

Tsukimichi

Moonlit Fantasy

5



Author
Kei Azumi
Illustrator
Mitsuaki Matsumoto


Hanashi
MEDIA

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JIN

A male student at the Central Rotsgard Academy who aspires to become a swordsman.

EVA

Works as a librarian at the Central Rotsgard Academy's library. She has an interest in Makoto, but...

SHIKI

Originally an undead monster known as a "Lich." After forming a pact with Makoto, he gained a human form.

MIO

Originally a giant spider, Mio gained a human form after making a pact with Makoto and is deeply devoted to him.

LURIA

Eva's younger sister. She works at a restaurant called the Ironclad Inn in Rotsgard.

MAKOTO MISUMI

The protagonist of the story. A high school student who was summoned to another world due to his parents' circumstances. Currently enjoying his life in this new world.

TOMOE

Originally a dragon known as Shin. She gained a human form after forming a pact with Makoto, and has a deep love for Japanese culture.

MAJOR
CHARACTERS

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Tsukimichi

Prologue

I, Makoto Misumi, along with my follower Shiki—the former lich—was walking through the streets of the Academy City of Rotsgard. Its urban scent and the well-crafted stone buildings were a stark contrast to the rural atmosphere of Tsige, the city we’d just come from.

It wouldn’t be fair to call Rotsgard simply a city; it was a sprawling metropolis, made up of many smaller cities gathered around it like satellites. Each of these cities housed its own unique educational institution, but the central city where we now stood was home to the most prestigious of them—the renowned Rotsgard Academy.

The process to apply to the institutions was straightforward: each applicant took an entrance exam here in the central city, and depending upon their abilities and aptitudes, they would be assigned to one of the surrounding schools. Of course, I suspected it wasn’t *just* about talent and aptitude; factors like wealth and social status would no doubt also be considered.

I was here thanks to a recommendation from a business magnate named Rembrandt, who had been a great help to me in Tsige. My goal was to take the entrance exam and hopefully enroll in one of the schools here.

To cater to students that came here from all over the continent, a variety of goods were sold and diverse clothing styles were on display. The sheer size of the place—easily big enough to fit several Tsiges inside—made walking through it a constant source of fascination.

I stopped in my tracks as something caught my eye.

“Is something the matter, Raidou-sama?” Shiki asked, using the alias I’d told him to call me by in this city.

“I’d like to say it’s nothing, but there’s... *that*.” I nodded toward the scene ahead.

A group of four or five men were harassing a woman. That was nothing out of the ordinary; in this world, too, the strong picked on the weak. However, what was strange was that the victim was a hyuman. In most places we’d seen since leaving Tsige, including in the Wastelands and Zetsuya, and here in Rotsgard, demi-humans were usually the ones picked on.

The stronger the influence of the Goddess’s teachings in a region, the lower the status of demi-humans. According to that cursed goddess, demi-humans were merely failed attempts before hyumans were created, existing in this world only due to divine mercy. Because of that, they were expected to serve the “perfect” hyumans.

I found myself thinking, not for the first time, how twisted that entire doctrine was.

“Ah, is it extortion or something?” Shiki asked, his indifference clear.

“I’m not sure, but it looks more like bullying,” I replied.

“Bullying, huh? Yeah, I suppose it could be seen that way,” Shiki agreed, though he still didn’t seem particularly interested. Once again, I was probably overthinking it because of where I came from.

Reflecting on it, when I’d first told Shiki about meeting the Goddess, he had been in a complete frenzy. His usually expansive vocabulary had shrunk to just a few words—“unbelievable,” “amazing,” and “impossible”—which he repeated while pacing around, as if his legs couldn’t stay still. Even when he saw the Goddess through my memories, thanks to Tomoe, he had those childlike, sparkling eyes.

Thankfully, he hasn’t gotten addicted to visual media yet. If he picked up some weird hobbies, that’d be a problem. But it’s only natural for him to be curious about a new culture. He’s bound to be influenced by something eventually, and

I've already prepared myself to accept it—unless, of course, he suddenly develops an interest in BL.

"I'm not used to seeing humans bully their own. I'm going to check it out," I decided.

"Raidou-sama?"

It wasn't because the victim was a woman. It was her eyes—they didn't look cold, defeated, or twisted. I couldn't quite place it, but there was something about them that piqued my curiosity.

"Hey, say something!" one of the men shouted, shoving the woman. The attackers were completely oblivious to our approach.

I exchanged a glance with Shiki. Given my inability to speak the human language, it was always reassuring to have someone who could do the talking for me.

"Uh, maybe you should stop?" Shiki asked in his usual polite tone.

Come on, Shiki, why the question mark? That should've been a cool, confident line.

"Who the hell are you guys?" one of the bullies sneered as he finally noticed us.

"Hey, can't you see these uniforms? Are you idiots?" another chimed in.

Ah, their uniforms. It looked like they were wearing the same outfits—probably from the academy. The colors varied, but the designs were nearly identical. I could guess what was going on.

"Should I kill them, Young Master?" Shiki's voice echoed calmly in my mind.

"Wait, what?!"

"They said 'idiots.' Were they calling me an idiot? Or... were they calling Young Master one? Ah, yes, that's a death sentence. I see how it is."

"Hey, hey, just rough them up a little, let them throw out some dramatic parting words, and then let them run away! No killing! Got it?!"

"Ah, yes. Roger that." Shiki's response was a bit too casual for comfort.

If this was how he interpreted things... Well, there wasn't much I could do about it. My mind drifted to my other followers, Tomoe and Mio. Tomoe, I had faith in. But Mio... I really hoped she wasn't going on a rampage somewhere. With Tomoe by her side, I trusted that things wouldn't get too out of hand. *I'm counting on you, Tomoe!*

"You guys, just give it up. I won't kill you," Shiki said nonchalantly.

Taking in their uniforms, a thought crossed my mind. *Am I really the first person from another world to come here? Or just me and the heroes?*

Their uniforms looked an awful lot like Japanese ones, especially the blazers. It was too much for coincidence... Maybe someone else had already visited this world and passed on the design. I mean, school uniforms weren't exactly universal across worlds.

"Shiki, do you have trouble holding conversations?" I asked.

"No, but I do find it challenging to deal with idiots."

Fair enough, I thought. Shiki was blunt, but I liked that about him. It then occurred to me that these guys might end up being my classmates. They were so proud of their uniforms—did that mean students had a high status in this city? That would have been rather different my old world.

I mean, if someone back home said, "Can't you see my uniform? I'm a high schooler!" they'd definitely be seen as a weirdo.

Even if this was an academy city, where everything revolved around learning and research, it made sense for scholars and researchers to be respected. But students? They were just the trainees. Shouldn't they be seen as nothing special?

"Don't mess with me!!!" one of the men shouted.

I noticed lines of energy swirling around in his palm. *Magick, huh?*

It was so slow. Not to mention, he was loudly chanting his spell, as if he were performing at a kindergarten play.

"Sorry, is this a circus act?" I couldn't *speak* his language, but I could communicate just fine by writing words in the air with magick.

My question was an honest one—if they were performing for us, the theatrical chant would have made sense—but my question seemed to have really pissed them off. All four were glaring daggers at me.

“Young Master, you certainly know how to provoke others.”

“That was a misunderstanding, I swear!”

Shiki completed a chant related to earth magick.

“What the—?! That was so fast!”

No, guys, it was just normal speed, I thought with an amused smile. Typical students, unaware of the real world. If they were that slow on a battlefield, one particular scary lady accompanied by a terrifying child would slice them up in no time.

Shiki planted his black staff against the ground with a sharp *thunk*. This weapon was one he’d received from an eldwar in the Demiplane; the dwarf had apologized, saying, “It’s just a quick job.” Despite that, Shiki seemed quite pleased with its performance.

The air was soon filled with the sound of screams—five people screaming, in fact. Pillars of stone erupted from the ground beneath the students, lifting them dozens of meters into the air. The woman they’d been bullying was now surrounded by the stone formations, almost like she was in a cage of rock.

Oops, probably should’ve warned her—being suddenly trapped like that must be terrifying.

Unfortunately, Shiki’s magick had also attracted quite a bit of attention on the street, and people were starting to panic. *Time to get rid of this.*

I gently touched one of the stone columns. Analyzing the structure of the magick, I traced it back to its core and dissolved it using shadow magick. The five columns vanished as if they had never existed, leaving the bullies suspended in the air.

Wonder what they’ll do now. They seem to know some magick, so maybe they can figure something out? Unlike me, one of them should be able to use wind magick, right?

“Impressive! You’re close to perfecting the counterspell to nullify magick,” Shiki remarked.

That’d be nice, I thought, giving him a vague smile. I could already nullify magick I was familiar with, but that didn’t feel like much of an accomplishment.

“Are you okay?” I asked the woman in glowing letters. *“If you can read this, it would be great if you could run away. I don’t know why they were bullying you, but now that we’ve gotten involved, I doubt this will end peacefully.”*

“Uh... Ah,” she gasped, clearly startled by the floating text. Judging by the woman’s outfit—an apron and dress with frills—though it wasn’t quite a maid uniform, I figured she was probably a servant of some kind.



She glanced up at the guys still hanging in the air, and her surprise seemed to dissipate. Gone, too, was the strange light I'd seen in her eyes earlier. *Oh well. I guess it was just curiosity on my part anyway.*

"I didn't ask for your help," she said.

So, she could read the text. Good, that meant communication wouldn't be an issue.

"I'm not expecting any gratitude. We probably won't meet again, so don't worry about it," I remarked.

She didn't reply.

"Just go already," I said.

"I work at the Ironclad Inn, just down the road. I live there, so... if you ever feel like it, please come by. I'd like to thank you, somehow."

"If I feel like it, I'll stop by."

The woman ran off, her wavy shoulder-length hair bouncing as she moved. *Ironclad Inn, huh? Sounds like a place that serves hotpot or something. I might check it out when things settle down. The food in this world is surprisingly tasty, even if it's a little on the bland side.*

"She's a bit rude for someone who just got saved," Shiki remarked.

"Really? If someone helps you out of the blue, it's only natural to be suspicious. Especially when a certain someone makes it all flashy," I replied, smirking.

It wasn't like this world had a bunch of superheroes roaming the streets. People tended to live cautiously. Even I had gotten a bit more cynical since arriving here.

"Flashy, you say?" Shiki asked, puzzled. "I used a rather subdued spell to avoid killing them."

Subdued? Really? If those pillars were any pointier, I'm pretty sure someone would've been impaled and killed.

"If anything, burying them might've attracted less attention," I mused.

“Now that you mention it, those guys are trying really hard to stay up in the air,” Shiki observed. “I assume they’ll tire out eventually, but I wonder if they have a death wish?”

Sure enough, the four men above us wore strained expressions as they struggled to maintain their levitation spells. They were slowly descending, and it was clear they would fall soon.

“Don’t tell me they can’t fly?” I asked.

“In that case, they’re just pigs. May their next lives be more fortunate,” Shiki replied.

“Help them.”

With a reluctant sigh, Shiki cast a much stronger levitation spell, catching the guys and gently slowing their fall to the ground... or so it seemed. At the last moment, he let them drop, and they landed with a thud.

“Shiki...” I muttered, exasperated.

What a bunch of kids!

“Just you wait, you’ll pay for this!!!” one of them shouted as he ran off.

“Dammit!”

“I’m, wait up!!!”

They stumbled as they made their retreat, one of them falling hard onto his rear. *Poor guy. But shouldn’t they at least know how to land properly? Didn’t they learn that in PE class?*

Honestly, do they really want us to remember those parting threats? It’s probably something they’ll regret later.

“Raidou-sama, if I may speak frankly,” Shiki began. “I believe it’s unwise to interfere in matters like this. Such things are societal phenomena. Trying to meddle in every small incident that cannot be eradicated at its root is meaningless.”

“Shiki, it’s not meaningless. I’m satisfied, at least,” I replied. “I know it’s a bit indulgent on my part, but if you really want to correct me, you’ll have to find a

way to make me stop.”

Shiki said nothing.

“I’m not on a mission to eradicate bullying. I just acted on a whim this time.”

“Raidou-sama...”

“Sorry for being such a troublemaking master,” I said, smiling.

“No, I overstepped,” Shiki replied, giving a slight bow.

“Well then, let’s do something to thank you for standing in line for me for so long. Can you believe it? You waited and waited, and the entrance exam isn’t for another three days!” I said, shaking my head.

“Uh?” Shiki’s face was suddenly clouded with confusion.

“‘Uh?’ What does that mean, Shiki? The exam’s in three days, right?”

“Raidou-sama? Which exam are you referring to?” he asked, his confusion deepening.

“The exam... to enter the academy?” I replied, equally perplexed.

Shiki had spent six long days standing in line to submit the required documents along with Rembrandt-san’s letter of recommendation, and now he didn’t seem to know what it had all been for!

“I understand that part,” he said, his tone even, “but do you truly intend to take the entrance exam?”

I nodded emphatically.

“Please listen carefully. The exam you’ll be taking in three days is *not* for school admission.”

Huh?

“To clarify, educational institutions—whether large or small—hold admissions at regular intervals. Schools that accept students on a rolling basis are quite rare.”

I mean, sure, that makes sense. Schools generally admit students once or twice a year. But this place—Rotsgard—houses almost a hundred schools of

various sizes! Surely, they have exceptions to the rules?

“At the moment, this academy city is not accepting new students, Raidou-sama.”

“Then... what were you waiting in line for, Shiki?” I asked, confusion creeping in.

“For the staff recruitment exams.”

Staff? As in... employment?!

“Shiki?! I’m already a registered merchant with the Merchant Guild. I’m not here to job hunt!” I shouted.

“Indeed, but the documents Rembrandt-san provided stated that you wished to apply for a position as an instructor of General Tactics.”

Rembrandt! What have you done?!

“Why didn’t you check the documents and notice something was wrong?!” I exclaimed.

“Because, Raidou-sama, the idea of you becoming a regular student seemed far more unusual. I assumed this was your intended path.”

Oh no, oh no, oh no! Rembrandt, what were you thinking?! And Shiki! I’m only seventeen! There’s no way I can be an instructor!

Should I have ignored the wax seal and just checked the contents? But at the time, it hadn’t seemed necessary. After all, I’d only ever dealt with Merchant Guild documents, so I wouldn’t have known what to look for in these kinds of applications anyway.

“The letter of recommendation... What did it say?!” I asked, trying to piece things together.

“Ah, yes. It mentioned that you, Raidou-sama, had extensive combat experience from the farthest reaches of the world. It noted that, while you had some difficulty with language, you were still an invaluable candidate and would be a great asset, even though this isn’t the usual recruitment period,” Shiki explained.

They're off-season?! I made Shiki wait in line for six days, only to find out it wasn't even the right time for recruitment? Could Rembrandt have submitted the wrong documents? No, that couldn't have been the case, not for him or Morris, his ever-diligent butler. They wouldn't make such an oversight.

"So, I'm taking a test in three days to become an instructor of General Tactics... or something like that?" I asked.

"Yes."

General Tactics? I've never even heard of that subject! How am I supposed to teach something I don't know? I'm going to flunk this exam.

I'd had two main goals since my fateful meeting with the Goddess: to learn more about this world and to establish a trading company. Attending the academy as a student had been a mere afterthought. In that sense, it didn't really matter if I ended up as an instructor or a student, as long as I got into the academy. But still... an instructor? An instructor was someone who guided and educated others. I definitely wasn't cut out for that! Maybe I could ask if I could switch to some sort of administrative role instead.

It was hours later when the weight of the situation finally sank in. I was staring up at the night sky, and I found that I had a sudden, unassailable urge to drink.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 1

Three days had passed since Shiki's shocking revelation. Now, here we were at Rotsgard Academy, and I had a test to take.

Ah, this atmosphere...

The tense, heavy feeling of an impending exam hung thick in the air. It reminded me, disconcertingly, of my high school entrance exams. Apparently, this process was just as nerve-racking for instructors.

As we made our way through the academy, I couldn't help but notice the countless stares aimed in our direction. Normally, such looks would be due to my unusual appearance, but this time, I had a feeling half of those stares had a different origin. I stood out here in a new way.

I'm way too young. The halls were packed with people, but none of them looked even close to my age. Most seemed to be in their thirties or forties. That was only logical, given that they had all applied to become instructors.

"There are even more eyes on me than usual. It's really getting on my nerves," I muttered.

"Raidou-sama, it's only natural. You're quite an outlier in this group," Shiki replied calmly but unhelpfully.

"Right. I must look like a kid who wandered in by mistake."

"You seem quite concerned about it. But for an instructor of a practical subject, what matters most is your skill. You'll have no trouble at all."

“Skill... for teaching General Tactics, huh.”

It turned out that General Tactics referred to all aspects of combat techniques. In short, it was a battle training subject. Shiki had explained that to me last night. But honestly, regardless of the topic, I couldn't imagine myself teaching anything to anyone.

I'd spent enough time in this world to understand that I was far from normal. The idea of me teaching regular people some kind of technical skill just felt... impossible. Sure, this subject seemed broad enough that I'd be able to focus on areas I was good at, but even my magick had been labeled “monstrous” by a lich.

Three days of these swirling doubts had passed, and despite it all, here I was. If I was being honest, I had shown up largely out of obligation to Rembrandt. If it hadn't been for his recommendation letter, I'd have bolted for sure. But I couldn't bring myself to embarrass someone who had helped me so much by simply skipping the exam. Failing because of a lack of skill was one thing, but not even showing up? That would be unacceptable.

The other reason I'd come today was Shiki. He had stood in line for six whole days on my behalf. Though he'd told me not to worry about it, I couldn't just dismiss all that effort. It would have been disrespectful.

“I've taught people before, you know. Being an instructor or lecturer is nothing to worry about,” Shiki said calmly.

