teach me anything except the fire-elemental Bridt. Luckily, I overheard the incantation for the illumination-producing Light from one of the sentries, so that was two of them under my belt.

I'll have to keep an eye out for more incantations in the future... You never know when one'll come in handy.

"First, though, I've gotta figure out what my upper limit is. I don't want to be experimenting in the middle of a real fight."

There was no reason to hold back now that nobody else was in sight, so I decided to try it out. I muttered the incantation from the previous night, forming another casting of Bridt at the same size and power as I had last night and firing it off. No issues there.

All right, next.

The first thing I needed to test was if I needed to say the incantation aloud. I let myself relax, focusing hard on manifesting a strong flame as I went over the words in my head. As soon as I ended on the final syllables of Bridt, I'd succeeded in making a new ball of flame. This one was far larger, however, and roiled with a bright crimson color. It was a good two or three times larger than the one I'd made in the cave to boot.

Good, it worked. I'm glad I made a smaller one last night... I might've wound up making one two or three times my size otherwise.

With that, I was ready for my next test. The road to the God-Mount stretched out before me, and at the foot of the mountain, I spotted a large structure like a gate. That would be my target.

I'll make you feel the pain of all the orcs who've suffered at your hands!

It was a few hundred meters ahead, but I could clearly make out the features of my mark thanks to my new vision. My test this time would be seeing if I could shape my Bridt into an arrow. All my time in the archery club at school got me more used to arrows than balls. I envisioned the sphere changing, and, sure enough, it elongated and rapidly thinned to my desired shape. If I could hit the ground at the base of that arch, I'd consider the experiment a success.

Now, let's see just how strong my magic is at full power.

I sat on my knees with my bow laid across my lap. By the time I readied myself emotionally, honed my focus, and taken to my feet, I already knew how the shot would play out. My club friends would often ask how I could be so sure of my shots, but I never knew how to reply and I'd just smile sheepishly in return. Somehow, I always just knew.

I was overjoyed the first time I hit the target. That pleasure lessened the easier hitting the mark got, however, and it came with a new realization. There was a limit to what one could achieve with skill alone. That was when I started closing my eyes to calm myself and hone my focus, simulating the shot time and time again. Then, when the simulation passed and I hit my mark, I would loose my arrow and make it happen. I approached everything, from my grip to my posture, with the utmost concentration.

When I was in middle school, my instructor told me I could use the dojo however I wanted. By that point, I was hitting every shot I made without fail. All I had to do was sit down and look at the target to envision how I could hit it, and reality followed. As long as I kept my focus, I could fire as many arrows as I liked, and each would hit precisely where I knew it would.

In high school, I was drawn to the archery club once again. The instructor was shocked to see me there, since she hadn't expected me to be so interested. I remember how she sighed a little and smiled when I said I loved bows. Thinking back, that was the point at which she became determined to teach me real archery. I learned the traditional way to fight with a bow, and how to conduct myself outside of the sport-shooting of kyuudou.

I never appeared at any tournaments at the teacher's insistence, but when the upperclassmen graduated, I found myself the club vice-president. I was so

glad they trusted me enough with such an honor, but unfortunately, I didn't get to enjoy club practices for long before I disappeared from the face of the Earth.

I guess I'm pretty upset about that still... It felt so nice to have underclassmen who relied on me.

There was no point getting homesick now, though. I forced myself to refocus, ensuring my Bridt was stable once more. It was the exact size and shape as one of the arrows I was used to, burgeoning with red-hot light.

Time to get serious.

I extended my left arm as though I were holding a bow, then drew my right hand with the Bridt back until my thumb was pressed into my cheek. Then, with a flash of brilliant red light, I let it loose. The bolt of flames zipped forth, and in the blink of an eye, it embedded itself in the ground before the arch as I'd envisioned.

"Looks like it worked... The speed was decent too."

It arced through the air just like I'd expect a real arrow to as well. Mastering it would take some time, but once I did, it'd be like always having a bow and arrow with me. That was big, and would no doubt come in handy down the road.

"Wait... What?"

The arrow didn't disappear, however, and instead began to distort and expand slightly. Then, as it passed some invisible threshold, it exploded, engulfing the entire arch in roiling flame. A moment later, the piping-hot air blasted past me.

"Shit... I didn't mean to do that."

Hopefully, nobody would miss the gate. I only hoped that there was nothing living nearby. The thought was deeply unsettling, and I resolved to hurry to the site of the blast as quickly as possible.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Oh, shit... I really messed up..."

By the time I arrived at the arch's remains, it was already too late. There were four or so charred bodies that looked like they were recently alive. Even the voice's owner was missing his bottom half.

How is he still talking? He's still got a lot of life in him.

"Are those fools already wise to our demon plot? Or no, have you come in an ill-fated attempt to slay Shen?!"

He had blue skin—if I remembered what Ema-san told me on the way to the cave, it was a sure sign he was a demon.

"Stop, stop it!" I urged him. "Don't try to talk anymore!"

"Kekeke..." he chuckled bitterly. "There's no saving me either way. Let me say my piece!"

Sure, but should you even be talking to me? I killed you and your friends here! And stop raising flags already, the situation's shitty enough as-is!

"At first, I thought we could convince them to join us in exchange for making our problems go away, but I never considered those pigs had a monster like you at their command..."

WHAT?! Where's all this coming from? Were these guys trying to get between the orcs and Shen or something?!

The demon chuckled hoarsely. "To think you would destroy the gate, though... You've chosen poorly. There'll be no escaping Shen's fury now."

"What? Why would Shen get so upset over one little gate?!"

Shit, shit, SHIT! This is like getting forced right into the boss fight without any chance to save! No matter what dialogue prompt I pick at this point, I get the feeling it's too late for that. I'm in deep trouble!

The demon chuckled weakly, his voice slowly petering out. "This is what you get... for destroying... her gate... Kekeke, serves you... right..."

With that, his body turned into something like ash and scattered into the wind. He was probably dead, and as I looked around, the other four bodies were gone as well. They must've blown away too.

Then, the very earth began to shake, and the cloud that had encircled the God-Mount's peak rapidly descended.

This cloud is... Wait, this is fog! Now I know the boss is coming out!

"Shen-sama, please listen to me!" I called into the white mass.

It was now only a few yards above me and descending fast. From within its depths, I could see a massive maw twist with rage, baring its teeth to reveal a great draconic mouth. It was slowly approaching me, as if intent on swallowing me whole.

Now, hold on a second. I remember hearing a Shen was some kind of giant clam in Chinese mythology, but this...

"Who was going to tell me Shen's a fucking dragon?!"



In this brand-new world / My common sense is worthless / A swift, painful death.

... Wait, I don't want my last thoughts to be a haiku!

Tsukimichi Chapter 2

First, to take stock of the situation—the dragon’s massive mouth, crammed full of razor-sharp fangs, was closing in on me with terrifying speed. With my newfound strength, though, I could no doubt take the blow in stride. I’d like to see it try to hurt me.

... Yeah, right! I’m dodging that sucker!

I concentrated hard on Shen’s teeth, jumping backward and out of the attack’s path at the last moment. It didn’t seem to care that it missed, however, simply lunging forward for another bite.

Dammit, how am I supposed to judge the reach of an enemy that’s flying?!

“Go away!” I shouted, dodging attack after attack.

Safe! I’m still alive!

I didn’t look away from the dragon once. Now that I had an idea of the size of its head, I could guess at its full size. It was at least a few times larger than a bullet train, but I still didn’t fully know its total length.

Oh, I’m so dead. I wanna see the manager! Get your ass out here, Goddess! There’s gotta be some kind of legendary weapon or armor I should have for this fight!

The fog was still descending, and soon I could barely see my own hands in front of my face, let alone the dragon. I was hoping I’d be able to notice the fog ripple and shift as it moved, but there was no sign of that whatsoever.

So, Shen itself is making that fog... That’s impressive. I can’t even feel its presence in all this stuff, so I bet it’s magic somehow.

I was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Just as I was trying to puzzle out a plan, I felt a chill run down my spine. I leapt forward reflexively, and turning around, I realized I'd dodged Shen's snapping jaws by a hair.

"Oh, c'mon, that's not fair! So, I don't even get to know where you are until the last second?!"

I was doing all I could just to dodge, and I couldn't possibly counterattack like this.

In a fight with such a big opponent, it was key to dodge or block every attack, and to only counter when I saw an opening... I thought. That was what action and fighting games alike taught me, and that was better than nothing. If there was no way of even sizing up my opponent, though, there was nothing I could do.

This would be the shittiest game ever! This is so unfair! It's like one of those bosses you're supposed to lose against!

My only options were to try to land a blow on its snout after dodging its attack, or fire into the fog, hoping I'd connect with its body. There was no guarantee its body would be defenseless, though.

What do I do? What now?!

Three cards popped up in my head, each with a different option on it. I was surprised I was composed enough to come up with something like that, honestly, but I wasn't complaining.

1. Dodge with everything I've got, then counter!
2. I just need to get rid of this fog. Blow, wind, blow!
3. Time to take the initiative! Attack whatever I can!

The first was frankly impossible. I was lucky to dodge that last attack, and I couldn't count on it happening again. Second was... well, I couldn't summon the wind like some general from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, so that was out. For the third, I could forego power for numbers and try to pressure it with my sheer number of attacks. I could keep throwing Bridts at it until I had a good

grasp of where it was, then fire a full-power arrow at a weak point if I found one.

That was it, then—choice three was possible, and I couldn't think of any better plan. I had to move fast and strike hard. My concentration wouldn't last forever, and if I let down my guard for an instant, if I panicked, I'd be hunted down in a heartbeat.

Shen

Even amongst the mighty dragons, I was a force to be reckoned with. I was dubbed *Invincible* for good reason. Though I lacked the raw power and defensive prowess of the other Greater Dragons, I thoroughly deserved my moniker. The reason lay in my power; Subspace.

Subspace allowed me to create a realm that I alone can control at will—a void of sheer darkness in which not even fog may be seen. Within it, I hold absolute authority, burning or freezing whatever should strike my fancy. I take my time in tormenting, then devouring any prey foolish enough to wander inside, and I have never failed a hunt within my Subspace.

I had intended for the insolent whelp who destroyed my archway to suffer that same fate. I needed but take two good bites at him while my Subspace flooded with fog, and as soon as it was full, I would bait him inside and that would be the end of it. For some reason, however, I was unable to lure him within, as though I were attempting to thread a stone through the eye of a needle.

Was the door I created too small? How is he able to resist? I shall have to hunt him with this fog alone, then.

I attempted to bite at his back, but he seemed to notice my intent at the last possible second, narrowly avoiding my jaws.

Tsk... What an irksome hyuman.

With that, it became clear I could not simply slay the intruder. Not only had he avoided the reach of my Subspace, he managed to detect my attack from within my sense-numbing fog. Was it coincidence? I had to know for certain. If there was in fact some reason for this, my reputation as Invincible would be at risk.

More importantly, if this fool should prove an agent of another Greater Dragon, I needed to know their identity to ensure my revenge. I hadn't the foggiest notion what offense they took in my slumbering at the Edge of the World, but if they were jealous of my power, my retribution needed to be swift and fierce. I would slay them, no matter who they were.

The hyuman was sizing me up carefully. I assumed he would be forced to flee to the point of exhaustion, but he had turned and began scattering some form of spell—fire Bridts, by the look of it—into the fog. Luckily, I possessed a decent degree of fire resistance and would likely be able to stomach such a feeble attack with ease.

That decision, however, proved a foolish one. Despite twisting my body about from where it was coiled loosely around him, one of the spheres of flame made contact with my flank. It was a pitiful strike that failed to so much as scuff my scales, but it lit up the fog and revealed part of my body to the open air.

The hyuman's next actions were blindingly fast. He cast Bridt again, forcing it into a hyper-compressed shape, and aimed it squarely at my exposed side. I rolled my serpentine body to avoid it, but the arrow flew swift and true, burying itself deep in my *flank*, of all places. Despite the piddling power of the earlier shot, this new Bridt exploded with searing heat, and dizzying pain shot throughout my body.

"GWEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRGH!!!"

The scream of agony that tore itself from my throat distracted me so thoroughly that I barely noticed the blast had dispersed my fog. Never had I cried with such pain before.

My body... What happened to my body?!

I arched my head about to see the injury, and was horrified to find a gaping hole of gory flesh in my side. Nearly half my width had been blown away.

Enough... This hyuman is no prey! He is my nemesis, a villain most foul!

It was foolish to tear my eyes from him, no matter the gravity of my injury. The wretch was now directly before me. In my confusion, I had forgotten to retreat into the fog and was simply hovering a short distance in the air beside him.

“Okay, here goes—a straight-up punch!”

With that befuddling cry, he drove his fist into my cheek. Stars exploded through my vision. His strength was not that of any hyuman—no, it was that of an ogre or giant, perhaps even greater.

“No good, huh... Backhand then!”

The second blow came in the same spot and with every bit as much force. My whole body coiled and reeled from the impact of the strike. Luckily, I was knocked back within the fog, and I was finally granted a moment’s respite to find myself. He was dangerous and not a normal hyuman by any measure. He had received some manner of blessing, no doubt.

Could he be an agent of another Greater Dragon? No, I cannot imagine any hyuman could change to such an extent. Is he a God, then? Could he be that fickle Goddess?!

I shook my head. That would explain the hyuman’s strength, certainly, but that shallow woman could not possibly favor a form as unappealing as his.

Gh... The pain still won’t cease. Never before have I been struck so brazenly, not to speak of the burning in my side. What in the world is he?!

I had little time to think, however, as I saw him on my left once more.

“How... How did you find me...?!”

That was impossible. I could not fathom being tracked within my own fog, regardless of how much it had thinned in our last exchange. I was too stunned to think.

“Time for the finishing blow...”

His hand began to shine with an unsettling red light.

Finishing...? No, impossible. What could he be...?

“Frog-jump uppercut!”

He drove his fist hard into my jaw from below—

“Go unalive yourself!”

The force of the blow sent my front half arcing back, sending my skull crashing into the rocks. It was a horrifying blow from such a puny opponent, and I struggled to grip to consciousness. The hyuman was an entire magnitude of strength above me. The humiliation was greater than any pain I’d suffered and I lost any luxury of choice I had. There was but one option left to me.

I pretended to be unconscious as I read his motions through my fog, then silently exhaled a different fog—this one designed to birth illusions. Aside from Subspace, this was my other power, one which made my opponents hallucinate either their heart’s desires or their greatest fears. Within this fog, my illusions were as visceral as reality, and I could confuse my targets as I pleased.

I could not bring the hyuman within my Subspace for whatever reason. My only option, then, was to lock him within a dream and keep him there until he perished. A nightmare would be foolish—there was a chance he would lash out in anger or sadness. No, I had to drown him in ecstasy until he died of starvation. Strengthened or not, he would surely not last more than a fortnight. If that failed, I would keep him there for a month—a year or more, even, if that was the price to pay for victory.

To think I, of all dragons, would have to play dead, much less attempt to slay my foe through such cowardice...

I swallowed my pride, and with newfound resolve, I confirmed the hyuman’s actions through the fog. He had turned his back to me and was breathing deeply. He was relaxing his guard, no doubt reassured by my apparent death.

Now!!!

My eyes flew open and I spewed illusory fog at him. He instantly tensed with caution—an impressive reaction speed, but it was too slow.

“This is the end, hyuman.”

Chest brimming with a thousand conflicting feelings, I grinned down at my foe in the cell of fog he was ensnared within...

※ ※ ※

“Huh? Is this... the archery dojo?”

My head felt foggy, and I couldn't remember what I was doing there. The setting sun streamed in through the window, dyeing the hall orange. It seemed like practice had already ended for the day, but I was still dressed in my uniform, a bow in hand.

Was I just about to start shooting?

One of my favorite things was to stay behind in the dojo after all my clubmates had gone home and continue shooting.

I released an arrow. Bullseye. Second arrow. Bullseye.

“Looks like I'm in top form today... Hah.”

I looked around me again, taking a few deep breaths.

Third arrow, and another perfect bullseye—it hit one of the earlier arrows I'd fired, an identical shot by every measure.

That's enough for today, I guess.

I was a little reluctant to wrap up so quickly, but I eased my stance nonetheless. As I cast my gaze to where my equipment was stored, however, I spotted my personal bow.

Right... I think I always fire that at least once before ending practice. How am I so forgetful today? I'm almost getting worried.

I switched bows, nocked an arrow to the string, and pulled it back. The tension was far greater than the school's practice bows, but that only made drawing it that much more euphoric.

“Hm!”

I strained against the weight of the draw. I used it every day, but for some reason it felt like ages since last I'd used it. I loosed the arrow and it buried itself

exceptionally deep within the wood behind the paper target.

... That's enough for today.

I cleaned my space and changed out of my uniform, but as I headed for the dojo's doors, I stopped. There was a girl standing there.

"You did so well, senpai!"

It was Hasegawa, a new club member who'd joined after the usual sign-up period. Rather than lagging behind the other underclassmen, however, her constant efforts saw her match then surpass their talents. Few students had experience with archery before entering the club, so constant practice was necessary to do well.

"Oh, Hasegawa. Why're you still here?"

"Um... Well, there's something I really wanted to do before the summer break..."

I recalled her goal from the beginning of the year. "You mean hit the target, right? You've already done that."

Wait. I'm pretty positive she did that just the other day...

She shook her head, her distress visibly growing. "No, I, um... Oh, don't you get it?!"

"Get what? I can't think of any other reason why... I know! You forgot something here, right?"

Her shoulders slumped with a heavy sigh. Her hair swayed slightly in the open window's breeze, her side ponytails appearing a pretty shade of red in the dying light. I'd noticed their rusty tinge when I was teaching her the proper stance for firing, and embarrassing as it was, I remember muttering about how cute her hair looked back then. She'd styled her hair the same ever since. I imagined keeping her hair tied up like that might hurt her scalp a little—not that I knew with short hair like mine.

"Misumi-senpai?"

Her words brought me back to the present.

“Huh? Yeah?”

“I... I’ve always looked up to you. I like you. Will you please go on a date with me?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

There was a long moment of silence.

What did she just say? She looks up to me? She likes... me? What kind of date is she referring to?!

I hated to admit it, but I wasn’t attractive by any measure. I was good at studying, but I wasn’t especially smart, and I was average at every sport except archery. Despite all that, by some incomprehensible miracle, she was looking up at me expectantly through her bangs—just a little, but enough.

“Senpai...?” Nukumi Hasegawa’s face creased with worry as my silence continued.

“W-Wait, just wait a... Can I have a minute?”

I hated to admit it, but I was unpopular—so unpopular that lesser men would’ve had a closet full of cringe that they’d thrown themselves into so they could get away from their loneliness even a little. I was barely any better, though, and I had zero confidence whatsoever I could turn myself around today, especially so suddenly.

“Sorry, but I have no interest in going out with you. I don’t believe in dating girls I don’t like romantically. I know it must’ve been hard to say all that, but I can’t date you.”

“No!”

“No what?!”

The hell is going on here? I’ve got no idea how to respond to that.

“We can date just to try!” she pressed. “You can fall in love with me that way! Can’t you even try, senp—no, Makoto-san?!”

What's even going on here? Did I fall into a dating sim or something? Even if I was purely opportunistic here, there's no way I could agree to that!

My head began to spin from the panic.

"H-Hasegawa?! You can't actually be okay with that, right?!"

"Call me Nukumi! Or is there another girl you're interested in?!"

"No, of course not, but...!"

I was beginning to crack under the pressure. I dropped my gaze to avoid her eyes, but I realized my mistake as the unmistakable youthful curves of her body came into view. I was, as it happened, now staring right at her chest. That seemed even worse for keeping a level head, so I forced my eyes back up to her face.

"Got it?" She looked me square in the eyes. "This is just a test, remember. You can dump me anytime, anywhere and I won't cry a bit!"

That... uh... I, um... I can't... say no to that.

"Can I ask you something first?" I asked. "Why me? What do I have over literally any other guy?"

She hesitated only briefly. "You're hot when you draw your bow. Like just a minute ago."

"You saw that?!"

I swallowed hard.

"The first time I saw you do that, I couldn't pry my eyes away."

"Uh... And?"

"I thought you were so elegant... I didn't have any hobbies back then, and I spent all my time stumbling through school, day in and day out. When I applied to join this club, though, I put a little too much practice into tryouts, and I reached my goal faster than I'd hoped."

"..."

"But every time I've watched you shoot—"

“Wait, you’ve been spying on me that much?!”

I didn’t even notice... Man, is that embarrassing.

“—I’ve wanted to get to know you more,” she finished. “That’s why I joined the archery club in the first place.”

She must’ve had a crush on me for a long time, then, since before I’d even properly met her. More importantly, it meant my alone time, the one part of the day I truly looked forward to, wasn’t as private as I thought. I wasn’t about to stop—I couldn’t—but I’d clearly have to be more attentive.

I cut her off as she opened her mouth to continue. “Okay... Thanks, Hasegawa. I’m kinda glad you like to see me practice so much. I’d prefer to start as friends, but, uh... Sure, we can go out.”

“Really?! You need to call me by my name, then! Say it—N-U-K-U-M-I!”

“Sorry... For now, I’d rather keep calling you Hasegawa. Now, it’s about time you head home. It’s starting to get dark, but at least the train station’s close. Will you be okay alone?”

It would’ve been cool to offer to walk her there, but I still felt a little lightheaded, and I didn’t want to push myself.

“O-Oh, of course!” she replied readily. “Just telling you all that makes me feel so much better... Let’s see each other tons over the summer break, okay?”

“Yeah... I’d like that.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I was hit by a strong feeling of something being wrong. My sixth sense was screaming at me, but I couldn’t figure out why.

Right. I’ve never had anyone like me before, let alone ask me out. Of course, I’d feel weird saying goodbye to her.

I sighed as I slipped on my shoes and finally left the dojo. “Man, that was a shock. To think this’d happen to me, of all people...”

That feeling of wrongness hit me again, stronger this time. Alarm bells clanged in my head. Something was off, but I couldn’t begin to fathom what.

She never said that!

The feeling assailed me again like a wave.

This is wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

That's right... This was wrong. This wasn't real. These weren't my memories!

The world about me warped and twisted. A moment later, I felt something else, a sensation I could only describe as waking up.

"This isn't real... None of this is real..."

I felt a pang of shame at my gullibility. Worse, I was incredibly guilty that I put Hasegawa in that kind of situation at all. I wiped tears of frustration away with my sleeve, and the schoolyard blurred in sync.

This has to be an illusion.

As soon as I knew that, I looked around again to find myself in a thick fog.

"That wasn't just some hallucination. Damn... Goddammit!"

If I relaxed now, I'd be lost in that dream-world again. I shuddered to think of how my lust might warp Chiki, of all people, if that happened again. I couldn't see that. It'd break me for sure.

Before I left the foggy world I was locked in, though, I felt I had to give the walls just one good punch to let some frustration out. I needed some way, any way to let out all the pain and anger I was feeling.

"Thanks for helping me realize how pathetic I am, Shen."

It took only a moment to find a wall—the only remaining barrier keeping me trapped in that hellish fantasy land...

Shen

What a strange creature... What experiences. What memories!

I was shocked by what I found as I dug through the depths of his mind. His memories were simply exquisite, no two ways about it.

Hard as it was to accept, he was a denizen of another world. What I saw in his head was more fantastic and extraordinary than anything I'd ever seen my entire life. Everything was so strange and new. To let him die would be a horrible loss. Among what I saw, one of his hobbies set my heart aflame. I had to talk to him directly and learn of this art myself. Never had I been so enraptured by anything. This was more than a whim—this was my true deepest desire.

I had to retain my grip on this feeling. I had to release him from the prison. I had to talk to him, and for that, I would need some gesture of good faith, to illustrate I meant no further harm. An expression I found in his head—to show what's in one's heart, it went—seemed it would earn his trust. That was my hope, at least, though I didn't know how that would change anything.

I resolved to do just that and see how he reacted. Even should he react with shock, that would be the opening I desired to begin a dialogue.

“Very well, then...”

I observed my fog, preparing to release it—but I was taken aback by what I felt. Some great power was gathering within it, growing stronger by the second. The world itself wailed under the pressure.

“What?!”

Finally, the wall burst, marking the first time one of my barriers had ever been destroyed from within.

What strength! Has he no limits?

I hurriedly rolled over onto my side in a show of submission, my eyes wide and inviting. My broad, draconic chest was fully visible—that was the closest I could get to baring my heart, as those of his world said. I did not know if I would come across as sweet or harmless, however.

Finally, he emerged from the fog. “Fina—”

He froze at the sight of me, all his ease and casual swagger replaced with confusion.

“My apologies. May I ask you to lay down your arms?”

“I... Huh?”

“I know not the contents of your dream, but I sincerely apologize for any discomfort you felt. I regret to inform you that I saw your memories as well.”

“Great... So, what’s up with the slutty pose and the puppy-dog eyes?”

It seems my intent was lost on him.

I composed myself properly as he continued to speak.

“You said you don’t know what was in my dream? Weren’t you watching?”

“All I can do is create the dreamscape. The rest was supplied by you and you alone.”

For some reason, my response distressed him, and he put his head in his hands and moaned.

“Otherworlder, I am Shen. I am a Greater Dragon, one known as Invincible. As you surely noticed, I excel in the art of illusions.”

“I’m Makoto Misumi. Yeah, I’m not from around here, but apparently, I don’t have to tell you that.”

There was a slight hostility to his words. Evidently, he was upset I saw his memories. Despite his unhappiness, however, my request had to be heard all the same.

“Makoto-dono, will you form a Contract with me?”

I had already resolved to go travel him, but I knew he was heading for human civilization. A Contract, then, was the easiest way to go about it. It was special type of magic that declared one’s relationship with another to the world, and granted a variety of potent advantages. Should both parties be equal in strength, each would receive equal benefits—but if one was stronger than the other, they would receive power equal to their relative strengths. It had been an age since a Greater Dragon had made such a commitment, but I did not

feel it rushed or imprudent. I would grant him power, and he could tell me of his world—and there was one thing in particular I desperately needed to hear more about.

“A Contract?” he echoed. “What’s that?”

“Simply put, we would become allies, though there is a ritual to be performed. I doubt you shall ever have the opportunity to Contract with one as strong as I, one of the strongest dragons alive. I swear you shall not regret it!”

“Huh... The more the merrier, I guess...”

“Yes, exactly! I am greatly interested in your hobby! Decide quickly, and decide well!”

Even now, I couldn’t pry that one particular memory from my mind.

His face contorted, as though he were in pain. “Gah, isn’t this blackmail?! I feel so threatened! Just what dirty secret did you find in my head?!”

“Well? I believe we shall both benefit.”

“Gh... Fine! Fine, you win! I’ll form your Contract or whatever. Just don’t hold me back or anything, okay?”

“I swear to my dying breath, I’ll accompany you well!”

With that, I began the Contract ritual—he didn’t know it, after all.

But what of the three Contracts shall I choose?

A 50-50 Communion was out of the question. With his immense strength, I would be at his mercy. A 70-30 Patronage was just as unfeasible. Much as I hated to admit, I would still be overpowered... somehow. I frankly had no idea where his immense mana came from. That left the 80-20 split of a Domination. That suited my interests, though I was a tad humiliated that I, a Greater Dragon, was forced to such lengths. The Contract would, in essence, make me his thrall.

Hehehe... I like the sound of that.

I was curious what he... what my Master would do next. I was beside myself with enthusiasm at the thought of accompanying him. It would be the highlight of my centuries-long life, no doubt.

“Allow me to thank you, Makoto-sama, my Master... Treat me well.”

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I now knew two things. That wasn't a lot, but given the tiny amount of knowledge I had on this world, that was nothing to sneeze at.

The first thing was that the power I received from Tsukuyomi-sama was the ability to create areas. I could create a hemisphere and apply whatever qualities I wanted to everything inside it. I had relative control over the size of the area, too, but the effect got weaker the larger it was. Since I could only alter characteristics of everything in the space, I couldn't use it offensively—not unless I found a way to exclude myself. I didn't have the guts to experiment, either, since the last thing I wanted was to die to my own ability.

When I attacked Shen, I'd unwittingly turned my desire to track the dragon down into an area with detection qualities. I wasn't able to see my hand in front of my face, but I somehow knew exactly where Shen was because of that. That also implied I didn't have to see the full extent of my area to affect it, but I was still foggy on the details. It was a versatile skill all told, giving me yet another thing to thank Tsukuyomi-sama for. As long as I used my head, it could be a life saver.

The second thing I learned was the general geography of the Edge. It was a wide, empty tract of dead land in the southwestern corner of the world, and I was currently in the northwesternmost part of it. The Goddess really had sent me off to a corner to sit in forever. The hyuman settlement I was aiming for was on the northeastern side of the wastes. The Edge continued a great distance south, however, and whenever I asked how far it went, nobody seemed to know. That was a horrifying little nugget of information, and I was profoundly grateful I wasn't dropped further south.