“Is that so?” I replied, still unsure.

“Yes.”

Why does Shiki already seem so certain I'm going to pass and end up teaching? I was still juggling my thoughts, wondering if I could even get through this exam.

“Well, I'll ask about office jobs too. I'm going to give it a try, regardless. Sorry for worrying you,” I told him.

“I believe the exam will be far easier than you expect, Raidou-sama.”

“That would be nice.”

With that, we finally arrived at the reception area for the exam. *Here we go...*

"I'd like to register for the exam," I wrote. After giving the man behind the desk a moment to read the glowing text, I handed him my documents.

"All right, Raidou Misumi. Let me briefly explain the exam process," he said as he scanned over the papers.

"Excuse me, I just have one question before we proceed."

"What is it?" he asked warily.

Given that I had interrupted his explanation and was making him accommodate my written communication, I couldn't really blame him for his lack of warmth. Shiki, standing beside me, seemed slightly irritated but was holding back. If Mio had been here, though, I imagined things would've gone south already. While Tomoe would have handled it calmly, knowing exactly what was going on, Mio would have probably grabbed the staff member by the collar and snarled, "Ah?"

Thanks, Shiki.

"I know this is the exam site for the instructor position, but do you happen to have any openings for administrative staff?" I asked, hoping against hope.

"No, we don't," the man replied with a quick shake of his head. If it were possible, he seemed even more annoyed. "You see, Misumi-san—"

"Yes?" I prompted.

"We're having a bit of a problem with that kind of thing lately. You're not the only one doing this, but people who get rejected from teaching positions have been coming to other departments, pleading with staff for any kind of work they can get. It's becoming a real issue."

His face contorted into an expression of deep frustration as he launched into a tirade. *Yup, this is a full-on complaint.* He was venting not only about the situation but also indirectly about me. His long-winded speech felt like a passive-aggressive attack, but I didn't bother arguing back. I just let his words wash over me, not feeling particularly angry. Instead, I found myself strangely... exasperated—at myself.

Is this how I've been acting for the past few days? Have I been causing Shiki this kind of frustration? I thought, a strange sense of déjà vu coming over me.

"Hey, um," I began, speaking out loud for Shiki's ears only, "Shiki, I'm really sorry for the last few days. I've probably been a pain, haven't I?"

The receptionist was still ranting, but he wasn't even looking at me anymore. I tuned him out to focus on Shiki.

But... there was no response.

"Shiki?"

Still nothing.

Uh...

I glanced up at Shiki's face, just to check.

Uh-oh.

This... wasn't good.

On the surface, Shiki still had that calm, polite smile plastered across his face. But I could tell—it wasn't a smile. It was that dark, foreboding grin, with shadows practically falling over the top half of his face. I'd seen this expression before. It was the same one Tomoe or Mio would wear right before things escalated into... serious problems.

This is bad! Just like with Tomoe and Mio...!

"Shiki, calm down—" I started.

"Do you get it?" the receptionist was saying, his words dripping with disdain. "No matter how often lowly trash tries to worm their way through unofficial channels— Huh?"

Before he could finish, Shiki's hand shot out and clamped smoothly, effortlessly, around the man's throat. In one swift move, he yanked the guy from behind the counter, pulling him in close.

Shiki muttered something, but it was too quiet for me to hear. However, I could feel his magick swirling around as he drained the life force out of the man.

Wait, what am I doing?! This is not the time to just watch!

I quickly suppressed Shiki's magick and wedged myself between the two of them, physically pulling them apart.

That was close, I realized, breathing heavily. There were way too many witnesses around, and this could've easily turned into a very public, very inconcealable murder.

"My apologies," I wrote quickly to the dazed receptionist. *"My companion acted out of line. If there are no administrative positions, that's fine. I've already submitted my recommendation letter, and I'll take the exam as planned."*

"M-Misumi! You can't just act like nothing happened after... after that!" the staff member stammered, massaging his neck and looking scared.

"Like nothing happened?" echoed Shiki. All politeness had left his voice, leaving only the cold, chilling tone of his lich form. "You have the gall to say that? Do you not even realize the vile words you spewed at my master? How you drenched him in your petty complaints and insults?"

The man cowered, his face going pale.

"And now you act as though I attacked you without cause? You dare twist the situation? Everyone here heard your disgusting words. My master *apologized* to you, and you didn't even have the decency to offer an apology in return! Is this how you treat someone who came to take the exam? Answer me!" Shiki's voice was loud and sharp, as if he were addressing a disobedient subordinate.

The receptionist was practically shaking in fear now.

Ahhh, damn it!

A crowd had gathered, with more staff applicants joining in by the second.

Just as I was wondering how I could possibly defuse the situation or whether I should try to make a run for it, a new voice spoke up.

"Please accept my apologies. It appears there's been some misconduct by one of our staff."

Great, now someone important is here. She was a beautiful woman, but her smile looked as if it had been plastered on, and it radiated an unsettling, cold

aura. She was exactly the type of person I hated dealing with.

Why do I keep running into people like this? The cast of characters I'd encountered ever since arriving in this world seemed designed to test my stress tolerance.

"Oh? You're apologizing, are you?" Shiki replied, his tone still icy.

"Of course. I'm very sorry. Even if your inquiry regarding administrative positions was out of place at the exam registration, it doesn't justify our staff airing complaints or using malicious language toward a guest here," the woman said smoothly.

Shiki didn't miss a beat. "Indeed. My master only inquired about administrative positions as a secondary matter. As we had already submitted a recommendation letter alongside the exam application, you should have been aware of that from the start."

"Recommendation letter...?" The woman glanced briefly at the man who'd caused the trouble.

I found it hard to tell people's ages in this world—especially humans'—because everyone was so attractive. For men, I could usually guess based on their general demeanor, but when it came to women, I was at a loss. This woman had a commanding presence and was probably older than the desk guy... Looking closely, I noticed faint lines on her face, which suggested she was probably somewhere between thirty and forty?

Our eyes met, and her smile deepened slightly. *Okay, maybe I should stop analyzing people for now.*

"You may step down," she said to her subordinate. "I'll handle the rest of the registration for this gentleman. While this is an exam registration and I cannot offer any special privileges, I will ensure that the remaining procedures are completed without further delays. I hope this is acceptable to you."

While the flustered receptionist stepped out from behind the desk, the woman calmly searched through the documents stacked on its surface. She must have been looking for my recommendation letter. She let out a soft sigh—a brief, almost seductive sound.

It was a relief to know the process would be sped up. I didn't want any special treatment nor was I asking to pass the exam without taking it. I'd just inquired about the administrative position in case it was available, like Shiki had suggested.

"Very well," Shiki sighed, his anger finally dissipating. "Since you're handling this professionally, I'll sheathe my sword, so to speak."

Phew, thank goodness.

"I appreciate your understanding. Now, as for your exam, Misumi-sama... You've applied for the position of General Tactics instructor. Which specific exam would you like to take? Since you have a recommendation, you may choose from the options listed here." She spread out a form in front of me, gesturing at the top of the page.

Right, I'd heard there were different types of exams. Or rather, there were options when it came to the balance between the written and practical portions. The exams she'd pointed to prioritized practical skills, with anywhere from 0 to 40 percent written.

There were also writing-heavy exams, with options ranging from a balance of fifty-fifty to ones that were entirely written—the last one mentioned spanned three days and included written tests in eighteen subjects, but—to my great relief—it was crossed out. It looked like I wouldn't be required to endure that. My eyes fell further down the page, where there was an 80 percent written with a 20 percent practical option.

"Oh, were you more interested in a writing-focused exam, Misumi-sama? Since you've applied for the General Tactics instructor position, you're not eligible for the fully written exam. However, if you prefer written, you can take the one with 80 percent written and 20 percent practical."

Oh, so that was why—it was because I was applying for a practical teaching position. Now that I thought about it, it was pretty obvious.

Even though I was about to take the exam, I decided to cut myself some slack. This system, where candidates could choose the balance between written and practical portions, was pretty unique. Plus, when I'd seen the list of eighteen

subjects on the notice board at the entrance, I'd quickly lost any desire to pick a fully written test.

"You look like you want to say something," Shiki said to her. He was still stuck in lich mode, and his cold tone jabbed at the woman's tentative response.

Come on, Shiki, there's no need to grill her over that!

I couldn't shake the feeling that things were escalating unnecessarily, despite me barely saying anything.

"No ulterior motive, I assure you," the woman replied. "It's just that most candidates with a recommendation letter tend to opt for tests in their area of expertise. For General Tactics, that usually means the practical portion is most relevant. I apologize for any misunderstanding."

Just then, someone came up behind her and handed her some documents. She scanned them quickly before looking up in surprise.

"I see... This recommendation is from the Rembrandt Company from Tsige. It seems you've made a name for yourself at the Edge of the World. I'm quite impressed."

"If you're done, let's move on with the registration," Shiki replied curtly.

"My apologies for the delay. Now, which type of exam would you like?" the woman asked, turning her attention back to me.

"This one," Shiki said, pointing, before I could open my mouth.

Hold on! Why are you deciding for me?! This is my exam!

"This one? Really?" The woman's surprise was palpable.

"Why?" Shiki asked bitinglly. "Do you have another issue you'd like to point out?"

"No. Just to confirm, you're choosing the practical-only exam?"

"Of course. I'm well aware it's the most difficult test, with only a handful of successful candidates in the past. That's exactly why I'm selecting it," Shiki answered confidently.

Wait... What?!

The most difficult?

Shiki, you've got to be kidding me!!!

"All right then, Raidou Misumi-sama, I'll ask you to wait in this room over here. Someone will be along shortly to guide you," the woman said, all business now.

"Efficient," Shiki remarked.

"As an apology for the disrespect you experienced earlier, we'll try to expedite everything for you from here on out. Naturally, that includes your exam. You'll start your three-day test today in the exam room."

"Hmm... I'd also like to apologize for my high-handed behavior earlier. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Thank you," Shiki said politely—lich mode was officially off.

Wait. What just happened? Apparently, I just got signed up for the most difficult exam available. This isn't good.

I felt like I needed some time just to process the shock. And starting today? Three days? I thought only written exams lasted that long. But three days of practical exams? What kind of test lasts three days?!

"Once you pass, there will be no further interview process," continued the woman behind the desk. "Since Rembrandt-san vouches for your character, we'll skip that step entirely."

Well, at least that's one less thing to worry about, I thought, although I couldn't help but wonder if skipping formalities like an interview might cause issues down the line.

I decided I'd better clarify. *"Thank you. But are these special arrangements really okay?"*

"Given that you're taking the most difficult practical exam, your results will speak for themselves," she assured me. "As long as there are no serious conduct issues after your appointment, your personality won't be questioned further. The interview would be a formality anyway, so there's no need for concern."

I see. That was a lot of pressure on this one exam. They were essentially saying that if I passed, I could get away with a few quirks. But it also implied there might be some hidden politics among the faculty. That was... worrying.

"I appreciate the speedy process. Apologies for causing a scene earlier," I wrote.

"Best of luck to you," she replied, offering a slight bow.

I felt someone approach from behind. The woman exchanged a glance with the newcomer, probably the guide who would take me to the exam room.

Well, I guess it's time to face the music. Time to throw myself into this "most difficult" practical exam and see just how far I could go... even if I ended up crashing and burning.

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The vast open field stretched out before me. Was this the legendary Grassy Plains?

Yes, this was the test site.

And, yes, the exam had already begun.

I still didn't fully understand why Rembrandt had pushed for me to become an instructor, but now that I was here, I didn't have much choice but to see it through. I'd kept asking myself if I could've been a mistake on his or Morris's part, but it seemed unlikely.

Still, I had a nagging feeling that while I was here, Rembrandt might end up dealing with whatever trouble Tomoe and Mio caused back in Tsige. The least I could do was keep things calm on our end here in Rotsgard.

Right... The exam.

On our way here, I'd complained to Shiki about the choice he'd made for me. His response? A smug grin as he said, "This will probably be the easiest for you, Young Master." I had no idea how he'd come to that conclusion, but knowing Shiki, the entire situation at the test registration had probably played out just as he'd intended.

So, here I was, standing in the vast field that would serve as our testing ground. The scale was insane; in every direction, plains stretched outward with no discernible end. Was this enormous scale typical of this world, or was Rotsgard on a level all its own?

And yet, out of what must have been thousands, or even tens of thousands of candidates, there were only four of us taking this test.

I'd only just met the others before we were sent here: an elf, a lion-faced beastman, and a hyuman. The two demi-humans looked like seasoned adventurers, while the hyuman man looked pale and thin, like a scholar or magician. I figured their overall strength was probably comparable to the mid-rankers at the Tsige Adventurer's Guild. Then again, Tsige's standards had risen a lot thanks to the influence of Tomoe, Mio, and Toa, so perhaps these three were around Level 150.

Meanwhile, I'm Level 1.

Yep, Level 1. I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around that. But to be honest, I wasn't all that bothered by it; after all, my level hadn't caused me any real trouble yet.

On the paperwork I submitted along with my recommendation letter, I'd listed my affiliation with the Merchant Guild rather than the Adventurer's Guild. Listing the latter would have required me to disclose my level, and I had no burning desire to explain why I was stuck at Level 1.

I remembered Shiki telling me how the examiner had done a double take when they saw that I, ostensibly a merchant, was being accompanied by someone like him. That must've been a sight.

Anyway, back to the test.

I looked down at the sheet of paper they had given us earlier. The task was pretty straightforward: scattered throughout this rugged landscape were a large number of spherical targets. Our job was to capture three of them within three days and return to the academy. That was it.

Everyone who completed the task would pass. The only rule was no fighting between participants. We had to provide our own food and supplies during the

exam.

Three days to find three targets... Sounds simple enough.

I immediately expanded my Realm to its fullest range, scanning my surroundings. Sure enough, there were only three other people here, and each of them had been teleported far enough away that, unless we actively sought one another out, we wouldn't bump into anyone.

I also detected some monsters in the area. Whether they were wild specimens or had been released for the test, I couldn't say. Either way, I'd need to keep potential combat encounters in mind. These particular monsters wouldn't pose much of a threat to me, but I wondered if the other participants would be okay. Still, the exam wasn't designed to be lethal—everyone had been given tools to escape if needed.

There was a bell-shaped item to signal that you were giving up. Then, there was a feather-shaped tool that we were meant to use upon completing the task. Both items served the same purpose: to exit the field. Still, the fact that they gave us two separate items felt a bit... pedantic. It was like the exam organizers enjoyed being a little too thorough.

As for the target spheres, we'd been briefed on their characteristics before the test began. The first thing they all had in common? They moved at high speed.

I'd seen a sample, and yes, they were fast. The balls were a size that could easily fit in your hand, making their movements appear even quicker. All the targets floated and vibrated slightly, accelerating from zero to top speed instantly, as if inertia had never been invented. Their movements were vaguely reminiscent of hummingbirds, though to be honest, the first thing that came to mind was a certain golden snitch from that famous wizarding sport.

Capturing one wouldn't be easy.

That said, I had the impression there might be a pattern to their movements. If I observed them closely, maybe I could find some sort of rhythm or logic to their seemingly erratic behavior.

The spheres came in three colors, and to capture each, you had to focus on their specific weakness—however, you also needed to apply the right kind of force or you'd destroy them.

Red: if hit with overly strong magick, it would explode.

Blue: if the participant got too close, it would burst.

Yellow: if struck with an overly strong physical force, it would shatter.

Other than their specific weakness, all three types were said to be incredibly durable. Naturally, if a sphere was destroyed, it wouldn't count toward the final tally. My initial strategy was straightforward: for the yellow sphere, I'd shoot it down with magick; for the blue one, I'd use a bow from a distance; and for the red one, I'd just get in close and punch it. Magick, ranged attacks, and melee, all covered.

Once you disabled a sphere, it became an ordinary ball, safe to pick up and carry. There were no specific rules about how to store it either.

The idea of camping out in the middle of nowhere brought back memories of the Wasteland. It made me nostalgic but also a little wary. Ideally, I hoped to finish this test in one day.

If there was no written exam and no interview, Shiki might be right—this might actually be an absurdly easy test for me. Thus encouraged, I set off to find the three spheres and get this over with.

—Now here I was, sitting on the ground, knees pulled up to my chest, staring off into the distance.

Why? Because I had just learned—the hard way, and very quickly—that my optimistic plan had been a naive, fleeting fantasy.

Finding the spheres was simple. It didn't matter what color they were—just expanding my Realm gave me a clear reading of their locations. No problem there.

I decided to start with the blue sphere, testing how close I could get before it would explode. I managed to approach it within my bow's range without

triggering a detonation. Feeling confident, I allowed myself a small smile. Things were going smoothly.

That was exactly when it started going downhill.

The first sphere I physically approached was yellow. Despite being thrown off by its erratic movements, I managed to get close and hit it with a punch. I watched carefully, expecting it to drop to the ground, motionless.

Instead, the moment I struck it, the sphere exploded into tiny fragments.

Not only had I failed to stop its activity, but I had completely obliterated it.

All right, next is the blue sphere, I thought, trying to shake off the frustration.

This time, I would be more cautious. I nocked an arrow and aimed at the blue orb, keeping my distance, confident it wouldn't explode as long as I stayed far enough away. The arrow hit dead center, and as I watched it bounce back from the impact, I readied my next shot. But before I could even fire, the sphere burst into a million pieces.

Another failure.

Finally, I turned to the red sphere. Since it required magick, I carefully crafted a low-powered Bridt spell and launched it. The magical bullet struck the sphere perfectly, just as I had planned.

And... it shattered into fragments.

What the hell is this?!

I had done everything right. I followed all the instructions, applied the proper methods for each sphere, and yet, all I had to show for it were broken remnants scattered on the ground.