This latter fact I learned from the highland orcs' village. After the battle with Shen, I returned to the cave I'd left Ema-san in to explain there was no need to offer up any more sacrifices. The orcs insisted I follow them back to their home to thank me, and I agreed readily enough. Everyone I met there was very generous in sharing what information they could.

Ema-san was shocked to learn that I'd made a Contract with Shen. Anyone who knew she used to be a dragon would be floored to see her now, and for good reason. Shen had taken on a human form after the Contract was formed. I'd been looking forward to riding a dragon around like a badass, but that felt pretty unfeasible now.

Contracts apparently had different terms and benefits depending on the type and could even change how one of party looked afterward. A so-called Communion, which was completely equal, resulted in no changes, but past that the weaker one would be forced to resemble the stronger one. My Contract with Shen was a Domination—an 80-20 split, of all things. She was acting cocky at the twenty, though.

That did mean that she looked a lot different, as proof of my dominating share of the Contract. She was almost entirely human, except for her eyes and razor-sharp fangs. Her face had taken on a cool and mature-looking almost Japanese profile, maybe due to my own heritage. I was surprised that along with that she wore a startlingly low-cut kimono draped over her tall and rather lean frame, despite having never worked out in that body once. I commented that she looked like some kind of warrior, and she demanded I call her a samurai instead—even though she probably would've looked better with a more Western aesthetic.

I asked her about her ability, Subspace, and that turned out to be another thing that had been changed by our Contract. She invited me inside, and instead of the empty void she'd described to me before, there was an endless plain of lush green grass. It was a welcome sight after the dusty wastes I'd been in for so long. Some of the wild grasses grew as high as my knees, and there was even a small forest a stone's throw away. I could see a good distance in all directions because of how flat it was, but there were no buildings in sight. There were no rivers, lakes, or other signs of water nearby, but I figured there had to be something with all the plant life around.

After using my power, I could confirm there were a few small streams in the area, plus some kinds of life. From how familiar the plants looked, I figured the animals could've been from Earth too.

The most notable things about the place, however, were the “sides.” That didn’t feel like the right word for them, to be frank, but there were foggy walls in the distance that marked the edges of the Subspace. I couldn’t see past them, and even with my detection abilities, I couldn’t pick up on anything on the opposite side. With the amount of space and how vast every horizon felt, though, it wasn’t claustrophobic at all. If anything, it was way too big for just the two of us...

“Seriously, what’s up with—”

Before I could finish my question, Shen interrupted me.

“What is this place?”

Why’re you asking me that?!

We decided to explore the area a bit, for thoroughness’ sake. Apparently, this little bubble of reality was now a full world unto itself. The Earth plants I recognized, especially the maples and Japanese cypress trees, made the air smell like home. I took what looked like a persimmon from a tree to find it tasted just like a persimmon should. I offered Shen a bite as well, and though she had no frame of reference, at least she thought it tasted good. The more we saw, the more surprised Shen became at the changes.

That’s kind of unsettling, given that her fog’s the only way to get here.

Shen explained that airborne mana was typically thin in the outside world, since the ground and plants alike absorbed mana to grow. A place like this should be impossible, then, and she frequently stopped to size up plants or soil as we walked.

If this is a whole new world, I guess that Goddess has no power here... That probably makes this the safest place I can be.

I joked that if she built a few buildings here, she could start Shen Real Estate, and she seemed to consider the idea seriously.

Soon afterward, we left the Subspace to return to the orc village. We’d earned a proper rest for the day, and the next morning, we’d make for the hyuman outpost. There was supposed to be a surplus of monsters in the way—but between myself and Shen, I was hopeful we could make it out in one piece.

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“Uh, Shen? Can you tell me what this is?”

“Oh? Can’t you tell, Master?”

“The orcs have come to say goodbye to us?”

She puffed her chest out with pride. “No! They’re moving in!”

What exactly happened while I was asleep? Where are they even moving, in a dusty hellscape like this? There’s few places you could survive out here, and moving the whole village across the wastes is just stupid.

Now that I looked more closely at the gathered piggy crowd, I saw that each family had most of their furniture and belongings waiting outside their homes already. It sure looked like they were about to pick up and leave.

Have they been planning this for a while or something?

The village elder bowed deeply to me. “Thank you for your generosity.”

My what? Did Shen promise them something?

They’d put us up with food and shelter for a night, so I figured we could at least protect them while they headed to their new home.

“Where are you headed?” I asked. “Would you like us to provide some extra security?”

The elder gave me a wide-eyed look, then glanced at Shen. It was hard to tell, but I guessed he was confused.

Shen turned to me. “Master?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it not a harsh life, here in the Edge?”

“Yeah.”

“These kindly orcs have been on the hunt for a new home for ages, but have yet to find a place that could support them. The journey alone would pose countless threats.”

“I bet... The land here’s not exactly friendly.”

What’s she getting at?

“As such, I’ve invited them to live in my world!”

“... Huh?”

Live in her what?

“How very dense of you... The Subspace! The wide expanse of fertile land our Contract has granted me! What could it be if not a world unto itself?”

Seriously?! I was joking about the whole real estate thing! She’s not seriously trying to put a whole town in there, is she?

“Are you sure you want all these people living *in* your Subspace?” I asked uncertainly.

“Of course! With the abundance of greenery, fresh air, and clean water, I can imagine no issues. I investigated it myself last night! I threw a fair share of wildlife within for good measure, so between them and the natural fauna, anyone could live there! Rather, I would say the soil begs to be plowed!”

Wow... She did her homework.

I was a little worried about letting wild monsters loose in there. They’d start eating the other wildlife for sure, and the whole ecosystem would collapse in no time. I had to check with Shen later to make sure there was nothing too problematic in there, and to cull any dangerous monsters before they became a problem. Hopefully, they’d just be good food for the villagers.

Wait, could there be Japanese wolves in there? I’ve always wanted to see a real one... I’ll have to check before they all become monster chow.

“Shen-sama was most generous in allowing us to live in her holy land,” the elder told me gravely. “It would be blasphemous to refuse such an offer.”

Holy land, huh? I bet he thinks all those sacrifices finally paid off...

As it happened, the sacrifices were all part of the demons’ plot, and Shen confirmed what I’d heard. Everyone in the village knew the Greater Dragon, but Shen wasn’t aware they were offering sacrifices, or that the highland orcs had a

settlement in the area at all. They worshipped her out of one-sided faith alone, and she wasn't a god besides. I wasn't about to chew them out for whatever they wanted to call the Subspace, though.

"You really decided all that in one night?" I asked.

The elder nodded firmly. There was no doubt in any of the orcs' eyes.

Shen grinned at me. "See? Surely, you've no complaint with this either, Master?"

"Yeah, I don't mind. Where's everyone going to live, though? There aren't any houses in the Subspace."

Their only option now was to camp out, but there were over a hundred villagers in all. It felt a little unfeasible.

"No houses?" Shen scoffed. "Fret not, I'll be swallowing this village in its entirety!"

"You'll what?!"

So, the village is just going to disappear from the face of the world?! What if rumors start going around about vanishing villages?! Wait, no... In a place like this, I bet nobody even knows this village exists.

"I need but envelop the buildings in my fog. Mere child's play! I've even asked the villagers to keep their most valuable possessions with them, should the worst come to pass."

She's thought this out pretty thoroughly... Wait.

"You're not planning on inviting even more people after this, are you?" I asked her.

"Of course! I've no intention of restricting immigration to those with pertinent abilities either."

Isn't she basically my familiar at this point? Hasn't it occurred to her even once to ask my take on any of this? She's practically ignoring me! She hasn't shown me any respect at all, outside of what she calls me!

If even a so-called Domination was this imbalanced, I could only imagine I'd be a slave to her will in any other kind of Contract.

"Ah, peaceful coexistence! What bliss! I shall found a city the likes of which this world has never seen!"

A real-life city building sim, here at the literal world's edge? This has gotta be a joke.

I let out a heavy sigh. "I can't keep up with this."

"Next we'll need a race who can sew," Shen mused. "Blacksmiths too."

"Okay, I'll bite. The blacksmiths are obvious, but why do you need seamsters so badly?"

"What a foolish thing to ask!" Shen huffed. "How could one craft a kimono without a professional? How could we produce katanas without a proper smithy?!"

She's serious about this... but those are both just things she wants for herself, right? She's practically wearing a kimono already.

There were other things that seemed more important to me, but Shen's mind was already made up.

"Master! I've finished transporting the orcs. The Subspace has its first official residents! Now, let us celebrate!"

I hurriedly looked around, and sure enough, the entire village was gone without a trace. I had no idea when it'd even happened.

"I've left a clone of myself within to properly introduce them. We shall travel through the morning toward the hyuman settlement, rest in the Subspace, then gain distance in the evening once more!"

She was a little too excited about it for my tastes.

I didn't even know she could make clones... When's she planning on telling me what all her powers are?

I asked her about it as we walked, and apparently all Greater Dragons could make basic servants capable of handling errands and following simple

instructions. The way she talked about them made me think of robots.

I just hope the Goddess can't do stuff like that, I found myself thinking as we continued together through the endless wastes.

As it happened, the reason Shen was so fixated on weaving and blacksmithing was the same as why she was so interested in me. It was simple.

“Ah, Master! A question about samurai!”

She was thoroughly hooked—

“I cannot stop thinking about the firefighters of old Edo... How valiant! How manly!”

—hooked on old period dramas.

She waved her hand and conjured an image on a billowing screen of smoke, chuckling at the buff men displayed there.

Is there anything her fog can't do? And here I thought it was just annoying... She doesn't have great taste in guys, but I can't blame her for her drama obsession. I watched them tons back home, after all.

“Show me more of your memories when we stop for lunch, Master!”

“You already saw them all!”

“Verily, I have them copied so I may peruse them at my leisure, but copies cannot compare to seeing them directly! Please, Master, I beg of you~!”

How's it any different?! I sure hope she doesn't copy peoples' memories without their consent often... She's pretty annoying when she wants to be too.

She sighed dreamily. “Oh, if only I could watch these period dramas of yours on a proper television...!”

“Sure, whatever you like. Just stop digging through my head.”

I'm not going to give her free access to my brain just so she can watch TV!

Shen gasped dramatically. “How heartless! You would rob my reason for living from me so easily?!”

“We literally met a few days ago! Besides, you just said you copied them all!”

“Ugh... But they’re *recordings!* I require them fresh from the source!”

“How exactly is it any different? If you can explain in a way that makes sense, I’ll let you see the period dramas, but *only* the period dramas.”

“It... It’s as different as a CG gallery and a proper sex scene replayer!”

Shit, is that a threat?! She’s totally threatening to tell everyone about my porn games!

Her gamer phrasing in particular sent a cold shiver up my spine. She was out for blood—especially since the difference was the exact same between a picture and a video, and that was a far more innocent comparison to make.

“F-Fine, you win! I’ll allow it.”

“What generosity! I chose my Master wisely!”

So, why do I get the feeling I chose my companion very, very poorly?

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Several days passed, and the situation had evolved so quickly I felt ready to vomit from nausea.

The orcs were making themselves at home in the Subspace, and every time Shen and I visited for lunch and dinner, Ema-san and a few others gave us a progress report.

Shen herself was oddly set on watching the dramas on a proper TV, and she puzzled over its construction every time we were in the Subspace. I was shocked to learn that she had something in mind for a proper hard drive and CDs, and she left at one point to retrieve them. When she returned, she had a stack of translucent crystal disks that looked mind-numbingly expensive.

I asked Shen if it was easy to record human memories, and she had some interesting things to say. Apparently, nobody truly forgot anything—the memories were simply locked away in the recesses of our minds, where we couldn’t properly access them. She was the only one who could fish information out of those gaps and reconstruct them, and that power even applied to herself.

That's one useful ability. She can draw them out and play them like a DVD—examining them for missed details, fast forwarding or slowing down, dividing them into chapters... Wait, is that all I am to her? A living CD?!

I generally left Shen to her technical challenges and spent a lot of my time in the Subspace wandering around and exploring. While I walked, I thought a lot about the active volcano that we'd be coming across soon. There, we would supposedly meet dwarves.

It was the first time I'd be meeting human-ish people in this world, excluding Shen in her new form. The dwarves were supposedly bushy-bearded master blacksmiths like the fantasy stories said. I didn't doubt that Shen's first words to them would be a half-order, half-demand to make her a katana, and I was already feeling a little sorry for them. Just watching the orc females slaving away to make something like a kimono brought a tear to my eyes. She would claim new victims soon enough, it seemed.

Apparently, Shen was determined to advance her Subspace and the growing community within. We'd have a good shot at scooping up most of the peoples living in the Edge of the World at this rate, and I was getting worried that we'd wind up with a small country on our hands.

Even the monsters called this wasteland the Edge, and for good reason. Nobody had properly settled it for several reasons. The most obvious one was the environment—the days were blisteringly hot, and the nights were freezing cold, and the ground couldn't support any crops, let alone the near total lack of water. Most of the wildlife was also horrifyingly strong, so it was survival of the fittest on multiple levels. Almost everyone living here needed to be skilled enough to defend themselves, and if we took a whole country full of these strong fighters out into the world, it'd probably upset any preexisting power balances.

"The dwarves should be fine, though, if they live way out here... Hopefully that won't cause any problems."

My main worry was Shen, since there was no telling what she might try to pull, but I could only attempt damage control after the fact. I was powerless to stop her in general, since I had no say in her Shen Real Estate ambitions or her

period drama binges. I had nothing in this world, and it was all I could do to survive. Sure, I was aiming for human civilization, but I had no plans for what I'd do when I got there. I had to figure out what I was capable of—no, what I *wanted* from my new life here.

I'd also been thinking about my special field-creating ability a bit more and decided to dub it Realm. Whatever energy it ran on, it wasn't mana, since Shen didn't detect it in my fight against her. It was virtually undetectable as far as I knew, but that was hardly surprising since it was a personal gift from one of the Three Divine Children.

I also had more time to examine the relationship between the size of my Realm and the potency of its effect. For instance, I was able to heal a pair of injured orcs in the blink of an eye by making my Realm as small as possible and giving it a healing quality. It was frankly more than I'd expected. If I made my Realm small enough to only cover myself with a strengthening quality, using only a table knife I could cut down whole trees so thick I couldn't wrap my arms around them, slicing through them like butter.

Currently, I could only give my Realm one quality at a time. Though it was possible to make one that enhanced both physical and magical attacks, but that was the most complex thing I could manage. Alternatively, I was getting great results from casting my Realm over a massive area with a detecting quality. Neither of these uses were refined enough to be helpful in the heat of a fight, meaning I could only put it to good use in a support capacity. I could revisit that idea if I found out more about it later—there wasn't exactly an instruction manual attached, so it would take time to figure out completely.

Additionally, I got my hands on some proper weapons—the orcs were generous enough to give me a short sword and a bow.

The orcs had practically begged me to keep the blade, which was startlingly sharp. The hilt was decorated in a way that none of the orcs' weapons were, and the blade was made out of a strange semi-translucent crystal. It sent small prisms of light dancing when I held it up to the sun. The hilt, which was made of the same crystal ore, felt oddly organic in my hands, more than any metal, and the material was far harder than any brittle crystal could be. I couldn't begin to guess what the ore was. The entire weapon was about a foot and a half long,

with the ornamented blade taking up a foot of it. My best guess was that it used to be a ritual knife—an athame, if I remembered correctly. I got the impression it could soak up mana from moonlight if you left it out just right.

At any rate, that settled close-quarters combat. I'd have to avoid hitting anything too hard, though, since it was far too pretty to break. Even the sheath was artfully made, and from the detailed engraving on it, I guessed it was made from some kind of horn or bone. The blade would serve its role as a weapon well, despite what I assumed was its original purpose. If I had to, I could probably sell it for a pretty penny too.

The bow, however, was far less impressive. The orcs almost never used them to hunt, so it was cobbled together by a local craftsman. It was better than nothing, though, and I gratefully accepted it. I'd have to be careful not to draw an arrow too fast or hard, but it was plenty useable.

In addition to my new weaponry, I'd also practiced my spellcasting with Bridt quite a bit more. Since I could fire it as effectively as I could an arrow, it made sense to make spellcasting my main combat style which meant my short sword would be a backup option. Keeping enemies at range between Bridts and my arrows meshed with my previous experiences in archery perfectly. Bridt in particular was even more powerful and versatile than I'd first assumed, and I was confident I could do well.

I asked Ema-san more about the incantations, and it turned out that she simply said the chant in the order they were written in the old magic tomes, and nobody knew what any of the words meant. The orcs had been passing down these written incantations for ages, it seemed, with tomes passing from mage to skilled apprentice. Since I knew the exact meaning of the incantations, though, I figured I could thank the Comprehension skill the Goddess gave me for that. She'd thought she'd only given me the ability to talk with monsters, but evidently it was far more useful than that.

I drew circles in the air with my index finger, and four small spheres manifested around it—red, blue, black, and yellow.

Man, is this useful.

The incantation Ema-san taught me generated a fire-element Bridt that was only good for shooting at things, but with a few small modifications, I could create more projectiles or add an explosive effect. I also picked up a few other elements too. Tweaking the incantation or changing up how I formed the spheres themselves gave me some interesting results, too, like using a different formula or variables in math.

I'd spent the majority of my time the past few days messing around with magic since I didn't have anything better to do, and I'd made some interesting finds. For instance, similar spells had some sections of their incantation in common, and even seemingly distinct spells like Light and Bridt had similarities. I didn't have any samples of healing magic to mess around with, but I assumed recovery spells and ailment-removing spells overlapped in much the same way. I was afraid at first that incantations were inextricable and couldn't be broken down and recombined like I was doing, so I was pleasantly surprised. Messing with the formulae and trying new things felt great, despite me having sucked at both math and physics back on Earth. Seeing the results change before my eyes added a whole new dimension of fun that I was sorely lacking back in school.

That said, my control was far from perfect. I couldn't figure out how to make a green wind-element Bridt no matter how hard I tried. I assumed that it was a matter of personal aptitude, though, since the similar-seeming thunder Bridt was almost as impossible to get a handle on.

As it happened, I had the greatest affinity for the blue water-elemental Bridt. Next after that was the black dark-elemental stuff, then earth and fire roughly tied for third. I could get thunder magic to manifest briefly, but I was nowhere close to putting it to practical use. There were a few other elements I tried, but water was by far the best element for me.

*So even with superhuman mana, I'm still subject to affinities and the like...
Noted.*

I spent most of my time in the Subspace testing out my magic as a result. I offered to help the orcs with moving in, but Shen wouldn't have it. Apparently, as the "lord" of the Subspace, manual labor was beneath me—though that sounded pretty stupid to me.

Since the entire village had been transferred wholesale into the Subspace, everyone had a home of their own, though a few villagers had their houses banged up a bit in the process. While the orcs worked on a house for Shen and I, the two of us were living in a tent. Said tent, however, was packed with stills from period dramas, which Shen had apparently plucked out of my memories.

“... Huh?”

As I looked at the images, however, I noticed a few that were out of place.

“Old family photos, eh?”

It was a shot of the five of us in our front foyer. Dad always insisted on getting a photo there once a year. On the left was my dad, and beside him, Yukikoneesan. Then came Mari in the middle, me, and my mom bookended us on the other side. It was the most recent photo, I noticed; the one we’d taken earlier that year.

“I guess this is the last one,” I muttered sadly. “It’s not like we can take any more as a family...”

I felt a pang of sadness. I thought I’d given up on my old world already, but somehow the thought wasn’t any easier to stomach.

“—No, enough of that!”

There was no point dwelling on that now. I’d only make myself sad and homesick.

But wait... This means I can get photos of my folks.

“Mom and Dad came from this world, after all, so maybe I could take a look into what they were up to?”

I was already ignoring the Goddess’ demand and getting as far from the endless dust of the Edge as soon as possible. I might as well travel the world with a photo of my parents—or a portrait based off a photo, maybe, so I didn’t stick out too much—and learn what my parents did in this world before coming to Earth.

That could be fun... All right, that’s what I’ll do!

“Now that’s decided...”

I had to start by finding someone good at art. I was horrible at drawing, so there was zero chance of anyone recognizing my parents from one of my pictures. With any luck, one of the orcs could do that for me.

Finally, I had a goal. I was dying to know what my parents were up to before coming to my world, since contracting with the Goddess herself to leave the world altogether was a big deal. There had to be a story behind it.

“Well, then... It’s still early, but we may as well head out now!”

I exited the tent and headed for the Subspace’s exit; a gate Shen had established some time earlier. There was no structure to it, per se, and it was just a patch of glittering fog that took you out. Even though I was Shen’s master, I had virtually no direct control over the Subspace, and I couldn’t enter or leave freely like she could. She’d explained the full process to me, though, and with any luck I would have some more control soon. It couldn’t hurt to have an emergency exit if I needed it.

“Master!!!”

It was Shen’s voice.

Right, I guess I should give her a name... She’s been pestering me for a while now.

I suggested Shin a while ago, just to shut her up, but she refused outright. I thought it was a decent name, though. She’d also shot down all the names I could think of related to her powers, like Phantom and Illusion, and even further afield options like Dream and Mirage. Apparently, she wanted something Japanese-sounding—specifically from the Edo era she fangirled so hard over. If she just wanted something that sounded like that, I could just call her Kiyohime or something and call it a day.

I turned to face Shen—and stopped when I saw the bundle of bloody hair in her arms.

Isukimichi

Chapter 3

Shen, with all her lanky height, was holding an incredibly hairy old man in a princess carry. It was a surreal sight, to say the least, and the contrast alone blew my mind.

Can we not have any more trouble, just for a little while? Shouldn't I get a break after that last boss fight?!

"Master, we should stay inside the Subspace for the time being."

At her words, I pointed at the guy in her arms. "Does he have something to do with it?"

He seemed pretty pissed at my bluntness, but I didn't care. A mystery guy showing up on the doorstep with wounds like that meant trouble, period.

Shen nodded calmly. "Precisely. How very astute, Master."

"So, what's the problem?" I asked.

"We're under attack."

"Attack? How? There's no way for anyone to get into this world except us."

The Subspace was a full world unto itself, and about as distinct from the outside world as Earth was. I couldn't imagine anyone getting in through the interworld barrier without Shen's say-so.

Can you maybe explain this in a way that actually makes sense, you former snake? Go apologize to your garter snake parents while you're at it!

"Our attacker is rather unusual," Shen explained. "And hungry as always, I should mention... Look, there she is now."

"Could you at least try to be worried?!"

“Master.”

Just answer me! Wait, Master? Me...?

She pointed behind me. “There.”

“... Huh?”

I turned around to a horrifying sight. Long, slender black legs, so unnatural it was like someone tried to overlay CG on live footage, were creeping out of a crack in the sky. The rift groaned wider as more and more legs skittered through, followed by a pair of glistening fangs.

“Dammit, does everyone wanna eat me?!” I screamed, my heart twisting with despair. “Ughhh... This can’t be happening...”

The intruder wasn’t as big as Shen’s dragon form, but it was massive all the same. Thick hairs covered its shiny chitinous skin, definitely insect-like but nothing like any bug back on Earth. It had to be nearly four large tents long in all its obsidian spidery horror.

Shen cackled at the spider in amusement. “Not a shred of composure to your name, is there? Dangle a meal before your bulbous eyes and you lose all semblance of sanity!”

“At least somebody’s enjoying themselves!” I snapped at my familiar. “Why don’t you deal with it, then?! You know that thing, right?!”

“Impossible,” she replied flatly. “I cannot handle such a gluttonous beast—not to mention that I cannot fight without a katana!”

“Enough bullshitting already!”

Enough with the lame excuses! What about your water magic, or your fog? Did you just forget about all your illusion tricks?! I clearly remember you told me you’re great with wind magic too!

The spider, evidently tired of my and Shen’s back-and-forth, lunged forward with startling speed. The flailing of its front limbs in particular made it almost impossible to read, but it was definitely heading for me.

Shen puffed out her chest proudly. “Rest assured, I shall guard my orcs and my city! And, of course, this unfortunate dwarf. I simply require you to squash

that loathsome insect.”

There was a casual levity to her voice.

Gimme a fucking break... Just look at all the saliva flying off that thing! I'm its lunch!

It spat a glob of webby strands at me as it approached.

“Webs?!”

I managed to avoid it, and the webbing splatted onto the ground. It looked incredibly sticky, and I had no doubt that one touch would totally immobilize me.

“Uh, Shen? A little help?!”

“What grace, Master! I knew you could handle her.”

“What the hell even is this thing?!”

“I know not her name, but she has lived in these lands since ancient times, always hungry. She's thoroughly unstoppable once her appetite has awakened her, and once her stomach is full, she slumbers in a new land until her hunger prompts her to stir again.”

I'd known Shen's name from the very beginning, but the similarities with the Chinese folklore made me assume she was a clam or something. Even if the name rang a bell, there was no guarantee this world's monsters followed Earth's tales. There were plenty of mythological giant spiders, but I didn't know any of them that went on rampages like this. From the sound of it alone, both the Greek Arachne and the Japanese Tsuchigumo were similar, but neither felt like a perfect match.

If only I had some idea of what specific spider this thing was, I might know how to deal with it...

I had to size it up from scratch, then. Between the blackness of its carapace and webbing alike, I didn't think dark magic would do anything at all. Most bugs in games, at least, were weak to fire...

While I was thinking, however, the spider rapidly closed the distance between us. It was just as fast as I'd expected, fast enough that I couldn't get out of the

way of one of its clawed legs in time. I was forced to draw my sword and slash at it instead.

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

It let out a mind-numbing screech as the impact sent me roughly to the ground.

“Guh!”

Pain shot through my body, but from my back, not my arm. It seemed I could safely block its claws, at least, though I’d get nowhere if I stuck to the defensive. There had to be some way to go on the offensive.

Let’s see if fire can drive this thing back...

I started casting Bridt, but modified it partway through so that my short sword was wreathed in flame. Then, I cast another Bridt, stopping it the second before it fired and letting it float in the air above me. That way, I could continue passively feeding mana into it while I fought. It should work like a charged attack if I cast it right, and that would let me fire off a powerful attack as soon as I saw an opening.

The spider continued slashing at me in a mad dance, interspersed with snapping lunges from its massive fangs. It was hard to dodge everything, and I barely had time to think ahead. I could practically feel how hungry it was, and how desperately it wanted to eat me—a deep, aching hunger that had probably plagued it since it was born. I almost felt bad for it, but not anywhere near bad enough to let it eat me. I tried talking to it a few times, but it only growled hungrily in reply.

It’s completely lost its mind... Poor horrifying spider-monster.

That gave me a potential out, though. I concentrated hard on its attack pattern.

Right, right, swipe, diagonal, left jab, fangs, then... Yes, another right! There’s a pattern!

I deflected the second right swing, slipping in close to a leg toward its underbelly. I aimed up at the joint between the leg and torso, deploying a

strengthening Realm targeted on myself as I did so. I threw in some mana on top of that for some extra power. I could feel both effects kick in successfully.

“Hiyaaaaaaaaah!!!”

The blade connected with the joint. With a hit like that, I should be able to do some damage.

“... Huh?!”

I gasped in surprise at what happened next. The leg simply *fell off*, my short sword slicing through unimpeded.

That was way easier than I'd thought... Is it really that frail?

“GYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

The spider hurriedly scuttled away on its remaining legs, and for the first time I could feel something similar to fear from it. I stepped back, too, just in case.

This isn't too bad... I think I can win now.

No sooner than the thought crossed my mind did the spider leap toward me, after briefly tensing, closing the distance in the blink of an eye.

“Shit! Oh, *shit!*”

Even more terrifying than the jump itself was the mass of webbing it spewed at me in midair. As it landed, it swiped at me with its forelegs—one of which, I realized, should've been the one I'd just cut off.

Damn, this thing regenerates fast!

Intimidation and speed aside, though, it was a telegraphed and simple attack, and I had no trouble dodging the claws and webbing both.

“How about this?!”

I managed to counter every attack that came at me. Between my magical strengthening and my Realm, my body felt far lighter and more responsive than before. I finally had enough breathing space to think through my situation. I sent four more legs flying at once, all of which scattered into black ash. Unable to flee with half of its legs gone, it stumbled awkwardly backward and stared at

me. I couldn't imagine what it was thinking—its irrepressible hunger had driven it totally insane.

“Oh, please tell me this is the end of this!”

The flames covering my sword were weakening fast, so I opted to create a new Bridt in my offhand and transfer the dying flames off my blade into it. Then, shaping the flames into an arrow, I launched it at the spider.

The point lodged into the spider's gaping maw, just as I was hoping—an ideal head-on hit. As soon as I confirmed contact, I released the massive Bridt I'd been charging, shaping it into a spear and sending it straight into its bloated abdomen. With both flaming arrows sticking out of it, I quickly backed up to avoid the coming explosion.

Okay, this has got to do some damage.

Both arrows exploded in unison, with such force there was no way the spider would come out of it alive. When the smoke cleared, however, it was still mostly in one piece. Its remaining legs were twitching and spasming disconcertingly, sending a chill up my spine.

Jeez, just how durable is that thing?