For a brief moment, I wondered if I had been tricked—perhaps the blue sphere had been disguised as red or some other kind of prank. But, no, the colors and characteristics of the spheres were all as they should be. Red was red, blue was blue, and yellow was yellow.

So, why did they all explode?!

I found myself wondering about the metal itself, the fragments of which I held in my hand. *Is this type of metal rare in this world?* No! I couldn't afford to mentally check out like this. Frustrated, I stood up and threw the broken pieces to the ground.

In the end, I already knew the answer, didn't I?

The problem wasn't with the spheres. It was with me.

It was painfully obvious now—my attacks were simply too strong.

I hadn't intended to use much power. In fact, I had deliberately gone easy. It was just a light punch, a basic arrow shot, a low-level spell. Just enough to test things out.

And yet, everything I touched shattered.

Resilient spheres that need to be hit with full force? Yeah, right. That test proctor was full of crap!

"Most difficult" exam? More like they're just trying to get rid of annoying applicants with impossible challenges.

Still, I couldn't just sit here and pout forever. I had to give it another shot. This time, I decided to go for a gentler approach. I'd barely flick the spheres or maybe even just give them a soft tap.

With that resolve, I set off across the field once more.

It was the red sphere that really got to me. The first time, I'd had to chase it down just to land a solid hit. Now I had to tap it gently? How ridiculous.

After several minutes of exhausting effort, I finally managed to tap it... only to have it explode again. The blue one? Gone. The yellow one? Obliterated. All three, destroyed once more.

At this point, it was almost funny. I could feel laughter bubbling up from deep in my throat, though it was less from amusement and more from sheer frustration.

Then I remembered something—I'd been keeping my body constantly enhanced with magick. Maybe that was the problem! So, I canceled the buff and tried again.

This time, I resolved to be so gentle that I could've safely poked a baby's cheek. I mean, I was practically coddling these spheres.

The result?

All destroyed. Again.

...

Uwooooooooooooo!!!

The stress hit me like a downpour. At this rate, I could forget about finishing in one day. In fact, I'd be bald from pulling my hair out by the end of the test!

By the time darkness had fallen, I was utterly defeated. My hours of struggling had yielded exactly zero spheres.

At that point, I decided to stop even reacting to the presence of any spheres. I just ignored them and looked for a place to rest.

On the way, a gorillian monster tried to attack me, but I left it half-dead before moving on. Later, a long-nosed, green tengu-looking beast met the same fate.

In the end, I decided to camp out under the stars. *Great. Wild camping, just like the good ol' Wasteland days.*

As a little vent for my frustration, I set up a barrier around myself—one that would give a nice sting to anyone who touched it—and finally lay down to sleep.

That's how I ended the first day of my exam—impatient, wiped out, and with nothing to show for it.

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The next morning, I awoke to find over a dozen beasts writhing in pain around my camp. But honestly, I didn't have the energy to care.

I went to a nearby water source to wash up, staring at the flowing river as I tried to empty my mind. After that, I figured I might as well use the time to

practice my archery. This test was already fraying my nerves, so the least I could do was calm myself before I jumped back into the madness.

“All right, let’s do this!”

By the time the sun had risen fully, I decided to give the trial another shot. As motivated as I was, the reality was that I’d be spending the day practicing restraint.

Ugh, how miserable.

In an attempt to distract myself, I widened my Realm to check on the others and noticed something odd—the elf was missing.

Damn it, they must’ve finished already. I know it’s not a race, but I’ve got to admit that makes me feel anxious.

It was only midday on the second day, and someone had already managed to capture three spheres. But I wasn’t giving up yet. If anything, this spurred me on.

With renewed determination, I approached a blue sphere that I’d spotted. *This time, I’ll be extra careful not to apply too much force.*

I focused, keeping myself relaxed, and notched an arrow with the gentlest of touches. My aim shifted slightly away from the center of the sphere—just enough to graze it without a direct hit. The idea was to create minimal impact, letting the feathers of the arrow brush lightly against the sphere.

It was, without a doubt, a feather touch.

Heh... Feather touch. I almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of the whole situation but quickly stopped myself. *Focus! Now’s not the time to be getting distracted by dumb jokes.*

Indeed, hanging around too long would be seriously dangerous. I had to finish this today and get out of here. I forced myself to refocus, drawing my bow and taking aim at a single precise spot. The arrow flew past my target, and the blue sphere trembled violently. *Well, that’s something new.*

Did it work?!

I notched another arrow, watching the sphere closely as I tried to keep from hoping too hard. Would it stop moving? Or maybe just shatter like the others?

None of that happened.

It just vanished.

But it wasn't destroyed. My Realm picked up on a new signal almost immediately—just as the sphere disappeared, it reappeared several kilometers away.

Teleportation?!

"You've got to be kidding me!!!" I exclaimed out loud. "No one said anything about teleportation!"

Was this test designed to be impossible?

Wait, I paused and forced myself to calm down. *Hey, at least it didn't explode. That's progress, even if just a little.*

All right... Breathe... Breathe...

I'd finally made some headway. Now, I just had to adjust my strategy.

I locked onto the new position of the sphere. Thankfully, there were no obstacles between me and it. Using the technique I'd been practicing—the one that allowed me to track targets without relying solely on my physical sight—I got ready to shoot again.

It was a strange sensation, like seeing through my Realm instead of my eyes, a mental image of the landscape forming inside me. I wasn't quite used to it yet, and my success rate with it wasn't great, but it felt possible. It was like a byproduct of mastering magick and search Realms.

Once I locked onto my target, everything else came naturally. I raised my bow, aiming not at the sphere directly, but at the exact spot where my arrow would just barely graze it, and fired.

A faint trail of magick lingered around my arrow as it sailed past, and somehow, I knew it had just barely grazed the sphere. The blue orb, still caught in my Realm, trembled violently again and fell to the ground.

No explosion.

No shattering.

It was still a sphere.

“Yes!!!” I raised a triumphant fist in the air, my shout echoing in the empty field.

I did it! Finally!

It had taken long enough, but I’d caught one. Just one for now, but I had actually done it! Not wasting another moment, I cast a strengthening spell on myself and bolted toward where the target had fallen.

Sure enough, there it was. The blue orb, no longer darting about, just lay there, rolling gently in the grass. I cautiously reached out, grabbed it—and it didn’t break.

It didn’t break!

“Two more!” I shouted, grinning like an idiot. For a moment there, when the orb had teleported, I’d been seconds away from snapping and scorching this whole field to the ground. Thankfully, I’d held back.

I couldn’t help but imagine how a more “mature” man might have handled it—probably lighting a cigarette with trembling fingers and waiting for the frustration to pass. Then again, I had no idea how people could find comfort in something like smoking. Would it really help? In any case, I’d figured out the key.

It wasn’t about attacking. These spheres were delicate. *Admire them, Makoto. Treat them like precious things.* That was the real solution.

Even if the target teleported, as long as it stayed within my Realm, I could handle it. Heck, I could stretch my Realm across the entire test zone if I had to. One of the great things about a search Realm was that even when you expanded its range, its effectiveness didn’t degrade as much as with strengthening magick. Plus, it was nearly impossible for anyone to tell you were using it—a perfect stealth advantage.

Eventually, someone might figure out what I was doing—but I doubted it would be one of the two people I still shared the field with. After all, even that famous lunatic Dragon Slayer Sofia, hadn't caught onto this technique.

And so, my cycle of trial and error began. But this wasn't the same endless guessing game as before. I had a successful capture under my belt, and that made all the difference. There were plenty of targets left, so I could fail as many times as necessary. I just needed to succeed twice more in the next two days.

It was a pretty favorable situation, all things considered.

At that moment, the test, which I'd been less than enthusiastic about the day before, transformed into a mountain peak I was determined to conquer.

"Hm?"

Right then, I noticed one of the other participants disappear from my Realm's range. Another teleportation. This time, it was the hyuman.

"Yeah, yeah. If you passed, congrats and good job," I muttered. "If you quit, tough luck. Either way, if you're still hanging around when I get back, dinner and drinks are on me, my friend."

Something felt different this time. Just a few minutes after they vanished, I sensed someone else appearing in the field.

What's going on? I wondered.

I decided I'd better keep an eye on the newcomer just in case; however, I had my own challenge to focus on. As long as they didn't get in my way, they could do whatever they wanted.

And so, I continued hunting for the red and yellow spheres until the sky started to turn crimson. After countless attempts, I finally managed to bag the yellow one.

Just one more.

The red spheres, though—they were a pain. Getting the force just right was absurdly difficult. Somehow, no matter how gentle I tried to be, it still felt like I was overexerting myself. My joints were starting to ache from the strain.

Still, I knew I was starting to get a feel for it. With one more day left, I figured there'd be no problem in finishing this up.

Feeling quite a bit more relaxed than the day before, I found myself back at the same spot by the river. It wasn't that I had set up a camp or anything; I just felt comfortable there. The water was clean, there were fish swimming around, and I'd collected some familiar fruit and nuts along the way back to it. After catching a few fish, I gutted them, skewered them, and roasted them over a fire I started with magick. The nuts and fruit I ate raw.

Yesterday, I'd gone to bed hungry and annoyed, but today I was actually starting to enjoy the outdoor vibe. The sky was dimming, and soon the forest around me would be swallowed by the night. Once I'd eaten my fill, I planned to get some sleep and leave the final task for tomorrow.

"Not bad," I said to the trees. "Does everything taste better cooked on coals, or is this especially good fish? I mean, it could use some salt, but it's not like I'm going to find a salt rock conveniently lying around. And that's not the point of this trial, anyway."

As I finished my meal and sat back, listening to the occasional pop from the firewood, I felt a presence entering my expanded Realm.

Someone was coming.

I could tell that it was the same person who'd arrived in the afternoon. They were still some distance away—close enough to see me in the firelight but far enough that I shouldn't have been able to see them. Luckily, I had my search Realm. So, they were watching me. I had no idea why, but I didn't think they were here to tell bedtime stories.

I activated my body-strengthening magick and set up another barrier. I also reallocated part of my Realm to focus on reinforcing myself. This newcomer wasn't particularly strong, so if they tried anything, the barrier would wake me up in time to deal with them.

For the time being, I needed to rest. Not because I was exhausted, of course.

Yeah, just to be cautious.

Goodnight.



I woke up to bright, warm sunshine. *Good thing the weather has been warm enough to camp out like this*, I thought. *If it was winter, my resolve might have broken on the first day.*

Just like the day before, an assortment of magick beasts was sprawled around my barrier. I immediately went to check the bodies...

... and there I saw a person.

They'd clearly tried to approach me while I was sleeping. Did they know who I was, or were they just after any test participant? Either way, I would have to be careful.

The person was clad head to toe in black; the epitome of a bandit. But with the power level that allowed them to be put to sleep peacefully among magick beasts, they wouldn't be much of a hindrance. In other words, they wouldn't affect my test results.

That's a relief.

There were more beasts than yesterday, and I had to push aside a few bodies to get to the river.

"—!"

Feeling a sudden surge of killing intent, I hastily threw up a barrier around myself. A high-pitched sound rang out. When I glanced in the direction of the noise, I saw a glowing, suspicious object fall to the ground on the edge of my barrier.

A thrown blade, perhaps?

Ever since my fight with Sofia, I'd been taking every opportunity to practice barriers and self-defense techniques.

When most people attacked, they let their killing intent overflow in that very moment. If I could sense that, I could start moving as soon as they threw their weapon. My strength rested in my fast chanting—or rather, the fact that I could omit it altogether—so my defenses were always ready in time.

The guy in the black cloak... Had he just been pretending to sleep?

He's gone.

No, wait— He's on my right!

I tried to jump back to create distance. But I couldn't see him; he must have been using some kind of concealment magick. Lucky for me, I could still detect his presence within the boundaries of my Realm.

"Tch."

I said nothing in response.

However, my evasive maneuver didn't go as planned. He grabbed at my ankle just as I pushed off the ground, throwing me off-balance and forcing me to my knees. Not the best situation. Immediately, the figure in black revealed himself and lunged at me, trying to pin me down.

Not only is he silent, but he's annoyingly persistent.

His weapon was a short sword, about the size of a kodachi. He might have had more hidden weapons, but I couldn't be sure. The blade shot toward my neck in a direct thrust, but I caught it with my left hand from the side.

The blade felt damp. Some kind of viscous liquid coated it—definitely not oil.
Poison?

If that was the case, he wasn't just a bandit. He was an assassin.

How charming.

I could see the faintest twitch of a grin on his face, distorted by the shadows of his black hood. That answered my question about the poison. *Great. Just great.*

First things first, though: I needed to break his blade.

I reached out, and with a sharp, satisfying crack, the sword snapped in two. He was left holding the hilt and the lower half of the blade, while the blade's upper half was in my hand. Thankfully, my hand was safe; between the reinforcement magick, my Realm, and the added defense of my armor, no

ordinary blade could possibly cut through. Sure, my hand might look like an exposed, defenseless one, but trust me—it was far from bare skin.

“Don’t think something like this could ever hurt me,” I wrote before casually tossing the broken blade aside. Just then, something red scattered in the air. I looked at my left hand.

There was a faint cut across my palm.

Seriously?

Wait, was that blade really that sharp? I glanced between the black-clad figure, the broken weapon, and my hand, feeling oddly conflicted. This was... awkward. Embarrassing, even.

I probably shouldn’t have boasted so soon.

“Haaa...” I let out a sigh, unable to help it.

How had that even happened? Was my magick weaker because I’d just woken up? Or maybe that sword was as sharp as Sofia’s? I felt disoriented, like I’d just witnessed a magic trick where I thought I knew the secret, only to end up with an entirely different result.

“You... you broke my blade,” the man finally said, his voice dripping with shock as he leaped back, putting distance between us. Where his attacks had been mechanical, his words now carried emotion—anger.

“So, you attack me, and now this? Was your target one of the test participants?” I asked, deliberately not saying “me,” but “test participants” to probe for more information.

While I awaited his reply, I subtly expanded my Realm—and noticed something unsettling: yet another participant, the lion-faced demi-human, was gone. Had he been taken out by this guy, or had he been forced to withdraw? Either way, I doubted he’d passed.

“More General Tactics instructors aren’t needed,” the man muttered under his breath, his tone thick with frustration.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I wrote. *“Are you an instructor?”*

“Heh. Do I look like an instructor to you?”

“Not at all.”

“Exactly. To be honest, this was supposed to be a boring job,” he said nonchalantly. “Scare everyone off, and that’s it.”

Lucky me, I thought. It was actually a huge relief to know that I wasn’t being targeted specifically.

“So, the other participants... Have they already...?” I let the words hang in the air, though I already knew the answer. I wanted him to confirm my suspicions, and maybe I could dig out more useful information.

“Of the two left, I’ve already persuaded one away. You’re the last one in the field. I was planning to intimidate you into giving up as well, but... with your weird barrier and what you just pulled, I’ve changed my mind. You broke my sword. You’re going to pay for that.”

“Are you planning to kill me?” I wrote, watching as his killing intent flared even stronger. Yet, he didn’t make a move.

“Yes. No, actually—technically, it’s already done. I was surprised when you grabbed the sword with your bare hand, but that blade contains a fast-acting...”

“A fast-acting what?” I interrupted, noticing a flicker of confusion cross his face as he trailed off. He stared at me intently, eyes narrowing.

“Who the hell are you? There’s no way you neutralized that poison in an instant. That’s impossible.”

“Neutralized? I didn’t neutralize anything,” I wrote again, inscribing the words with deliberate calmness. *“I can tell you the secret, but only if you share your name—and the name of whoever hired you.”*

I had no idea if I could get him to reveal his client, but it was worth a shot.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said, shaking his head. “Assassins failing and being asked who hired them... It’s a tale as old as time. But those who came before us took certain precautions.”

“What are you getting at?”

“When a job is handled through the guild, the assassin and the client never meet. There’s no contact whatsoever.”

"There's an Assassin's Guild?" I asked, and the idea came with a vague sense of dread. An organization like that would definitely be underground and not very much fun to deal with.

"Tough luck for you." The man sneered.

"No, actually, you've helped me realize that it's better not to stick my head too far into this. I appreciate it," I wrote.

"Oh, is that so—?"

"By the way, can you still move?"

"Ugh! What did you do to me?!"

"You're quite the talker. But to be honest, I'd really like to focus on the test right now. So, for a few different reasons, I've decided to let you go. In fact, you're in the way, so get lost."

"You're saying one thing and doing another, aren't you? If I can't move, I can't exactly disappear—"

"Well, I don't think someone like you would keep from causing trouble if I let you go unscathed... Oh, and as for why the poison didn't work on me..."

"What?"

"I'll tell you because I'm a nice guy. It seems I'm immune to poison now. Just found that out recently."

"And... what exactly are you planning on doing?" the assassin asked, clearly not convinced I would let him go.

"I'll make you disappear. But don't worry, it won't kill you. I won't ask any more questions, so you can keep your mouth shut. Just remember, next time you get a mission, maybe focus more on being quiet and professional."

"What? Why are you backing up? Hey, why are you running toward me? What the—?!"

"Simple," I wrote, grinning. *"I'm going to kick you far, far away."*

"Gahhhhyaaahhh!!!" His strange, desperate cry echoed as I kicked him with enough force to send him flying. I could feel several bones break under my foot.

The man's body became nothing more than a speck in the distance as he flew out of sight.

This should put enough of a gap between us—both in terms of damage and location—to ensure he doesn't interfere with the test anymore.

I glanced down at the small cut on my hand, deciding to just wrap it in some cloth for the time being. *When I get back, I'll have Shiki take a look at it. It'll be fine.*

"All right, back to the test. Let's wrap this up and go home," I muttered to myself.

Who knows how many red orbs I punched and jabbed after that? I'd kept track up until I reached three digits, but after that, counting just felt pointless. I'm pretty sure I didn't hit four digits, though.

I had hoped to finish by lunchtime, but that goal evaporated as the stars claimed their place in the night sky. And finally—finally—I captured all three types of orbs.

It had been such a long journey. These past three days would definitely go down in my personal history as some of the toughest I'd ever faced. Still, I'm certain I gained a new skill—restraint.

I could go home now. Finally, I could go back to Shiki.

"Goodbye, nameless wilderness. I'll never forget the trials of these past three days," I murmured as I activated the wing-shaped item I'd been given for the return trip, my words fading into the dark night.

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"Oh, Misumi. Have you finished collecting everything? Or are you forfeiting?"

What a lovely, unpleasant greeting.

The staff member's overly cheerful smile suddenly made me realize how tired I was. Given which tool I'd used to come back, shouldn't the answer have been obvious? If not, then giving us both the bell and the wings must have been some kind of petty harassment.

"Of course I collected everything. See for yourself," I wrote, handing over the cloth bag with the three orbs.

I couldn't help feeling some pride at having completed the exam. Of course, I'd never expected it to be such a grueling mental trial.

"Oh? You've collected them? Excuse me, I'll just look... Wh-What is this?!" the man exclaimed upon peering into the bag.

Did I get a rare bonus orb or something? If so, it was pure luck. I had no idea there even was such a thing, and frankly, I hadn't had the time or energy to go looking for one.

Oh? All three of my fellow test takers were in the room, even the one who'd finished on the morning of the second day.

Were they waiting for me to be nice, or did the rules prevent them from leaving early? Either way, the elf who finished first must've been exceptionally skilled to complete such a harsh test with ease.

As for me, I'd like to think I managed because I'd tried multiple times and finally worked out what to do. The test was difficult enough, and it'd be sad to think this much of a difference came just from initial strategy.

Shiki wasn't here, though—nonparticipants weren't allowed in the room. I'd told him to take some time off, that I'd contact him when it was over, but he'd simply replied, "I'll be waiting for you. Good luck."

I glanced again at the other three participants. Rather than competitors, they'd always felt more like comrades; we'd been assured that, as long as we met the conditions, we could all pass.

Just wait, guys. I'll treat you to a feast of food and drinks! Let's swap stories about this brutal test!

"Raidou-dono, just... who are you?" the proctor suddenly asked, his voice carrying a tone of disbelief.

Huh?

Why was this overly formal guy all of a sudden addressing me with "-dono"? And why were my comrades staring at me, their faces full of surprise?

All I'd done was bring back the requested items in the required quantities. There wasn't anything particularly special about that. I mean, sure, the test was absurdly difficult, but still...

"I'm just a merchant with some combat experience," I wrote calmly, trying to ease the tension.

"These orbs... You've brought back one each of the three types. No one in the history of this exam has ever passed with this result..." the proctor said in wonder. As he pulled out the red, blue, and yellow orbs one by one, his hands trembled dramatically and sweat poured down his face.

The room wasn't even warm. So that sweat must've been either nervous cold sweat or greasy panic.

This makes no sense.

I had simply gathered the three types of orbs as shown in the sample—one of each. Just like we'd all been told to do three days ago.

But...

The astonishment of the other three participants had reached a new level. Their eyes widened, and one of them shot up from their seat in shock.

What... did I do wrong? What's so strange about this? I mean, a minute ago, he was casually saying I passed, so there shouldn't be an issue, right?

"As far as I remember, we were told that this was the exam—gather three orbs," I wrote, looking to the proctor for confirmation.

"Yes, indeed," he said with a nod, though he still seemed uneasy. "I told all of you to capture three orbs. The test, as I explained, is to capture three highly durable orbs, each with specific defensive characteristics, using your 'best method' for each one. However..."

He paused, clearly still processing what he was about to say. "You, Raidou-sama, brought back one of each type. In other words, you captured each of the three different orbs using a method tailored to the properties of that specific orb. Is that correct?"

"That's correct," I replied calmly, sensing there was more to this test than I'd realized.

"This exam is designed to assess various abilities required by 'specialists' who teach practical combat skills to students at Rotsgard Academy and the other schools here. Precision and attack power are the most important aspects. As you can imagine, survival skills—dealing with monsters, camping out—are secondary. If you struggled with that part, then you'd be better off learning at the academy rather than teaching."

"I guess that makes sense. There weren't any particularly dangerous monsters, and there was plenty of food and water available."

If someone couldn't manage to survive where I'd just been, let alone aim for the orbs, they would make a terrible adventurer. The place was practically paradise compared to other wilderness areas.

Still, the human participants were trembling.

Wait... Could it be...?

"What's more," the proctor continued, "you subdued each orb with exactly two strikes. This demonstrates not only the precision of your attack methods but also that Raidou-sama possesses sufficient power to destroy these orbs with such efficiency."

I see.

I guess the staff here could gather a lot of information just by looking at the orbs.

"Yes, it took some time to find the right amount of power," I wrote, keeping my response modest.

But... Ah, now I understood why he's so blown away.

The true passing requirement for this test was to collect three red orbs, three blue orbs, or three yellow orbs. In other words, a single color would have sufficed.

You've got to be kidding me.

If I'd known that, I could have finished and gone home by the second day. The thought of my misunderstanding and my over-the-top abilities made me feel nothing but a deep sadness.

“‘The right amount of power,’ you say?!” a voice growled from behind.

It was the lion-faced beastman—the one who'd been forced to forfeit after being threatened by the man in black. Covered in fur, he looked like a full-on beast, especially when standing on two legs.

“What an impressive statement,” the proctor continued, his tone reverent. “Besides Raidou-sama, the only other participant who returned with an orb was Efka, the eight beast race candidate. However, he was only able to secure one red orb after giving it his all, and when he realized he wouldn't have time to complete the test by the third day, he forfeited.”

I see.

“And the elf candidate, Myuri, failed to find even one blue orb on the first day. Realizing that her range of attack was shorter than the orb's detection range, she also forfeited. The human candidate, Kelly, was injured during a nighttime attack by monsters and had to withdraw. However, when compared to the disastrous results of previous tests, the fact that some candidates even returned with orbs means that this group was quite exceptional overall.”

They all forfeited?!

Not only that, but the elf—who relied on long-range attacks—had given up because her range was shorter than the detection field for the blue orbs? And someone had gotten hurt by those minor monsters in a night raid? And finally, Efka, despite returning with an orb, had been scared into quitting by that assassin?

...

I gave up trying to make sense of it.

Well, I won't be buying any of you a drink today, I thought to myself. You guys aren't comrades or allies at all!

"It was quite a rewarding test," I wrote, trying to maintain some dignity despite my internal frustration.

"As expected from someone who's survived the Edge of the World," the staff member said, admiration clear in his voice. "It makes sense. To succeed in business among those ruffians speaks to a power beyond the ordinary. The Rembrandt Company is known for being assertive, even forceful, in its dealings, but there was not a single lie in their recommendation letter. I did think the recommendation was rather grandiose coming from him, but now I understand. Your ability to communicate through writing is as effective as spoken conversation, and if needed, your servant waiting in the other room could assist as your voice. Of course, we evaluate based on skill, not appearance."

Well, it was good to know there would be no problem with having Shiki assist me during lectures. The final comment about "appearance" was unnecessary, but I decided it wasn't worth addressing.

The staff member looked me straight in the eyes and continued, "No complaints. You've passed, Raidou-sama. The academy city welcomes you as a temporary instructor. You're authorized to give one lecture per week at Central Rotsgard Academy, and you can participate as an assistant instructor for up to two additional sessions. Furthermore, considering your situation, Shiki-dono is permitted to accompany you during lectures."

With that, he extended his hand for a handshake. Naturally, I accepted.

One lecture a week, huh?

Well, I probably won't need those two assistant slots, so essentially, it's just one job per week. I'm a temporary instructor, not a full-time instructor. No homeroom duties. Thank goodness! It felt like a massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Then there was the mention of Central Rotsgard Academy. That meant I would be working right here in this city, which was much more convenient than being assigned to some satellite town.

I should start looking into the shop I plan to open and make some preparations before my next call to action. Yes, this is good.

Maybe I would even drop by that place with the girl, the Ironbark Inn or whatever it was called. Honestly, I hadn't planned on visiting, but since I would be living and working in this city, it wouldn't hurt to make an appearance.

Heh, I swear, if they serve shamo hotpot... I thought, chuckling to myself. If that happens, maybe I'll bring Tomoe along for the experience.

Leaving Tsige, I never imagined I'd end up working as an instructor. And to be posted at a prestigious academy where elite students gathered...

Thus, our life in the academy city began.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 2

Six days after the exam, Shiki and I were lounging in our room at the inn—we always shared a room, to save money—when a letter arrived. Shiki was reading a book, one of several that were piled up on his bedside table.

The former lich was an avid reader, and in the weeks we'd been traveling together, I'd gotten used to seeing him pick up books that piqued his interest. Books weren't cheap in this world, so I'd asked him once if he was managing his money well. He assured me he had enough savings, so I thought my concerns were unnecessary... except they weren't.

It turned out that Shiki had been overpaying for his books. He'd been using mana-infused stones and gems as payment, which far exceeded the value of the books. After learning this, I made sure he sold the stones for cash before buying more books. However, Shiki had taken the whole thing rather lightly; apparently, he didn't see any issue with paying too much for knowledge, which I found a little dangerous. Wasteful spending wasn't a good habit.

Although I called myself a merchant, I was still a commoner deep down. I couldn't stand seeing money keep flowing out without any real business progress. Luckily, I had access to products from the Demiplane and dwarf-made weapons, which was kind of like having a literal money tree. So, I probably shouldn't have worried so much about expenses. Still, it felt like a waste to just watch money go out the door like that.

"Young Master, is that a notice from the academy?" Shiki asked, pointing to the letter.

“That’s right,” I confirmed, reading the letter. “They say they’re officially confirming our acceptance and that they request our presence to finalize the contract. We can either go this afternoon, or the day after tomorrow in the morning.”

I sighed. *So, it’s going to be like that.* Given that the academy basically ran this city, I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised that things were more about their convenience than ours.

“Well, I’ll finally be able to ask them about the shop as well,” I mused. “The Merchant Guild already gave us permission to do business, but when I mentioned the academy, they warned me that their regulations take priority. Oh, and remember, call me Raidou.”

It would be troublesome if he called me by my real name, especially at the academy.

“Oh, that’s right, Raidou-sama. Still, it was fortunate that we found such a good property that was ready to go,” Shiki said, recalling our lucky find.

“Yeah. The previous owner kept it in great condition, so we could probably use it as is. The fact that even a well-kept shop like that went out of business is a bit concerning, though.”

Even before dealing with the academy, we’d started meeting with the Merchant Guild and looking for property. Rembrandt must have put in a good word for us, because there were no problems with the guild. They even helped with our search for a shop, but—well, there were so many vacant properties. Some were in good shape, others not so much, but there were far too many closed-down businesses available for my comfort.

The locations ranged from hidden, hard-to-find corners that you’d never stumble upon unless you knew where to go, to prime spots right on the main street which stretched from the city gate to the academy. The types of businesses varied as well, but restaurants and weapon shops seemed to be the most common. Next came general stores, and... well, nightlife establishments.

Even in a city so focused on academic research, I found it fascinating that these kinds of places existed too. Not that I had any intention of going, but when Shiki and I visited, the guild receptionist—smiling all the while—helpfully

pointed out where the entertainment district was located and even detailed the services offered. *She's a pro*, I thought at the time.

“A city of this size is bound to foster fierce competition. Especially with so many young people here, the clientele is quite unique. Trends probably rise and fall much faster than in Tsige,” Shiki mused, rubbing his chin in thought.

“A few months ago, the place was bustling, but now it's as quiet as a graveyard,” I replied. “Scary how fast things can change, huh?”

If I were to open a restaurant, I'd focus on creating staple dishes to attract regulars, but I guess that was just me being overly cautious. If I had to bet on something, I'd probably serve food from my world—Chinese or simple Japanese dishes. If I wanted to target younger customers, fast food might be a good idea. Not that any of these thoughts mattered, since I wasn't much of a cook to begin with.

Shiki, too, seemed to understand the difficulties of running a business here, judging by the pensive look on his face. I appreciated his desire to contribute in his own way, but I needed him to concentrate his efforts on supporting me at the academy more. So, while I'd love for him to help out in the shop, he'd likely be by my side most of the time.

I also needed to think about who would actually run the shop. Hiring a hyuman was an option, but I didn't know them well enough yet. If there was any risk of being underestimated, I'd rather bring in someone from the Demiplane. In that case, the top candidates would be the forest ogres, provided Tomoe's training had gone well. The runner-up would be an arach, though they were frighteningly strong, and unlike the forest ogres, there was nothing human about their appearance. That would make it pretty tough for them to blend in. Aqua and Eris could probably be good salesclerks, too... as long as they behaved themselves.

Maybe it's no good. If I'm worrying this much, I'm probably not fit for the job. Plus, they're young women—there's bound to be trouble with customers... I winced, feeling a twinge in my stomach.

The forest ogres that Tomoe brought over to the Demiplane were supposedly elite, but many of them were young. Depending on how much their

personalities had been reformed, they might still be troublemakers. Then again, the arachs didn't have any experience interacting with humans at all. Both options seemed to have their own issues as potential shop staff.

I guess I should consider hiring humans, I thought. But I wondered—did people in this world do interviews where you could easily assess someone's abilities? If that was seen as too stiff or formal... *I should probably ask the guild about it later.*

Without communication or combat skills, I'd be worried about trouble with customers, like those rude students the other day. Although, thanks to them, I now knew the forest ogres were strong enough to handle things.

"The shop's on a major street, so we shouldn't have too much trouble attracting customers. Plus, there aren't any similar businesses nearby," Shiki commented.

"That's why I bought it on the spot with cash. I'm not good at promoting a hidden shop, so we'll just throw some money at it if needed. We'll be selling general medicines, and we can take custom orders for weapon crafting too. I'm counting on you for that, Shiki," I replied, looking at him seriously.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"I need you to be the face of the shop. So, during your lectures at the academy, I'd like you to subtly share your knowledge of potions and demonstrate their use in practical settings. That way, the students will know about the quality and effectiveness of our products."

"You've already thought this through, haven't you?" Shiki said, smirking.

"That's about the extent of it. But it's true—people already know the potions you and the arachs make are high quality."

Yes, Shiki had been getting along well with the arachs, much more so than with Mio. It was like a fusion of alchemy and pharmacology. Their collaboration had given rise to a wide variety of magical potions, including some that even used rare ingredients like the Ambrosia flower. Of course, I wasn't planning to put those kinds of potions on the shelves.

Oh, speaking of which, I should start thinking about the lineup of medicines we'll sell. We'll definitely need general fever reducers and wound ointments, antidotes tailored to monsters' venom, and... the stamina drink I came up with. Well, it's basically an energy drink meant to help with fatigue recovery. If modern humans found them essential, they should be just as effective in this world. I'm sure it'll sell well—at least until competitors start copying it. It could become a big hit for hardworking students and laborers.

"I'd like to move forward with the shop plans, so let's head to the academy this afternoon," I suggested. "If all goes well, we should be able to act quickly."

"Sure. What about lunch?" Shiki asked.

"Hmm. How about Ironclad?"

"Yes!" he agreed, his face lighting up. "The hotpot there is exceptional. No objections from me."

It had only taken one visit to the Ironclad Inn, the day after my test, for us to become regular customers. I didn't even want to know the exact number of times we'd gone. The hotpot dishes, a specialty from the owner's homeland, tasted quite different from the flavors of my own world, but they were delicious nonetheless.

For me, it was the nostalgia factor, but Shiki seemed to like them purely for the taste. There was never any point asking him where he wanted to eat; he would invariably say Ironclad. That night, I actually wanted to try a new restaurant for dinner, so I deliberately chose Ironclad for lunch instead. Surely, Shiki wouldn't insist on eating there for both meals.

It reminded me of someone back in my world. Whenever we'd ask her where to eat, she'd always say, "M*c" or "McD***Id's"—even though both names referred to the same place. Eventually, no one even bothered asking her anymore. I had a feeling Shiki might end up in a similar situation here if I didn't take the initiative to explore new places.

When I first saw hotpot dishes on Ironclad's menu, I seriously doubted that there were other people from our world here. I doubted it even more when I saw the unique flavors and seasonings, but the taste cleared up those doubts completely. There were a variety of hotpot dishes, some more unusual than

others, and it made me realize how hard it must be to keep things fresh in this city without people getting bored... though there was no soy sauce flavor.

If the owner had asked for my opinion on the menu, I would have said, “No sweet hotpot dishes, please.” For me, that was just a hard no. The moment I saw that overflowing cream mixed with the ingredients, I honestly considered escaping into a fantasy where it was just meringue or something. The way Shiki ate it with such enjoyment made him seem almost superhuman to me. But that was a secret I resolved to keep to myself.

Thank you for eating it all, Shiki. For the first time in this world, I actually gave up on food. Please, I’m begging you, let’s keep the white broths to tonkotsu or soy milk.

The Ironclad’s proprietor was named Luria. She seemed much brighter than when we first met her, probably because she was at work. Seeing her cheerful, professional demeanor just days after what she went through with those men attacking her, I realized her strength.

I’d never had a part-time job, so I didn’t really understand the concept of switching between “on” and “off” modes at work. It made me feel kind of pathetic, to be honest. Maybe people in the working world had to be that tough to survive. And in this world, where discrimination was even more blatant than back home, people probably had to be even tougher.