Luckily, the twitching quickly subsided, and when it lay still I knew I'd won. I was a lot calmer through the ordeal than I'd been with Shen, no doubt thanks to my experience. That, or it was straightforward enough that I had more time to think and could act more confidently.

This makes two bosses down. I sure hope I got a level or two from all that...

“lhyigh...”

I froze. That didn't sound right.

“Hyaghah~” it whimpered.

An inexplicable fear coursed through my veins. Something was very wrong here.

“Master?” Shen called out to me, discomfort clear in her voice. “Unless I'm mistaken...”

“What? What’s wrong? Why do you sound so uncomfortable?!”

“Perhaps... Perhaps you hit her so hard she *enjoyed* it.”

“I... Huh? What?!”

The giant spider’s a masochist?! You’ve gotta be kidding me!

“lhyahyhyahyhyahyaaaaaaaaa!”

The spider let out something that sounded like a cry of ecstasy as it stumbled to its newly-regenerated legs. My gaze darted nervously between the horny arachnid and Shen’s troubled frown.

“This can’t be happening... Nooooooo!”

Despite my cries of despair, my endless fight with the spider began anew.

“Hah... Hah...”

I watched the colossal spider spasm, dreading what I knew that meant. Its legs were useless to it, and massive Bridt fire-spears protruded like spikes all over its chest, abdomen, and even its head. It was no closer to dying than it was the first time—no, the quivering was from *joy*, not pain, fear, or anything a sane creature would be feeling. I just hoped there would finally be some kind of lingering damage this time.

“I hope that’s the platonic kind of bliss... How is she this tough, though?”

Shen shook her head disappointedly. “To think she would go to such lengths... What a miserable fool.”

Apparently, she’d met the spider before to similar results, but it fled after she hurt it enough. Shen saw it as nothing more than a nuisance, and she decided to make me fight it for the experience. She was so draconian with her methods I felt ready to cry.

What exactly is this thing, anyway?

The fire-stakes I was pinning it down with eventually burned out, disappearing as if melting into its body. I noticed for the first time that it was focusing on taking in my spears now. Since there were no holes left, it had to be sucking in

the mana from my spells and using that to heal. Not even crushing its head had a lasting effect, and I couldn't find any weak points—assuming it even had any.

Damn, what a pain.

"Igh... Ihya, hahaaa!"

I was getting dizzy from exhaustion, and I wasn't ready for it to be fully healed already. As soon as the last of the spears faded, it charged at me once more.

This again? I guess I have to keep hitting it until it finally dies... Oh, well.

I created a few more Bridts to counter it, not caring that I was getting a little sloppy.

"Seriously, all the monsters in this world are so—"

I didn't get to finish my sentence, however, as it suddenly reared up in an attack I'd never seen before.

"Ihyahyaaa~!"

"Oh, shit!"

I can't dodge it!

Its taloned legs started rapidly jabbing and stabbing out at me in a frenzied flurry. One of the spear-like thrusts landed in my arm, burying itself deeply within.

Damn, it's got me pinned! Why pull out the mind games now?!

I was defenseless as a second clawed appendage bit into my leg.

"Gh...!"

I deployed a Realm at the last moment, centered around my lower torso. That only delayed the pain, though—it must've broken through my Realm, somehow. While the remaining force wasn't enough to run me through, its second claw was buried at least as deeply as the first. It drove its claw methodically deeper, working its way through me until my strength finally gave out and my back collided roughly with a tree. I was literally pinned down.

"Gah!" I gasped as the air was forced from my lungs.

The obsidian arachnid eagerly drew itself closer, nearing its fangs to my helpless exposed flesh. I frantically looked away.

This is it! I'm gonna get eaten!

I could feel hot air on my skin as its breath hit me. The last thing I thought was that it wouldn't start with my face, at least.

"Ungh... Argh...!"

"Hehh... Ahyahya~!"

... The hell? Why's it giggling and drinking my blood like that?

It seemed like it had stabbed and pinned me to a tree so it could drink my blood, not eat me alive. While I was still working through the most turbulent emotional rollercoaster of my life, I finally realized that it had shaken me off its talons, and I was freed from the tree.

Shen

Not once did I imagine the spider would be such a threat. No matter how many powerful spells Master fired at the beast, no matter how many times her legs were cleaved from her body, it made no difference. The horror regenerated with sickening speed and assailed him again. It was a brutish and inelegant fighting style by any measure. Even with twenty-odd spears of flame piercing her body, she continued to twitch and convulse with pleasure. Nonetheless, Master bested me in battle, and I was convinced he would be victorious here as well, and for that reason alone, I was impressed by the beast's determination.

She began to stretch again, her legs reaching across the grass like shadows at dusk. Master seemed no less surprised than I was and was forced to fight on the defensive once more. Her attack was direct and mindless, however, as I would expect of a dumb animal. Despite the experience she gave Master, it was high time the fiend left our world for good.

In the blink of an eye, however, the creature had pinned Master to a tree and had sunk her fangs into his shoulder.

Hm. Perhaps I let her roam free a tad too long. My apologies, Master, I shall attend to your wounds immediately.

“Hm? Is that...?”

He was moving, intent clear in his eyes. It was an admirable sight to say the least, one that sent a shiver up my spine. Then, something between the pair exploded, a blast violent enough that even a near-immortal horror could not take directly. She scuttled away from the burst, and with his limbs free once more, Master got to his feet. About him were four crimson spheres. They elongated into slender arrows one by one, tearing through the air toward their mark—and no sooner than one left did another Bridt take its place.

The incessant red arrows, each nearly the size of a spear, drove into the beast’s body, one after the other. His earlier spell had hovered about him accumulating power for some time, but this new trick was a different feat altogether. No, from the sheer rate at which the spheres were forming and shaping, he surely must have modified the incantation such that they would form, fire, and prepare the next automatically. In effect, the spell would provide devastating speed and power as long as the caster retained sufficient mana.

A Greater Dragon had succeeded in such feats in the past, but from what I recalled, the mere sight of it made my head split. To think he had done so himself from the most fundamental of spells was inconceivable.

Such a trick would not work, however. He could hurt her, granted, but she could simply absorb his mana to undo any damage dealt. Rather than stopping, he began to move once more. There was a calm to his eyes, but there was a murderous pressure within their depths. My breath caught in my throat as I watched for his next move. His arm extended, brandishing his athame in one hand, azure light erupting forth from it and wisps of frost taking flight. It was beautiful beyond description.

“So, he’s been holding back his full power.”

I had assumed he was fighting the spider with all he had, but evidently not. Both these new techniques were a cut above his earlier spells, not to mention

the change in element—water, it seemed. It suited him far better than fire, but that was likely a product of our Contract. There was a high chance he was more naturally proficient with a different element.

Ah... I see now.

These techniques were making heavy use of atmospheric mana, whereas his earlier techniques relied on his own stores alone—and only small amounts, at that. He must have been restraining himself out of fear of the effect on the Subspace. That caution was now thrown to the wind, and the determination in his eyes spoke to his desire to slay his foe at any cost. This next attack, then, would decide the fate of the battle, for better or worse. It was my duty to watch his strike to the end.

Master released his weapon, and the blade darted through the air toward the spider of its own accord, a streak of brilliant blue light trailing behind it. I was surprised the athame could withstand so much mana, let alone catalyze the spell itself. Evidently, it was no mere ritual dagger.

The streak of blue burst through the sadistic storm of red arrows, running the arachnid through. The light rapidly intensified and spread, enveloping the spider and even Master himself. The entirety of the Subspace trembled and quaked, as though the ground and the very air we breathed feared his power.

Finally, the light began to slowly fade. I realized with horror that a faint ashen silhouette of the spider had been burned into the rock face behind it.

Ha... hahahaha... I have no words for this.

That strike could slay a dragon. Aside from myself, there were several Greater Dragons that specialized in raw defense—the most notable of which was the so-called Sand Wave—but not even she could escape such a blow unscathed. Rather, the wound could even prove lethal.

I could only stare blankly at Master as he approached the rock pile, likely intent on reclaiming his blade.

“Still hungry, pervert?”

The words barely left his mouth before his legs gave out, however, falling back with exhaustion. He must have run himself to exhaustion—hardly

surprising, given the sheer amount of mana he used. That final blow must have sent him over the edge, both physically and mentally.

Fine. I suppose I can carry him to safety.

I had barely taken a step toward him when movement in the corner of my eye stopped me.

“What?!”

The spider *crawled out of the rubble*. She had somehow survived a blow that would slay any Greater Dragon. Even if that beast were the manifestation of darkness itself, it could not have withstood the assault. I ran for Master, but I was too far and too slow. The spider eagerly leapt on his prone body.

Damn! Never have I known such regret! Damn, damn, da—what?!

The fiend made no move to eat Master. Rather, it was nuzzling him affectionately.

“Ahyahyaaa!”

Again with the odd sounds of pleasure!

“That was sooo goooooood~!”

“... What?”

It sounded like it just spoke.

“That was the best... You’re the best! I’m so full! I’ve never been so satisfied~!”

Nothing made sense. The spider was talking, a feat I had assumed was impossible.

“Wow, wow, wow~! That was so painful, so delicious, and felt soooooo amazing! I’ve never had anything like it!”

Intelligent or no, she was perverse to her core. I was tempted to leave and never lay eyes on her again, but Master was still in danger... Though his virginity seemed at greater risk now than his life.

“Pardon the intrusion, but do you have a minute?”

“I’ll never leave you! I’m going to stay with you forever and ever and ever!”

“Listen to me, slut!”

Offering a silent apology to Master, I delivered a swift kick to one of the arachnid’s legs.

“Ow! Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!”

“Master has more than earned his rest. It has been an age, hasn’t it, spider?”

“Um. Who are you?”

“I suppose I cannot ask too much, given my present form... I am Shen, the Greater Dragon.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. I’ve been sooo hungry up until now I couldn’t even think straight... Wait, did you call him Master? How do you know this lovely little gentleman?!”

I was not anticipating that change of topic, to say the least.

“I contracted with him a mere few days ago. As such, our bond is thoroughly uni—”

I cut myself off. The spider was glaring at me murderously. She couldn’t possibly be jealous, could she?

“Huh... Equal partners in a Communion, are you? I see how it is. I know a thing or two about Contracts, after all. I just have to kill you and remake the Contract with him, right?”

Everything she said was fundamentally wrong, not to mention that she was putting the cart before the horse.

“No, wait. In what world would I call a Communion partner ‘Master’?”

What an idiotic creature... Her brain must be pitifully small, as befitting common vermin. I suppose she does not need intelligence to hunt, after all.

She reared back a little in confusion. *“So, what, it’s a Patronage thing? Don’t tell me you’re the smaller share?”*

Her surprise was understandable. Normal humans would be unable to contract with a Greater Dragon at all.

I shook my head. “No, a Domination. An 80-20 Domination. I am, in essence, his servant, hence this form.”

I spun about just once to show her my new hyuman guise. She was jealous, no doubt—I could wear kimonos *and* use a katana, after all, and I was stronger than I had ever been in dragon form. I had no regrets as to my transformation at all.

“A Domination?! Aren’t you supposed to be a Greater Dragon?”

“Don’t say that—my pride yet stings. More importantly, you should know what that means.”

“You’re in a hyuman form now, so... Seriously?!”

Apparently, she was smarter than I gave her credit for.

“Exactly. Try to linger near Master, and the stress will surely break him. If you wish to accompany him, worthless whore that you are, you had best appear more hyuman.”

“Doesn’t he have to agree to this, though?”

“’Tis often better to ask for forgiveness than permission... though I did indeed receive consent for my Contract.”

“... And you’re sure you’re his servant?”

“Naturally. Would you prefer proof of our physical bond as well?”

“Uh, no, I’ll be doing that before you.”

“Very well. I, however, shall be receiving my name first.”

I was unwilling to budge on that point alone. I had my pride, after all, not to mention seniority over her.

“So, I can do it, right? I just contract with him like this?”

“Yes, yes. Get on with it already.”

“Hehe! Thanks, senpai~!”

The spider must have deduced that my Contract with Master benefited him more than it did me. In other words, he was likely to accept a similar offer from

her.

With that, we began the Contract ritual, with myself as Master's representative. I had the spider and Master face each other... more or less. He was still out cold. Then, a thin white light connected the pair which blossomed into a pillar betwixt them.

The light rapidly shifted to crimson—the color of a Domination. In other words, she would be my equal under him. That did not sit well with me, though I did notice a slight burgeoning on the side of Master's mana. Since it was virtually impossible for his mana to have increased since our contract, the spider had to have been my inferior in strength, if only slightly. That was the only natural conclusion.

Eventually only the silhouettes of Master and the spider alike were visible in the light, signaling that the transformation was about to begin. The beast—a mindless devourer since time immemorial—began to shrink in on itself and become rapidly more humanoid.

"I'll serve you to the day I die, Master."

"What in the...?!"

The first thing I saw emerge from the light were her locks of silky black hair, the precise kind I wished I had to no end. She had slender, sensual limbs, and she was clad in a woman's elegant silk kimono. The Contract had been struck, and she was every bit as human-looking as I was.

Master's life is rather eventful, if naught else... Oh, if only I could have black hair...

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The Subspace was clearly growing, and I was getting more and more confused.

On the horizon, what was supposed to be an open plain was now a deep, dark forest. It appeared in the middle of the reeds, looking like it had always been there, running right through the center of the orc settlement. There was probably a lake or even an ocean downstream. It wasn't an illusion or anything either—the ground was literally expanding and shaping beneath my feet. The fog-wall that marked the edge of the world seemed to be slowly receding as well, and while the water was currently vanishing into the mist, it was likely to change soon. There were more plants and water sources in general, and something about the landscape seemed distinctly similar to home. There weren't any rice paddies or Japanese-style houses, but there was that kind of feeling in the air.

Man, this place is unstable... Do we really want people to live here?

I put a hand to my forehead and sighed—not at the state of the Subspace, but at something important I had blissfully forgotten.

After my deathmatch with the killer spider, my unconscious body was carried into a tent the orcs prepared for me. The first thing I saw when I woke up was a beautiful dark-haired woman at my bedside, her head propped up in her hand as she rested.

A long, awkward minute passed before the stranger noticed I was awake and looked up.

“Thank you for the meal, Master. For the first time in my life, I feel genuinely full.”

Literal tears were brimming in her eyes. None of this made sense.

“Uh... Wait here.”

I ignored her as she tried to talk to me and I left the tent. I was hoping the fresh air would help me clear my head a little, but it only made things worse.

Stupid Subspace... Is tormenting me really that fun? It could've at least sent me a memo or something...

There was a whole lot of nothing I could do about it now, though, so after confirming there was nobody in sight, I decided to go back inside.

“Welcome back.”

The tent was empty except for the mystery lady. With no other options at my disposal, I decided to ask her what happened while I was unconscious.

As it happened, the lady was the spider, the same perverted bug I was fighting against until the moment I fainted. She ate my mana to regenerate herself, and the more I hurt her, the more turned on she got. A true masochist. As soon as we established that, though, she bowed and tried to tell me she had contracted with me while I was asleep.

I had assumed Contracts had to be consensual, but apparently that didn't matter. It was a big mystery for me in general, honestly. It didn't seem fair that other people could sign my name on such a big deal, and I was beginning to doubt the sanity of this world's rules... but then again, with that Goddess in charge, I already knew this place was shit.

I took a deep breath. It was impossible to believe before, but now that I had a minute to breathe deeply, I felt somehow connected to her... unfortunately. There were no take-backs, either, and no processing period I could take advantage of. It frankly seemed unfair. The entire Contract process needed work.

“I can only speak to you so fluently and stay by your side by virtue of our Contract, and with it, my humanoid form. I will serve you heart and soul.”

I didn't doubt that to be the truth. She was impulsive and chaotic during her spider period, granted, but she seemed genuine now. Worse, if I turned her down now, there was a good chance I'd run into her again in the future the next time she got hungry. The very thought made me shiver again. For the first time, I was so scared I might piss my pants. All I could do, then, was nod and agree.

This world has way too many mandatory events, and why am I getting a new party member already?! This pacing is shit!

“So, where's Shen?”

It was my tent, and the middle of the night by my best guess—the Subspace’s sky was supposed to match the outside world’s, at least.

“Shen is on standby outside,” she informed me politely.

I extended a detection Realm, and I found Shen a short distance outside the entrance. She must’ve come by after I got some air. She likely had business to attend to, but something about the situation felt wrong. There was no way I could leave her standing outside, though, especially since she was waiting for me to wake up.

“Could you call her?” I asked the former spider.

“Of course, dearest.”

“D-Dwha?!”

Dearest?! What happened to “Master”?! Since when did we hit that point? Not that I like being called Master, either...

Her clothes made not a sound as she stood, and I realized the kimono material was just thin enough that I could see her curves through the fabric. There was no way I could bring either of them into town, not unless I was trying to stick out like a sore thumb.

As she exchanged a few words with Shen, I took in her silky black hair and matching deep obsidian eyes. Her eyes were slightly slanted, providing interesting contrast with her porcelain skin and alluring lips. Despite her refined almost Japanese appearance, she was taller than me—but still shorter than Shen, of course.

I know I was thinking about this before, but how come I’m only popular with the nonhuman girls? First Shen, now... wait, I don’t know her name. Does she even have one? I guess I could call her No-Name, or Number Two, but that feels kinda rude for a girl as pretty as her.

She needed a new name. I couldn’t even keep calling her “the spider” either, since there’d be a chance the orcs would figure out she was the one who attacked the Subspace and that could put her position here at risk. More importantly, I had to know if Shen had dragged her into the Subspace voluntarily to fight her, since she attempted something similar in her fight

against me. With the recent changes, the world would make a poor battlefield, especially considering the risk to the orcs.

I needed to know her plans for the Subspace. If she was truly intending to build a city, there was a lot of groundwork that needed to be laid, including outlining essential facilities and surveying the land it would be built on. I'd even help her with it, if she wanted. The orc village, not to mention any future settlements we decided to take in, could remain intact on the outskirts... Though again, there was no point thinking about that until a site had been chosen for the city.

If we're going to build a city, though, I'd like to see what other cities around here are like for reference.

The orcs had their hands full trying to survive, and they didn't have the resources to work on their infrastructure. That would all change now. That said, I was convinced that letting Shen handle everything by herself would lead to her replicating old Edo or Kyoto, and that seemed just wrong. I could imagine the Subspace's residents slaving away now, just like they did in the old days on Earth, and I shuddered at the thought of a peasant revolt here.

"Oh? Master, you're awake!" Shen called from the doorway.

I nodded. "Yeah. So, how did you manage to make me Contract with someone while I was literally unconscious and helpless?"

"I assisted you, naturally. I imagined you would prefer it to being eaten alive. Besides, if we left this thing to her own devices—" She roughly jabbed a thumb in the spider's direction. "—there's no telling when she may decide to inconvenience us."

Yeah, that would really suck... That's the main reason I ended up agreeing with her decision.

I sighed. I'd figure it out, somehow.

"I'm glad to have such good servants, at least..."

Shen grinned at me proudly, as if agreeing wholeheartedly with the assessment, and the spider-woman blushed happily.

So, sarcasm goes right over their heads... Noted.

I shook my head a little. "So, Shen? If you were up waiting for me at this hour, there's gotta be some reason, right?"

"Ah, yes!" She turned back toward the tent's entrance. "Come in!"

A moment later, the hairy guy from earlier stepped inside. I vaguely remembered Shen carrying him when the spider-lady first entered the Subspace.

Wait, is he shorter than me?! That's a first for this world!

"So, are you a dwarf or something?"

All three of them started in surprise.

"Exactly," Shen confirmed. "How very astute of you, Master."

The dwarf seemed the most surprised of anyone, and the spider simply nodded thoughtfully.

Are dwarves rare in this world or something?

"But this is no ordinary dwarf!" Shen continued dramatically. "No, this is a master of his craft, of a line of smiths credited with many a divine relic! This is an elder dwarf!"

So elder here means powerful, not old... I'll try to remember that.

The dwarf stepped forward, bowing politely. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. As you have surmised, I am a dwarf. Thank you kindly for saving my life."

"Uh... It's nothing? I'm Makoto Misumi, but you can call me Makoto. And you are?"

"M-My apologies! My people call me Beren."

"Wow, you're polite... So, Beren-san, you said I saved you? I'm pretty sure that was Shen, not me..."

Shen shook her head no, brow furrowing. "What? Of course not. I simply grabbed him when he was about to be devoured and took him into the Subspace."

I'm pretty sure that counts as saving him.

Beren nodded. "My home was attacked by a horrific spider, you see. If Shen-sama hadn't led the foul creature away, the whole village may have been lost. Not only that, she harbored me when I was too injured to move. I..."

He paused for a moment to look at said former spider with a worried frown. Not surprising, since she literally almost ate him. The "foul creature" looked a little guilty, but only a little. I didn't know whether to be impressed or upset at that.

"... I must thank you for fending her off," he finally continued. "Luckily, her curse was broken, and she seems to be a pleasant young woman once more."

Wait, what? She was just a spider who became human-adjacent after contracting with me, right? This isn't some fairy tale.

I shot Shen a questioning look, and she nodded slightly.

Think of it this way, Master, she seemed to be saying. There's no need to explain further now, and at this rate, we may well recruit him to our cause.

I snorted a little. "Cause?" *You just want him to make you a katana.*

She rolled her eyes. *Saved from certain death or no, the truth would only confuse him. This is for the best.*

We broke eye contact.

Damn, she's heartless... I almost feel sorry for our hairy, new friend.

I turned to face him and noticed that he was waiting patiently for us. He'd evidently noticed Shen and I were in the middle of something.

"The Black Spider of Calamity has terrorized the world since time immemorial," Beren began. "It ate its fill and left as quickly as it came. By all measures, it was more natural disaster than living being, and it ate countless artifacts right from our storehouses."

Shit, she eats metal?! How strong is her stomach?!

I looked over at her to see that she was blushing a little. She *did* do it, then.

Maybe it's better that we go the fairy tale route, then... If we're trying to get him to stay with us, we should try to make sure he doesn't have beef with anyone first.

The dwarf's head dropped a bit as he continued. "Now, as the master of such a verdant land, I have an important request to make of you."

Uh oh. Time for another side quest... I just want to get to town at this point.

"What is it?" I asked. Hearing him out couldn't hurt, at least.

"My people have lived in this land and plied our trade for many years now. We chose this place, despite its danger and its inconvenience, to protect our wares from brigands. However, the land is harsh and barren."

Most monsters didn't come out into the Edge, so it'd probably be decently safe on that front. They could remain hidden here, too—not even Shen knew where they lived, and she was literally neighbors with them. That was bound to cut down on the number of thieves they needed to deal with.

I nodded understandingly. "So, your treasures are safe, but you're constantly going hungry."

"Precisely. And that leads me to my request..." He paused for a moment, trying to find the words, but I already knew where this was going. "Could you perhaps let us live here, in this land?"

Yep, called it.

There was everything a village could need here, and we'd only get better off the more people we welcomed in. It was solidly defended, too, between Shen, the spider, and I guess myself. It was just what they were looking for. Shen already looked giddy at the prospect. The spider was trying to remain composed, but I caught her licking her lips hungrily. She had me a little worried, in fact, so I'd have to remind her not to eat our new residents...

"Sure," I replied promptly.

Beren's jaw dropped. "Y-You'd allow it so readily?!"

"We've got the space for it, after all. Just promise you'll get along with the orcs."

“O-Of course!”

I sensed he was a little confused, but I frankly didn't care. They shouldn't cause any problems for us, and Shen was already planning on inviting him.

Shen eagerly began listing conditions. “You must help us create our city, and create weapons or armor for us as needed. Oh, and I have every intention of charging taxes in the future as well. Lastly, you must accept Master as the sole lord of this land.”

She already thought about this, didn't she?

“A city?!” Beren's eyes widened, but he nodded readily. “We'll gladly accept those terms.”

Living in the Subspace must mean a lot to him, then. I'd always imagined dwarves as stubborn and coarse, but Beren was amicable and understanding.

The dragon nodded. “I will build a city here in due time. You are free, of course, to remain an independent village should you so desire.”

“Interesting,” he mused, stroking his beard. “A lush land behind a curtain of fog, housing a hidden metropolis... I like it!”

He's almost as excited as she is... Shen really lucked out with him.

“I had every intention of supplying you with our wares,” he added.

“Very well! You may bring your comrades here. I shall open the path for them.”

“Wonderful. In that case, I'll leave right away. Would you be willing to wait two days, until I arrive there?”

“I suppose so. Tell your people to gather all they require, and when you send word, I shall transfer your village whole into the Subspace. You'll be treading the trail I blazed!”

That trick again? It's handy, I'll admit... They don't even need to pack much, and they can even take whatever furniture they want.

The transfer process reminded me a lot of teleportation. Under the right circumstances, she could move someone into the Subspace, then spit them out

somewhere else.

Maybe I'll ask her to make a more permanent gateway or two for places we'll need to visit often.

"Farewell, then!"

With that last cry, Beren-san shot off like a bullet. My thoughts were already elsewhere, however.

"So, I could talk to him just fine, huh..."

Unlike my first conversations with Ema when we first met, I had no trouble understanding him at all. Perhaps I only needed to "tune" it the first time.

Or wait, dwarves are humanoid, too... Do they speak human, then?

Shen nodded approvingly. "Excellent work, Master."

"Very impressive," the spider agreed.

No, that can't be it. I was talking to the spider even before her transformation... Assuming you could call that a conversation at all.

"You are quite impressive indeed for holding a proper conversation with that spider."

"Your mana was quite delicious," the spider added. "The ideal husband, indeed."

Frankly, I'm not very flattered!

I couldn't imagine that edible boyfriends would catch on, and I really didn't want to be the prey to her predator.

Shen turned to me seriously. "Now, Master, there is but one more matter on which I require your assistance."

"You want a name, right?" I asked.

"Indeed. I will not abide merely being called Shen any longer. You must give me a proper name, as is your duty as my Master."

The spider nodded in agreement. "I would also like a proper name soon, if you don't mind."

I figured as much.

I didn't want to keep calling them by their old "names" either, and I was eager to find something else to call them. It was probably like being called "Hyuman" all the time, and that would immensely suck. To be honest, I was a little surprised the ladies felt the same—if anything, I thought only the spider would want a name, if anything, since that was by far the worst of the two.

"You don't want one right now?" I asked the spider.

She smiled. "I would much rather wait until Shen-san has had her turn. She was here first, after all."

The spider was incredibly elegant in her every movement. If Shen was a warrior, then the spider was like a princess.

"Okay... So, I can just call you No-Name or Spider-san or Number Two or something. I'll remember tha—"

I could practically hear something snapping as the spider's expression soured.

"Absolutely not!"

I blinked. "Huh?"

"That's not a proper name for a lady, dearest! How dare you?!"

"Can you stop with the pet names?! Besides, I don't know what else to call you. What are you anyway? Your species, I mean."

She blinked. "My species?"

"Yeah. Mind if I ask?"

"Hm... What am I, I wonder? I can't remember a time before I was controlled by my appetite, so I'm afraid I don't know much about myself."

So, she has amnesia? Or wait, that would imply she had earlier memories, and we've seen no sure sign of that yet.

I nodded at her. "Okay, then. I guess I'll call you Kuro-chan for now."

"Am I a pet to you?!" she snapped. "Forget what I said, I want a proper name now!"

Shen bared her teeth. “Hey! Did you not say I would be named first?!”

Evidently, the pair had struck some kind of bargain on the subject, though I had no idea why it was that important.

The spider turned up her nose. “Oh, but Shen-san, you can’t possibly be suggesting I accept any of the miserable excuses of names he’s suggested so far. Can’t you make do with that neutral name of yours for now?”

Shen smirked. “So, you would cast aside your chance to be intimate with him first?”

“Gh... I suppose if I must...”

Wait, what did they decide?! I’m not going to have sex with either of them! Probably. I mean, a spider and a dragon? A little out there for me.

“I already tried to name you,” I cut in, frowning at Shen. “You shot down every idea I had. I gave you a whole list of options back when you first told me you wanted a new name.”

She snorted indignantly. “I would rather fall on my blade than accept such frivolity!”

“Besides, Shen isn’t a bad name compared to No-Name or anything like that... Wait, spider, I think I have the perfect one for you.”

“Oh, really?!”

“WHAT?!” Shen balked.

I sighed heavily. “What now?!”

“No, no! I shall not tolerate it! Courtesy *demands* you name me first!”

What is she, four?

I turned back to the spider to find her giggling dreamily to herself, drunken on the slight bit of favoritism I’d shown her.

Jeez... Of all the people who could be my companions...

I shook my head in irritation. “Fine! I’m naming you both, right here and now, starting with Shen!”

I shot them both challenging looks, and was met with slight disappointment and overwhelming satisfaction. I figured that was the closest we'd get to agreeing with each other.

I turned to the dragoness. "Okay, Shen..."

"Make it a strong, mighty name, Master!"

"Uhhh..."

She looked at me with a mix of purehearted excitement and hope.

Shit, what now? I've got a proper name for the spider, but I'm still drawing a total blank on her...

"Uh... Um..."

She tensed with anticipation. "Yes?"

"I... Hm..."

"... Have you not thought of a name for me yet?"

"Of course, I have! I just, uh..."

Her shoulders slumped, tears welling in her eyes. "Why did you conceive a name for the bug, of all things, before me...?"

Is it really that big a deal? Maybe the whole naming part of the Contract is more important than I thought.

I cleared my throat. "Okay, Shen, I know what to call you. From now on, you will be known as Tomoe."

"Tomoe?"

"Yep. It's the name of the strongest and bravest lady warrior I know."

Her eyes widened. "You have women samurai in your world?!"

"Yep. She's famous for following her husband to the battlefield."

If I remembered correctly, Tomoe Gozen was her husband's foster sister and partner on the battlefield. He was lucky guy, and they clearly trusted each other a lot—to the point where they probably killed for each other in a very literal

sense. Of course, all I knew about her was from games, so I didn't know for sure how historically accurate my knowledge was.

Shen nodded proudly. "Oh! In that case, I shall gladly accept the name of Tomoe!"

I got the feeling she was overreacting a little, but since it was literally the only female warrior name that came to mind, I was just glad it worked. I didn't want to wrack my brain for another option. The name Yodo also came to mind, meaning "stagnant water", but to me it felt more like the kind of name a devious mastermind would have.

As Tomoe repeated her new name over and over, humming cheerfully, she started to glow ever so faintly.

"Uh, are you giving off light right now?"

"Hm? Ah, yes. Upon receiving a name, my power increases. Consider it the strengthening of our bond given form."

Wow, so it is a big deal, then... I feel a little bad for coming up with it in the moment.

"Still," she continued, "the name is quite pleasant on the ears... Yes, a fine name, indeed! From this hour, on this day, I shall be known as Tomoe! Understand?"

She looked proudly at both the spider and me, but for some reason her cheeks soon flushed pink. Most adults would find that kind of childish glee embarrassing, especially given her age.

"If the name makes you stronger, though, does that mean there's a name out there that'll give you the biggest boon?" I wondered aloud.

"Of course."

"Jeez, why didn't you tell me that sooner?!"

"Fret not, Master! I'm simply glad to receive such a thoughtful name from you, efficacy and potency be damned!"

"Sure, but still..."

It would influence our whole life moving forward in one way or another, and it didn't feel right for me to make sure a crucial decision on vibes alone. I was feeling a little guilty.

"At ease!" she insisted. "I have no desire for a name given with such criteria, anyway. Now, if you would pardon me, I must inform the masses of my new identity!"

With that, she dashed out of the room, like a child eager to show off her birthday presents.

The spider sighed. "Oh, I'm feeling a little jealous now... So, darling, may I ask you to name me now?"

"Uh, sure. That was my plan. Before that, could you please stop with the sappy pet names?"

"Oh, dear, I had no idea...! You'd prefer to be called Milord, then?"

One step forward, two steps back.

"No, just Misumi or Makoto, please."

She grinned at me. "No."

"Why?!"

"You own me, after all. I couldn't possibly be so forward with you. Even Shen... no, Tomoe-san addresses you as such, and we both know how proud she can be."

Yeah, but that "darling" or "dearest" shit makes my skin crawl... Maybe I should make her stay with Master, like Tomoe? No, I don't like the idea of her, of all people, calling me that...

"How about Misumi-san?" I offered.

"Impossible."

"Find something else with Tomoe, then! I'm officially banning both "Milord" and all pet names, and that's an order!"

She trembled, her face going bright red. "A-An order?! I-If you're forcing me, then I suppose I have no choice... I'll consult Tomoe about it later."

“Now,” I continued, “about your name...”

“Yes?”

“How about you tell me whatever name draws out your full power, or whatever?”

She grinned happily. “Absolutely not.”

Why?! I don't get them at all!

“Okay, but if it affects your strength, that literally affects me, too...”

She swore under her breath. “Damn that Shen... Couldn't she keep her mouth shut just a few minutes longer?”

Huh? I must've misheard her... Did she just cuss Tomoe out?!

“Wh-What if I want to think about it a little more?”

“You just told me you had a name already.”

“Yeah, but this new information changes—”

“It changes nothing! Tell me the name you thought of, right now!”

Wow, she's being forceful... With how she's leaning in so intensely, I'm surprised she hasn't blushed and pulled away already.

“Besides,” she continued huffily, “how could I be happy with a name born of such banal rules? I'd much rather have a name that you thought suited me from the bottom of your heart than one for sheer strength alone.”

“Even if it makes you weaker?”

“You assume your name would make me at all weaker. Besides, I've never cared much for strength. Please, tell me the name you've thought of.”

At this point, it was clear she wouldn't take no for an answer.

“Okay...” I swallowed hard. “Here's your new name, then. From now on, you'll be Mio.”

“Mio...”

“In the letters of my homeland, it combines the character for ‘zero’ with the one for ‘water,’ which represents my main magic proficiency.”

She started with nothing but her hunger, so in a sense, she had nothing—zero. Then, with my mana being what filled her belly and gave her a “start” in our Contract, it seemed like a good, meaningful name, even if it was a bit of a stretch.

“I’ll accept it gladly,” she replied with a bow. “I am Mio from this day onward. Thank you for your generosity, dearest.”

“What’d I say about calling me that?!”

“Ah. I’ll try to stop doing that. Mio... Hehe, a name with your element in it... Hehehe...”

“Uh, Mio? Earth to Mio?”

“Wait... Zero, and water, your element? Does that mean you wish to flood my empty spaces with your very essence?! Oh, I can hardly wait!”

Whelp, she’s a lost cause. She can’t even hear me now. Why is everyone I know so weird?

I pushed her out of my tent as she continued to hallucinate. I was exhausted, despite having just woken up after who-knows-how-long, and I wanted nothing more than to sleep.

What a shame... We’re finally so close to the hyuman town, too...

The morning after I named by companions, I left my tent to a surprising sight. The orcs were assembled in full, with Mio and Tomoe standing as if to address them. Whatever they were doing, it was way too early for it.

“Listen well!” Tomoe barked. “Last night, Master bestowed a name upon me. I am to be addressed as Tomoe forthwith!”

“Likewise, I have a new name as well. Please call me Mio.”

“YEAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!”

I wasn’t expecting such an intense reaction from the crowd. Evidently, it meant more than I realized.

“Now, as you are aware, Master is the lord and sovereign of this land,” Tomoe continued. “However, you cannot all simply parrot me and address him as

such!”

Mio nodded. “Please note that he has vetoed both Dearest and Darling already, and addressing him by name is nothing short of insulting.”

It’s not, actually. I’d prefer that! Can everyone please just treat me normally?!

The orcs, however, all nodded in assent.

“Therefore!” the pair shouted in unison. It was an effective way to draw the crowd’s attention back on themselves. “People of the Subspace!”

Yeah, yeah, go on already.

“Your Lordship, Milord, Headsman—three options remain! We will decide the proper way to address him by vote!”

Okay, so... WHAT?! The hell are they doing?! Why?!

“I-I... Uh... Wha...?”

Dammit, I can’t even talk properly! All three of those titles sound like shit!

“First, all for Your Lordship!”

“Yeaaahh!”

Uh-oh. That’s quite a few.

“For Milord, now!”

“YEAAAAAAAAAAHH!”

Shit, that one’s popular!

“Now for Headsman!”

“Yeah!”

Thank god! I’m too young to be a Headsman!

With that, Tomoe and Mio turned about to face me.

“And as such...”

“And so...”

God, don’t say it!

“Allow us to call you Milord!” they pleaded in unison.

“You’re all crazy!” I shouted. “No, not crazy... You’re all fucking idiots!”

Tomoe shook her head disapprovingly. “We decided it democratically, did we not? I thought you liked democracy.”

“I was voting for Milord as well,” Mio chimed in. “I would’ve made sure I called you that no matter what!”

I didn’t agree to any of this! And Mio’s making it sound like she orchestrated this whole thing!

I massaged my temples in irritation. “Look, am I in charge here, or aren’t I? Why are you even doing all this?”

Mio smiled. “Didn’t you tell me to talk it out with Tomoe last night? I’m doing just that, aren’t I?”

“But why are none of the options normal?!”

Tomoe frowning in irritation. “Not normal?! We slapped every last person with power awake last night and put them to work devising the best titles for you! They slaved away all night! They are normal beyond compare!”

Wait, all night?! So, some of the poor orcs here have been forced to play along with this nonsense the whole time I was asleep? Man, I feel so sorry for them all...

All eyes were on me, as everyone awaited my response to their vote. They looked so hopeful even though I didn’t want any of this to happen in the first place. I couldn’t say that now, though, not with all the pressure I was under.

Having to deal with all this first thing in the morning should count as harassment, honestly...

“Y-You, uh... You can call me Milord,” I muttered.

A deafening roar of approval rose up from the crowd. There was no doubt in my mind that everyone would be calling me that from now all.

Why does it feel like I’ve lost...?

Several hours had passed since the torturous morning vote, and we'd started trekking across the wastes once more. My morale started low, but I grew steadily more excited the closer we got to the town. Then, just when the outline of the town became distinct on the horizon, we had to stop.

And just when it was getting good, too!

As it happened, we were supposed to wait for the rest of the dwarves to arrive before hitting town. That made enough sense, and putting the visit off one day wouldn't hurt us. We gave up on traveling for the day and retreated to the Subspace to relax. They wouldn't need my help to move in the new residents, and even if they did need help showing the newcomers around, one of Tomoe's clones could handle it better than me. For some reason, though, they decided to wait to introduce the dwarves to me formally until the next day at noon, so without much else to do, I turned in early for the night. It was odd, but I tried not to dwell on it.

I really hope this doesn't lead to anything bad...

When I left my tent the next morning, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Shit. I knew I should've said something! Oh, my head hurts!

Unlike yesterday's orc assembly, the crowd this time was far more scattered. To my right was a group of fifty-odd dwarves, headed by Beren himself. In the middle, Tomoe was standing at the head of a group of blue-scaled lizardfolk. There had to be more than a hundred of them in all. Finally, Mio on my right led four people who had mostly human top halves, but they were spiders from the waist down.

What the hell? How are there so many of them?!

"Not bad," Beren called to Tomoe. "And here I thought you'd said noon."

Tomoe chuckled. "Ah, but if the both of you are showing off to each other, I would be remiss to hold my own people back! Impressive, are they not?"

The spider-centaurs exchanged awkward glances.

"Oh, you're so quiet!" Mio chided them. "You can do whatever you like, but remember—if you so much as look at Milord wrong, I *will* eat you."

Her followers hurriedly nodded their agreement.

Yep, this is total chaos. I've got no idea what the hell is going on here.

The dwarves were the only group I was expecting, but with only fifty-odd people, their village was a lot smaller than I'd initially thought. Assuming each family was a couple and maybe three kids, that was only sixteen households. I was surprised they had enough people to count as a village at all—but then again, I didn't know anything about the demographics of this world, so I couldn't say for certain.

Tomoe's people, the lizardfolk, all stood at attention with their swords and spears respectfully touching the ground, their heads bowed reverently whilst taking a knee. They looked almost like knights. I noticed that none of their weapons had sheathes, despite how useful one would be in a town. Coming from a place where katanas were the most common sword, going around sheathless felt like asking for trouble.

Tomoe sure has some polite followers... She's lucky to have them.

Lastly, the four human-spider things behind Mio. From how few of them there were, it didn't look like they had a proper village or anything. I was a little surprised they didn't jump out to help Mio in our fight if they were her followers—but then again, I doubted she was much of a people person, so to speak. She had a boss-like quality to her that made it hard to imagine that. Her subordinates were polite enough, though, their heads dipped with a hand on their chests. I doubted they could talk at all, what with how much they were nodding and how little they were speaking.

"Listen well, my children," Mio cooed. "Milord saved us all from that maddening starvation, so we must serve him body and soul in return."

Children? Did they just show up and start eating everything they could, too? I had no idea Mio had enough mana to feed all four of them and remain conscious... N-No, the less I think about giving Mio mana, the better.

"Hm?" Tomoe finally noticed me and shot warning glances at Beren and Mio. "Hey."

They noticed me as well, and all three of them straightened their posture attentively.

“Uh... Good morning?” I cautioned, somehow turning a simple greeting into a question.

“Good morning, Milord!” everyone called in unison, bowing respectfully.

It sounded as though every voice in the square was addressing me, making it clear that my mumbling had somehow reached and been understood by them all.

Is this also thanks to the Goddess's gift? Nifty.

Beren-san, after briefly seeking approval from my two aides, took a step forward. The mob of dwarves behind him stood and stepped forward in unison. It was an indescribably intimidating sight.

“Please forgive me for being so direct, Makoto-sama. We, the fifty elder dwarves assembled before you, will have the pleasure of residing in your domain forthwith. Thank you once again for your generous hospitality!”

“Uh, you're welcome? I'm Makoto. Please, just call me that.”

“Allow me to introduce the head of our settlement!” Beren-san boomed.

He didn't even respond to my request... Why is he so tense? He should really take a deep breath and relax a little.

Beren-san stepped back to rejoin his peers as a wizened older dwarf with a massive beard emerged from the crowd. He had a clear aura of leadership about him. The elder bowed, and I awkwardly followed suit.

So, bowing is a thing in this world, too...

“I am the leader of this band of elder dwarves, Eld. I must thank you for granting my people haven from the outside world, and in such a verdant land, no less.”

“Uh... Hi, I'm Makoto. If you have any trouble settling in, or if you have any questions, just talk to me.”

“Thank you most sincerely. Do you mind if I ask you something, then?”

“Sure.”

“You appear to pass as hyuman, but you have a Greater Dragon in your service—the illusion master Shen-sama, no less. Not only that, you have with you the great spider who has threatened to devour the world time and time again. Neither would possibly pledge themselves to a hyuman.”

“Uh... I guess?”

This is about my crazy powers, I guess... But I “pass” as hyuman? That just stings.

“Let me be blunt. Have you arrived from the heavens by the Goddess’s grace to bless this infernal wasteland?”

There was an eager glint in his eyes, but he couldn’t be more wrong.

“Like I’d do anything for that bitch!” I spat. “I’ve had nothing but trouble since she drop-kicked me into this hellhole! My life has straight-up sucked ever since!”

“Wh-What...?”

“That’s right, she spewed some shit about living out my days in the middle of nowhere! That motherfucker abandoned me!”

Just thinking about her makes my blood boil!

“Y-You’re not here on a divine missive, then?” Eld-san asked nervously.

“Nope! Not one damn bit! I’m just a victim—though I’ll admit, it’s a little nice to be able to talk to monsters and demons and stuff...” I trailed off awkwardly.

He perked up a little. “You were blessed to be able to talk to us, you say?”

I nodded. “She called it ‘Comprehension’ or something. She was insulting me the whole time she did it, though!”

I was hoping to forget all about that stuff, honestly.

Eld-san stroked his beard thoughtfully. “So, would that make you unaffiliated with any of the hyuman powers?”

“Of course. Also, just to be clear, I’m *not* a hyuman. I’d much rather you call me human, thanks.”

“Human, you say? I haven’t heard that name in an age... They were said to be the ancestors of today’s humans.”

“I guess? Anyhow, please call me that, thanks.”

“Understood. Now, I must confess, I am relieved to hear you are no servant of the Goddess. My kin has long stood opposed to her aims, though not to the point of outright animosity. We are no friends of humans or demons, either, leaving us with precious few allies.”

“Oh, okay... You guys are on your own, then.”

“But I must say, you’re rather interesting. First, this Shen Real Estate business, then revealing you can talk to us and having such overwhelming mana... You’ll be an interesting man to serve.”

“Ahaha... I’m not much of anything, really...”

He chuckled. “My apologies for dragging this on so long, then. I will bring you a token of our alliance later.”

With that, Eld-san stepped back.

Tomoe cracked her knuckles, grinning cheerfully as always.

“Now it’s my turn.”

The lizardfolk behind her all stood in one coordinated motion. They seemed almost militaristic in their coordination, like soldiers at attention.

“Now, my lord, I bring you my servitors, the misty lizardfolk! They are inheritors of great air and water mana, and are a rare and powerful sight. Look upon their glorious azure scales!”

“Huh. I never knew you had servants.”

“A great many have chosen to worship me over the ages,” she declared with a hint of pride. “Especially when one considers those who see me as a god. These people, however, hold a special role among my followers. Each one of them has the strength to slay a Lesser Dragon!”

“Whoa... But wait, they look like they’d be more used to fighting as a group. I can’t even imagine how great they’d all be together.”

“Excellent observation, my lord. You’ve a great eye for subordinates. From today, all eight hundred of them shall be living here as well. I trust you will put us to intelligent use.”

She dipped her head at me, and the lizardfolk behind her bowed deeply.

I couldn’t help but feel like such a military was lost on Tomoe. They could be incredibly potent if what she said was true, and even though I had no idea what a Lesser Dragon was, exactly, it sounded strong. Her followers acted and felt more like elite knights than regular soldiers.

Finally, it was Mio’s turn to speak.

“Here are my servants, the arach,” she said with a polite bow. “They were driven mad with hunger just as I was, but after receiving your essence, they made a full recovery. As such, I brought them here.”

Arachs? Doesn’t ring a bell. I guess whatever Mio is has nothing to do with my world’s mythology, after all.

That wasn’t what hit me most, though.

My essence...?! I know she means my blood or mana or something, but she makes it sound so dirty! How did she even manage that?

“Uh... How did you give them my... whatever you gave them?”

That came out a lot more awkwardly than I was hoping. My head was still spinning as I tried to understand what had happened.

“Oh, that? It’s rather simple.”

She beckoned one of the arachs closer. Once it was within reach, it drove its hand clean through her shoulder by the collarbone.

“What?!” I gasped.

The arach was fidgeting with pleasure. It seemed to be *enjoying* itself.

No! Nope! I can’t! Are all spiders in this world horny sadomasochists?! It’s almost like having a bunch of little Mios around... Oh, god, my head hurts!

I noticed with a start that some kind of fluid was dribbling out of Mio’s wound and was getting drawn into the arach. It was just a little sickening.

“I-I, uh... I get it, okay? You can stop now.”

“Very well.” Mio pulled the arm out of her shoulder, but no blood came out. The hole healed in the blink of an eye. “I hope you had your fill.”

That’s still cheating... though I’m not really one to talk.

“We... arach,” said the one that stabbed Mio. “We, have no... names. N-Nice, to... meet you.”

Their words were awkward and stilted, and they had to struggle to get the words out, but they seemed kind and straightforward enough. They probably lived alone and didn’t have any need to talk to others, which explained why they didn’t have names or full verbal command of their language. That, and they were starving just as much as Mio was.

Mio glared at them. “What, no heartfelt words of thanks for Milord? Do you *want* me to eat you? Do you?”

Jeez, Mio, are you a mobster or something?!

“It’s fine!” I hurriedly reassured her before turning to the arachs. “Feel free to take your time getting used to this place. I’m sure it’s a big change for you.”

Mio respectfully stepped back from the transgressor. “My kin and I can produce a valuable reagent from within our bodies, and we have some knowledge of ancient alchemical practices as well, so I should hope we will be useful to you. I must thank you again, Milord, for agreeing to take in my people.”

So, the dwarves are blacksmiths, the arach are alchemists, and the misty lizardfolk are warriors... That, and both the highland orcs and the lizardfolk should be good for heavy labor. We’ve got all the makings of any fledging city... minus the humans, I guess.

With that, we were all introduced to each other, and we were now free to visit the hyuman village. Soon, my first major goal in this world would be complete.

I can’t wait to meet some humans!

I nodded and addressed the assembled crowd. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all. If you have any more questions, you each have your representative. Tomoe, Mio, Eld-san, make sure everyone settles in okay. You can choose wherever you like for your homes, but no fighting over land. Now, I’ll be leaving alone for a short while.”

Tomoe’s brow furrowed. “Alone? What of the danger?”

Mio nodded in agreement. “You must allow me to accompany you, Milord.”

“Nah, I should be more than fine. It’ll be safer than the wastes at the very least, and besides, I need you both here to make sure everyone moves in okay. I’ll just spend the night at the village, and I’ll be back tomorrow. Later, then.”

With that, I turned and made for the exit. Luckily, neither Mio nor Tomoe seemed to be following me, which meant I’d succeeded in persuading them. If anything went wrong in the Subspace, they could surely handle it. I had to get to town as soon as possible. I’d been in this world for a full week now without meeting another human soul, and my two fights to the death weren’t exactly a replacement.

Finally, I can see people! Real, flesh and blood humans... I can’t wait.

It didn’t take much walking before the buildings of the town came into sight. The gate was a simple affair, and it was too small to be a village—more like a small community.

By the time I was close enough to make out the finer details, I happened to run into a woman whose age I couldn’t really pin down. All I could tell was that she was beautiful. She had soft blonde hair that billowed faintly in the wind, and her skin looked like pearl against the filth and dust of the Edge.

Wow... None of the girls in the archery club back at school were half as pretty as her, and we were famous for having the most beautiful kids in school.

She had stopped and was watching me dubiously. I felt my pulse quicken just a little.

Is this some kind of event? Is it... fate?!

I strode closer to her, head full of happy delusions, and called out to her with a friendly “Excuse me!” I gave her my best smile as well.

Her reaction, however, was just a little disappointing. She let out a horrible scream at the sight of my pearly-whites and sprinted in the opposite direction toward the gate like her life depended on it.

Wow. So, this is what a hard no feels like... That really stings.

Since she was headed into town, though, I decided to follow her. I was careful to walk, just in case she thought I was trying to chase her down.

Finally, I arrived at the gates, and I was surprised to see a crowd of people were already gathered there. Some had elven ears, though, and other were furry beastfolk. All of them were clad in full armor with their weapons drawn, and they were glaring at me with full-blown malice.

Weird... I didn't think I did anything to piss them off yet.

They were intelligent, rational people, though. I was sure we could settle things with words, instead of having to bash each other's heads in like barbarians.

“Hello, my name is Makoto Misumi. Would you mind letting me inside?”

“...”

None of them replied—actually, they seemed to get angrier from that.

I just gave them my name! What the hell?!

They began whispering amongst each other. I decided to wait for a while so they could get their thoughts in order. Then, when they broke their huddle, their front ranks leveled their weapons at me. They looked ready to attack at the drop of a hat.

Wait, what?!

Behind them, a second rank nocked their bows and readied their javelins, and I could hear the muttering of magic from behind a few with staves.

Shit! This is bad!

“H-Hold on, now! I only want to—”

“%(*&@^(@*&^!!!”

I froze in my tracks. Luckily, they held their fire.

Fuck. You’ve gotta be kidding me.

“@)#(%*&!”

I tried raising my hands in a show of surrender, but apparently it appeared antagonistic to them. A flurry of arrows and spells flew out at me. I extended a defensive Realm around me, and all their attacks luckily bounced off. A few of the frontliners had charged toward me with swords and spears, but they stopped when they realized I had some kind of barrier.

Even though they had stopped their attack for the time being, the villagers made it clear they would fight to the death if I tried to threaten them. If I didn’t retreat now, things could only escalate.

So, I spun around and sprinted away from the village. Not even a horse could’ve caught me at my speed, and the dust cloud I kicked up blotted the villagers from sight in an instant.

“DAMMIT! How the hell is hyuman the one language I can’t speak?!”

That was the one language that I absolutely, undeniably should’ve known.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?!

I’m in real deep shit...



They couldn't understand me. Up until now I could just speak normally in Japanese, and everything from orcs to dwarves, and even monster spiders were no issue. It made absolutely no sense that my ability wouldn't work on fellow humans, of all things. There had to be a mistake.

Just to alleviate my mounting fears, I asked Tomoe and the others to try talking to me in the so-called Common Tongue, what most humans spoke, but all I heard was gibberish. The fact that they could communicate with humans where I couldn't was just salt in the wound. Mio in particular took me by surprise.

How can she talk okay? I thought she had no memories outside of being hungry! Is she a genius or some shit?!

The Common Tongue was the main language used by humans in this world, almost without exception. Every human nation had it as their official language of business and government. I asked why it wasn't called Humanese or something, but as it happened, every main political power in the world was a human state, as it had been for a great long time now, and their centralizing influence on the world and global culture saw their views emphasized. It was surprising that meaningless string of sounds was so common and widespread.

I was so unable to accept it, in fact, that I was convinced they were screwing with me, and I attempted to prove it. I had representatives of every race inhabiting the Subspace gather in a hall, and I let them all mingle. After talking to each in turn, I confirmed that I was the only one who could understand the words of everyone in attendance. They could also communicate with Tomoe and Mio with decent efficacy, of course, but amongst each other, comprehension ranged from dubious to none. Of them, the orcs came out as the only ones able to converse with every other race acceptably, and I could see that coming in handy down the road.

At any rate, it was now clear that I needed to learn the Common Tongue somehow, and that I would be completely screwed as things stood without Tomoe and Mio.

Dammit... I won't forget this, I swear!

Isukimichi

Chapter 4

I won't forget it, huh... I remember when I was that naive.

Sure, it wasn't that long ago, but my sense of time was quickly distorted by the hours upon hours of time I'd spent studying. I'd be the first to admit I rushed into things a little.

Unfortunately, I was still struggling to wrap my head around the Common Tongue's nonsense pronunciations. I was better with listening, but I had to stop and puzzle out any words I didn't immediately recognize and compare them with what I did know. It was slow and sloppy but mostly worked fine.

Okay, I'll admit it, I'm kind of fucked.

There were all kinds of tonal inflections that still went way over my head, and the harder I tried to learn, the more I struggled. My only hope at this point was to pray I could figure stuff out from the context.

My pronunciation, however, was an absolute lost cause. No matter how hard I tried, Tomoe and Mio couldn't make sense of what I was trying to say. Even my best efforts to copy them exactly were fruitless. They would tell me I was using the wrong "A" sound, but I couldn't tell one "A" apart from all the others, and we just ended up arguing. I had finally accepted that speaking the Common Tongue was impossible for me, even if I tried for years to come. It hurt to have to give up so quickly, but there was no other way to look at it. It was a total waste of time.

Writing, at least, came easily to me. Since I didn't have to worry about perfect pronunciation, it was just like learning any other Earth language. In only a month, I'd gotten to the point where I could read and roughly understand most text, and I could write simple passages to boot. That meant I could "speak" by using magic to conjure writing midair like speech bubbles in a manga, and

despite how clumsy it was, at least I could communicate. It was like passing notes, but with no paper required. Now all I needed was Tomoe or Mio to interpret any emotional factors that were lost in the writing, and I'd be good to go.

I really hope that dumb Comprehension ability I got from the Goddess isn't interfering with me here... I know she didn't want me dealing with humans at all, but this is just cruel.

Unfortunately, that wasn't my only problem. I still had to know why that first villager ran in terror from me, and why the village guards met me at the gates with lethal force. It couldn't be a simple language issue. Either there was some other issue afoot that meant the village needed to be on high alert, or something about the way I looked—maybe who I looked like—was bad news to them.

After some investigation, however, it turned out that neither was correct. They always had security that tight, and my appearance wasn't a major factor either way. No, as much I hated to admit it, as desperately as I wished there was some other reason, the problem was with me myself. Learning that was even worse than finding out I couldn't talk with them directly.

Apparently, I was practically oozing mana, to the point that even random humans could see it on me. The very air in the ten-foot radius around me warped with the stuff. The Subspace dwellers could, of course, see it as well, they simply didn't mind too much given I was so conversational, had tamed a Greater Dragon, I looked like any old human, and I seemed not to care about it. None of them even considered that much mana was leaking off me unintentionally, so nobody bothered to mention it to me.

Next time, I really wish somebody would notice... maybe even overreact a little? Even fainting from the density of the stuff would get the point across.

Tomoe said it was "like a river birthed from a mighty glacier." It sounded cool, but I felt I had to know more.

"So, how did I look to the humans?" I asked her.

"Hm... To put it simply—"

“As simple as possible, please.”

She paused for a moment. “As though not one, but several Demon Kings had just alighted before them, I suppose.”

“...”

I had no idea how to reply to that, but it came across clearly enough.

When I called out to that woman in some mystery language and followed her smiling to the town gates, they reacted the only sensible way; by attacking me. I couldn't blame them for that.

I sighed deeply.

What the actual fuck?!

I wasn't going to be broken so easily, though. I was the eldest son of the Misumi family, and on my honor, I was going to find some way around that nonsense. Maybe if I asked the dwarves nicely for help, they could make something to prevent all my mana from leaking out—or at the very least, conceal it for when I wanted to talk to humans. Sure, all the guards already saw my face, but I wasn't above wearing a mask into town. I could ask the dwarves about that too—maybe have them make something cool that covered only the top half of my face, like some kind of superhero.

I might need new clothes as well, which I could ask Ema-san about easily enough. She could probably round up some extra clothing from all the different races we were housing, and I could take my pick. Basically, I had to go all-out to make sure I went unnoticed, even going so far as to take Mio or Tomoe with me, just in case.