Fortunately, as many times as we’d been to Ironclad, no one seemed to suspect that I was coming just to see Luria. The truth was, every time we visited, we were too focused on the hotpot dishes—especially Shiki. Still, in the beginning, for some reason, Luria would always give me these incredibly wary looks.

Do I look suspicious? I mean, I’m not wearing my mask anymore...

Wait, could it be because I’m not wearing the mask? No, that’s overthinking it.

After all, when I talked with Luria, who was clearly human, there was nothing strange about her behavior. Why had those students been harassing her? Bad luck? Coincidence? No... Was there something special about her? When I asked her about it, she went silent. That had to mean something.

Since Shiki and I ordered two hotpot dishes whenever we visited, we stood out quite a bit in the shop. Luria eventually learned our names, and now we exchanged a few words every time we came in.

Today, as Shiki worked on his food, I told Luria about our upcoming visit to the academy and how we were finally about to start work. She was the first person in this city who knew us by name. Our shop was going to be a bit farther from here, so I realized we might not be able to come as often after we opened. The thought made me feel a little lonely.

Then again, if I left the decision up to Shiki, chances were high we'd keep coming back here. *Still, there are so many different restaurants here that ignore local cuisine. While we're in this city, I want to try out as many new dishes as possible. Maybe I'll even find something like kombu or katsuobushi before Tomoe, which would make for a great souvenir.*

One day, I'd like to treat Shiki to the kinds of hotpot I know from my world. Mizutaki, shabu-shabu, sukiyaki, yudofu... Yeah, I'd love to eat those myself too.

Oh, right. If possible, I wanted to start working on the interior of the shop this evening. Shiki and I had already scoped out the nearby stores for design ideas, so we had a general plan in mind. One nice thing about this world is that you didn't always need to hire craftsmen for renovations if you could use magick. And since Shiki had earth-based magick, he could handle those tasks himself. It was a subtle but satisfying way to save money.

Plus, it would be good practice for my own magick. Lately, I'd been trying to keep myself in a state of focus, ready to activate magick on a moment's notice. Even so, I couldn't maintain it for long, so I'd been practicing creating strong, though incomplete, defensive barriers. Just the other day, I'd learned how much more difficult it was to use magick than to move my hands or feet, especially in the heightened mental state of a battlefield.

Ever since the Goddess had found me, I'd been constantly reminded how hard it was to predict what would happen next. *I have to make every day count. After all, my life is on the line.*

Shiki and I finished our early lunch and arrived at the academy just as a crowd of students began spilling out from the various buildings; their lunch break had

just started.

The massive white structure in front of me reminded me of something from my previous world. It made me feel strangely nostalgic—perhaps because the sight of a school itself stirred up some homesickness.

As we made our way to the appointed room, we avoided the curious stares from the students (I wanted to believe it wasn't because of how I looked).

The double takes and wide-eyed stares are just because we're new here. Definitely.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you."

As soon as we finished our greetings, a round of applause broke out.

The office we were in must have been where all the academy's administrative matters were handled. It was spacious, and with the desks all in neat rows, it briefly reminded me of a staff room from my school days—though it lacked that particular sense of tension.

There were two people handling the introductions. They gave us a detailed explanation about class content and rules, then they asked us about our plans for the lectures.

One of them, whose name was Bright, seemed to be an instructor like me. Well, "like me" wasn't quite right. He was a full-time instructor and worked here every day, while I was just a part-timer that wouldn't even be staying in the dorms. He apparently also taught General Tactics, though he didn't look particularly strong. Teaching combat techniques couldn't just be theoretical, so I figured he had to be competent in his own way.

Bright explained the practical aspects of the lessons and gave me an overview of the students' skill levels. As I listened, I had to stop myself from thinking, *This doesn't sound much harder than playing house*. Even if I found it hard to believe, there was no way I could openly say something like, "Handling elite students (haha) might be a bit troublesome."

The other person in charge of introductions was an important figure from the administrative office. Whereas Bright came across with an air of superiority, this guy exuded humility. He was polite and proper—unlike at my high school, where the office staff had been weirdly casual. Maybe it was just a difference in how they treated students versus instructors. Still, the way he answered questions about pay and my shop without even glancing at any documents showed how competent he was.

When they finished explaining everything, the administrator said, “We look forward to working with you,” and Shiki and I replied the same thing.

“Well, I’ll be off then,” said Bright. “For the first few classes, I’ll send some of my students your way on a rotating basis. After that, you’ll need to gather your own students based on your ability, Raidou-sensei. I’ve heard you’re quite skilled. I’m looking forward to it,” he added with a smile.

“Ah, thank you, Bright-sensei,” I replied, bowing my head. Shiki followed suit.

I’d heard about Bright before; he was known for being a good mentor and was well-liked by the staff for introducing students to new instructors. The people in the administrative office all seemed to appreciate him quite a bit. I actually found this a bit unsettling. *People who are too nice can be... unnerving.*

The administrator had also mentioned that it was rare for part-time instructors to fill their allotted number of students. As a part-timer, my limit was thirty students—half of what full-time instructors could handle. In a place as big as this academy, I found it hard to believe that anyone would struggle to gather thirty students.

Unlike practical lessons, where class size was limited due to safety concerns—especially when dealing with swords or magick—the only cap on a lecture was how many students could fit in the room.

Payment for instructors was based entirely on performance. Part-timers had a lot of freedom in choosing their students, so if you wanted to earn more, the best way was to fill your class to capacity. A part-time instructor earned ten silver coins per student per lecture. So, if I had thirty students, that would be three gold coins per class—or about the annual average salary at a shop or guild office. If you held multiple classes per week, well, the amount you could make

was staggering. From a modern Japanese perspective, the pay seemed excessive for a teaching job. And that was just part-timers...

“So, Raidou-sensei,” the administrator began, “about your lecture schedule. Would you be able to start next week? Bright-sensei will have about ten students ready to attend, so that will be no problem on our end.”

“Next week, huh?” I wrote. “That works for me. However, I’m planning to run classes where I personally select the students, so Bright-sensei might have to put in a little extra effort. Also, I intend to keep the class size small. I assume that won’t be an issue?”

Although we’d asked about this earlier, I thought it best to double-check. I wanted ten students or less, and only one class per week. Up to this point, my only teaching experience had been tutoring some local kids back in my world, and that had been purely a volunteer gig. Starting small and having Shiki there to help seemed like the safest way to ease into things.

“Of course,” the administrator replied with a nod. “Though it’s quite rare. Most part-time instructors aim to gather as many students as possible... Perhaps your approach is different because you’re also considering the management of your business at the same time?”

“Since I’ll be responsible for the students, I want to make sure I can properly look after each one,” I wrote. “As for the trading company, there’s no issue as long as we don’t conduct business on campus, right? Thank you for the quick response.”

I was hugely relieved to know that neither Shiki nor I would be violating any rules by demonstrating potions or sharing knowledge here.

“You’re very humble, Raidou-sensei. And serious too. I must say, it’s a bit unexpected. We’ve heard about your considerable abilities, so we were a bit anxious about what sort of person would show up. The students here are among the best in the city cluster. Please feel free to train them thoroughly,” the administrator said with a smile.

“I will. Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” I wrote.

“Oh, before you go, let me show you where to find the library, in case you need to find resources, and the reception desk for field and training ground reservations. You’ll probably be relying on both of those quite a bit in your first few weeks.”

Good point, I thought. I should probably take care of the field reservation today too. I bet the paperwork for that will be no joke.

I also needed to give some more thought to the management of the shop. *Should I go with the forest ogres? The arachs would be wasted on that job, but... maybe I should ask Tomoe for her opinion.*

Next was the library. I’d expected more of a small reading room, but the fact that it was in a separate building suggested it was quite extensive—almost like something a university would have.

A library that big could have some valuable resources, especially when it came to magick. *I should check it out, I decided. Sorry, Shiki, but you’re on field reservation duty.*

“Shiki, I’ll head to the library,” I wrote as we stepped into the hallway. *“Once you’ve finished the paperwork, come meet me there.”*

Shiki nodded agreeably. If he had been Tomoe or Mio, they probably would’ve caused a scene and refused to split up. This was exactly why I’d chosen Shiki for this mission. It was really nice—though, admittedly, the main reason was that we were both men.

Since the library and the reception desk were in opposite directions, Shiki and I turned our backs to each other and headed toward our respective destinations.

The hallways were bustling with students chatting, and the bulletin boards were packed with a variety of notices—some cheerful, others purely informational. It instantly reminded me of the university my sister went to, which I’d visited during summer break one year.

“This place is exactly like a Japanese university,” I muttered aloud. Before I’d left Tsige, there were moments when I felt a pang of homesickness. As I’d traveled, those feelings had gradually faded, but now... the memories were

coming in an unstoppable torrent, not just of my sister's college but of everything about home.

For a strange moment, part of me wasn't sure whether I was back there or still in another world.

"Oh, this must be the library. Wow, it's huge," I said as I finally reached it. I knew full well no one here could understand me, and yet I kept on talking to myself. Did I come across as a lunatic? Probably. But after all the things I'd been through, stuff like that hardly bothered me anymore.

Still... it's big. Much larger than the public library in my hometown. I was genuinely surprised to find a library of this scale in this world. It really drove home the fact that I'd started my journey in the middle of nowhere. Meanwhile, the heroes had the privilege of beginning in the grand castle of a powerful nation. *Hah, guess life isn't fair.*

I stepped inside.

Books, books, and more books—piled high on shelves that towered far above my head. Rows of shelves stretched out to either side, like an endless forest of trees bearing the fruit of knowledge. I'd never seen this many books gathered in one place in my life. *It's... overwhelming. Just incredible.*

It felt just like a library from my world, quiet, reverent, full of gently flowing cool air. I was so enthralled I didn't even stop to wonder whether it was magick or technology that controlled the climate in here.

The sheer size of the library, coupled with the overwhelming presence of the books themselves, belied what must have been a large number of people inside. I noticed some floating on platforms, moving along the shelves and retrieving books, but even that scene couldn't steal my focus from the powerful aura of the books.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

A calm, soft voice addressed me. It had a mature, almost seductive tone to it.

I turned to see a woman who must have been a librarian, given that she wasn't wearing a student's uniform.

“My apologies,” I wrote quickly. “I’ve never seen such an extensive collection before. I was so captivated that I lost myself for a moment. This is an incredible library.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you for your kind words about our library. You were standing still in the hall, though. Is there something you’re looking for? If you have a specific book in mind, I’d be happy to help you find it.”

Wait... she’s not surprised that I’m writing?

The truth was, I had no idea what to start looking for, but I thought I’d better give her something. *“I don’t have a particular book in mind, but I’m interested in any books about magick, specifically incantation languages.”*

“Oh my, that’s a rather subtle topic for someone like you, Raidou-sama, with your impressive magical and combat abilities. Is it, by chance, for Shiki-sama to read?”

!!!

I quickly jumped back, putting distance between us. *How does she know my name?!*

Fortunately, we were in the open hall near the entrance, so my evasive maneuver hadn’t sent me crashing into anyone. Not everyone could pull off the kind of weird, sudden movements Sofia favored. I wasn’t about to change my strategy—keeping a distance from any potential threat was my top priority.

As I’d jumped back, I had put up the invisible barrier. Staying on edge every day had its benefits. All I needed now was to be able to do this without straining myself mentally.

“Incredible! In just that instant, you’ve already deployed a barrier. It’s like magick—no, it *is* magick, but you handle it so seamlessly, like you’re not even chanting. Just like the rumors said.”

“Who are you? How do you know my name?” I wrote, not taking my eyes off of this strange librarian or whatever she was.

She looked young—early twenties? About the same height as me. She wasn’t armed, and I couldn’t sense any powerful magical equipment on her. She didn’t

give off any particularly strong magical auras, just the usual for a hyuman. She wore a loose robe, so I couldn't tell how much muscle she had, but it didn't look like our encounter was causing her any stress. Nor was there any sign of her preparing to cast a spell.

Her clothes made it hard to discern her figure, but she was definitely a woman. Her face was... cute. A solid hundred out of a hundred. Her hair was blue, not the deep indigo of Tomoe's but a translucent, light blue, almost like water. She was probably hyuman, but I had absolutely no idea who she was.

"Just like the rumors said." So, she knew about both me and Shiki, as well as my magical and combat abilities. Could anyone here possibly know that much? If so, it would be someone from the exam board. But could a librarian like her really access that kind of information? I didn't want to believe that personal details about exam participants would be leaked so easily.

"There's no need to be so nervous," she said with a little smile. "I'm an instructor at the academy, after all. I know your name, at least."

That's a lie. I had just learned in the office that there were hundreds of staff members here, including part-timers. There's no way she could know them all by name. Besides, this was literally my first day here.

I wasn't about to lower my guard. I kept close attention on the flow of magical energy, watching for any mental interference or strange movements from her.

"Unless you can prove you have a photographic memory or something, I can't trust you," I wrote, maintaining my distance.

"It was just an innocent prank, but it seems you're quite the suspicious type," she sighed, shrugging her shoulders in frustration. "I learned your name and other details from someone else. That's all."

So, had the staff talked? Still, for something as trivial as a prank, it was a little too unsettling.

"Fine, I'll tell you who gave me the information. You know Luria from Ironclad, don't you?"

That name caught me off guard.

Luria. Yes, of course I knew her. It made sense that she'd know both my name and Shiki's.

"Your abilities I learned about from the person who handled your exam. I'm not sure if you know him, but his name is Ers. We were at a dinner"—here, the woman mimed raising a cup to her lips—"and he told a story about someone who collected all three types of orbs."

All three types of orbs. That would explain the vague comments about my magick and combat skills. But I still couldn't figure out the connection between Luria and this woman.

Is she a regular at Ironclad? But would Luria really just gossip about customers like that? She doesn't seem the type to spill personal details. Despite the many times Shiki and I had visited, I was sure I had never seen this woman before.

"I know Luria," I wrote. *"I've been going to Ironclad a lot lately. But I don't understand how you'd get this kind of information from her."*

"Sigh. Luria's my younger sister. She mentioned something about strange customers, and it turned out those customers were you and Shiki-sama. Shiki-sama, who apparently even finished the cream hotpot. Quite a surprise," she added with another smile.

The cream hotpot. That nightmare. How in the world did Shiki manage to eat two of those?

Hmm. If she even knows about the cream hotpot, then it's probably true. Luria's older sister, huh? Now that she mentioned it, they do have the same color hair.

I examined the woman again.

"Is something wrong?" she asked suspiciously.

Poor thing. I wasn't sure of the exact age difference between her and Luria, but this sister had clearly lost the development race. Luria, probably helped by her uniform, was obviously more developed and stood out. Even though the woman before me wore a robe, it was clear—there was no competition. The chances of a reversal were slim to none, so... *Yeah, I hope she lives strong.*

“I’m feeling a bit uncomfortable now, but have we cleared up the misunderstanding?” she asked again, her hand adjusting her glasses as her eyelids twitched. That gesture—I recognized it. People who wear glasses tend to fiddle with them unconsciously.

“Yes, the misunderstanding’s all cleared up. So, you’re her older sister, I see. But calling me by my name right off the bat would surprise anyone, not just me.”

“Your reaction was more than just surprise, but I apologize for the offense. My name’s Eva. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Eva, is it? Well, as you know, I’m Raidou. I’m a part-time instructor here. Are you a librarian?”

“Yes. If you need any help finding a book, feel free to ask. I’m usually over there,” she said, gesturing toward a counter on the right side of the hall. A few other staff members stood there, watching our interaction.

“I’ll be sure to let you know. For now, I think I’ll be on my way.”

“Are you sure? You were asking about books on incantation languages, right?”

“I’ll look into it some other time. Thanks, again.”

“That’s a shame. I’ll be here when you’re ready,” Eva said, giving me a warm smile as I exited the library.

Phew. That was tense. I was too shaken to even think about reading.

“Raidou-sama! Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Here was Shiki.

I turned to see him jogging toward me down the hallway. Knowing him, he’d probably rushed through his task at the reception desk as fast as possible.

“Shiki, you didn’t keep me waiting. Thanks. Let’s head to the Merchant Guild and check on the shop,” I said, falling into step with him.

“All right,” Shiki replied.

It was still too early to call it a day. I was grateful that we’d have more time than expected to work on the shop. With that in mind, I left the campus—if it

could even be called that.

※ ※ ※

“Did you hear? The new practical instructor supposedly can’t even talk.”

“What? How’s he gonna teach then? Don’t tell me it’s all going to be demos.”

“Apparently, he uses writing. As long as I can get stronger, I don’t really care. But I hope he’s not useless.”

“Bright-sensei told us to go to at least one lecture... but I heard he’s a demi-human.”

“A demi-human?! Why would the academy make one of them an instructor?”

“Does it matter? Not all demi-humans are bad. Elves are pretty common around here, and just because someone’s a demi-human doesn’t mean they’re ugly.”

“I just hope it doesn’t turn into one of those empty lectures Rotsgard is infamous for.”

“If I don’t like it, I’ll just skip. There are plenty of electives to choose from.”

“Man, I just hope he’s good-looking.”

“Idiot. If you’re gonna say that, I want a beautiful female instructor!”

“Haha...”

...

Are you kidding me?

Seriously... are they for real?

This... These are the students I’m supposed to teach in my first lecture?

Caught between nervousness and anxiety, I had unintentionally expanded my Realm, and that conversation was what I had picked up. I immediately regretted it.

They’ve already made up their minds about me, and we haven’t even met yet!

Shiki and I were sitting on a bench in the middle of our reserved field—a wide, open grassy area that we had booked out earlier—waiting for the students to arrive.

To prepare, I'd read through a few textbooks and guides recommended by the administrative office. Now I had a slightly better understanding of both this academy's uniqueness and my own position here in terms of magick and teaching.

First, the uniqueness of this academy...