That's what I'll do, then... My day on the town can wait until the dwarves have done their work.

Several days later, I received word that the dwarves had finished the mask and ring I'd ordered, and I was finally ready to try the village once more.

The ring was the collaborative effort of all the most skilled dwarves, dubbed Draupnir. It was a special, one-of-a-kind piece of craftsmanship that absorbed mana and compressed it for easy, unobtrusive storage! This special model even

came with a safety feature that most people would call a curse, where I literally couldn't take it off until it's had its full of mana! Apparently, my mana was just too dense to conceal otherwise. I could contain it manually to some extent, but only for a short while. It started off white, then changed color as it sucked in mana until it “shut off” at bright red. That was just a natural quirk of its material, it seemed.

I asked Tomoe and Mio to accompany me into town once I was ready, and I received two energetic yeses.

Ah, a heroic trio, like the brave samurai of Mito Komon! That would make Milord our undercover master, of course, with the dashing Kaku-san as myself! You, Mio, can be Suke-san or Hachibe-e, I frankly couldn't care less.”

Why are we pretending to be in medieval Japan in a literal fantasy world?

“Uh, Tomoe? I'm pretty sure there's no Mito anyone in this world.”

They didn't even have a Japan here.

She frowned. “Hm... Indeed, we are lacking crucial supporting cast.”

Or maybe we could abandon the whole samurai drama roleplay thing altogether?

I sighed heavily. “Why are we ripping off of old dramas, anyway?”

“What a foolish thing to ask! Now that I have my freshly-forged katana, I must put it to proper thematic use!”

I shouldn't have asked.

Tomoe began waving the sword the dwarves made for her about dramatically. “Gleam, oh fearsome blade of mine! Back! Back, or I shall cut you down!”

She's really getting carried away... That's not even Mito Komon anymore.

Even Mio seemed excited for our trip, in her own way.

“Oh, I can't wait to try all sorts of delicacies along the way! You'll naturally be my main course, Milord, and I'll save some ruins for dessert.”

Uh, Mio? I'm definitely not edible. I don't care how hungry you are, no eating inanimate objects or people... I can't believe I have to say that at all. And how am I the main dish? Why me?!

She shook her head. “No, I'll focus on quality over quantity. All I need is Milord's blood, some mana, and if I'm lucky... hehehe!”

This shit's giving me a migraine... I don't even want to imagine what she means by “hehehe.”

I was growing less and less confident about taking these two with me on my journey. It felt like I was just giving myself more handicaps.

C'mon, I can do this. I'll be fine. This'll all work out somehow.

Before we left, I gave instructions to representatives of each race in the Subspace so things would continue running smoothly in our absence. With that, we were finally ready to go.

Just in case anyone got suspicious of the way I was dressed, we agreed that I'd pose as the son of a rich, unnamed merchant, on a journey to learn the family trade. Tomoe and Mio were my bodyguards, and we could sell all sorts of rarities—namely, the goods made and crops grown in the Subspace. I couldn't speak due to a childhood illness, and the mask and ring were both cursed so I couldn't remove them... more or less. That part of my cover story was half-baked, and I was half afraid I'd still arouse suspicion. It was weird to have that much baggage on one guy, after all.

And so, I began my trip proper—a nonstop string of disasters that would somehow make the world a better place along the way.

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To seem as inconspicuous as possible, I tried to keep the visible parts of my face still as we explored the village. I'd gotten the impression the settlement was small before I was chased away, and it turned out to be a slightly fancier version of a refugee camp, like I saw on TV in Japan. It was hard to even call it a proper village. It was the makeshift base of operations from which the humans

explored the Edge of the World, and although they didn't have the facilities for it to be a proper headquarters, the locals called it their base.

Most of them lived in tents, and some parts of the camp had small log cabins, but there were a few ornate stone buildings that clearly contained the settlement's more official facilities. If I had to guess, they kept their most valuable finds there.

According to the guards at the gate, most of the residents were either there for training or looking for natural resources. Either strength or money—straightforward enough as far as objectives went, and enough reason to live in the last frontier of hyuman civilization. The more entrepreneurial of them were likely more concerned with turning a profit than in being decent people, but that was just a guess, and I hoped I was wrong.

Despite it being our first hyuman settlement, there was a pervasive sense among the residents that we were at the literal edge of the world. There weren't any children playing in the town square, obviously, and I felt stupid for feeling disappointed.

We had no trouble whatsoever in passing through the front gates, of course. Thanks to the mask and the ring, nobody even stopped to consider I could be the “monster” they ran into the other day. We also prepared a cart full of rare goods as part of our cover, and they welcomed us with open arms without even stopping to suspect us.

One of the men at the gate was especially interested in some of the Subspace-grown fruit, and I felt a little bad that we'd just crammed handfuls of random fruit into crates and called it merchandise. Out here in the wastes, though, anything fresh was probably a blessing, and there was a decent chance fruit was especially valuable. Several of the elder dwarves had lived with humans in the past and had experience trading with them, and they were kind enough to teach us some basics, but this settlement was far from business as usual. What information we had was pretty old, too, so it couldn't be much use except as general reference.

While I wanted to pass as a merchant, I figured it couldn't hurt to register as an adventurer while I was at it. The dwarves told me about an Adventurer's

Guild, and I was eager to get a taste of the fantasy trope. The local guild was outfitted for training its members, and I couldn't imagine they got many new members, and Level 1 applicants in particular were probably unheard of. Still, I figured it couldn't hurt to get the paperwork out of the way now and get a tour of their facilities. It was worth mentioning that only my level was bugged. Both Tomoe and Mio had their levels tested with more of the orcs' color-changing paper, and they both tested as high-level. If either of them was to register instead, there wouldn't be any issue.

There was no upper limit to level, from what I'd heard. I was used to a maximum level of ninety-nine in games, but there were recorded cases of people being in the hundreds. That just made me more of a mystery. Tomoe and Mio both registered in the triple digits, which was a decently high level for a hyuman—but again, the dwarves' information was nearly thirty years old at this point. Besides, the pair only looked humanoid, and they weren't subject to those standards anyway.

“Just don't have such a high level you knock everyone in the Guild on their asses, okay?” I warned the pair.

That was the real issue. All we knew for sure is that they were Level 100 or higher, and that put us in a tough spot. It would intimidate the townsfolk, sure, but it would attract plenty of attention in the process, and the cons far outweighed the pros here.

Tomoe grunted indifferently. “That is one answer we do not possess. Only the likes of hyumans and demons care for such formalities.”

Fair enough. A legendary dragon doesn't need numbers to prove she's strong.

Mio nodded in agreement. “Precisely. If I remember correctly, though, a party of Level 250 to 300 hyumans managed to slay one of my children many years ago now. It was quite the brutal affair, and I heard many of the adventurers died in the process.”

It was hard to say how useful the arach's report would be here, though, especially since it was nothing more than hearsay.

Seriously? Maybe we should avoid the Guild altogether, depending on what the average level around here is like. If an arach can take on so many Level 300s

and put up a good fight, it's safe to assume Mio and Tomoe are both way above that.

For the time being, however, we could stay for a month or so, pick up some idea of the worth of goods and the basics of business, and maybe learn how to convincingly act like adventurers. Hopefully, we wouldn't attract any untoward attention before we left... but somehow, I doubted that was possible.

Is it just me, or is this place weird?

Given it being located in the Edge, it made sense that there would be all kinds of races here, not just humans. I was surprised to see demons walking normally through town, despite their supposed war with humankind. Even that made some sense—the land was harsh enough that they didn't have the energy or resources to pick fights with each other. They were in very much the same boat, after all. Instead of proper stores, most of the local business was done in stalls on the street, which again made sense given the shortage of materials and space. They'd need plenty of outlets as it was the metaphorical front lines before the wilderness.

Despite all that, however, one thing still seemed deeply strange to me.

Why is everyone here so attractive?

“Hey, Tomoe, Mio.”

“Hm? Something amiss?”

“Is anything bothering you, Milord?”

Both of them turned to look at me. They were both beautiful, obviously. If a simple Contract could turn a pair of literal monsters into such beautiful women, then I almost believed everyone here was hot by default.

“Why do you think everyone at the base is so attractive?” I asked them. “If there's actually some kind of rule that says only pretty people can live here, I think I'll go insane.”

That was just it. Everyone, from the humans to the demons, from the men to the women, were all beautiful. It was totally impossible. To put it bluntly, I was

closer in appearance to an orc than a proper human being, and I wasn't exaggerating.

Why am I crying all of a sudden...?

Neither Tomoe nor Mio seemed to care much, however.

“Really?” Tomoe snorted. “I spot not a face worth noting.”

Where the hell are you looking? The elf that just walked past you, literally as you said that, could be a statue come alive. If we had a figure even half as attractive as her, it'd sell in a heartbeat!

Mio nodded. “Nobody worth noticing, certainly.”

Are you blind? Look literally anywhere around us! It's like we wandered into a pack of supermodels!

“You can't be serious,” I finally managed to say.

Both nodded seriously.

Wait. So, are they saying that everyone here is that hot? This world really has it out for me, huh!

I froze as I realized something I wish had never occurred to me. My parents were residents of this world originally, and they were pretty cute—probably average by this world's standards, but still. My sisters were also pretty, some of the most beautiful women I'd seen.

B-But what about me? If my parents were both hyuman, then I guess that means I'm hyuman too. Am I some kind of changeling, then? Was I swapped out with a dwarf or an orc or something? Did my mom cheat on my dad with some kind of monster? Did they find me under a bridge somewhere?!

No, that was impossible. The Goddess herself confirmed I was their kid, through and through.

“Hm? Something the matter, Milord?” Tomoe asked me with a frown.

“Are you ill?” Mio leaned in closer to my face. “Would you like to find someplace to go inside, perhaps?”

They both looked genuinely worried, so I decided to put that line of thought out of its misery.

“Nah, it's nothing. Actually...”

That's right. I need to learn about this world, first and foremost.

“See if you can figure out how much things cost at the stalls here,” I asked them. “Check if the prices are fair, what's popular, what's likely to sell soon, whatever you can come up with. When you're done, compare your findings.”

Tomoe sighed in irritation. “How troublesome.”

Mio bowed. “As you will.”

If that's not telling of the kind of people they are, I don't know what is.

“Okay, time to head for the Adventurer's Guild... That's the name of the place, right? Can you check, Tomoe?”

“Verily.”

She stopped a passing man to ask him. Unfortunately, this was the best and easiest means I had of communicating with the townsfolk. Without them, I was stuck trying to write messages. I still ran the risk of sticking out, since I was dressed like a weirdo and muttering to my aides all the time, but it was better than talking openly in strange languages.

I'm not bitter about this, I swear... This is totally fine.

Before long, Tomoe returned from talking with the passerby.

“We need but turn right at the corner, Milord, and the Adventurer Guild will be before our eyes.”

Good, no problems there. Let's get going.

Makoto Misumi's Diary: Our First Town

My world, my home, is now forever beyond my reach. However, it feels as though I carry my old home with me in how I try to apply my old sensibilities to every new thing I encounter. I know that is an exercise in futility—there is no meaning in clinging to those old beliefs, in extolling those old virtues.

The humans, my racial fellows in this world, are all far too attractive. It feels as though I have wandered onto the set of a movie, one where they cast all the most attractive people they could find on purpose, and then they used CGI to make them even more attractive. Perhaps even the beauty I spotted outside town when I first arrived was simply average in this world. The Goddess's insults and insistences that I was ugly are objectively true.

Yet even the most attractive of this world's residents struggle to survive like everyone else, a strange sight to my eyes. I have seen beauties the like of which would be snapped up by scouts in a heartbeat, hugging their knees weakly in alleyways with dead eyes.

I wonder if I will ever grow accustomed to this new world's norms? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as they say, but I struggle to accept this place could be so ruthlessly equivocal. Looks were a privilege and a talent unto themselves, and it felt cruel to steal such a tool from these poor souls. All I can say for certain is that this world will no doubt continue to surprise me.

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“What? You want to register? Here?”

The Guild's receptionist looked at us with unconcealed confusion.

I figured as much. No way your average rookie would sign up in a hellscape like this.

“Yes,” Mio confirmed politely. “Milord is here to observe the process for future reference, but the two of us would like to become official members.”

The receptionist nodded slowly. “All right... but may I ask why your companion there is dressed so strangely?”

She'd been staring at me for a while, but I didn't think she'd actually say something about it.

But, man, is she cute. A face like hers would fit right on a magazine cover. That just makes her words cut deeper!

I couldn't blame her, though. If I saw a guy with five white and pink rings on his left hand, a long gray robe, and a weird mask, I'd be staring at least as hard.

“Milord is the heir to a renowned merchant's household who will remain unnamed, but he was quite the sickly child. He lost his voice in his youth, and has never truly recovered it. Not only that, he has run afoul of several curses in our journey thus far...”

At the first mention of curses, the receptionist's gaze went from suspicious to loathing. It almost hurt. Mio, of course, was getting progressively more agitated as the conversation drew on, and her smile was strained. I heard a clattering from my other side, and I turned to see Tomoe quivering with anger, her hand wrapped tightly about the hilt of her sword. I grabbed her wrist and shot her a harsh look, and luckily she got the message and released her weapon.

If you both hate hearing this so much, you should've thought up a different cover story! This is on you!

“In order to suppress the curses,” Mio continued, “Milord must wear his mask and rings at all times. However, you will find he is quite the talent with magic, and he possesses a unique means of communication to take advantage of that.”

She looked at me, and grasping her message, I created a speech bubble by my head with the word “HELLO” written on it in the Common Tongue. The receptionist started in surprise, but luckily she didn't question me further.

So, I'll be fine with writing what I need to say, then... That's one less thing to worry about.

“I hope you can forgive Milord's eccentricities,” Mio continued. “Now, my companion and I are confident in our skills, but we have yet to enlist at the Guild due to how busy we've been with Milord. We decided, however, that we had best register while we have the chance.”

Tomoe nodded briefly in agreement.

Mio met the receptionist's eyes, an unspoken threat passing between the pair. “Now, are there any outstanding issues, or will we be permitted to

register?”

I'd decided to let Mio do most of the talking at the Guild since Tomoe asked for directions, but it was a difficult decision. For the time being, though, Mio seemed to be doing fine.

“N-No, not at all!” the receptionist hurriedly replied. “I understand that your situation is complicated. I was only a little surprised, given that this branch is almost entirely composed of powerful adventurers, and we've never had anyone register here before. We, um... I'm so very sorry.”

That's my line, lady. Sorry for giving you such a scare.

“First of all, please allow us to record your levels. I'll explain our facilities while we wait for my colleagues to prepare the test.”

That was ideal, and I gave Mio the go-ahead.

“Please do,” the spider bowed.

“Very well. At our Guild, we perform all the administrative and supporting tasks you would no doubt expect of our organization. We organize work by rank, from E to SSS, taking into account both the difficulty of the task and any special circumstances. Adventurers are similarly ranked, and we encourage them to take work of an equal rank.”

That sounded simple enough. They needed some way to quantify their adventurers' strengths, after all.

“On that note, you will start at Rank E, though we will increase your ranking as you successfully complete quests.”

Mio raised an eyebrow. “Oh? So, regardless of our level, we'll be required to start with the absolute easiest of tasks?”

How are you so confident, Mio? You literally just need to listen along. No matter how strong you are, that doesn't mean a thing if the Guild doesn't know they can trust you.

The receptionist smiled awkwardly. “I-I'm afraid so. No matter what your level is, you'll be starting with Rank E, though if you can finish that without difficulty, you'll likely increase your rank more quickly than usual.”

Tomoe sighed irritably. “How troublesome.”

You too, Tomoe?

I shot the both of them chiding looks, and they bowed apologetically.

The receptionist continued. “In addition to the alphabetical rankings, we also distinguish between minus, neutral, and plus modifiers. For instance, one would need to finish only three Rank E+ quests to become a Rank D adventurer, but five E quests, or as many as ten Equests.”

I was surprised she wasn't too shaken by my aides' intimidation, but looking around the hall, I noticed a few rough-looking adventurers. She was probably used to handling tough customers.

Basically, we just need to get Tomoe and Mio a handful of E+ quests and we'll be good as gold.

“I should also mention the two special rankings, while we're here. The first is open to adventurers of any rank, but if the quest is demonstrably low-level, adventurers of too high a level may be barred from accepting it. For these quests, the usual failsafes the Guild puts in place for security purposes don't apply, and these quests must be accepted at the adventurer's own risk. Many of these are regular ranked quests that have been failed by multiple parties, and as a result, the Guild will grant the completing adventurer a rank-up as a show of gratitude—provided the adventurer is lower than Rank S as of accepting the quest. Rank S or higher adventurers are instead noted as special contributors to the Guild and are evaluated more highly accordingly.”

Huh... High risk, high return. That could come in handy for us, though... I'll ask Mio and Tomoe to focus on those for now.

“The second special ranking,” the receptionist continued, “is reserved for quests intended for specific adventurers or parties. In these cases, you would be dealing with the requestor directly and negotiate your reward in person. Many times, this results in greater compensation than what is offered for ordinary quests, but there is typically little to no change in your rank afterward.”

Oh, so you can ask for specific people for your quests... Good to know.

“Finally, please note that joining the Guild grants you access to all facilities and services we offer.”

That was great to hear. I was worried for a while that the Guild was this world's equivalent of an exploitative contract-work agency, but they seemed to be legit.

The receptionist paused as if recalling something, then turned to me. “Oh, something else I should mention...”

Wait, me?

“As you've likely contracted with the Merchant's Guild already, please note that their contracts will take priority in case of conflict between the two. You'll be contractually obligated to prioritize your arrangements with them over us.”

That was the first I'd ever heard of a Merchant's Guild. I'd assumed this world was all swords and magic, and I didn't even consider the whole economic side of their society. It was especially embarrassing because my cover story dealt directly with that kind of thing.

“Of course, most of the restrictions are to ensure you don't use your connections as an adventurer to establish monopolies and keep the marketplace as free from unnecessary violence as possible. We ask that you strictly adhere to these guidelines.”

So, that's it, then? I'm glad she explained it so concisely, despite supposedly having never done it before.

I rapped my knuckles on the table to get her attention, then made a speech bubble. *“Two questions. Firstly, where can we get information on the Guild's top-ranking adventurers? Secondly, what approximate rank would someone slaying a lizhu be?”*

She read over the text, and fortunately she seemed to understand everything I asked. When she finished, she looked back to me.

“You're free to check the bulletin over there where you'll notice the ranks of every adventurer active at this branch has been listed. We update it regularly, so you should always assume the information there is accurate. As for your lizhu question, there are a number of factors that can modify the difficulty,

from whether a single monster or a whole nest is eradicated, to the type of materials retrieved. Could you be a little more specific?"

Man, they get specific...

"I would like to know the reward for slaying a horde, with all materials harvested."

"In that case, we would ask for the pelt, fangs, and eyes. Such quests are typically set as Rank C+, but against a whole pack, that'd increase to a B. However, most adventurers take material-harvesting quests only rarely, as it's often more work than it's worth. Also, lizhu in particular are troublesome in packs, so those quests are often given a special ranking."

Maybe I shouldn't mention I kicked one to death by accident, then.

After thanking her, I told my companions I'd check the rankings and left for the bulletin board. Unless the board had lots of Level 300 to 400 adventurers on it, it might be best not to register at this Guild.

I approached the bulletin and read the name at the top of the list—Mils Ace, Rank SS, Level 444.

Ace looks like a last name... and here I thought Misumi was weird. Three unlucky 4's in a row is a bad sign, though. I hope he doesn't die soon.

Next down the list was a Level 280 Rank S adventurer with a more normal name. From that, it was fair to assume this Ace guy was pretty strong, but not even he hit Level 500. That didn't bode well for Mio or Tomoe, then.

That cinches it. No way we're registering here. I'll make up some BS excuse and we'll get out of here.

Since it took so many adventurers in the top twenty to stand any chance against just an arach, Mio had to be significantly stronger. It was foolhardy to draw so much attention to ourselves when we still barely knew a thing about how things worked here.

While I was at the bulletin board, however, I heard a growing clamor behind me. I turned around to see my two servants, each with a sheet of paper in their hands.

Uh. Did they not figure out why I was looking at the rankings? Are those level-recording papers, just like they look? Is this all a bad dream? I mean, I'm the one who's supposed to be screwing up the natural order of things here! Why am I having to work so hard to keep them out of trouble?!

I hurried back to their side. The origami-sized papers they were holding were both a violent shade of red, and its surface was writhing with strange symbols. They were definitely level-measuring papers, but the red color looked more like a malfunction than an intended reading. We were getting stared at like we were a bunch of escaped convicts. I resisted the urge to shout and blow my cover, so I gave them both my angriest glare instead. Luckily, they seemed to understand why.

Tomoe laughed weakly. “I-I swear I'd no idea what this was... The blasted thing simply turned red when I picked it up.”

Mio wordlessly nodded in agreement.

Oh, so they get why I'm so angry? They should've picked up on that a minute ago!

There was now a second receptionist at the counter, and this one had cat ears. She was a beastkin, probably, and I was so grateful for the sight.

The other receptionist swallowed hard at the papers. “Th-Those should function perfectly up to Level 400...”

I wasn't surprised she was so shaken. Both my companions had at least the strength of the three strongest people at the Guild, after all, and I assumed they could easily beat out Ace-san.

I guess we can't say we changed our minds now, huh? Time to go public.

The cat-eared receptionist held out a fresh pair of papers. “Th-These are 625 papers, then...”

I held out a hand to stop her. “*They had the strength to escort me unharmed through the Edge for the past week.*”

Mio, Tomoe, you two don't have to look so smug about it!

“In terms of pure power,” my speech bubble continued, “they can defeat arach-class monsters in single combat. May I request you bring a higher-level test?”

A ripple of surprise ran through the gathered crowd.

Why did I say arach?! I mean, the spider-things said to be manifestations of pure darkness? Kin of the Spider of Calamity herself?! What's that make their level, in the nine hundreds? Just imagine what everyone else will be saying now! If the receptionist pulls out 1,600 papers or something like that, they'll wind up testing as good as the Spirits or better! No, their first papers had to be broken. Matching that Ace guy's level at all shouldn't be possible!

The intensity of the crowd's chatter grew in volume, and I resisted the urge to cover my ears with my hands.

What even are Spirits? I don't even know if they're strong.

“Really?!” the cat-eared receptionist's eyes widened. “We hardly ever need anything stronger than 625 paper... I'll check the storehouse!”

She ran out of the room and returned moments later with a bundle of papers in an old envelope.

Tomoe shot me a wary look. “Milord, it seems we may have attracted quite the audience.”

No shit! We'll just have to bluff through this and hope it doesn't get worse.

“Um... Here you are.”

The receptionist proffered a pair of new sheets, each of which was large enough to need to be held in both hands. I noticed that she removed a metal clip from each sheet as well, releasing mana throughout its surface—evidently, the sheets were inherently mana-charged, and they needed to be activated for use.

I made a new speech bubble. “*You first, Tomoe.*”

She obediently nodded. “As you will.”

As soon as Tomoe grabbed it, the paper began to change color. Nearly a third of the paper from the edges was dyed red, and it was still growing. Apparently,

if it went completely red, the test would declare them as Level 1,600. That would explain the tension in the bystanders, then, as the color hastened toward the center of the sheet. Finally, it came to a halt when a little over eighty percent of the sheet was crimson. Any sign of mana disappeared from it, meaning it was likely safe for someone else to touch it now.

The cat-eared receptionist took the sheet, clamped the metal piece back on, and peered at the metal surface. The exact number would likely appear on that, then. She sighed deeply at what she saw, then scribbled something on a paper. Then, she grasped the measuring paper once, and it flashed into flames and disappeared.

Is that some kind of storage magic? Are the used sheets dangerous or something?

“Y-You've been formally registered as an adventurer, Tomoe-sama. Here is your ID plate.” The nervous receptionist handed her the plate.

Tomoe accepted it eagerly. “Oh? They've captured my likeness in the mithril! Does it resemble me, Lord?”

I nodded. There was no point in using a speech bubble for this.

Introducing mithril just like that, huh... It looks like a perfectly normal metal. It's not even very shiny.

“Now for your rank and level, Tomoe-sama...”

The onlookers swallowed hard.

“... You are Rank E, and L-Level 1,320. As of this moment, you are officially the strongest adventurer in the whole Guild.”

The strongest?!

“Oh, how thoughtful of you to recognize me as your superior so quickly! May I ask how much weaker than me the former strongest is?”

Man, she's in a good mood. Has she forgotten we're supposed to be laying low?!

I was admittedly just as curious to hear the gap, though.

“That would be the Dragon Slayer, Sofia Bulga... R-rank SSS, Level 920.”

“Hmm... Dragon Slayer, you said?” Tomoe smirked. “How many of them has she hunted, I wonder?”

Right. I keep forgetting she's a dragon too.

“If what I heard was correct,” the receptionist replied, “Sofia-sama's party slew the Greater Dragon Lancer, right in its lair in the Empire.”

Tomoe snorted dismissively. “Lancer? The self-professed Heavenly Sword? Serves the fool right for getting so confident.”

I was glad the mask made my expression easier to hide.

That's a cool name, though... I would've loved to meet the guy.

Mio raised her hand. “Is it perhaps my turn yet?”

Oh, I forgot they hadn't measured her yet. I get the feeling she'll hit the quadruple digits, too...

She picked up the paper, and after a minute, it was finished—at a whopping ninety percent red, no less. The cat-eared receptionist quivered violently as she fumbled with the result plaque. She no doubt knew they were both way stronger than that Dragon Slayer person, and she was sweating so profusely I almost felt sorry for her.

“M-Mio-sama, Rank E... Level 1,500.”

Yay, we've got a new number one already.

We were bound to stick out no matter where we went now. I had to be the only merchant in the whole world with not one but two bodyguards in the quadruple digits.

“What?!” Tomoe's face flushed with rage. “Impossible! How is she nearly two hundred levels higher than I?! I demand a retest! Bring me a new paper!”

Why's she so worked up over some stupid number?

I patted her firmly on the shoulder. “She was fighting the whole time you were asleep. Of course, she tests as higher. Now, my turn.”

Tomoe had spent who-knows-how-long on her mountain while Mio was literally hunting for food and tearing places up the world over. There was a clear difference in how much experience they had.

And knowing that masochist, there's a good chance she has more "experience" too.

I left Mio to console Tomoe as I turned to the still-quivering cat-eared lady. "The paper, please."

With trembling fingers, she made for the 900 paper.

I smiled awkwardly and held out my hand to stop her. "Just the smallest one will be fine."

I can't imagine I'll need it.

I grabbed the small sheet one-handed and waited for it to change. There were no symbols on this one, or other indications it was doing anything. The room around me was so silent and still it hurt. Finally, it changed color only faintly.

Oh? Did I finally get a level-up?!

The receptionist sighed with relief. "Rank E, Level 1."

I knew it... I just knew it. No reason for me to be upset about it, right?

Our audience seemed even more confused now that they knew how staggeringly low-level I was compared to my companions. Worse, since all this information was publicly available, it'd be hard to hide this going forward. Luckily, ranks seemed to be valued more than levels, so as long as they stayed low-ranked we would be able to fly under the radar... hopefully.

The receptionists offered to conduct a more thorough analysis of our stats, which I summarily refused. If one or more values were unusually high, that could only hurt our case. I was still curious, however, so I resolved to find some other way to check my own status.

With that, we left the Guild to browse some street vendors as we hunted for a hotel. The cat-eared receptionist told us where the Guild's official recommendations were. The other adventurers eagerly parted before us in avoidance, and the path to the settlement's dirt streets seemed wider than it

was on the way in. We had other things on our mind, though—we had an inn to find.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 5

“The Kusunoha Company, is it? Do you have a plate from the Merchant's Guild with you?”

I shook my head. *“Sorry, we lost it somewhere on the way here. We won't have any means of replacing it for several villages yet, so for now we'd like rooms as ordinary guests... no, as adventurers.”*

I held out my adventurer plate, and the young man at the desk accepted it, glancing only a moment before handing it back. “Raidou-sama, is it? Understood.”

I got the feeling we were in risk of drawing too much negative attention to ourselves, so I made up the Kusunoha Company and an alias to try and maintain some secrecy.

It had a really nice ring to it... Raidou, heir to the Kusunoha Company. I didn't have any of the abilities or great sideburns of the video game character the name was inspired by, though. Since my servants only looked human, I guess I passed as a summoner... A dragon king and a mythical beast, I guess.

The clerk's brow furrowed. “My, a lost plate... That's a shame. The Merchant Guild only has a sub-branch here, so I'm afraid there's little we can do about that.”

“I'm simply glad we got away with only losing the plate, given our journey,” I wrote grimly. *“We had never intended to traverse the Edge in the first place.”*

That was true. I wasn't planning on coming to this world at all.

“I'm impressed you did so well out there, sir. It's a miracle you made it here without proper preparation.”

"I have my subordinates to thank for that. Now, may we have two rooms? There are vacancies, I hope."

"Of course. I'm afraid our only open rooms are our priciest suites, however."

Great... At least this inn finally has available rooms. It feels like this village is in the middle of tourist season.

Maybe I was playing too many games, but I'd assumed we would only need to hand over some gold and we'd get a bed on the spot.

"How much per room?"

"Well, since you've provided your adventurer plates, and you have horses to tend to as well, the price will be considerable, but we can offer a better rate than with your merchant plate."

He was dancing around the question, coming across as a little-brother-type character from a dating sim. He seemed born to fidget.

"Well?"

"About the price, then..."

I urged him to speak with a firm nod.

"... Please understand that as you are adventurers, we hold no liability for any lost or stolen objects during your stay."

He wants to avoid answering that badly, huh?

I couldn't imagine most adventurers would have many goods to carry by wagon, but merchants would have all kinds of wares. Of course, they'd hold the inn liable for any losses, even in a rough-seeming burg like this. I'd never heard of a safe, crime-free refugee camp, after all.

"I don't mind," I wrote. *"We will not request any form of compensation for losses."*

"Including the cost of tending to your horses, then, the price will be six gold pieces per night."

Shit, that's pricey!

I heard from the dwarves the going price for a room at an inn was one silver at most, but evidently their information was outdated.

As it happened, this world relied mainly on metal coins for currency. There were the standard copper, silver, and gold coins, of course, but they had a higher-value coin in the form of mana-conductive Morian silver, dubbed magisilver coins. Lastly, the most expensive coin was truegold, a coin made of a valuable metal far pricier than ordinary gold. I assumed Morian silver was the technical name for mithril or something, but the dwarves confirmed they were different metals altogether. If that were the case, I imagine adventurer plates would be made with that instead.

In terms of value, one copper equaled about a thousand yen, a silver was ten thousand, and gold was a hundred thousand. Then, magisilver was about a million yen. Truegold pieces weren't made much and mostly put up as display pieces. Supposedly, just one could buy you a castle. It reminded me of how Japan only used coinage in the Edo era and their golden *han* pieces.

The average monthly wage was between one and three silver, which felt so different from the inflation-plagued yen.

That means this goddamn place is a whopping six hundred thousand yen a night... That's a little much even for the get-rich-frontier, isn't it? They don't even have horse insurance!

I was at a crossroads. I could accept the fee and play the fat-walleted merchant, but I'd be spending the money the dwarves gave me, and I promised them we wouldn't waste it on anything nonessential. We could, of course, make back the money in time...

"Make that ten days," Tomoe said confidently, claiming total dominance over my wallet.

I shot her a dirty look, then started pulling gold coins out of my wallet.

One... two... three...

I could practically feel everyone else counting along with me. Of course, Tomoe wouldn't know how much money that was, but all the money I had in

the world was this pouch of a hundred gold pieces. Most of that was on the table now.

Ten days at a hotel for six million yen, paid up-front in cash... Haha, I feel like such a celebrity. A neat couple mil for a room at a log cabin in the middle of nowhere!

The clerk nodded. "Paid in full, thank you. Allow me to show you to your room."

Tomoe paused. "Ah, one more thing..."

I stopped her from continuing like a flash counter in some fighting game.

What does this idiot want now?!

The youth spun around, swallowing hard. "U-Um... Yes?"

"Our lord is a gentle soul, but I have a bit of a temper, you see. I've received no end of scolding about it." She casually pulled her adventurer's plate out of her pocket, making sure the clerk could see her abomination of a level. That was a threat, if I ever saw one. "This so happens to be the first inn with any vacancies we've been able to find in town. Your hospitality is welcome, granted, but are you certain the price is correct?"

"O-O-Of course," the clerk stammered. "Y-You know how it can be, out here on the Edge... Besides, we have more pride in our establishment than any other lodgings in town."

Is it just me, or is he starting to sound suspicious?

Tomoe nodded. "Good. The best room at the last inn we tried, you see, was a mere one gold piece per night. Forgive me for suspecting something was amiss. Had you implied your prices were a sham, why, I was prepared to obliterate this miserable pile of sticks altogether, hehe."

She was smiling, but there was piercing doubt in her eyes. I'd assumed she was just an airhead, but she was a lot sharper than she gave on. I didn't even know how she found that price. I glanced at Mio, whose smile didn't reach her eyes either. The pair of them sent a chill down my spine.

“Allow me to check one final time,” Tomoe drawled. “You said it was six gold pieces a night, did you?”

“Th-That's, um... I...”

So, he was overcharging us on purpose after all... That baby-faced pretty boy was trying to play the villain? I guess the whole “you can't judge a book by its cover” thing goes double in this world. That'll be tricky to get used to... I can't help but melt a little when I see a pretty woman. I'm just a high schooler, after all. Wait, does this world even have high school? Probably not in a town like this, anyway.

“T-Two gold pieces!” the boy finally stammered, bowing so deeply he nearly bent himself in half. “I'm so sorry, I must've been mistaken!”

Still, that was about two million yen for the three of us, which should've gotten us a hotel built like a palace. I couldn't believe that was the normal price for such a shitty room.

Tomoe raised an amused eyebrow. “Oh? What a curiously large mistake to make.”

She began kicking her leg idly, “accidentally” putting her foot clean through the wooden floor. The clerk froze at the sight, color draining from his feet.

She sighed. “Oh, my apologies. It seems your floors are growing rather old.”

It was clear from the look on the clerk's face that wasn't the case.

“Please watch yourself, Tomoe-san,” Mio cautioned her. “But here's an idea, boy... Why don't you hold onto the remaining money until we check out? Until then, we'll be holding you entirely responsible.”

Damn, Mio, that's just harsh, forcing him to hold onto the money he tried to scam out of us. If he tries to flee with our gold now, he won't get off with a tame little scare...

He frantically shook his head. “N-No, I'll return your money right now, promise!”

“Far too much hassle,” she waved him off with a sigh. “Our master has no need for such a paltry sum, anyway. I'm looking forward to our meals... I

certainly hope your offerings will sate me.”

The smile on her face made it clear she wouldn't take no for an answer. She was intent on making him follow through.

If they're both so smart, though, why'd they go and cause so much trouble in the Guild like that? If anything, it feels like they're trying to cause problems...

The clerk paused at the door, half-turning back to wordlessly plead to me.

What are you, a chihuahua?! Too bad I'm more of a cat person, bitch!

Even if I was a dog person, though, I wouldn't raise a finger to help him fresh from trying to scam us. I couldn't think of anything fitting to reply to the clerk, so I pointedly looked away and headed to our room.

“How troublesome... I'm glad we could nip that nonsense in the bud.”

Mio nodded in agreement to Tomoe's complaint. “Hopefully, that foolish boy won't be tempted to harm anyone else the same way. And the thought of him having to carefully safeguard the very sum he tried to steal from us... Hehehe!”

“You're both sick,” I spat. “Though I guess he kind of deserved it...”

Now that we were in our room, I felt it was safe to talk freely. The room showed no signs of being soundproof, but I figured that we wouldn't be overheard as long as we tried to keep our voices down.

“I must admit, though, things are more expensive in general than we were led to believe,” Mio said.

Tomoe shrugged. “It is what it is. It seems the sellers set the prices here... Not much to be done.”

“Yeah... Especially with how rare even the essentials are here,” I admitted. “No wonder the market's screwed up... What a place to start off with.”

Tomoe nodded sagely. “We must not expect money to hold its worth here. A flask of water is more valuable than a decent blade—and monster fangs or claws are more valuable still.”

“Because they're so delicious?” Mio guessed.

“Water's the only thing there you should be consuming! Seriously, Mio, stop trying to make everything about food.”

I didn't think warning her would do any good, though. Once a glutton, always a glutton, it seemed.

“The most valuable goods here are those which can only be found locally, and thus sell for handsome prices elsewhere,” Tomoe concluded. “After which comes difficult-to-acquire daily essentials, and finally, standard weaponry and armor. What an unusual place this is...”

I could understand essentials and the like being pricey, but I couldn't wrap my head around weapons being cheaper than food. If I had to guess, though, it was that food and water ran out quickly and needed to be in constant supply, which increased the demand. On the other hand, weapons wore out slowly and needed to be replaced far more rarely.

Something about this still rubbed me the wrong way, though. Weaponry took specialized skills to make, not to mention the special facilities and materials needed. It felt weird for them to be pricier than food and luxury goods under any circumstances. No, something had to be up.

I guess where there's power and money, there's bound to be people pulling the strings... Any merchant who wants to do business in a place like this would get rich quick, no doubt, but there has to be some deeper reason for it all.

“Wait, there's a Merchant Guild in this place, right? Should we really try to sell stuff without going to them first?”

Tomoe nodded thoughtfully. “Certainly, they seem to have a branch here.”

Mio shook her head. “If they didn't want you plying your trade, I'd like to see them try to stop you.”

That's not the problem here. We really can't afford to draw any attention to ourselves.

“Would that not put our Lord's words under suspicion?” Tomoe questioned her. “We claimed to be registered with them, despite the lost plate, yet we don't know the most basic of their rules? It only serves to weaken our Lord's guise as heir to a wealthy merchant's entire operation.”

Maybe she's not dumb after all... That's almost exactly what I was trying to say.

"Yeah, that," I nodded. "Mio, could you please go check out this branch office place? Just say you're interested in joining them or whatever and figure out as much of their rules as you can."

Mio blinked in surprise. "Surely, you don't mean right now, Milord?"

"Of course, I do. Rumors about the two of you will be all over the town in the morning, so now's the only real time we can move unobserved. Go on, now, go."

She sighed heavily. "Oh, fine, if you insist. I'll leave if I must."

As Mio left, and Tomoe grinned at me in satisfaction.

"How fitting, for our master to use us as he sees fit. You are a wise old soul."

"I'm not an old anything!" I snapped back. "Besides, we wouldn't have to be so careful in the first place if you didn't put on such a scene at the Guild."

She pursed her lips unhappily. "But is this not the way it was always done on *Mito Komon*? Is the appeal not to investigate the local troubles after arriving at the inn?"

"Nah, this is totally different. Who knows if there's an evil mastermind at all?"

"Of course, there is."

"How are you so sure?!"

The world's a lot more complex than the black-and-white ethics of old dramas!

"The market is too mismanaged for it to be anything else. This must be a plot."

Okay, so she's smart now? Does all the dumbness get kicked out of her head when she goes into drama-geek mode?

"You're pretty sharp, Tomoe."

"Nothing of the sort. You no doubt figured out much the same before me. Ah, just think—someone out there is making so-called 'dirty money'! Illegally!"

You don't have to sound so excited about it!

"I hope Mio finds something so that we'll at least have some direction," I muttered.

"Impossible, no doubt. She seemed none the wiser to the plot at hand, and I would be surprised if she returned *without* a stalker!"

Again, no need to sound so gleeful.

One of our biggest problems, though, was that most of my wares were food. We couldn't sell any of it without standing out.

Okay, why is this playing out like an old Mito Komon episode?

"Personally, I think you're more like the villain-of-the-day or the corrupt merchant..."

Her evil laugh would be perfect for either role, but there honestly weren't any other characters I would say fit her perfectly.

Her brow furrowed with irritation. "Clearly, I am a natural fit for Kaku-san!"

"One of Kaku-san's whole things is he doesn't use a sword!"

"Then I shall be a new Kaku-san, a sword master!"

"You're gutting the character!"

"I will be carving out his place, at any rate. No further questions!"

So, you're just going to force your way?!

"You're so... Okay, fine, you're Kaku-san."

More like high-on-crack-san, but whatever.

"Hm? That nuance... You intended that as an insult!"

Can she read minds now?!

I sighed. "I'm beginning to suspect you caused all that ruckus at the Adventurer's Guild on purpose."

"Er. Well..."

Shit... Was she seriously trying to screw everything up, just for her dumb Edo-drama roleplay?!

She smiled weakly and averted her gaze. "Haha... hahaha..."

Yep, definitely high-on-crack-san. She's gonna get us all killed.

※ ※ ※

Knock-knock!

A loud rapping came from the door.

Hm? Who's that?

I shot Tomoe a sidelong glance.

"Who goes there?" Tomoe called out.

"It's me, Mio. May I open the door?"

"Be my guest."

It sounded like her, but I extended a detection Realm around us just in case. Sure enough, there were six men surrounding the inn, and from the way they held themselves, each was an experienced fighter.

Well, damn. I never thought she'd actually get followed back here...

Mio, noticing my piercing glare, went a little red and began to fidget. "M-Milord? Is something the matter? You're staring so intensely..."

I shook my head speechlessly. "No, just... forget it."

From the look of it, Tomoe had also clued in on our visitors. They hadn't entered the building yet, nor had they approached the stables for our wares. I doubted the leak was from the clerk, given how badly Tomoe scared him, but he seemed like the easily bribable type.

"I've finished investigating the Merchant's Guild," Mio announced.

I nodded. "And?"

"It appears selling goods without one of their licenses is illegal. The closest place we could get a plate issued or renewed is the closest town to here, Tsige."

“How far is it?”

“Roughly three villages away. The journey there typically takes a month.”

Wait, three whole towns after this one? That’s ridiculously far.

We would struggle to support ourselves in the meantime, no doubt. Even if Mio and Tomoe did adventuring work between now and then, Rank E pay couldn’t be that great.

“Is there any way to sell our stuff sooner?” I asked.

“It would seem a trading post can address our needs.”

“A trading post?”

First I’ve heard of that.

“We can act as wholesalers to any branch of the Merchant’s Guild... By the way, may I ask what a ‘wholesaler’ is?”

You should’ve asked the folks at the Merchant Guild that.

“Basically, we can only sell to other merchants,” I explained. “But, well...”

It’d be an excellent way to tell the market value of our wares, but given the current state of disarray the base was in, I felt the merchants were purposefully trying to milk the adventurers dry. I didn’t want to enable that—but there was a good chance I was just overthinking things.

I thought for a moment. “I guess all our wares are set to expire soon, so we may as well sell all we have to the trading post tomorrow.”

That would net us some money, at least.

Day one was at a close, but there was far too much to do for us to relax yet. I decided against retreating to the Subspace and prepared to sleep in one of the inn’s beds instead.

Tomoe nodded. “We had best pay no mind to our stalkers outside either.”

Mio shot her a confused look. “Stalkers?”

“Did you not realize you were being followed?”

“Me? Followed?!”

I wasn't surprised. She didn't strike me as one for avoiding danger, instead opting to dive right into it and swallow the danger whole.

She strode toward the window. "I'll go dispose of them."

I shook my head. "Nah, leave them. I want to let them go."

"Why?!"

"I said, leave them."

She pouted her lips. "Hmph."

"C'mon, it's almost time for dinner. It'd suck not to enjoy it, right?"

Fortunately, that lightened her mood on the spot, just like I was hoping it would.

I turned. "By the way, Tomoe..."

"Yes, Lord?"

"I want you to wait by our wares... Actually, you should probably spend the night out there. They're already starting to get nosy."

Her eyes widened. "What?!"

"You wanna be like Kaku-san, right? Well, he's always the one to do this kind of thing in the show!"

"B-But dinner!"

I smiled warmly. "You'll be fine!"

"A-Are you the devil, Lord?!"

"Now, you probably don't need to be told, being the good little merchant's servant that you are, but don't lay a finger on our wares, okay?"

"You're a demon! A demon is among us!"

"Just remember how much trouble you've caused for us today! Now go on, that's an order!"

I had to put my foot down every once in a while.

Call me a devil, a demon, or whatever else you like! Mwahahaha!

Shen

Honestly, he could stand to be more considerate.

At this rate, he was set to be none other than the stereotypically cruel old man. I would much prefer him as the kind and knowledgeable Komon-dono himself, of course, not to mention he had close to no desire to stick his nose into danger. With the attempted scam at the front desk, for instance, he noticed the ill-doing but did nothing. Had I not interfered, the encounter would have ended before it began. That was no good. The world would not become a better place—and I would have no chance to use my new katana either.

Though the blade was proper in form only, the elder dwarves... no, the eldwars, as I shall call them, had succeeded in making a katana. I was glad that Mio was fittingly careless to invite trouble to our doorstep to advance the plot. She fit the role of the bumbling Hachibe-e-san to perfection, conducting every preparation we needed. Now if only our Lord would be more willing to engage with the evildoers, we could begin our World-Saving Journey: Edge of the World arc in earnest.

Presently, I was huddled among the various wares in our wagon. Though I was still put out by the lack of dinner, there was an air of anticipation, and I found myself grateful to my Lord for his foresight. I had my sword at my hip—a lithe one-edged blade in the shape of a proper katana, though I had yet to find the forging method for a true one.

My Lord had memories of being dragged by his parents to something called the Hamono Matsuri, or Cutlery Festival, in a town called Seki, during which such blades were made. I resolved to search his memories more thoroughly later. Luckily, he was the curious type, and regularly researched whatever captured his interest. It was an easy trait for me to take advantage of, and I was rather grateful for that.

I glanced about at our wares. Most of it was fruit found growing naturally in my Lord's home world. As he claimed to recognize it all, he was quite useful in identifying the edible ones. Each fruit was ripe and juicy, with flavor I had

confirmed personally. That was another product of harsh environment he had lived in, and despite the somewhat haphazard manner of packing, none of them had shown signs of bruising yet. They were fresh as fresh could—

I froze.

“Hmph... So, they have dared make their move.”

Mio’s stalkers were slowly closing in. While their approach betrayed evidence of dedicated training, I had spent far too long apart from humans to detect them on that trait alone. No, there was a subtle malice in the air that made their untoward intentions clear. They were coordinated in their movements as well, speaking to tempering in the crucible of battle.

Hmm... How shall I proceed?

The moment before I left the room, my Lord had begged me not to slay them all where they stood. I had grown far stronger since the forging of our Contract, yet I had no dampening items as my Lord did. Should I attack in earnest, they would perish in seconds, yet I could not simply ignore my orders.

Let us test the ideal use of force.

Two of the six opted to wait outside, while four entered the stable. Perfect. Now I would leave two alive, even in the worst-case scenario. Two of the four thieves slowly approached the wagon, reaching out to lay hands on the vehicle.

The time is nigh!

I silently stood and drew my blade, moving beside the cart.

“What business have you with our cart?” I asked cheerily.

The intruders froze, heads whipping about to stare at me. Their eyes spoke of equal parts caution and malice. That was no small wonder; with my prey before me and battle nigh, I was meeting their eyes with the predatory glee of a snake observing a juicy rat.

“...”

My prey remained silent. They exchanged glances but once, nodding slightly. They had no desire to negotiate, then, but I had no qualms about that. Such miserable hooligans deserved pain. The lookouts, despite no doubt hearing my

interruption, made no move to close in. I assumed they would stay out of the fight, then.

I caught the glint of steel in the two closest thug's hands, and the two watchers made a throwing motion. In tandem, the wagon-pilferers lunged at me. I deflected the first, then dodged the second. The throwing knives were deflected mid-air with the sheath of my blade. Their blows were light and sluggish, far from a match for me.

The short sword that missed me slashed up once more, and at an angle that begged me to kick it from its owner's hands. I delivered a swift toe-kick to the attacker's wrist, one that failed to carry even my proper weight behind it—and yet with a dull crack, the hooligan was sent flying back. I had restrained myself as best I could, but his wrist had no doubt shattered. I felt that using my sword would be a foolish and lethal decision, yet my curiosity got the better of me.

“Hmm...”

I would avoid slaying them if I focused my attacks on their weapons. I swiftly stepped back, and before my opponents could compose themselves, I unleashed a swift crescent slash.

“What?!” one of them gasped.

Unable to respond further, he likely had not processed my backstep either. I had all but disappeared from in front of him, and he had frozen like a miserable novice.

Clang!

My opponent froze at the sound of his blade mysteriously shortening before his eyes. I barely felt the resistance of his steel, my katana feeling as natural in my hand as an extension of my body. The eldwars had truly outdone themselves, and I was eager to see what they would do with a proper katana.



Schlk!

What was that sound?

I followed it to see half of my opponent, from the chest up, fall wetly to the floor. I witnessed the bottom half collapse a moment later.

Impossible! To think I would deal such a blow...!

Worse, it seemed my unease had reached the remaining four opponents. If I failed to move quickly, all four would escape, and I needed living villains to interrogate! The two most distant watchouts already had significant distance on me, and our scrap seemed likely to spread should I pursue them. No, I had to be content with the mid-guard pair.

I switched the grip on my blade, recalling my Lord's advice that I should have a reverse-edge katana forged as well. My next targets had already brazenly turned their backs and were fleeing. Though I could not see their faces, the body shape of one spoke to her womanhood.

I reasoned that should I only manage to take one alive, my Lord would prefer the woman. Her chest was rather large and seemed to stick out prominently from her black garments. He kept insisting on the beauty of passersby despite their thoroughly average appearance, so I reasoned he was simply starved of a woman's touch. Despite that, however, he made no move to consummate our Contract. He was a puzzling man, indeed.

No... If my Lord held a woman captive, what would separate him from any corrupt official?! He would commit such a misdeed, no doubt! What a wicked ploy, utilizing my adoration of my Lord against me! What a cunning tactician... though I cannot deny this seems odd, somehow.

Such thoughts could be shelved for a time, however. I would let the woman go and bring the man back instead.

I kicked off the ground toward my mark, effortlessly surpassing the breastless attacker. Then, I turned to cut off their intended escape route, driving the flat of my blade into the pit of his stomach. The other turned back, her eyes widening at the sight of my blow. She had no doubt seen the fate of her comrades, and as

I expected, she stumbled but once before increasing her speed and fleeing for her life.

Hehe, I knew it. Excellent work! Now I need but extract what information we need to find the evil dwelling within this place! Finally, it begins now! All according to plan... Kekekekeke!

※ ※ ※

“That’s it, ‘corrupt official’ is the only role that suits you now.”

I sighed at the sight of the dark-robed man Tomoe had brought back. He still hadn’t regained consciousness, and Mio had already headed back outside to dispose of the bodies Tomoe left behind.

As I folded my arms imperiously at Tomoe, a fourth person sat silently on the stool behind me, eyes wandering uneasily about the room.

We headed to the dining hall after parting with Tomoe, and while on our post-dinner walk, we stumbled across a lost young girl. The plan was to take her back to the inn and figure out all we could about her situation, but on the way, we ran into Tomoe. She was extremely pleased with herself, boasting that she hadn’t killed them all. I was honestly fine that three of the six had fled, but when I asked if that meant she’d captured three, I didn’t get the answer I was hoping for.

“I slew two where they stood, but one still lies there, alive,” she mentioned indifferently.

She had tried to kick the first’s sword out of his hands, but accidentally sent him flying, and he never got up after hitting the ground. My best guess was that he died of shock. For the second, she’d cut his sword to disarm him, but accidentally sliced the poor guy in half. Apparently, they were both accidents, and she kept muttering excuses, but none of that mattered.

This is just sick! This isn’t something a cute little “oopsie” can fix! God, I’m traveling with a murderer!!!

I asked Mio if she could eat—er, make the bodies disappear nice and quietly, and she was more than willing to help. She headed right out to the cart for

cleanup.

Sighing, I went over to the bed to check on our captive. Their body was lithe and slender and lacked any of the muscles I would've expected.

"Uh, Tomoe? Did you abduct a girl or something?"

"Hehe... Kekekeke...!"

Uh oh. What's she laughing about?

"I knew you were the sort, my Lord!"

What "sort?" The hell's she talking about?!

"I see it now, my Lord—you would call me the corrupt one now, wouldn't you?!"

I didn't know what she was so confident about, but she knew what I was about to call her... A lucky guess.

"However," she continued, pointing imperiously at our hostage, "that is a man!"

...

So? Why the hell should I care?! More importantly, I need to know if she checked this guy for hidden weapons or not!

She obviously did, though, if she was so confident he was a man. There wasn't a blanket or anything, so his body was on full display.

Is this really a guy, though? Something about this is a little off... I mean, look at those hips—

I sighed. Clearly, Tomoe didn't pat them down, because there were knives in their sheathes, clear as day.

"Why didn't you check him for weapons?" I chided her. "Seriously, why would you drag him all the way up here without at least making sure he's unarmed? That's just careless."

I removed the knives. They were probably throwing knives, since they didn't feel right for swinging around in the hand—though they'd be more than enough to sneak up behind someone and stab them in the neck.

Tomoe chuckled weakly. “I had thought it would be entertaining, should he threaten violence upon us when we’re alone.”

That’s not my idea of a good time, but you do you, I guess.

The hostage moaned, shifting in the bed. He was probably just turning over in his sleep—

Kssh!

“... Whuh?”

There was the sound of shredding fabric, and whatever had been keeping our captive’s breasts wrapped tore, revealing *her* large chest.

... Oh.

With that, we were back to my earlier words. Tomoe was still in shock, and as she glanced from me to the hostage and back again, she seemed to shrink with shame.

I guess that puts Tomoe in a bind, just like our hostage’s boobs were... Wait, that’s not funny.

The attacker must’ve been tying her chest pretty tightly, though, or else they wouldn’t have broken free like that.

“Th-This must be a plot! A cruel machination of some hidden mastermind!” Tomoe sputtered. “How else could my hand be forced with such cruelty?! Oh, the inhumanity!”

“Could you at least try to consider my needs next time?” I sighed heavily. “I mean, you had to have known this’d make interrogation that much harder.”

“I avoided the boobily one with great grit and determination,” Tomoe replied stoically. “She was a man mere minutes ago, I swear.”

Uh... “boobily one?” I’m lost, but that’s probably for the best.

“Seriously, though... If you ever have to kidnap someone again, make sure you strip-search them. That way you can make sure they’re unarmed... and check their junk if it really matters to you that much, I guess.”

“Ah, but you forget—I was so stricken with fear at being made a molester, I was unable to touch them.”

“Goddammit... Safety first! *Always* safety first! This isn’t some drama. You don’t need to worry about censorship or how you’ll look or any of that! It’d be better for all of us if you were a pervert, not an idiot!”

In theory, of course—I hope nobody quotes me on that.

“Hrnghh...!”

No growling!

I shook my head in irritation. “Honestly, you’re so—”

“E-Excuse me?” came an unfamiliar voice.

I stopped. The voice was slight and plaintive, and it wasn’t Mio or Tomoe. I couldn’t think of anyone it could’ve belonged to, though.

Oh, right... I forgot about the girl we picked up on our walk!

She was still hunched on her stool, an uneasy look on her face. Apparently, she lost her family, and we took her home to get some details and help her find them. Tomoe almost made me forget about her altogether. She was a perfect stranger, and I was almost positive she didn’t understand a word of what I was just saying.

Of course, she’d feel uneasy about that... I was writing to her this whole time because I was “too sick to speak.” No wonder she’s worried.

I looked back to Tomoe. “... Just try to be more careful next time, okay?”

Seeing the effect I had on the girl had drained the anger right out of me.

Relieved at the shift in my emotions, Tomoe bowed to our guest. “Oh, thank you for your assistance, girl!”

Shouldn’t she thank me first?! She even switched to proper Common Tongue for that... This has to be a premeditated crime. I just wish she’d use her head to make my life easier instead of causing problems all the time... I think I’m gonna cry.

“I thought you said you can’t talk?” the girl asked me confusedly.

"I can speak," I replied as clearly as I could in Common Tongue. My pronunciation should've been perfect, and I was confident I got the emotional inflections down too.

The girl just cocked her head to the side in confusion without replying. I glanced at Tomoe, who nodded and turned to address the girl.

My, how considerate.

"My Lord attempted to say he 'can speak.' See? Utterly unintelligible."

"Huh?! All I heard was 'ihamyumyuamunee'!"

Shit... Did I really sound like that? I guess only the very first part got across...

"That is the most fascinating part of his curse," Tomoe continued dramatically. "You see, while he is unable to speak the Common Tongue, he is skilled in other languages and can communicate with us freely through their use."

The girl blinked. "I thought he got sick?"

"Indeed, we thought as much at the time, but that was naught but a byproduct of the spell. We refer to it as a mere illness to avoid discrimination. Most would hear of the curse and deem my Lord unclean, after all."

The girl seemed to accept that answer.

Man, I wish I was half as good at convincing people as her...

Her tiny brow furrowed. "You can speak so many languages, but you can't use the Common Tongue... That's horrible! Whatever demon cursed you is really bad!"

Wait, demon? Are curses a demon-only thing? If so, we'd better come up with a different explanation... I don't want to give a whole race a bad name for an alibi.

Tomoe nodded sympathetically. "A poor soul, indeed. Now, girl, tell me what brings you here, and how you came to find my Lord."

"Hold up," I wrote.

Didn't she hear what the girl said at all?

“Hm? Is something the matter?” she replied casually.

What, is she really okay with what the girl just said?

“What makes you say I was cursed by demons?”

I was hit with another wave of relief that she was old enough to read.

“The Common Tongue is a blessing from the Goddess, a gift to everyone in the world so we can talk to each other! Everyone gets blessed with it a little after they’re born!”

“...”

“Oh, but not the monsters. Only humans are accepted by the Goddess, so monsters need to study hard to speak.”