At Rotsgard Academy, students were required to take certain core lectures for their department, but beyond that, they could choose elective lectures from any field. It was a system that gave each student a lot of freedom to create their own schedule.

While the required lectures for each department were fixed, electives like mine put the instructor in a very weak position. There was no need to commit to a course for half a year or even a full year; if students didn't like a lecture, they could just switch to a different one.

Since instructors' pay was determined by the number of students enrolled in their lectures, they resorted to a variety of tactics to attract students. For instance, some avoided scheduling their lectures during popular time slots or made their exams easier. In more extreme cases, there were even rumors of instructors who let students buy their way into the class. Unfortunately, it seemed that improving the content of the lecture was rarely the first method instructors choose to boost enrollment.

In short, even though I was an instructor, there was a high chance I'd be looked down on by the students. And for some reason, it seemed I wasn't starting out as their favorite.

Then, there was the issue of magick. It seemed like I shouldn't reveal my own way of doing things too openly here. Apparently, in this world, magick was supposed to be chanted aloud and memorized, with a strong emphasis on vocal incantations.

What I did—casting spells without speaking—was called silent casting and was said to weaken the power of the spell.

It turns out I've been breaking the basic rules of magick this whole time without realizing it.

Still, I thought maybe I could make that a unique feature of my lectures. I could just say something like, "In actual combat..." and teach the students my way.

Shiki broke into my thoughts. "Raidou-sama, the students are about to arrive."

"Yeah, I know. Shiki, our plan for the lecture is just like we talked about earlier, right?"

"There should be no problems. First, you'll demonstrate your abilities, and then, for the students who are still interested, you'll teach them practical chanting techniques. I doubt there will be many of them who want to focus on close-combat techniques, but for those, I'll cover general antimagick combat strategies. It's an approach that none of the other instructors offer, so I think it'll filter out anyone who isn't serious."

"It's a solid plan. There's no point in giving a large number of students more knowledge or power than they can handle. Plus, it's easier to teach a smaller, more dedicated group."

"Indeed. However, having Raidou-sama be the strict one while I play the nice guy... Isn't that role reversal?" Shiki raised an eyebrow. "I don't think we need to divide the roles like that."

"Well, two instructors teaching an elective is rare, and I'm also curious to see if this method is really effective. I think playing the bad guy will have a stronger impact. If it feels off, we can stop, but just humor me for a bit."

"Haaah..." Shiki sighed, clearly unconvinced.

Maybe I'd watched too many detective dramas, but I'd always wanted to try this technique: the classic "good cop, bad cop" routine. Between me and Shiki, it made sense for me to take on the stricter role.

And, no, this isn't about giving up and playing into the idea that I'm not treated like a person. It's just strategy.

As I was lost in thought, I noticed a few glances from the group approaching us.

Here they come.

“Um, is this Raidou-sensei’s General Tactics class?” This was the girl who’d grimaced at the mention of a demi-human a few minutes ago, but her tone was polite enough.

Rather than responding to her directly, I gave a small nod to Shiki. Time to be bad cop.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Shiki answered with a calm smile. “You’re the students referred by Bright-sensei, correct? I’m Shiki, Raidou-sensei’s assistant for this course. And this is—”

“I am Raidou,” I wrote, “Shiki’s master, and I once led a caravan through the Wastelands at the Edge of the World. My main profession is that of a merchant. Though I cannot speak, I will be communicating with you this way. This class will be rigorous, focusing primarily on magick, and I expect you to keep up.”

With my appearance, I figured it might be better to play up the strict, no-nonsense instructor rather than trying to win them over with friendly smiles. The gap between a tough exterior and occasional moments of kindness might work better than trying to be approachable from the start.

I had considered acting more intense, but since I’d be writing everything, I’d decided a cold and strict tone would be more effective than trying to yell through my speech bubbles.

“We’re also planning to open a rather unique shop nearby, so please feel free to stop by when you get the chance,” Shiki added with a gentle smile, effortlessly transitioning into a promotional role.

That had been my idea as well. As long as we didn’t mention the name of the shop, we wouldn’t run into any issues. Plus, I wanted Shiki to keep that calm, smiling demeanor throughout the class. He’d be the kind, approachable Shiki-sensei while I worked on being the stern Raidou-sensei. We’d make it work.

“Since this is our first class, let’s start with introductions,” I wrote, then I had each of the ten students who came for the lecture introduce themselves. Name,

age, what year they were in, their goals, and what magical attributes they were proficient in.

It all went smoothly enough, but one thing left me with a question: their attributes.

“You said water was your strongest attribute. How well can you use other attributes?” I asked one of them.

“O-Other attributes? Uh... well, I can use a little earth and fire, but not much.”

“Can you borrow the power of spirits?”

“What?! No way! That’s impossible!”

So, she can barely use anything other than water, and she doesn’t have much magical power either.

Wait... Could this be a pattern?

“You said fire was your main attribute. What about others?” I directed this question to another student—the one who’d implied that demi-humans were fine as long as they were good-looking. He frowned, clearly not liking the question.

“I can use wind to some extent. But, no, I can’t use spirit magick.”

I asked several other students, and most could only handle up to three attributes, at best.

Feeling somewhat baffled by how limited they were, I decided to ask Shiki telepathically.

“Shiki, what’s going on here? Are humans limited in how many attributes they can use?”

“No, not exactly,” he replied. *“However, they tend to focus too much on the ones they’re best at, not training much in the others. Among humans, being able to wield multiple attributes at a practical level is considered a rare talent.”*

“But anyone can do it, right?”

“Of course. It just takes more magical energy to use attributes you’re less skilled with.”

“Got it. Makes sense.”

Even if these guys were beginners, focusing on just one attribute seemed like a poor strategy. Being able to use multiple would be so much more practical in real-life situations. Now that I thought about it, even that childlike, sword-wielding dragon had seemed surprised that I could handle multiple attributes. Maybe training these students in a wider range of magick could be interesting after all.

Well, I wouldn't mince words with my students. *“I understand your current skill levels. Unfortunately, I have to say that you're still inexperienced.”*

“Inexperienced?! Us?!” The retort came from the one who'd complained about my inability to speak. From his appearance, I'd have pegged him as more of a warrior type, and apparently, he had the bravado to match.

“That's right. Some of you want to serve in the military, others want to make a name as adventurers, and some hope to stay here as researchers. Given your current abilities, you might be able to get your foot in the door, but you'll spend your whole lives stuck as third-rate professionals.”

“Isn't that a bit much? You're just a temporary instructor,” snapped I-Don't-Like-Demi-Humans. She was clearly angry. But today's goal was to showcase my and Shiki's abilities, and then leave them with a strong impression of Shiki as the kinder instructor. This was an important turning point for that, so I had to provoke them a little—sorry about that.

“It's the truth,” I wrote calmly. *“Let me ask you something. You're a mage, right? What do you think are a mage's greatest fears in battle?”*

“Isolation, being approached by the enemy, panicking, and running out of magick,” she answered, clearly quoting from a textbook. Well, she wasn't wrong.

“Correct. Excellent. Now, what is the ideal that a mage should strive for in combat?”

“Adaptability, of course. Whether isolated, approached by the enemy, facing unforeseen circumstances, or running out of magick, a mage must be able to make the best decisions in any situation.”

“Exactly. You’re quite capable. Now, suppose your classmate here—who specializes in water magick—faces an enemy that can only be effectively harmed by wind-based attacks. What would be the adaptive solution?”

“In that case, the frontline fighters would need to prepare wind-based attacks, or another backline mage would—”

“There’s only her. No one else.”

The girl paused to think before answering, “Then she would need to prepare wind-based attacks in advance, maybe by using a magick item.”

“Exactly. When you can’t cover something yourself, relying on tools is the right move. Preparing items that give you access to other attributes is a smart tactic, but being able to wield those attributes yourself is far better. You shouldn’t settle for mastering only one or two elements. In a real fight, being limited to just three attributes won’t cut it. You’ll feel yourself lacking, and it will cost you.”

“But in the academy and even in the military, we’re taught to focus on mastering a single element first,” another male student chimed in—the one who had mentioned the idea of an “empty lecture.” He looked dissatisfied.

It’s not the method, I thought, but the fact that they don’t go beyond that one focus. And these are supposed to be the elites? I could understand why they felt upset, though—it was always annoying to be told that what you’ve been taught is wrong.

“You all claim to be elite, don’t you?” I challenged, raising an eyebrow. *“But just like anyone else, if your primary attribute is discovered and countered, you’ll be shredded apart like paper. Is that the kind of mage you’re aiming to be?”*

“Th-That’s why we rely on the frontline swordsmen and knights...” another student muttered, his confidence faltering.

“Relying on others? Trust is a powerful word, but it shouldn’t become an excuse to do nothing. If you’re going to call yourself elite, then you should be looking at the battlefield from a higher perspective, preparing yourself with countermeasures others might not see. Even when it comes to defending yourself, giving up just because it’s not your strongest attribute is unacceptable. If something is within your reach, you should grab it.”

This was easy to say, but in reality... it was a difficult path to walk. Not that it was something I would have to worry about, but if someone chose to follow that route, it would be rough.

“Guh...”

“So, Raidou-sensei, are you saying that even if you were isolated and let the enemy get too close, you could still handle the situation from a higher perspective?” one of the students challenged. Ah, that was the boy who said he hated incompetence. It seemed like I’d finally piqued his interest.

“Of course. That’s exactly what this lecture is for—to teach you how. Today, we’ll show you a mock battle between Shiki and me. You’ll see firsthand the strength of the people you’re learning from.”

I glanced at Shiki, who nodded and reached for his staff. As he unwound the glossy cloth it was wrapped in, the eldwar staff revealed its radiating, powerful presence. The cloth, which resembled something like silk, had been enchanted to conceal the weapon’s true power.

“Raidou-sama and I will demonstrate a fraction of our abilities,” Shiki told our students calmly. “Please observe and take note. I hope we can serve as an example of what you should aim for.”

Whether or not his words got through to them, the students’ eyes were fixed on the staff, wide with astonishment.

“Hey, that staff...”

“What is that?”

“It’s overflowing with magick power, and there are so many different elements mixed together.”

“Incredible... I’ve never seen anything like it, not even in the academy’s exhibits.”

So, the staff really is something special, I thought. If only they knew about my clothes. But since they don’t radiate any visible energy, I guess they just look normal. An eldwar once told me that my armor was quite unusual, as it was designed to amplify me rather than to exhibit any external force.

The two of us moved a bit farther away from the students to prepare for the mock battle. Shiki wore a serious expression as he tied back his long hair. Knowing him, he wouldn't hold back.

"From this distance, it should be enough to simulate a situation where the enemy has already closed in on you," I wrote, addressing the student who had made the comment earlier. He nodded solemnly in response.

"Shiki, let's begin."

"Very well, Raidou-sama. I shall borrow your strength. Here I come!" Shiki said.

With that, the mock battle commenced, designed to showcase our abilities and make it easier to proceed with the rest of the lecture.

Male Student Aspiring to Be a Swordsman

The mock battle between the new instructor and his supposed assistant began at such close range that a spellcaster wouldn't even have had time to chant before being overwhelmed.

If I'm being honest, the only reason I showed up to this lecture was because Bright-sensei told me to. I had no intention of coming back. From what I'd heard, Raidou's lecture was mostly about magick and incantation, which didn't interest me at all since I was training to be a swordsman who only used magick as a backup.

Besides, I knew what this was—Bright-sensei's little welcome package for new combat instructors. Whenever a new one joined the academy, he'd send them enough students to fill their first lecture, making them overconfident. But he only sent students who couldn't care less about the subject matter and would never show up again. From then on, the new instructor would struggle to fill their classes. Desperate, they'd come crawling back to Bright-sensei for help, and he'd generously take them under his wing.

It was a nasty trick, but I couldn't deny it worked. Bright-sensei specialized in teaching tactics from a theoretical perspective, but I think all he really wanted was to maintain a higher status than the practical combat instructors. He was always trying to elevate his standing.

Personally, I've never liked him. I don't believe you can gain real strength just by sitting behind a desk, scribbling down notes, or debating in a classroom. And recently, his lectures have been pretty lackluster. There's been a power struggle among the academy's instructors, and Bright-sensei is obviously more focused on boosting his influence than teaching properly. I'm not saying tactics and strategies are useless, but they're not enough on their own.

Of course, the practical combat instructors aren't much better. There are several lectures I've enrolled in that I'd love to drop or swap out for something more useful. In this academy, with all the children of nobles and the wealthy, it's all too common to see lectures that amount to nothing more than flattering the students. You won't gain any real skills from that.

As for me, I got in on a merit scholarship. I'm here to push myself to my limits, even if I get injured in the process. But lectures that offer that kind of challenge are few and far between. Worse, they're often so unpopular that they get canceled. I can't tell you how frustrating that is.

So, I had zero expectations for this young guy with the disfigured face, who didn't speak and might not even be human. Let's be real—if someone around our age was really that talented, the nation would have snatched them up a long time ago. Sure, he passed the recruitment exam, so he's probably got at least some baseline ability, but still—

The man holding the staff—Shiki, I think his name was—had just declared that he would “borrow Raidou's strength” and then he'd dashed forward, closing the gap between them in an instant.

He was fast. Probably faster than me. I had assumed he was a mage too, but now I wasn't so sure. He had this gentle demeanor, nothing that suggested he was skilled in close combat.

“What?!” The words slipped out before I could stop them. And I wasn't the only one; suddenly, everyone around me was murmuring in shock.

At the tip of Shiki's staff, a yellowish blade materialized, turning the weapon into something like a spear. I hadn't heard any chanting. Was it the staff's ability? The immense magical energy radiating from it made it clear that this was no ordinary weapon. It must have been worth an actual fortune.

In the blink of an eye, he aimed the blade directly at Raidou's chest. Shiki had called Raidou his master, so why did it look like he was going for a lethal strike?

He thrust the spear forward mercilessly, faster than any mage's eyes could track.

It's over.

I was sure Shiki had won. But then the spear stopped—just ten centimeters from Raidou's chest—blocked by a hexagonal barrier.

“What?”

Again, there'd been no chanting. Not a word. *What... what is this?*

A chill ran down my spine, like ice water had been poured over me.

Raidou wasn't holding anything—no staff, no weapon of any kind. He had formed the barrier without a focus, casting silently in an instant. If this was some kind of prank, it was far beyond anything reasonable.

Unfazed by the blocked attack, Shiki adjusted his stance, wielding the staff like a spear to launch a rapid series of strikes. His speed increased, his movements fluid and aggressive. Even my eyes couldn't keep up.

And yet, Raidou calmly blocked every strike with a single small barrier, moving it just enough to intercept each blow.

Shiki's spear struck Raidou's barrier directly, but the instructor deflected it—the blade sliding off the edge of the barrier. The once-flat surface of the barrier had gained depth and curvature, guiding the attack away as if it were part of an intricate, flowing defense.

In the next instant, Raidou struck the side of Shiki's staff, causing him to lose his balance. Without missing a beat, Raidou thrust his right hand forward. His palm, now glowing a fiery red with magical energy, sank into Shiki's torso and

exploded. Shiki was blasted several meters away, kicking up a cloud of dust. *What an exchange.*

Raidou had barely moved from his original position.

Incredible. Is this really a battle between mages?

I heard someone gasp. Like me, they were captivated by the battle unfolding before us.

Before the dust fully cleared, Shiki—who had been sent flying—used the momentum to stand, rolling onto his feet. With a swift motion, he drove the butt of his staff into the ground.

At the same time, Raidou leaped backward. The ground where he had just been erupted with countless earthen spears, thrusting upward to impale their target.

Wait, Shiki's a master of earth magick?

Raidou... No, Sensei must have predicted this. If it were me, that surprise attack would have been the end.

Without realizing it, I found myself biting my lip.

A gust of wind swept through the remaining dust clouds, clearing the air with a single magical strike. A red flash—it must have been a Fire Arrow—cut through the haze. Raidou-sensei had cast it while jumping back, shattering several of Shiki's earthen spears.

Whether it had hit Shiki or not was unclear. There was no explosion, no shock wave—just a clear view of Shiki as the magick faded out of existence. And there he was, standing tall... and smiling.

Shiki's clothes didn't even have a tear on them. The Fire Arrow had been decently powerful, or so I had thought. Some of the girls had even screamed when they saw it. But not only had Shiki blocked it, he seemed completely unscathed.

Suddenly, the ground beneath Raidou-sensei's feet rose again, forming a sharp, dark crystalline projectile. Its pointed tip gleamed, resembling something like a spiked nut, then it suddenly shot toward Shiki with the speed of an arrow.

Shiki met the black projectile with the tip of his staff, now devoid of its blade. As soon as the staff touched it, the nut-shaped thing crumbled into dust and scattered across the ground.

Raidou-sensei watched for a moment, then he conjured two more arrows—one blue, one red—and fired them at Shiki almost simultaneously.

Once again, Shiki intercepted both attacks with the tip of his staff. It was as if the glowing arrows melted into the staff's head, disappearing without a trace. *That staff... It's absorbing magick?!*

"No way... Water, earth, and fire... There's no way someone can use all three attributes at such high power."

"Parallel chanting... I've never seen it before..."

That's right. As impressive as Shiki's staff is, Raidou-sensei is just as remarkable. He's using three different attributes at a combat-ready level. And on top of that, he's constructing two spells at once through parallel chanting.

Raidou-sensei created a speech bubble in the air. *"You managed to block them all, even though I didn't give you much time between the strikes of different attributes."*

"I've trained quite a bit," Shiki responded calmly.

It was the first conversation the two had exchanged since the battle began.

"But you're taking too long," Raidou-sensei wrote, his expression unchanging.

"You're right. Let's finish this with the next move," Shiki agreed.