“...”

Something felt a little sad about how the girl’s “everyone” only included humans. There was something more pressing, though.

Does this mean I’m technically a monster?

The blessing stuff sounded a little weird too. I heard that every year after birth, everyone has to go to the Goddess’s shrine or something to pray, and with every visit a child’s mastery of the Common Tongue increased. There were some differences in when a kid was able to speak, of course, but it was generally around the age of three that it happened. The girl told us she hit that point at age four.

Obviously, I can’t just pick that shit up... I have nothing but respect for the non-humans who manage to master the Common Tongue.

It wasn’t based in any sort of science, after all. You just had to repeat the vowels nonstop, over and over, until eventually you got enough blessings for it to make sense. Forcing non-humans to make sense of that literal nonsense and come to grips with the language manually was impossible.

Huh, so that’s how it works... Fuck the Goddess! Does she expect me to fight tooth and nail for every little thing?! That’s it, it’s officially on!

With that startling revelation about the Common Tongue aside, I turned to Tomoe and got right down to business.

Mio

Upon returning from cleanup, I found Milord utterly expressionless and Tomoe with a troubled look on her face. I surmised that the subtle snoring from the back of the room belonged to the girl we took in. Sitting opposite Tomoe and Milord, however, was a woman who openly exuded malice.

Honestly, Tomoe-san, did you not think to abduct a man? Milord is the prime interrogator, after all.

She was clearly one of the ruffians who tailed me from the Merchant's Guild, and I doubted she would taste any better than her fallen comrades. Even though I had consumed them indirectly by enveloping them in darkness and leeching the mana out of them as they decomposed, they had all the flavor complexity of mud. Had I not partaken of Milord's mana, however, I would likely not have minded.

I imagine the contents of the interrogation will have little to do with me.

I was still struggling to grasp the ways of the world, and human emotion in particular was confusing at best. If I grew irritated, I would no doubt devour her on the spot and incur Milord's ire. I was admittedly curious, however, at the novelty of Milord's expression, and I grew curious of their conversation.

"Tomoe," Milord finally said. "Do it."

"Gladly."

With that, Tomoe-san enveloped the prisoner's body in fog. She flailed about in an attempt to resist, but she fell weakly to the bed moments later. It seemed like some manner of sleeping spell, except the fog stayed thick about her as she slept.

"You can see her expression, Lord, can you not?"

He nodded. “Seems that way, yeah. You’re sure I can talk to her like this?”

Still, Milord showed no hint of emotion. I’d never seen him in such a state, and I felt inclined to slay the woman no doubt responsible for it where she lay.

“It will be as though you are speaking through me,” Tomoe confirmed.

“Whatever. Let’s get this over with.”

They had yet to notice my return, likely due to Milord’s sternness. There was no malice or anger in the air, only an indescribably intensity.

“Still, this is a rather dry means of interrogation... There’s no fun to be had.”

I’m impressed she can speak with such levity.

“I don’t need it to be fun. It doesn’t matter if we threaten her, drug her, whatever—as long as we get the information we need.

“I suppose.”

“I’m glad to have you with me on this. I don’t know how to get a truth serum or anything, and I’ve never tortured someone before.”

There was no warmth nor chill to his voice, only level fact. I had heard his former world was a peaceful land without death or pain, so I had assumed Milord would be more uneasy about such matters.

Does he intend to kill this woman? I suppose it’s not my place to say.

Contract or no, I belonged to him in both body and soul. Nothing else mattered, and at times like this, it was important to remind myself of that.

I watched as the pair continued their interrogation. Tomoe-san had done something to the woman to make her more suggestible, and she readily answered whatever question Milord posed. Their attack was not to steal our wares, and the girl Milord and I had found was somehow related to the incident.

My, this base is full of filth.

After their questions seemed to dry up, they both sighed and let the fog about the woman disappear before trading glances. That, I took it, was the optimal time to announce myself.

“You’ve finished, I take it? Wonderful work.”

Milord whipped about in surprise, his expression softening at the sight of me. “Oh, Mio. Something like that... Are you done with the cleanup?” His voice was soft and gentle, much as it always was.

“Of course,” I replied. “The flavor left much to be desired, as expected.”

I shot Tomoe-san a glance, and she dipped her head apologetically.

Milord sighed with relief. “Thanks. Now if only things would stop going the way Tomoe wants them to, we might be able to catch our breath.”

As Tomoe-san wants?

I recalled she mentioned finding a mastermind of some kind, though I had yet to hear any details.

Tomoe-san shook her head frantically. “I swear I’ve no intention of forcing my will any further! I doubt it would be sufficiently amusing.”

I had no idea what she was speaking of, but evidently this latest ordeal was nearing its end.

“Shall we take this up again tomorrow?” I asked. Assumedly, there would be little else to do with the interrogation at its end.

Instead of answering me, however, Milord simply handed me a scrap of paper.

“Wh-What? Milord, may I ask what this is?”

It was a drawing in charcoal, and a rather adept one at that. It was a portrait of a smiling young woman, shown from the bust upward.

“The girl’s sister,” Milord said simply.

Ah, now I see.

When we first met the girl on her walk, she had asked us if we had seen her older sister. We had made the girl accompany us on the grounds that it felt like she was being watched—though since the observing presence had vanished by the time we arrived at the inn, I was unsure as to why she was still there. If that was Milord’s will, however, I was disinclined to deny him.

From the interrogation, it was made clear that said elder sister was being held by our attackers, and Milord seemed intent on rescuing her. It was a foolish desire, of course, as we had no means of knowing if the girl's sister was even alive.

"I think I know where the sister is. Can you and Tomoe go check it out now?"

What...? Does this mean we won't be sleeping tonight?

"M-My lord!" Tomoe-san protested. "First, you refuse me dinner, and now sleep?!"

For once, I agree with the lizard.

Milord nodded matter-of-factly. "You guys don't even need to sleep every night, do you?"

That... that was accurate, I supposed. I could remember spans of months or even years of remaining awake, followed by slumbers just as long. I wished to match my sleep to Milord's as much as possible, however, not to mention the other issue at hand.

"Perhaps you have a point, Milord, but—"

"I *want* to sleep, my lord!" Tomoe-san protested loudly. "Sleeping in this body grants me a feeling of morning freshness like I have never felt before!"

She was blunt and crude in her phrasing, but I agreed. I only had my human form for several days, but sleeping left me feeling oddly fulfilled.

Milord shook his head. "You heard what she said. We have no idea if the girl's sister is still alive. Besides, we even know where she is, and I'm sure the two of you can figure out anything that comes up along the way."

"What point is there in rushing if she may already be dead?" I inquired.

I had intended it as an honest question, but that was a mistake. Milord's eyes clouded over with emptiness once more.

"Mio... I want to do everything I can to save this girl's sister. Please, just try to bring her home safe. Even if she's already dead, we need to tell the girl that as soon as possible. Understand?"

I swallowed hard and found myself nodding. Something about the look in his eyes was deeply unsettling. They were unnatural and uncaring, as if he had lost all interest in me entirely, and being deemed useless so abruptly was indescribably painful. I glanced at Tomoe-san, who seemed just as distressed. She nodded firmly.

“Sorry about this,” Milord apologized emotionlessly. “I’ll take the girl to the trading post tomorrow, so don’t worry about that. Focus on finding the sister for now, dead or alive.” He glanced at Tomoe. “Since we don’t have enough actors, you two will have to play Gin-san and Yashichi as well.”

Tomoe sighed. “I suppose we have little choice... Komon-sama’s role was always to wait for word that the innocent were safe. Mio, we’re leaving.”

I had no idea what had transpired in the exchange, but I was grateful that some of the tension had disappeared from the air. Milord was at his best when he was at ease, and I felt some small shred of gratitude toward the dragon.

Tomoe stopped in the doorway, however, turning back to Milord for just a moment. “Ah, one more thing.”

“What’s up?”

Good... He sounds normal again.

“Should we complete this mission successfully, I... I would like to refer to myself as ‘oneself.’”

The tension visibly rose from Milord’s shoulders. I likewise was confused why she would need permission for such a thing.

“Uh... I don’t see why not,” he replied, a sentiment to which I couldn’t agree more. “Why are you even asking?”

“It certainly seems to fit me better, yet I presumed that was a pleasure Komon-sama alone could enjoy.”

“Well... it’s not. Do what you want.”

“Ah, thank you kindly, my lord! Farewell!”

After a thoroughly disrespectful bow, she flung the door open and charged out. I followed her, retaining total composure. She no doubt knew our

destination, so I only needed to trail her.

Once we'd left the inn, however, I stopped. There was one thing that still bothered me, and now that we were alone, it felt right to ask. Given the late hour, there were no passersby in sight.

"Tomoe-san? May I ask what caused Milord such distress?"

She shrugged. "No clue. I was simply glad you returned when you did and helped move things along. You've seen the portrait, yes?"

"I have. The girl's sister, was it?"

"Verily. As the girl claimed to be a deft hand with drawing, we asked her to provide a visual aid."

"She's rather good for her age."

From what I'd heard, she was barely ten years old.

Tomoe nodded. "However, the moment he laid eyes on it, the emotion drained from Milord's face, and a strange pressure took to the air. The captive likewise reacted in the oddest way... That, you see, was the reason behind the interrogation."

I thought back to the scene in the inn room. Certainly, I'd never experienced its like.

"Do you suppose Milord knows the sister?" I guessed.

"Impossible. He has not a friend nor foe in all this world."

There was a firmness in her voice that cut off further assumption.

"You... you know Milord rather well," I managed to say. "I was under the impression you had known each other only briefly."

It should've been no more than a few days, from what I was told.

"I suppose... Though my circumstances in particular are quite unique."

"May I ask?"

"Why not? You see, I can freely control illusions, though that comes with a potent side effect."

“Which would be?”

“I can see memories... I *saw* Milord’s memories. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“You what?! How dare a lowly servant violate his mind so?!”

“He and I were enemies then, much as you and I were.”

I’m rather jeal—no, I shan’t say it.

“Who is Milord, then?”

“Ask him that yourself. Do so, and the two of you will no doubt find new wells of trust.”

“That makes sense... but would it be so wrong to tell me yourself?”

She shook her head. “Not even I have seen everything—nor have I seen your memories. Our lord has given me permission to peruse the contents of his head, of course.”

My memories? I doubt I have any from those endless days of gluttony...

“In the memories you have seen, though, did you see anyone similar to that portrait?”

That was the easiest way to find out, but again, Tomoe shook her head. “I’m unable to search for such minute details, not to mention that much of his mind was closed to me after our Contract. Perhaps it lies within. There is one thing of which I can be certain, however.” She turned about to look me in the eyes. “Should we fail to secure the sister’s wellbeing, our lord will no doubt remain in such low spirits for some time yet.”

That was a serious issue, certainly. Ensuring his mood improved was critical to maintaining the pleasant nature of our journey. Tomoe needed no reply to know the import was conveyed.

“Very well. In that case, I will leave such matters as the past behind and focus on the task at hand.”

For our present and future alike, for my continuing enjoyment of our little trip, I fixated on the objective set before us.

Isukimichi

Chapter 6

“Um... I know you’re a lord or something, but shouldn’t you at least know how to drive a cart?”

Despite the chill morning air still hanging thick around us, the words of the little girl holding the horses’ reins beside me felt even colder.

It’s not like I can’t drive... It’s as easy as shaking the reins and making the horses move, right?

The only complicating factor was the fact that the “normal horses” pulling our cart of wares had pair of horns sprouting from their foreheads. There was some kind of magic or biological trick at play to make them appear invisible, but that didn’t make them less real.

The “horses” were monsters known as bicorns, and were frequently used by orcs and lizardfolk alike for transportation. That meant I could talk to them, but I didn’t know how much they could understand me. At this point, it felt like I could talk to anything except inanimate objects and humans.

The problem was that instead of using the reins, I could just ask them to go and they did. I’d quickly stopped doing that, though, on the grounds that I wanted to seem as normal as possible. When I was trying it out back in the Subspace, Tomoe said it was weird hearing me talk to them in a strange tongue, so I stopped even attempting it.

Not that I should take that shit from a wannabe samurai in a Japan-less world, but still.

“Sorry,” I wrote. *“I’m used to leaving everything to my aides.”*

“Hmph... Shouldn’t an heir to a big, important business try harder?”

She’s got me there.

No wonder she was so capable for her age, growing up in a place like this. The girl was way smarter and more capable than a kid had any right to be.

“That’s why I got kicked out of my mansion,” I replied. “This is more an attempt to make me more independent and capable than it is to see the world.”

“Oh, I totally get that! But are you sure you can sell all this stuff without Mio-san and that other lady?”

Shit, she gets it... She’s a lot harsher than her sister, that’s for sure. Then again, she’s just a look-alike, so that isn’t a fair comparison.

I completely lost my cool when I saw the portrait the night before. Right now, however, I was trying hard to forget how rough I was on Tomoe and Mio and trying to stop feeling so shitty about myself.

“I’m sure anyone could sell this fruit.”

For the first time our whole conversation, the girl looked at me in surprise. “Huh? Why?”

“I’ve never seen this fruit before either. It’s likely that nobody has. Since we don’t have the funds to continue our journey as-is, I’m determined to sell it for whatever price I can get. Besides, fruit seems like it would go over well here.”

“Hey, um... Maybe I shouldn’t ask you this, but...”

“What is it?”

She hesitated. There was a chance that she had more on the mind than just finding her sister.

“I’ve never seen fruit like this, and it all looks so fresh and tasty... Where did you get it, and how’d you get it here?”

There was a sharpness to her gaze—like an informant, or a spy. If she was just a spy, though, this whole thing with her sister would be even more impressive, since I never doubted she was telling the truth. She’d have to be the best actor in town—no, in the world, if this was all an act. Maybe she was being blackmailed; someone threatening her sister in return for information. That would make sense of the odd time we found her. She was overly eager to follow us back to the inn too.

If that's the case, though, whoever's behind this shit is scum. Who'd force a grade schooler to do their dirty work?

"Hm... I doubt you'll believe me if I told you."

"Go on, try me!"

Overly eager as always. That didn't matter, though; I had a few ideas for our wares, and the sooner the information got out, the better. It didn't matter if she was just an informant.

"We had never intended on coming to the Edge at all. In fact, this whole visit was an accident."

"Okay."

"As we wandered the wastes, however, we were enveloped in an impenetrable fog. Deep within, we found a thriving village."

"A village? Around here?"

"Yes... Two, maybe three days' travel. The settlement was full of rare and dangerous in-hyuman creatures."

"What?!"

"As it happened, though, they could speak the Common Tongue as well as anyone else and were friendly to us. They gave us shelter for several days, and they sent this fruit with us when we left."

"..."

I knew she wouldn't believe me. My story was only half truthful, after all.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Y-Yeah... What kind of races did you see there?"

"Plenty, from lizardfolk to arachs. It was a strange place, like we'd stepped into a dreamland."

I looked back at the fruit. Having physical evidence should help my case a lot, though I had no intention of telling the folks at the trading post that story. I was hoping to just call them rare and get them sold.

“Really?!” The girl shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t imagine that...”

“I know. Sometimes I’m convinced that place isn’t real either.”

“In the fog, huh...”

She paused to think.

I knew it, this girl is sus as hell.

“Is this the trading post, Rinon?”

I tried to recapture her attention with the best attempt at her name I could write. Her sister was Toa, apparently, and was one year my junior. This was the most inconvenient part of writing everything I wanted to say, since she had to be looking at the speech bubble and paying attention for her to “hear” me at all.

“I’ve never heard of a village like that around here,” she muttered to herself.

With little recourse, I tapped her on the shoulder to regain her attention.

“Eep?! C-Creeper! I’m getting molested!!! Er... huh? What’s going on?”

M-Molested? Does the world have boundaries I don’t know about?! I wasn’t expecting to hear that, especially since human rights in general seem to be in a gray area here!

“S-Sorry,” I scrawled. *“I think the building behind us is the trading post...”*

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I totally forgot about it!”

Still, sexual harassment is a known thing in this world... Noted.

I tried not to feel too embarrassed as we pulled up to the building. All eyes were on me as the only new face in town—metaphorically speaking, of course, and my mask wasn’t helping. Rinon waited on the cart, adamantly refusing to step inside the trading post.

Is it just because her clothes are a little torn and dirty? I don’t know where the tailor is, though, and I really doubt they’re open this late at night, anyway.

Besides, it felt weird to buy clothes for a little girl I literally just met. If anything, that was a rich-guy thing to pull, and not for an average joe like me.

I approached the clerk, who smiled at me warmly. “Good morning! I don’t recall seeing you before. What may I help you with?”

“Good morning. I was told of this place by my servant last night. She has short black hair and unusual clothing.”

His eyes widened. Evidently, Mio had left an impression.

“Um... Pardon my rudeness, but...”

“My apologies, but I cannot speak. I hope you’ll accept my written communications.”

The clerk nodded understandingly. Evidently, that wasn’t a big deal.

“Ah, understood. If I may be so bold, am I correct in understanding you don’t have your merchant plate?”

“I don’t, as embarrassing as it is to admit. I’ve only been trading for a short period, so I’m at something of a loss.”

“Of course. Rather, it’s a miracle you arrived here at all. You are blessed with great luck, sir, a talent I and many others sadly lack.”

“I had my share of unusual issues on the way, I assure you. Now, I would like to inquire if you could buy the wares I’ve managed to scrape together along the way.”

“Well, you certainly can’t sell them yourself without your plate... I’m glad you elected to sell to us directly, rather than trying to go behind our backs. It’s the only proper thing for a merchant to do.”

He laughed cheerily and urged me to show him my wares. From the way he was acting, either the Merchant’s Guild wasn’t involved in last night’s attack or he was too far down the food chain to know. Since we could more or less talk normally, I could hopefully glean that information from him.

“This is my cart,” I wrote as we arrived outside.

Rinon was still seated in the driver’s box. Evidently, she had no intention of running.

“She’s your slave, I assume?” He turned to the girl without waiting for a reply. “Hey! Show me the goods!”

The hell? Slave?!

It took me by surprise, but given where she was seated and how she was dressed, I could see how he made the leap.

Still, I didn’t know slavery was a thing in this world... Gotta watch out for that.

I had to fix the misunderstanding, though. It felt weird that the clerk was so casual about it, and even Rinon had begun digging through the cart as though this were normal. I didn’t know if she was used to being mistaken for a slave or what, but the whole situation felt deeply wrong.

“Excuse me. She is a friend of mine, and my guide to your trading post. She is by no means anyone’s slave.”

“Ah.” He looked unaffectedly at the girl. “My apologies, miss.”

Evidently, he assumed there was no harm done. Even Rinon was looking at me in shock, and it took a moment for her to recompose herself, bowing slightly as she tied back the tarp so we could see the fruit.

His eyes widened. “What in the world is this?!”

“What do you think? I imagine you’ve never seen fruit like this. They’re all delicious, I promise. You’re welcome to sample one.”

I took a pair of apples from the closest basket and handed him one before taking a bite of the other.

“I-If you insist...”

Evidently relieved that the fruit was, in fact, edible, the merchant took a bite of his. His eyes widened in shock as he pulled back to examine the fruit, then he took a second, greedier bite. He proceeded to scarf it down to the very core, careful not to let a single drip of the sweet juice escape his lips.

Wow... I’m glad I stocked extra. It should be nice and easy to sell out. Hopefully I’ll at least make enough to help cover the inn’s cost.

“Well?” I wrote. “It seems it struck your fancy.”

“I’ve never tasted anything so delicious in my life! Where in the world did you find such wonderful fruit?!”

“That will stay my little secret, I think. Do you think you could buy all my wares?”

“A secret?! You’d monopolize such a treasure?!”

“Monopolize? Of course not. The method for obtaining these is somewhat unusual, and I’m unsure I could replicate the process myself if I tried.”

The merchant’s jaw dropped in horror. “You mean this is all the fruit there is?!”

“I’m afraid so. Worse, it will likely spoil in a few short days, so I would like to get it off my hands by then.”

“Hrm... A one-time-only deal, then...”

“What are you willing to pay?”

“... Can I try the others as well?”

“Of course, but only one of each, please. I have very limited quantities.”

“Understood. How much do you have in all?”

“Only the contents of this cart. There are four crates of each of the four varieties, so sixteen crates total.”

The merchant called several other employees, and together they split an apple (a second one, as the first was already gone), a peach, a pear, and a pomegranate. I’d picked them at random, but they were surprisingly edible for wild strains. On top of that, they all grew without any regard for seasons or climate, making them even more confusing.

And here I was thinking I’d have to upgrade my wares... I bet I could keep selling these as-is, no problem.

The merchant finally wiped his mouth of the last fruit. “They’re spectacular, each and every one of them.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“Now, let us discuss the price.”

“Go on.”

“I apologize that it might seem we’re treating such a fine product so lightly, but we’ve never dealt with such fruit before. I certainly hope what we offer will be satisfactory.”

I guess even if they taste great, most people won’t pay for stuff they don’t know. He’s asking for permission to undercharge me, it sounds like.

He thought in silence for a long moment. “Thirty gold per crate, that’s my offer. That would be a total of 480 gold pieces for your entire stock.”

What the fuck?! They’re acting like they’re lowballing me here, but that’s still a ridiculous amount of money! That’s practically the cart’s weight in gold! It’s like I’m hauling around gemstones!

With money like that, I could pay the whole cost of the room at the inn and have plenty to spare. I had to haggle at least a little, though—if I agreed on the spot, it’d cheapen the product. I was glad I hadn’t asked for a hundred gold for the lot, otherwise I would’ve been scamming myself out of my own wares. My biggest encouragement, though, was the look on the merchant’s face that told me he expected me to ask for more.

“I must admit, I was not expecting such a sum. It hardly feels proper to ask more from you.”

His face lit up with hope. “Y-You’ll let us have it at that price, then?!”

Damn, where’s his poker face?!

“I’m afraid not. Is 480 not an awkward price to settle on? Make it an even five hundred, and we’ll call it a deal.”

“Five hundred?! You have a deal! Hey, guys!”

He rushed over to tell his colleagues, all of whom were just as giddy as he was. The fruit would likely be sent to a noble or a bigger market.

I wonder how much I can get per fruit going forward? I bet I can cap it at two, maybe three times today’s price!

Rinon was staring at me blankly, still petrified by the price we’d settled on. After all, she was hearing that just one of the ones she ate could be more than

her sister made in a year.

The merchant returned with a bag of money a few minutes later, and I spent a minute or two counting it.

“Five hundred gold pieces, received in full. Thank you very much.”

“No, thank you! Should you come across any other such rarities on your travels, please let us know.”

“I will. Farewell, then.”

Rinon finally recovered enough to snap the reins on the now-empty cart, and we were back on the path to the inn.

I just sold a bunch of random fruit for fifty million yen... I guess today's my lucky day.

When we returned to the inn, the stalker Tomoe had caught was gone. That wasn't a surprise—we hadn't left her tied up, and she was alone in the inn the whole time.

I threw myself down on one of the room's massive beds. I used to lay down like that whenever I needed to think, or sometimes even to sleep... not that it mattered now, obviously. The bed was a little too plush, making me feel like I was sinking when I laid down on it. It was large, too, about a king size, with an air of poshness about it. I'd never thought in such a luxurious room before.

Rinon was gone. She'd insisted on stopping by her house, refusing to return to the inn. That was obviously a cover, though, since there was no reason for her to return with her sister still missing. Even now, I was tracing her movements with my Realm—even if she could sense mana, there was no way of detecting it.

At the moment, she had met with someone a couple dozen yards from the inn's entrance. I could hear every word they said from this distance, even if I couldn't see them directly, and I had an excellent grasp of their emotions and expressions to boot. It was a near-perfect gift from Tsukuyomi-sama, hampered only by the lack of a proper instruction manual.

“Well? Do you know who they are?” the stranger asked.

Rinon shook her head. “All I learned was that he’s the heir to some merchant’s fortune.”

“Pathetic. Our men at the Merchant’s Guild could find out that much.”

Obviously. What, did he think I was going to spell out my life’s story to a little girl I literally just met? Is he stupid or something?

“B-But with the attack on their wares, I barely got to talk to them at all!”

“Right... I believe our agents have returned. They’re currently under observation to ensure they didn’t return with any unexpected ‘gifts.’ Unfortunately, they found nothing to shed light on their true identities. You had to have found something out.”

“By the time I woke up, the two ladies were already gone. I left with him to the Merchant’s Guild right after that.”

“His companions, eh? The preposterously high-levelled ones? We’ve heard nothing of note on them, maybe because they’re being purposefully kept under wraps. So, what else?”

Oh, so the Adventurer’s Guild is keeping things quiet on purpose. I’m glad it’s not common knowledge yet.

“When we came back,” Rinon continued, “the lady they’d captured was gone.”

“Gone...?”

“I said I had to go home, and I came out.”

“That cocky noble brat... Did he just leave her, without binding her or setting a watch or anything?”

Shut up! He’s right, but I don’t want to hear it! Still, this guy’s attitude is pretty shitty... A real scummy guy.

“So?” he pressed. “What did you learn of his cargo?”

“I, um... I don’t know.”

“You what? You had to have found *something*. Go on, spill!”

“He said that there’s a village in a fog back two-or three-days’ travel from here, and he got the fruit from a bunch of friendly lizardfolk and arachs there.”

“...”

“I-It’s the truth!” she stammered, growing audibly worried at his silence. “That’s what he said, I promise! He even told me he didn’t care about their worth!”

So, they’re not willing allies, then? Interesting.

“He doesn’t *care* about the price?” the man echoed incredulously.

“It was like a dream, he said, so he didn’t care as long as they sold... The old guy at the Merchant’s Guild bought the whole cartful for five hundred gold pieces.”

“Five hundred?!” His voice rose in shock.

Uh... Maybe you shouldn’t be yelling about that stuff in the middle of the street.

“Y-Yeah,” Rinon confirmed.

“That’s the minimum price, then. These newcomers sure are interesting... Five hundred, huh?”

He smirked so sickeningly, I was surprised Rinon was keeping her cool at all.

I knew I was getting lowballed... But at that price? Damn. I bet a lot of that fruit’s going to go to attempted propagation and then be resold for even more money.

“H-Hey... Let me see my sister! You said you’d let her go if I got the information you wanted from those people!”

He scoffed. “What, you think that half-assed intel’s enough to pay for her life? You’ll never see her again at this rate.”

That shithole... How dare he blackmail a little kid into doing his dirty work?!

I could feel anger rising inside me, and I seriously considered sniping him with magic from the inn.

I can do it... No, I should do it.

After I began the incantation, however, I stopped. If I killed the guy now, Rinon would have to watch him die, and that'd be pretty traumatic.

I guess you live for now, asshat.

I was forced to listen as Rinon continued to plead for her sister's safe return.

Finally, the man sighed. "If you wanna see her that bad, fine. Just one more thing and she'll be free. I'll even forget about the money you owe me."

Money, huh? I bet they've been paying off the interest for ages already...

"Really?!"

"Yeah, kid, I promise. Now, listen up..."

What the man suggested next made my stomach churn. Rinon immediately refused, but I could already tell how the conversation was going to go.

I withdrew my Realm. I didn't need to hear those words from her lips. The important thing was that Rinon's sister was alive, assuming I could take the man's words at face value. If not, I was prepared to make myself a killer. I had no intention of taking a page out of Tomoe's book, but I was ready to get a *little* rough if I had to.

Shutting my eyes, I tried to sleep. I couldn't make another move until Tomoe and Mio were back, and there was nothing for me to do in the meantime. Besides, I got the impression that would be best for Rinon as well.

With one last shoulder-heaving sigh, I let myself drift to sleep.

Isukimichi

Chapter 7

N*n? What's this noise...? Oh, right, I fell asleep. I wonder if Rinon's okay?*

I was still trying to decide how to react depending on how she was doing. If she was alive, I'd try to keep the damage minimal. Otherwise, well, I was making no guarantees.

"Hnngh... Morning."

I looked around. Tomoe and Mio were there—and, to my relief, both Rinon and a girl identical to the portrait she'd drawn were present too.

"Ah, my lord!" Tomoe exclaimed. "Awake, are you?"

"Good morning, Milord."

It's already evening, though... Is she trying to insult me for sleeping in so late?

I looked over at Rinon, who swiftly looked away. Beside her, the sister dipped her head apologetically. She was all in one piece, at least, and I assumed either Tomoe or Mio had retrieved her safely. That scumbag had demanded she steal the money we made from the fruit, so if she was here safe and sound, that boded well.

Man, she's lucky... I'm kinda jealous.

"Raise your head, woman," Tomoe commanded the older sister.

Slowly, she raised her head.

"Sorry for the writing," I apologized via text bubble. "You can read without issue, right?"

I figured the chances only the younger sister was literate were slim to none, but I felt I should double-check.

“Oh, um, of course! Th-Thank you ever... ever so much for saving me!!!”

With how nervous she was, she fumbled every other word.

Still, I didn't expect this... She's identical to her in every way, except for the color of her hair.

“No need for formalities. You're not my servant or anything.”

“See?” Tomoe boasted. “Alive, and in one piece, even!”

Mio nodded. “She was under the influence of a rather nasty drug, but I removed it safely from her system.”

I could tell how badly the pair wanted me to praise them for a job well done—and to be sure, they did a great job. I didn't expect Mio had tricks like that up her sleeve, but I wasn't complaining.

I looked back to the sister.

Wait, what was her name again? I know Rinon told me, but I can't remember now for the life of me... Man, this is embarrassing.

Disrespectful as it was, I couldn't help but look her over from head to toe. She was more than similar—she was the same as that girl in my world, despite obviously never having met her. She was taller than me, and with a body that really caught the eye... especially her chest. Their faces were identical, except the woman before me had a slight roughness to her eyes—a curious kind of confidence that spoke to her time as an adventurer. However, her hair was the same shade of red as Rinon's, instead of the red-tinted black hair of the girl I knew.

There was no doubt about it, she was identical to the underclassman I ogled in Tomoe's illusion. She was serious and dedicated in my old world, and approached archery with a charming intensity. I knew the girl in front of me was different from my former clubmate, but my chest tightened oddly—especially after what happened with her in the fog.

“You... You're Hasegawa, right?” I muttered.

She flinched at the sound of my voice. “Wh-What?”

Tomoe ignored my muttering, thankfully, but Mio's ears twitched faintly. I got the feeling she'd be interrogating me later.

"No, forget I said anything. More importantly, I've heard about your situation from Rinon. I'm glad you're safe."

The sister nodded. "It was nothing I didn't bring upon myself, but I appreciate your saving me. I must've gotten carried away."

Hasegawa's lookalike continued to tell us how she got into so much trouble in the first place. I could understand how she'd get cocky as a capable adventurer in the get-rich-quick atmosphere of the wasteland frontier, but bringing her little sister out here didn't seem like a great idea. After all, one little mistake saw her sister on the streets while she got kidnapped and drugged half to death.

"This place is rather dangerous, after all. I'm only alive thanks to my highly competent aides."

I smiled just a little. Tomoe and Mio's levels were just absurd, after all. Both of them started looking very full of themselves in their own way—but more interesting was the change in the sisters. While the elder seemed deeply moved, little Rinon looked terrified.

"They're both startlingly strong," the former said. "I was quite surprised. They appeared out of nowhere without so much as a sound in the room I was being held in!"

Tomoe grinned smugly. "Nay, it's nothing so impressive."

"It's a little trick with darkness. Anyone could do it," Mio boasted, trying and failing to retain her composure.

C'mon, you two. Could you get any more smug?

The elder sister's eyes lit up. "That was it, dark magicks! She used it to remove the drugs from my body, and then she destroyed the breakproof, magick-proof door with an incantationless magick!"

Wait, so they broke the door just to leave? How'd they get in, then? Can they teleport with Mio's dark spells or Tomoe's fog or something? And if they can

teleport in, why didn't they just teleport out, too? And that detox power... I'll have to get her to teach me that later.

Blowing up the door felt like overkill, admittedly, but the whole process sounded like a net positive.

None of that explained why Rinon didn't seem happy to have her sister back, though. Chances were that either Tomoe or Mio caught her in the act of stealing the money. I could understand feeling guilty about that, but she really should've been happier her sister was home safe, not staring at the ground with such a desolate expression.

"After that," the sister continued excitedly, "Tomoe-sama used some rather fantastic swordplay to wipe out every mercenary in our path!"

Oh? And here I thought they did everything nice and peacefully... Maybe she's just exaggerating.

I'd just warned Tomoe about going overboard, and I didn't believe she'd try anything so flashy.

Tomoe tensed. "Y-You speak too highly of us, Toa. We did nothing so—"

I held up my hand to cut her off. She looked like a little kid whose prank had been exposed against her will. From the corner of my eye, I could see Mio was sweating bullets. Rinon's sister—Toa, that was her name—excitedly continued.

"Don't be so modest, you two were amazing! I've never seen power like that! You even tore down all those special anti-magick-material buildings like they were nothing! Between your sword, Tomoe-sama, and Mio-sama's darkness, nothing stood a chance!" Tomoe and Mio began quivering in fear, but she didn't notice. "You even tore right through that team led by Ace, the strongest guy at the Guild, and his whole team of adventurers and mercenaries!"

What the shit? Don't tell me they got up to all that while I was sleeping! How'd they do so much in so little time?!

As I listened to her tale of horror, I could feel my eyes start to glaze over. I was glad my mask helped with that, at least, but it did nothing to stop the tears that began trickling down my face.

What Toa told me next, though, made her tale up until then feel like a warmup...

Toa

I was once in a party with four other adventurers, and we had been exploring the wastes without any goal in particular. Nowhere in the area, be it forest or cave, was mapped in its entirety. At best, some of the more hospitable areas were half-plumbed.

We had recently learned of an active volcano in the area that supposedly housed a colony of elder dwarves. However, the party responsible for the discovery was assailed by the Black Spider of Calamity immediately afterward, and while they narrowly survived, we weren't able to get any further details. If the mountains housed a course of top-class weapons and armor, however, it was worth the risk.

Elder dwarves were said to have smithing techniques that were long lost among other dwarven tribes, and were superior blacksmiths even for their race. They had been seen only rarely in recent years, but if they all fled to the Edge of the World, that would make sense. In a place like this, anything was possible—including getting some new elder-dwarf-crafted weaponry. There was nothing better than getting equipment straight from the source, after all, especially if that meant cutting out those conniving merchant middlemen.

Given our levels, though, there was little chance even that would help us stand out. We were on average at a lowly Level 120, and that meant we had to stick close to the base at all times. The best we could do was the odd hunting quest to bring back one monster part or another, or the occasional extermination, where we took the valuable parts to sell anyway.

In any of the Four Great Nations, a party of our level would be top-notch, and able to take on virtually any dungeon or threat. The Empire knew our group by name, even. In this hellscape, we were barely worth mentioning. On our first

expedition into the wastes, two of us died, and on the third journey, another fell. We consistently recruited more allies to fill the gaps, but it was at that point the only other original member of our group fled with their life. With that, all the friends I'd come to this land with were gone.

Then, on our last trip, we lost badly to the lizhu we were supposed to be hunting. All four of my new party members were slain, and I was forced to return to base alone with nothing to show for it. I'd been preparing for our quests on borrowed money, and that error proved fatal. I was forced to take on physical labor to pay my debtors, which meant having to quit adventuring, likely for good. The loan shark's bodyguards were far stronger than I was, and that was the end.

Since I was a woman there was a limit to the physical labor I could do, but no issues with my face or body. Instead, I was drugged and forced to pay my debts working in a brothel. Most of my "clients" wanted to relieve their stress more than anything else, and soon I was too battered and broken to continue. And so, I was sold off once again.

This time, I was locked in a room and forced to take all manner of drugs and poisons for some human experiment or another. In all likelihood, I was destined for that room from the moment I was forced into prostitution.

Throughout my entire journey, there was only one thing I wanted. I didn't care about dwarven gear or money, but I'd willingly gone to a place in which I had to be prepared to die for such things. My little sister was likely dead, too—she was my only family, and she had to stay at the base since she couldn't accompany us on our adventures. If I died out there, though, no amount of love or care for her would've mattered, and the base was no place for a kid to survive alone. That was frustrating, but a sacrifice I felt I had to make.

Maybe I never had any chance of that.

Once, while my family was still leading rituals at a shrine to the spirits, the most powerful of us left to join a dragon-slaying party. It was a fierce creature, renowned as the Invincible. Everyone was convinced of their success. According to rumor, the party was in the realm of Level 600, and there was said to be over a hundred of them in all—but not one of the brave dragon-slayers returned

alive. It was a colossal failure. Worse, a sacred blade that my family had enshrined was stolen by my dragon-slaying kinsman, and our entire family paid the price by being chased out of the temple.

All my ancestors did was give permission for the relic to be used for dragon-slaying. I didn't understand how it was somehow their fault that none of the adventurers returned alive. There was no point in getting worked up about it now, but I was burning with resentment nonetheless. We'd kept our heads down and tried to blend in for generations, often having to uproot our lives whenever our "sin" was discovered.

I'd heard the story countless times growing up, and I'd wanted to retrieve the sacred blade from the Edge for as long as I could remember. I became an adventurer as soon as I could, honing my skills for the day I could finally right that crushing wrong.

And yet, I was unable to find anything on the relic, on the dragon, on anything that would further my goal. I even lost my sense of self through the drugs I was forced to take. It was then, when my life had lost all meaning, that a miracle occurred.

"Is this the girl, perhaps?"

"Oh, good. She's still alive."

I heard voices. That changed nothing—I couldn't speak, let alone move.

"Hm? Is she ill?"

"It would seem she's been drugged."

"I suppose she might die, then, should we attempt to carry her out as she is."

"Wait just a moment... Ah, I see. The drug she's under renders her immobile."

"Oh, you know your medicines, do you? How practical. What now, then?"

"Hehe, this will be easy."

With that, the black-haired woman extended her hand over my head, and in the blink of an eye, all the feeling in my body returned. My brain spurred into motion once more. I couldn't believe I was unable to even think mere seconds ago.

The blue-haired woman stroked her chin. "How amusing..."

"Let me get the door for you."

With that, the black-haired woman extended her hand to the strengthened portal, and shadowy tendrils rose from the floor to envelop it. The door was crushed and cast aside before my eyes.

Wait... If the door was still intact, how did they get in here?

The blue-haired woman folded her arms imperiously. "You are Toa, are you not?"

What's going on? Am I saved?

"Y-Yes... That's me."

"How do you feel? Anything amiss?"

She seemed to genuinely care about my condition. She was an ally, then. I tried not to get too hopeful.

"I'm a little sluggish, but I can move," I replied.

"Excellent. Are you prepared, Mio?"

The second woman nodded. "Let's leave, Tomoe-san."

"Yes, let—" the first started for the open door, then paused. "Ah, drat. I nearly caused trouble for our lord again."

"For Milord?" the Mio woman echoed. "How so?"

"Listen well, Mio. We were ordered to save this girl's life, were we not?"

"We were. She seems perfectly alive to me."

"Naïve! Oh, how naïve you are!"

"Wh-What? How?"

I was getting a little worried from how loudly they were arguing. I felt I should stop them before any of the guards overheard them, but I was so confused by the whole situation I didn't know where to begin.

"Picture this," Tomoe continued. "When we return to report the good news, will not our lord ask about everyone else?"

Realization lit Mio's eyes. "Oh!"

"Precisely. Should we return with this girl alone..."

Her face twisted in despair. "Milord will surely be upset with us!"

Tomoe nodded grimly. "Verily so. In other words, there is but one option left to us."

"I suppose we'll have to liberate everyone in this facility, won't we?"

"Just so. The others, of course, we can release once we arrive back in town—the room is far too cramped to fit them all."

"I see... I'll make note of that."

They were nodding sagely at one another at the intelligence of their plan.

I don't think this is the time or place for a chat, though...

"Sorry, but that's enough, intruders," came a dark voice from the doorway.

Oh, no... I knew it.

No guards would be incompetent enough to not notice the missing door, let alone the loudly-chatting pair in the middle of my room.

Worse, I recognized the voice—Ace, the strongest adventurer at the Guild. Instead of exploring the wastes, he made his fortune as a bodyguard for the local rich types. That was no insult to his skills, however, as the sheer level gap between that and the second-strongest at the Guild could attest.

And just when I thought we had a chance...

"Noticed us, have they?" Tomoe declared.

"Oh, my, what a dilemma."

Neither of them seemed too fazed. The only possible explanation was that they had no idea who this man was.

Ace's eyes widened at the sight of the pair. "You two...! Guards!!!"

"Sir!" A couple men in armor ran into sight.

The crooked adventurer jerked his head in the visitors' direction. "Are these the weirdos you mentioned?"

One of the goons nodded. “Yes, sir. That’s them, Ace-san.”

He scoffed. “So, you’re the four-digit monsters? Fancy running into you here.”

Four digit? What?

Tomoe nodded. “Ah, so you know. Word travels fast, does it not?”

“Milord was correct to have us move quickly,” Mio agreed.

“I gotta admit,” Ace sneered, “you got me stumped. So? How’d you do it?”

I wasn’t following—rather, I was so lost I’d started to panic.

“How did we do what?” Tomoe echoed.

“I don’t understand.”

He scoffed. “Quit playing dumb. How’d you cheat the level detector? Did you really think you’d fool anyone? I mean, c’mon, Level 1,320 and 1,500? Hyahahaha!”

Cheat the what...? What in the world is he talking about?

“Me, I figured it out by accident,” he continued. “Who’d guess that liquid could do so much? I had no idea anyone else knew.”

“We only figured it out ‘cause Ace-san told me,” a guard chimed in. “Never would’ve got it alone. Four digits is just dumb, though.”

Tomoe and Mio rolled their eyes, unimpressed.

“Say what you will about us, but—”

“Oh, is that it?” Ace sneered, his eyes narrowing. “Guess you two are just that dumb... That asshat who was with you rigged it all, then.”

At that, something in the air changed.

“Yeah! That conman!” the guard cackled. “Anyone could tell that rich kid shit is just an act!”

From the underlings’ laughter, I guessed they were a little drunk. They were probably letting their advantage in numbers get to their heads.

What’s this chill running down my spine? It’s not Ace and his goons, either...

“What kinda pansy-ass man would be caught dead in a mask and pink rings? Is he a girl or some shit?!”

No... This is rage.

“He’s gotta be ugly as fuck under there!” another guard guffawed. “I bet he ain’t even hyuman! Hyahahaha!”

CLONG!!!

I heard the sound before I saw either of them move. Tomoe’s fist was stopped a hair from Ace’s face, and a ball of dark energy was frozen in the air less than an inch from his chest. There was only one explanation for it.

“Clay Aegis,” I breathed in disbelief.

That was the only explanation. It was a special defensive tool forged from rare metals that could only be found close to the base, and it could manifest a wall of force around the user to nullify almost any physical attack. It could only be used so many times, but the defensive power it offered was unrivaled. The sound, then, had to be Tomoe and Mio’s attacks colliding with the barrier, and with such force that I could feel the tremor in the air.

“Not bad,” Ace smirked. “You’re pretty strong. Too bad I came prepared. Now, prepare to—”

“Mio.” Tomoe glanced back at her ally. “This one will handle this human trash. The rabble is yours.”

“Preposterous. Do you expect me to let such insults to Milord stand? Besides, I was under the impression you would leave the ‘this one’ nonsense for later.”

The two began to argue, as though Ace weren’t immediately in front of the pair.

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare ignore—”

Tomoe shrugged unaffectedly. “They have already noticed us, so focus on detoxifying the other captives, if you will. This one, on the other hand, must beat this fool for his insolence.”

Mio huffed. “Leave enough for me, will you? I won’t rest until I’ve slapped him as he deserves.”

“Verily so. Now, let us practice restraint on these hyuman vermin.”

With that done, Mio-san healed the other hostages who had been kept in the same room as me—all at once and without an incantation, no less.

Tomoe-san turned to Ace. “Now, this one shall use naught but bare hands. Try to survive a single hit.”

She pulled back her fist, then drove it forward again in a blur of motion.

Sqwrch!

Her attack easily shattered the Clay Aegis’ barrier, her fist smashing into his face and sending him crumbling into the wall, where he fell to the floor without so much as a whisper.

H-He was the strongest man in the whole guild...!

“Come, now!” Tomoe called. “Give this one the best you’ve got!”

She began tearing through the crowd of mercenaries, her gleaming sword sheathed at her side as the guards swarmed her with blades drawn. Each blow snapped blades and shattered bones, and the sight of such a handsome young woman tearing through the goons took my breath away.

“Hey!” Mio-san protested. “Leave some for me, now!”

Having finished tending to the other drug victims, she charged into the fray—but instead of attacking the mercenaries, she grabbed Ace from where he’d collapsed at the foot of the shattered wall.

SPACK SPACK SPACK SPACK SPACK!!!

She unleashed a horrifyingly fast flurry of slaps, to the point where I couldn’t even see her hand. Almost instantly, his face swelled to a horrific red state.

“Hahh...” She exhaled contentedly before laying into the surrounding goons.

“Well met, Mio!” Tomoe-san shouted over the din. “Remember, try to grasp the precise amount of force needed to leave them barely alive!”

“With so much practice fodder, I imagine I’ll have little issue. I doubt their cretinous leader will die either.”

“Perhaps we should make the room a tad wider, though...”

“Agreed. There’s scarcely room to fight properly.”

Finally, Tomoe-san drew her oddly-shaped sword, and Mio-san covered her slender white hands in dark energy. With a single blindingly fast slash, the walls about us crumbled and fell, and the rubble was greedily swallowed by the darkness at our feet. The former prison was blown away entirely, replaced by the vast night sky.

I must be dreaming...

Their work done, my first rescuer sheathed her blade while the second tied up her skirt so she could move more easily. The guards, finally realizing how hopelessly outmatched they were despite being near Level 200, tried to flee in terror—but the two women were on them in seconds like a pair of avenging angels, beating and tossing them about like dolls.

For the first time since we’d met, I accepted that they had to be Level 1,320 and 1,500. My fellow freed captives were watching the sight with every bit as much emotion. The nightmare was over, and it took only a few short minutes to happen. The only thing left intact was our room, and the rest of the once-opulent mansion just off the base was now rubble.

“Nghat fo fagh!”

Something screamed unintelligibly behind me, and I felt cold steel on my throat.

I was careless. The attacker was Ace, no doubt, but I almost felt sorry for him now. His cheeks were swollen to the point that he couldn’t even say “not so fast” properly. Neither Tomoe-san nor Mio-san showed any sign of recognizing his resurrection.

His irritation was palpably growing, and he tried to repeat himself. “Nghat fo —”

In the blink of an eye, my rescuers were by me—Tomoe-san on my left, and Mio-san on my right.

“Enough!” they shouted.

Tomoe-san's kick and Mio-san's punch met their mark, and Ace was literally blown away, out of the rubble, then out of sight. It was the first time I'd ever seen someone literally take flight from getting hit so hard.

Tomoe-san sighed. "This one supposes our work here is done. Did we overdo it, perhaps?"

"Of course not. Anyone who disrespects Milord deserves nothing short of eternal torment."

"I suppose so. Mission accomplished! Ahahaha!"

"Hehe. It seems I'm even more adept at beating people half to death than you are."

Tomoe-san suddenly stopped laughing.

Um... I thought the fight was over. Why is the air so thick with bloodlust all of a sudden?

"Surely you jest," Mio-san said, teeth gritting slightly. "I vanquished three more than you did!"

"Oh, are you really that bad at math? I clearly had you beat by two."

"You're one to talk—it would seem even basic addition is beyond you. Listen well, this one is the rightful victor!"

"No, it was clearly me."

They began arguing, without even bothering to move so I wasn't right between them. It was downright terrifying, especially since they both had more power in their little fingers than I did in my whole body.

"Um... Could you perhaps put this aside for now?" I cut in hesitantly.

"As if!"

"Inconceivable!"

"Eep?!"

Tomoe-san glared me in the face.

Sh-She's not going to hurt me, is she?!

“Listen well, girl—no, Toa, was it? Was this one not far superior in every way? You saw this one vanquish more, did you not?”

As if to prove her point, she drew her sword and swung. The mighty wall surrounding the mansion burst into rubble with a massive thundering.

U-Um...

I hurriedly nodded my head. It was the only obvious answer.

“What?!” Mio narrowed her eyes at me. “I’ll have you know, Toa-san, that should the mood strike me... Hup!” In the distance, one of the base’s buildings was bathed in darkness and devoured. “See? I’m much more capable, aren’t I?”

That easily?!

Again, I hurriedly nodded my head. It was the only obvious answer.

Tomoe-san scowled at her supposed ally. “Oh? Are you truly that intent on competing with this one?”

“Me? Of course not. I was simply asking for a third-party view, that’s all.”

“Hahaha.”

“Hehe!”

Despite their laughter, there was murder in their eyes. Whatever was about to happen, it was too late to stop it now.

“Look, Toa! This one is more impressive!”

“No, Toa-san, didn’t you say I was?!”

I could only stand and watch as the base, a monument of the final frontier of civilization that had stood proud for decades, was destroyed before my eyes piece by piece.

Neither of them cared about the tears streaming down my face. It was an unbelievable sight, to say the least. The only forces that stood any chance of stopping them were already fallen, and there was hardly a single building standing now. What was once a thriving base was now a mountain of rubble. The only structure left was the most expensive inn in town, for whatever reason.



With the entire settlement in ruins, the two strangers exchanged smiles and a firm handshake. The storm had passed, but at a cataclysmic cost.

At the entrance to said opulent inn, we found my little sister—who had miraculously survived the destruction—and I braced myself to meet whatever my saviors called their “lord”...

※ ※ ※

“No! No, absolutely fucking not!”

I sprung to my feet as Toa finished her tale and rushed to the window, throwing wide the curtain, but instead of a thriving base, there was only a desolate lot of barren, crater-pocked land. I whipped about to glare at my aides, but they both purposefully avoided my gaze. I was overwhelmed with the urge to go on a full-blown tirade, but instead the one oddly calm part of my mind took over. Looking back over the room, something clicked.

Rinon... So, that's why she was looking so scared of them.

“I'm glad you're safe,” I wrote simply.

At the sight of that message, the girl burst into tears and rushed at me, wrapping her arms tightly around my waist.

No wonder she's scared shitless.

I didn't know when she arrived at the inn exactly, but it must've been hard watching her home be destroyed around her—and worse, to have the pair responsible for said destruction show up immediately afterward with her sister alive and well. After a short while, the poor girl cried herself to sleep. It was a lot of stress all at once, after all.

I shot Tomoe and Mio dark looks. Now that Rinon was cared for, I could feel my frustration hit boiling point. I grabbed the bow I'd been given by the orcs and one of my special dwarf-made arrows from the quiver. Taking two threads attached to the fletching, I tied one each to Tomoe and Mio's clothes. I didn't say a word the whole time. Then, as I nocked the arrow—

“Er...”

“M-Milord? I don’t believe this is a good—”

They realized what was happening, but it was too late.

“Go repent in space, why don’t you?!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!”

“M-MILOOOOOOOOORD!!!”

With a sharp twang, the pair of them were dragged out the window by the arrow. I could hear them shouting about the state of their clothes as they flew, but I frankly didn’t care. They deserved at least that much for leveling the whole base.

What were they even thinking?! We can’t keep doing this! We’d be terrorists... Oh god, we’re terrorists already! What if someone figures it out?! Argh, I can’t even think good!

It’d be best if I took some alone time from Tomoe in particular. She seemed the type to like training journeys and the like, so she’d probably jump at the chance if I so much as mentioned the idea. Mio was more compliant, and it was easy enough to rein her in if she started getting carried away. With her as my only bodyguard, we could rush for Tsige and put this mess behind us as fast as possible. Without our resident troublemaking samurai-wannabe, we wouldn’t have any more problems... hopefully.

Yeah, that’s it. We’ll get out of here and to someplace nobody knows us as soon as possible!

I started hashing out a rough plan as Toa and I gathered all the other people who’d been held captive by Ace. Sure enough, they were sitting in the hallway where Toa left them, and they were kneeling on the hard floor as politely as they could. There was a hyuman, an elf, and a dwarf for a total of three other captives.

The trio tensed visibly at the sight of me, bowing deferentially. Tomoe and Mio had intended to return them to the base, but that obviously wasn’t an option anymore. The hallway was the only real shelter left. I didn’t get why they weren’t inside the room with us, but apparently it would’ve gotten too crowded otherwise.

The sight of them helped cool my head, and I wrote one simple sentence for them.

"I'll see you safely to the next town."

Tsukimichi

Epilogue

At a
Castle in
a Faraway
Land

Anticipation hung thick in the air of the throne room. All of the most important nobles and advisors in the land were assembled, each waiting in silent suspense. They'd heard of the Goddess's awakening from the lesser spirits and the heroes that were summoned in suit. The Demon King, from his imperious throne, had his brow knitted in consternation.

"The Goddess has awakened," he finally said. "The information is from the spirits themselves, so there's no doubt."

The four-armed general stroked his chin. "Then the hero summoning rumors are—"

"They're true," he confirmed.

Murmurs ran through the assembled commanders.

When the Goddess fell into her sudden slumber ten years ago, the demons enlisted the aid of the lesser spirits and swore to spread their domain from the dead, infertile lands they had been driven to. They had been hoping to secure any amount of fertile land, as even the gods' blessings were beyond them, but the war proved to be massively successful.

The once-great power that believed most strongly in the Goddess, Elysion, was no more, and over half its former land was in demon hands. The would-be brutal clash in the heart of the land ended overwhelmingly in the Demon King's favor, and the rest of the country fell effortlessly afterward. Over a dozen countries, large and small, had been wiped off the map in the conflict, and the face of the world had been irreparably altered.

The demons had no end of fertile land now, and their borders stretched as far as the sea. Having a port that didn't freeze for half the year was especially

useful in ensuring their once-starving people could finally be fed, and they'd seen no end of prosperity.

Further south of the former country of Elysion, however, were the two greatest military powers in the world, the Kingdom of Limia and the Gritonia Empire. The demons had attempted to conquer them after Elysion's fall, but they were unsuccessful in claiming all their lands. The pair were the demons' next goals, after they solidified their newly-conquered gains, and the demon army had stopped their advance at their fledgling empire's southern edge to maintain the ever-present threat of invasion. That, in a nutshell, was the reason behind the recent era of "peace."

While they were still far from perfect in stabilizing their claims, the demons were finally at the point where they were ready to resume their invasion. That, of course, was when the Goddess's revival and rumors of new heroes began to spread—their armies' worst nightmare.

Originally, the plan was to hold their southern border while they enlisted the aid of the non-hyhumans in the western Edge, then force an advance around the superpowers and eliminate the two other largest nations of Lorel and Aion first. After that, Limia and Gritonia would fall to a pincer assault. However, with the Goddess in the equation, not to mention the heroes, there was a chance they might lose.

One of the generals, a half-snake, spat in disgust. "To think, all our work might be for nothing..."

Had the Goddess remained dormant for only a little longer, the Demon King thought, the hyhumans would've been as good as defeated anyway.

He watched the silent faces of his generals for a long moment before finally addressing them again.

"Our efforts to date have not been pointless. The forces of the Edge will bolster our ranks, no doubt. One problem yet remains, however." His brow furrowed deeply. "Heroes have descended in Limia and Gritonia, no doubt, and I can feel their strength. I've no idea what means they might be using to hide their true strength, but in all likelihood, they may even have more mana than me."

“What?!”

“How is that possible? Mere humans, overpower you?!”

“They must have brought another world’s mightiest champions here,” the Demon King continued. “Should they grow accustomed to the ways of war in our world, we will no doubt be forced onto the back foot. We must assume the Goddess herself has granted them her blessings. More mana means little, however, if they are not given time to master it.”

Despite the dark news, there was no hint of despair in his voice.

“The issue is not, however, the summoning of this pair. No, there may well be another.”

A general sprang to their feet, gaping. “A third hero?!”

“At ease. There are only two heroes, of that I am certain, one in Limia and the other in Gritonia. They pose no threat yet. The other, however...” He paused, at a loss for the first time, and his advisors exchanged uncertain glances. “The third, I fear, is at the Edge of the World.”

He had only felt a faint pulse of mana from the Edge, but given that his castle was in the far north of the continent, he had previously never felt anything from there at all. There had to be something afoot, but he possessed no means of discovering what, and that was the source of his discontent.

“Not even I should be able to sense something so distant, but there is certainly something there, and I cannot deny the possibility. There could well be a non-hero visitor from another world.”

It was impossible to tell why they were here, or what their connection was to the Goddess. Another hero, at least, would be easy enough to plan for, but the mysterious figure bred nothing but uncertainty.

The Demon King sighed. “For now, this stranger is far less worrying than the heroes. Have our agents already in the Edge look into it.”

The commander in charge of maneuvering the armies nodded sagely.

The four-armed general broke his silence and stood, his massive body dwarfing all those around him. “I must reorganize our front lines. I take my

leave.”

He left, and the Demon King said nothing. He supported the general’s efforts to maintain the border with Limia in their entirety.

“Quite heartening, indeed,” the King muttered to himself as he watched the general leave.

But if this creature with immense mana is truly in the Edge, even now, and if it elects to side with us, the heroes will be nothing. Rather, we may finally have the means to strike against the Goddess herself. The humans have both her and the two heroes on their side; a similar boon would be invaluable to us.

The Demon King’s thoughts lingered still on the mysterious presence in the Edge.

Little did Makoto Misumi know, the entire world had begun to take interest in him, and his troubles had only just begun...

Back Matter

Author: Azumi Kei

Born in Aichi prefecture, Kei began writing *Tsukimichi* and posting it online in 2012. It became an instant hit and went on to win the 5th Fantasy Novel Awards' Fan Prize. In May 2013, the first volume was revised and officially published for the first time.



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