The two gave each other a friendly nod. I was completely captivated by their battle. By this point, I knew without a doubt that this was beyond any fight I'd ever witnessed at the academy.

For the first time, both of them began chanting aloud. The language was unfamiliar to me, probably something ancient—the chants had an entirely different rhythm and sound compared to the spells we learned.

Shiki aimed his staff at Raidou-sensei, and a series of overlapping magick circles formed at the tip of his staff. As they spun faster and faster, a complex, glowing sphere began to form.

Raidou-sensei, meanwhile, assumed a half stance. His left hand was extended forward, and his right hand was drawn back as though he were about to fire an arrow. At his right hand, a dark spherical mass of black energy swirled.

The moment both spells were released—

White light from Shiki's spell clashed with the black sphere from Raidou-sensei. The resulting collision created a burst of light so intense that it robbed me of my vision entirely. From somewhere in the blinding whiteness came a short, sharp cry.

Gradually, as the light subsided and my vision returned, I saw it: Raidou-sensei, standing tall, gripping Shiki by the neck, who had fallen to his knees.

"I concede," came Shiki's voice.

A sigh escaped me, my whole body feeling drained from the tension. It wasn't just me—everyone around seemed to relax at once, their strength leaving them. Raidou-sensei released Shiki's neck and turned his gaze toward us.



Just minutes before, I wouldn't have thought much of meeting Raidou-sensei's gaze. But now, after what I'd just witnessed, that same look filled me with a sense of dread. For just a moment, I found that I couldn't hold his gaze.

"Whether you choose to come again or not is up to you. But if you truly desire strength, you are welcome to return." His written message hung for a moment in the air before us, laced with a faint magical aura that somehow made me feel even more on edge.

I was shaken. That there could be someone like him... *The world is so big...*

Raidou-sensei walked off the field without looking back.

I made my decision then and there. I didn't need to think about it—I knew beyond any doubt that I needed his guidance.

Shiki turned to address us. "Well, it seems that aside from the introductions, we didn't accomplish much today. But I hope that demonstration proved that mastering multiple attributes and refining your chanting techniques will have a significant impact. Now, does anyone have any questions?" His hair, which had been tied back, had come loose during the battle. In spite of the intense combat just moments before, he wore a calm, gentle smile.

Shiki... He was a mage yet had better close-combat skills than me. I couldn't help but respect him. Though both of them were incredibly strong, my admiration for Shiki came from a place of genuine respect, rather than fear.

As Shiki's gaze shifted toward a girl in our group, we all followed his eyes. One of our classmates was clutching her left arm below the elbow with her right hand. Beneath her palm, blood trickled down in thin streaks.

"I-It's nothing. Just a small cut," she mumbled.

"Did you get hit by a piece of debris from the mock battle?" Shiki asked gently.

You should've dodged that, I thought. But then I remembered the flash of light and the cry I'd heard during the final moments of the battle. If that's when she'd gotten hit, it would've been impossible to avoid. None of us had been able to see anything at that moment.

Still, she looked embarrassed, probably thinking that her own slowness was to blame. She was one of the scholarship students, like me; we had a lot of pride to maintain.

“Really, it’s nothing serious. I’m fine, really... Ah—”

“Let me decide whether it’s serious. I may not look it, but I’m quite skilled at healing,” Shiki said with a reassuring smile. Taking her arm, he gently moved her right hand away to inspect the wound.

With practiced ease, Shiki conjured a small stream of water with magick, cleaning the blood and dirt from her hand.

He can use water magick too...? And to heal? I was at a loss for words.

“It looks like a shallow cut. Nothing too serious,” Shiki said calmly.

“Ah, yes. Thank you,” my classmate replied, still a bit flustered.

“This shouldn’t require any magick. Let’s see... Ah, here it is.” Shiki reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial, showing it to her. “It’s nothing special, but this is a simple salve I made. If I apply it to the wound like this—”

“Eek!” she squeaked, startled.

“Ah, was it cold? My apologies, forgot to mention that.”

“N-No, it’s fine... really...”

Shiki carefully applied more of the salve, spreading it evenly over her cut. Before our eyes, the wound closed up and disappeared as if it had never existed.

“Amazing...”

“Whoa!”

“That’s incredible!”

He didn’t even use magick. That had to be a super expensive magick potion, right?

Wait... Handmade?

So, he dabbles in alchemy and potion-making too?! This guy’s superhuman.

“It’s nothing to be amazed by,” Shiki said modestly. “It’s just a basic healing salve with a few improvements.”

Basic? This is considered basic?

What did his “advanced” skills involve, raising the dead?

“All right, you’re all set. Sorry for causing any harm,” Shiki said kindly.

“N-No, thank you... really, thank you. Um, how much do I owe you?” she asked, clearly embarrassed.

“A simple thank you is enough. We’ll be stocking this kind of salve at our shop soon; it’s nothing out of the ordinary. Well, take care.”

Ordinary? There’s no way this kind of potion is something you can just find at any old pharmacy, Shiki.

He gently brushed the dirt off the girl’s uniform, bowed slightly, and then turned away from us.

For the first time, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude toward my teacher.

Bright-sensei, thank you.

Thank you for introducing me to Raidou-sensei and Shiki.

For the first time at this academy, I think I’ve finally found people I can truly call my masters.

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In the vast sprawl of Rotsgard Academy, where new construction and renovation were constant, there were also areas that had fallen into disuse, left abandoned and awaiting demolition. Just as Makoto was settling into his dual roles as a temporary instructor and the head of his trading company, an ominous plot was beginning to take shape in a shadowy corner of the academy, a place where few dared to tread.

“And what’s this money for?” The irritated voice echoed in the dim, windowless chamber.

“It’s the penalty for our failure, as per our contract. I’ve brought the full amount,” came the other man’s low voice.

“I don’t want your damn money,” the first man spat in frustration. “Honestly... Eliminating some hopeful candidates is one thing, but targeting someone who’s already become a temporary instructor—especially someone like *him*—is entirely different. And yet you people have the audacity to call yourselves the ‘Assassin’s Guild’? Pathetic.”

“Rest assured, the target will be eliminated at no additional cost,” the guild representative promised, keeping his eyes on the floor.

The client’s voice sharpened with suspicion. “You’ve dealt with the failure who botched the first attempt, right?”

“That man...” the assassin began, carefully choosing his words, “is one of our most skilled and accomplished operatives. He showed an unusual level of enthusiasm for this mission, and we intend to use him until the job is done.”

“*Enthusiasm?*” the client scoffed, his tone dripping with disbelief. “You’re telling me that the guy who got kicked halfway across the battlefield by a mage and had his weapon shattered is *skilled?*”

“If I may speak,” the assassin said, attempting to maintain his calm. “You never mentioned that someone of such monstrous power would be among the candidates. That would have been crucial information.”

“I told you that everyone participating in that exam was competent. They come from all over the provinces. It’s impossible to get precise information on every single one of them. That’s why you were paid so handsomely.”

“With all due respect, dealing with someone who could break Tsurugi—the blade forged from the reverse scale of the Greater Dragon Mitsurugi—requires preparation, even for us.”

“Hmph. If that sword were really made from a dragon’s reverse scale, there’s no way it could have broken. Maybe your man was swinging around a fake all this time.”

“Absolutely not,” the assassin quickly refuted. “That sword was his lifeline. Even as we speak, he’s nursing his wounds, nurturing his hatred, and

sharpening his fangs for the next strike.”

“Anyway, your priority is to eliminate that temporary instructor who passed the tactical exam—as soon as possible. We have no need for anyone who doesn’t align with our interests. I doubt you understand how important it is that we maintain a strong voice in Rotsgard.”

“We do intend to proceed, but... are you sure we should act now?”

“What are you trying to say?” the client asked, a dangerous edge creeping into his tone.

“There are movements suggesting that some may be trying to bring him into their fold,” the guild representative clarified, leaning forward to meet the client’s gaze.

“That’s irrelevant. It’s just a backup plan for if you fail.”

The assassin’s gaze sharpened as he probed for more information. “Even though you’ve already stationed someone to keep tabs on him, you’re calling it insurance?”

“Is that a threat? Are you implying you know too much about my plans?” Slowly, deliberately, the client rose from his seat.

“No, no. Just confirming our next steps,” the assassin quickly clarified, suddenly deferential.

“We have a good working relationship, the Assassin’s Guild and me.” The client’s voice was cold and steady. “I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Like I said before, it’s just a contingency. Besides, the one tracking his movements is a low-level librarian. She doesn’t even know my face. When the time comes, I can dispose of her. She’s a useless woman anyway, just another incompetent cog.”

“You really are a... remarkable man. We’ll begin right away. If that’s all, I’ll take my leave.”

“Wait. Take this,” the client commanded, tossing the small pouch of coins back at the assassin. “It’s not much, but I expect you to use it to make sure the

job's done right.”

The assassin hesitated for a moment, weighing his options. After a moment, he silently accepted the money. When he left the room without a word, neither party knew the other's name.

“Damn assassins, getting too cocky,” the client muttered to himself. “We’ve already had to work hard to suppress the rumors that some extraordinary fighter passed the exam, even though it was only a practical test. If they’d just done their job right, we could have placed one of our candidates in the next round.”

The man ran a hand through his hair, restless and agitated. Frustration leaked through his every move. Everything was going wrong—first, the botched assassination, and now a skilled combat instructor passing the exam. And the attitude of this guild representative... Who did he think he was? Was he trying to provoke him?

“Maybe it was a mistake to use the Assassin’s Guild,” the man muttered bitterly. “They could’ve sabotaged things in advance, taken someone hostage—there were a hundred ways to handle it, but no, they had to try an assassination that was clearly beyond their means.”

To anyone watching, the man would have looked like just another of the academy’s full-time instructors. His clothes were nothing out of the ordinary nor was his appearance. However, this man was anything but ordinary. The group he had referred to as “we” was the real source of his authority, an authority that his target—Makoto—knew nothing of.

By appearing out of nowhere and passing the exam, Makoto had unknowingly walked right into the middle of this man’s carefully laid plan to manipulate the instructors overseeing practical combat lessons.

He had hoped to leverage the assistant instructor role to publicly humiliate and discredit Makoto, eventually causing him to lose favor with the academy. But Makoto hadn’t made a single move as an assistant. Every scheme the man had set in motion had failed to materialize.

“But that History of the Kingdom of Limia lecture wasn’t something I arranged,” he mused aloud. “A combat instructor being assigned to help with a

theory course—no, someone else is obviously unhappy with him as well. Hmph, I should handle this annoyance while it's still manageable. Once more people find out about his abilities, it'll be impossible to keep the truth about his exam results under wraps. Before he gains any real influence, I'll have to either get him under control or get rid of him."

The new guy's abilities, along with his reputation as the head of a trading company, were causing quite a stir among the scholarship students—especially the female ones.

The more popular Makoto became as an instructor, the harder it would be to oust him.

The man paced back and forth across the dim room, his brow furrowed in deep thought as he continued muttering to himself. Finally, he sighed, giving up on whatever scheme had been brewing in his mind, and left the room.

Since the day Makoto had arrived in Rotsgard, storm clouds had been gathering over the city.

Was it that trouble followed Makoto wherever he went? Or was he simply drawn to places where turmoil was bound to erupt?

Unbeknownst to him, Makoto had been racing full speed away from peace and tranquility—both as an instructor and as the head of the Kuzunoha Company—ever since he set foot in Rotsgard.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 3

Even though I'd gone to bed late, I woke up at least an hour before sunrise. I'd been working as an instructor for two weeks, in which time I'd gone to Ironclad... about ten times. I swear I *can* go without hotpot for a while... but that's not important right now.

Today was the big day—the grand opening of the Kusunoha Company's very first store. Unless you counted the spot we'd rented in Tsige... Nevertheless, I decided to think of this one as our first. We'd gone through a lot to get here, and we were finally going to have a place of our own!

After talking it over, Tomoe and I decided to bring two forest ogres from the Demiplane. And guess who'd been sent? Aqua and Eris—the same ones who had attacked me before.

The moment I saw them, I almost said, "Swap them out!" But they clung to me with such tearful eyes that I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Besides, I trusted Tomoe's judgment... I think.

I took them out to the outskirts of town to test their strength against some monsters and was happy to see how much they'd improved. Though, for some reason, they flinched whenever I mentioned Tomoe, Mio, or even Komoe-chan. *I guess they must've gone through some serious training.*

I explained their job and gave them an advance on their salary, and they swore loyalty to me with dead-serious faces. Apparently, life seemed easy here, even with the rather stringent conditions I imposed on them to make up for our short-staffing issues.

I mean, ten hours of work a day, six days a week? Sure, they had room and board included, but still... they seemed genuinely happy with that. What kind of life had they been living in the Demiplane? It wasn't like they were locked up in solitary confinement there... right?

They even got excited about having free time before and after work. When I told them they could eat out if they wanted, they cried.

Last night, we had our final meeting—Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, and me—and we agreed that two eldwarls would be sent over today. They'd worked at the Tsige branch a few times, so I planned to rely on them quite a bit.

As for the initial staff, it would just be me, the others, and Shiki. When I asked the Merchant Guild about interviews and evaluating skills, they said it was pretty normal to hire people and train them afterward. They didn't typically check skills in advance. In fact, it was rare for them to even post broad job-listings. Most people got hired through introductions, or it was the shop owner's friends and family who end up working there. The kind of "help wanted" ads you'd see for part-time jobs weren't really a thing in this world. The guild offered to send people our way, looking a little concerned, but for the time being, I politely declined.

That said, we still didn't have nearly enough people—not by my standards, anyway—but for the business model I had in mind, we had a strong enough core team for the moment.

I planned to make the shop stand out by staying open until around midnight, when the nightlife crowd would be heading home. Once we had more staff, I even wanted to turn the place into a twenty-four-hour convenience store. Luckily, Rotsgard had no regulations about operating hours for shops like ours. Most stores simply closed around sunset, like 6 p.m., because that's when the customer flow slowed down and the streets became less safe. This meant, as long as we had decent security, we'd be able to scoop up all the nighttime customers. It'd be great if they remembered us as that store that stays open late for medicine and other essentials.

Still, we would have to see what traffic was like after midnight before deciding if we could really run a twenty-four-hour business. After all, not as

many people in this world stayed up late, not even in a college town like Rotsgard.

I was also thinking about the option of doing nighttime deliveries. But if we did that, we'd have to figure out how to handle the orders efficiently. For now, I'd try opening the store until midnight as a kind of market research.

Oh, right. Speaking of plans, this wasn't everyone just yet.

Tomoe mentioned she'd send "someone else" along with the eldwars, and although I didn't quite like the way she'd said it with a mischievous smile, I had high hopes for this surprise staff member. Tomoe herself was off investigating the battlefield where I'd fought the Dragon Slayer and Mitsurugi, so she wouldn't be here today. Mio, too, had some prior commitment, which made it clear she wasn't as attached to the academy city as I'd thought. Perhaps she was starting to make connections with people other than me, which actually made me happy.

I finished getting dressed and stepped outside my room into the still quiet house, then I made my way down to the shop on the first floor.

That's right—about three days ago, Shiki and I moved out of the inn and, along with the other employees, started living on the second floor of the store we'd bought as is.

There were six rooms on the second floor. One for me, one for Shiki, one for the forest ogres, one for the eldwars, one for the "surprise" person, and one room left empty. For now, we were using some of the first floor as storage, which left the second floor entirely for living. The forest ogres and eldwars might rotate out periodically or return to the Demiplane, so I wasn't sure how often their rooms would actually be used for sleeping.

Each room was about the size of four to six tatami mats, around 3 by 4 meters—smaller than the rooms in the Demiplane. And thanks to Shiki's remodeling skills, I think they turned out quite stylish. I'd been trying to help out with the interior, but halfway through, I realized I had absolutely no taste for design and ended up leaving it all to Shiki. I'd noticed the same thing when we were remodeling the shop. For an ex-skeleton, he had a surprising eye for these things.

Taking a deep breath, I started inspecting the interior of the store that Shiki's taste and my direction had brought to life. My eyes skimmed over the assortment of the goods we'd taken inventory of and stocked late last night. I wasn't comfortable leaving everything up to others, so I'd stayed up tinkering with the layout—moving things around to make sure the display for the featured products didn't interfere with the flow of the shop.

Even though I knew I was just repeating what I'd done last night, I couldn't help myself.

As I worked with a small grin on my face, I noticed the faint light of dawn filtering in from outside.

It's almost time, huh?

We weren't opening until noon, but still, as soon as the sun rose, it started to feel real.

For now, we'd be selling the things Shiki had picked out—a variety of medicines, plus the energy drinks that I'd thought up and the others had helped bring to life, plus cut-up exotic fruit from the southern regions (well, actually, they were from the Demiplane). Although we'd decided to hold off on selling weapons, an eldwar would be offering weapon repair services. Apparently, they'd gotten overwhelmed with weapon-making requests at the Tsige branch, which was starting to strain their operations.

As for the Demiplane fruit, our experience in Tsige had taught us to cut them up and pack them in containers so the original shape wouldn't be recognizable.

It wasn't just the fruit's "benefits" that were the issue—we'd also discovered that the seeds posed a bit of a problem in the hands of others. So, we decided to advertise them as "exotic fruit, precut and easy to eat," and we sold them seedless. The way we could handle refrigeration with simple magick made me appreciate just how much easier things were with magick when compared to science.

As for the medicines, Shiki had been promoting them during his lectures—there were healing salves, versatile antidotes, and cold medicines that treated fever, pain, and other symptoms, along with potions that temporarily boosted a person's abilities. Shiki told me he'd tweaked the strength of each product just

enough to keep them “within the bounds of common sense,” which was reassuring.

As I busied myself organizing the shelves one last time, I realized this wasn’t the kind of shop that would be overflowing with customers on the first day. It was more likely the kind that would slowly build a reputation through word of mouth, eventually attracting regulars. For today, if we could just sell some energy drinks and fruit to curious customers, that would be enough to plant the seeds for the days ahead. Better to keep our sales targets low for now. Besides, if we flooded the market with too much product all at once, it could cause problems. *I just hope everything goes smoothly... I’m so nervous.*

Since I didn’t have any lectures today, I could stay in the store all day after we opened. Later at night, I’d head to the Demiplane and report back to Tomoe and Mio about how the first day had gone.

I stepped outside and glanced up at the sign hanging above the entrance—a hinoki wooden board engraved with the kanji for “Kuzunoha.” It was probably only readable by me, Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, and a few others, so yeah, maybe not the best for marketing. But I couldn’t resist. I’d added a pronunciation guide in the local language above the kanji, so it should be fine.

I’d picked hinoki, a cypress native to Japan, mainly for its scent, but the wood gave off a nice traditional Japanese vibe. Even better, an eldwar had praised the quality of the material as building timber.

After glancing once more at the sign for our new shop, I took a deep breath to steady myself and headed back inside.

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Around ten that morning, while the two forest ogres and Shiki were busy cleaning the shop, I received a message from eldwar Beren for the first time in a while. He informed me that the two eldwars and the helper were ready to be sent over. On his instructions, I went upstairs and opened the gate to the Demiplane, welcoming the three arrivals.

The person who appeared behind the two eldwar... looked familiar. Was this the helper? *But a hyuman... That's surprising. Where have I seen him before?*

The man greeted me with the confident grin of an old friend. "Long time no see, boss."

I froze. What hyuman had ever called me "boss"? Something about this felt unsettling. *Is this some kind of hint? Maybe my body remembers something my mind doesn't? But we'll have to communicate through writing... What a hassle.*

The confusion must have shown on my face, because the guy's voice took on a tone of uncertainty. "B-Boss? Tomoe-anee ordered me to come help you out."

Tomoe-anee? Now I was even more puzzled. I had no idea who this guy was. He was tall, lean, and muscular, with short, cropped silver hair, and long arms and legs. His sharp, upturned eyes and angular jaw gave him a wild, almost feral look, yet there was a cool determination in his gaze. *Wait... cool?* Suddenly, a memory of a not-so-tasty drink flashed in my mind. *Could it be... Could he be someone I met in Tsige?*

With a vague recollection, I decided to ask, "By any chance, did we meet in Tsige?"

His reaction was immediate, eyes going wide with disbelief. "Wh-What?! You don't remember me at all?!" he cried, a mix of shock and hurt in his voice.

Sorry, things have been a bit chaotic lately.

"It's me! Lime! Lime Latte, boss! I'm the adventurer you let off the hook a while back," he explained, now pointing at himself in exaggerated frustration.

Ah... right! The guy with the disgusting coffee name. Yeah, that's him.

He gave a satisfied smirk. "Looks like you finally remembered."

"But I thought I gave Tomoe a sword to apologize on my behalf. What brings you here?" I wrote.

Lime's expression softened as he recalled the event. "Yes, Tomoe-anee did give me a sword. And let me tell you, boss, it wasn't just any sword—it was a masterpiece, of a class I'd never even seen before. I nearly passed out when I saw it."

Wait, what? I had told Tomoe to leave the sword with the guild, and specifically instructed the eldwar not to go overboard with it. *What did Tomoe do this time...?*

“And since then,” Lime continued, “Tomoe-anee has taken me under her wing. She’s even let me go with her on some of her jobs.”

I didn’t hear about any of this, Tomoe. I felt surprised, and even a little betrayed, at being kept in the dark.

“She said I had potential,” Lime added, rubbing his nose with his finger and grinning like a kid. “Of course, I don’t have the skills yet to match that masterpiece of a weapon. But still, I wanted to repay the trust that Tomoe-anee and you, boss, have shown me, so I’ve been doing what I can to help her!” Lime’s eyes gleamed with determination as he gripped the sword at his side.

Tomoe, what exactly have you been teaching him these past few months?

Lime Latte pulled out the sword, a katana-like blade, and stared at it with a resolute expression.

A katana? You gave him a katana? To replace a dagger, it seems... a bit much.

The sword was striking, with a bright-red lacquered scabbard, a hilt wrapped in a traditional diamond pattern, and a flower motif engraved on its tsuba, the weapon’s handguard. I recognized it immediately. *That tsuba... It’s the same as Tomoe’s.*

This isn’t a coincidence. Tomoe probably gave it to him as a way to win his loyalty. She’s surprisingly clever when it comes to dealing with people, especially for a dragon.

“She’s had me report on the shady things going on in Tsige from time to time, and she’s even trained me. Every day has been an absolute joy!” Lime continued, beaming with excitement.

“I see,” I wrote.

It was clear he had no regrets about his current situation. *So, I guess that’s fine?*

“And that’s why Tomoe-anee sent me here to help out with the Kuzunoha Company. Please, use me any way you see fit, boss!” Lime finished in one breath, kneeling down and bowing deeply before me.

Tomoe, did you make this guy your spy in Tsige? You really are something else... I’m glad we’re on the same side.

I still wasn’t entirely sure I could trust him completely, but at the very least, Tomoe had judged him to be someone useful enough to bring into the Demiplane. *I guess I’ll have to rely on him.*

Still, this guy was supposed to be the top-ranked adventurer in the Tsige guild, right? Was it okay for him to just leave like this?

“I appreciate the offer, Lime-san, and I’ll take you up on it, but aren’t you the top adventurer in Tsige? Is it really okay for you to be here?” I wrote, holding up the speech bubble with some concern.

“You don’t need to worry about that, boss. I’m not the top adventurer anymore. Toa’s party has that honor. And, please, just call me Lime.”

“I see, so Toa’s group’s at the top now.”

The girls who had clung to Tomoe like little pilot fish had also grown quite a bit. It might not be long before they set foot once again into the depths of the Edge of the World.

“They’ve got a goal now, and they’re pushing themselves hard to reach it. I think they’ll go far,” Lime said, nodding approvingly.

“That would be nice,” I wrote. *“Coming from an experienced adventurer like you, I can trust those words.”*

“I’m not exactly a seasoned adventurer anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when I entrusted my life to Tomoe-anee, I submitted my retirement notice to the Guild.”

“Retirement?”

I kept writing as calmly as I could, but inside, I was pretty shaken. *Does that mean he quit being an adventurer?!*

“I just want to see the things you and Tomoe-anee were working so hard for, even if I can’t fully understand them. Believe it or not, I don’t have a single regret about it,” Lime said with a determined grin.

Wait, I didn’t brainwash this guy, did I? What exactly is Tomoe aiming for, other than her Edo fascination? As for me, my goals were limited to learning about my parents and taking a swing at that goddess—oh, and running a business. What did Tomoe say to Lime to get him on board? The thought worried me.

“If you have no regrets, then I won’t say anything more... but the job I had in mind for you here is just watching over the store. Are you sure you’re okay with that?” I asked. Wouldn’t it be a waste to use him for security work? He could probably handle duties at the academy...

“That’s fine by me. Also, Tomoe-sama asked me to keep an eye on the rumors and happenings around town...” Lime’s eyes asked the question he hadn’t voiced aloud: *What do you want me to do?*

So, she wants him to be a spy here too? That made sense. It would definitely be helpful to have someone gathering information. I could rely on Shiki for anything within the academy, but for what was going on around town, Lime might be the better choice. He seemed more suited to it, and it wasn’t the kind of work the forest ogres or the eldwars could do so easily.

Maybe I should have him teach Aqua and Eris as well. After all, Lime had once been a prominent figure among the adventurers in Tsige. He probably wouldn’t have any trouble handling people.

“Great. I’ll rely on you for that as well,” I told Lime. *“But if anything costs money, don’t hesitate to tell me. And before you get involved in any dangerous information, report to us and let us make the judgment. I don’t like taking unnecessary risks.”*

“Got it. Well then, I’ll start by helping with the cleaning while I take a look at what we’re selling,” Lime said, giving a quick nod before getting to work.

Well. That was unexpected. But I have a human worker and one who seems like he'll be a huge help.

Thanks to Lime Latte's cooperation, the first day of the Kusunoha Company's grand opening went off without a hitch. With his smooth handling, even when the bigwigs from the Merchant Guild and some local VIPs showed up unannounced, Shiki and I managed to pull it off and greet them properly. I should have expected people to drop by for greetings on the first day of business, but I'd completely forgotten about that. *Close call.*

I was a little disappointed that we didn't receive a single request for weapon repairs. But I guess even with student-level weapons, people value trust when it comes to something they rely on to protect their lives.

The precut fruit sold out by midafternoon, and even when we put out additional stock in the evening, it was gone in no time. As for the medicines, they sold steadily from the moment we opened, and when the students I'd promoted the products to during lectures showed up in the evening, we sold out almost immediately.

Maybe I should've set a purchase limit.

The cold medicine didn't sell much, likely because people weren't familiar with it. Still, I figured once people got sick and word spread about its effectiveness, sales would pick up. I couldn't help but wonder, what would the concept of a "general cold medicine" be in this world? When I'd first explained it to Shiki, he'd gotten so excited that he'd immediately started working on it, calling it revolutionary. Maybe no one here had thought of making something like that before?

Maybe calling it a weak, general-purpose medicine would make more sense than using a term like "cure-all." I'll have to think that through.

Luckily, the energy drinks did quite well. Most customers who bought medicine also ended up picking up a few bottles. Maybe the low price was the key. On the other hand, our enhancement potions didn't sell as well. Given their effects, they were probably more suited for adventurers, so maybe they would sell better in Tsige. Since we'd put weapon production on hold for now, it would

be good to introduce a new product. Besides, if these potions spread through the academy, they might end up being restricted for use during exams.

Anyway...

The Kuzunoha Company has only just begun.

We'll probably face competition, get questioned about our products, or even face pressure from different groups. This is where the real work of running the business begins. I'm just a teenager, surrounded by non-humans, so I have no idea how far we can go, but... I'll give it my all.

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The trading company was doing well.

I should have seen it coming, but not long after the store opened and gained some attention, issues like reselling and stockpiling started popping up. My solution was to limit the number of items each customer could purchase and then make some “requests” to those who were obviously reselling. I also made peace with the fact that I couldn't 100 percent eliminate the problem. Getting worked up over a game of cat and mouse would just be a waste of energy.

The lectures were going well too.

Thanks to the students that Bright-sensei had sent my way, plus a few more who came through word of mouth, I had managed to retain five students. This actually wasn't a bad number, I thought. Having too many would just be a hassle anyway.

All five were scholarship students, and all of them were highly motivated to become stronger. For the average student, my lectures were probably too intense or carried too many risks, making them less than appealing.

Technically, I had left the door open for additional students, but I wasn't expecting many more. For now, I had the ones who stayed participate in some light “experiments” during class—nothing that would put their health or lives at risk, of course.

During the lectures, I set up a weakening barrier over the entire practice area. It made the class look flashy, but the academy judged that it wasn't dangerous enough to cause concern. That was exactly what I wanted. The only thing that worried me was that the barrier's effectiveness should have decreased as its range expanded, but lately, it felt like the barrier was actually getting stronger the more I used it.

I hadn't experienced any interference from other instructors, and things remained peaceful.

In other words, life in the academy city was running smoothly.

And yet...

After finishing my lecture, I went to the library, which had become part of my routine. It didn't take long to find the book I needed, and I set it to the side of a desk before sitting down, slumping forward and letting my head rest on my arm.

A long sigh escaped my lips.

I was feeling somewhat cornered.

"Never would have guessed this world lets humans practice polygamy," I mused. "Apparently, it's a sacred institution ordained by the Goddess..."

I found that I was talking to myself more and more since coming to the academy, especially because no one there understood Japanese. Still, I tried to be mindful of it—the last thing I needed was more people giving me weird looks.

But really, polygamy? That goddess sure knows how to make a mess of things. What an idiot.

In my limited imagination, I'd always associated polygamy with a harem—a pleasant fantasy, really, for the benefit of men. *I was so naive. So, so naive.*

After seeing how human society actually worked, I finally realized the truth: this wasn't about having a bunch of wives and living in bliss. No, this system exposed an even greater disparity among men.

The women flocked to the most successful men—the beautiful, strong, and wealthy ones. The reality was that not every man could have a harem. In fact, there was an increasing number of men who couldn't even marry a single woman. *What kind of cruel goddess are you, making a system like this? What are you trying to achieve with all this selection?*

It's not that I feel trapped because this system means I won't be able to get married.

It's the opposite.

I'd been at the academy for a few months, and about two weeks ago, it had started.

The confessions.

For his part, Shiki had been getting confessed to by women since our first few days of lectures. I never felt envious nor did I try to comfort him—I just let him whine about it without much concern.

Once the company was up and running, and I'd started to gain some recognition at the academy, things began to change. It all began when one of the students called me over, saying she wanted to “ask me some questions.” I didn't recognize her from the lectures, and we'd never met anywhere else.

“Sensei, are you married yet?”

That was... the beginning of the nightmare.

“No, *why do you ask?*” I had responded innocently.

“Then, I'd be fine with being your third wife or later, so will you marry me?”

My head was instantly filled with question marks. There wasn't a single trace of the nervous excitement or the pounding heartbeat I used to feel when a junior or a friend from my club confessed to me back in my old world.

I was just... stunned. I mean, being proposed to by a girl I'd never even met before? There was no way for that to feel real. Was she joking? Nope, her expression remained completely serious as I stared at her in shock. I thought she must have been crazy.

I knew it was rude, but I just sighed and wrote, “*Sorry, not interested,*” and got the hell out of there.

The next confession came later that evening. Actually, it wasn’t even a confession—it was another proposal, just like the first one. After that, whether I was in the shop, out and about, or even at the academy, I started getting called out and proposed to on the spot.

The most baffling part was the line, “Please make me your nth wife.” And by n, I mean anything but one—usually the number was between three and five.

Polygamy... It’s really the worst.

Apparently, because I was running a business, had some wealth, and was reasonably capable, they were willing to overlook my looks and settle for being the third wife or later, thinking they could ride the coattails of my success. Some of them even had that ulterior motive written all over their faces, like they were just after money to restore their families. I could practically see their schemes.

They wanted to leave the love and childbearing to the first and second wives, while they just sat back and did nothing.

I guess that’s what this is really about.

There was one time when a girl who was totally my type came up to me in a lab coat. I couldn’t even tell if she was asking for research funding or proposing to me—it was that confusing.

“If you’re willing to be my first wife, I’ll give you all the money you want, and we can get married,” I jokingly wrote, figuring I’d lighten the mood.

Her face twisted in disgust, and she shot back, “No thanks!!!” before running off so fast you’d have thought her life was on the line.

I’d been feeling pretty low after getting hit with so many of these insulting proposals, but that one really got to me.

Seriously, this is exhausting. This isn’t some lucky phase where I’m popular; I’ve just been marked as prey. Honestly, it was easier when people didn’t even see me as a person. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.

It hadn't happened in the library yet, but it felt like only a matter of time.

Why was the library a safe zone, anyway? Was there some kind of rule, or was someone keeping them at bay? Whatever the reason, I was grateful.

I raised my head and grabbed the book in front of me, trying to shift my thoughts. *All right, time to study.*

The shop was closed today, anyway. At first, I hadn't taken any days off, but I noticed that most shops around here were closed once or twice a week. Since we were already open late, I figured it was fine to have a day off too, so I made the lecture day my day off.

I remembered how the smaller of the forest ogre girls had raised her fist to the sky and yelled, "Gloriaaaa!" when I mentioned taking a day off. *She's still a mystery... I really don't understand her.*

"Oh my, are you reading a book on religion today? You really read a wide variety of books, Raidou-sensei. Magick, combat, history, geography, culture, even about demi-humans... I believe the only subjects I haven't seen you delve into are fiction, mathematics, or biographies." The voice was a familiar one; it was Eva, the librarian.

"Eva? You startled me. Do you really remember every book I've read?" I wrote.

"Of course. You see, I'm quite interested in you, Raidou-sensei."

"Please, spare me. Don't tell me you're about to ask me to marry you as well."

"Ah, so that's what's been wearing you down lately. It seems you've had many young ladies eager to become your wife... though in name only. My condolences, Sensei."

"Right now, this library is my only safe haven. They make fun of how I look, but as soon as they find out I have money, they flock to me, hoping to leech off it. Honestly, what do they even think marriage is?"

Eva's smile faded into a wry expression. "Well, a lot of the students here are daughters of nobles or wealthy merchant families. For them, marriage isn't always a continuation of love—it's often about strategy. That might explain why so many approach it that way."

She always spoke intelligently, providing grounded explanations. It made her easy to talk to, and I liked that.

I shook my head. *“So, it’s like a political marriage, then? To think they’re already thinking about things like that at such a young age... Is that normal for nobles and the wealthy?”*

“I suppose you could say they simply arrive at those thoughts earlier than others, thoughts that most people will have at some point in their lives,” Eva replied.

“I see. Personally, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with a marriage based purely on love.”

Well, really, I don’t just think it’s not wrong; I believe marriage should be a relationship formed through mutual feelings of love.

Eva looked surprised, but she quickly recovered. “You’re so... No, I suppose I should say you’re pure, Raidou-sensei. As kids, we often imagine marriage as a continuation of affection. But as we grow older, our feelings become tied to various interests. And naturally, words—especially those like ‘love’—don’t always carry the meaning they used to.”

I was pretty sure she’d been about to call me “innocent.” Her words were practical, even a bit cynical. *Is there some deeper reason she’s paying attention to me? If so, it’s a little sad.*

“Then, Eva, what do you think love means to adults?” I wrote, curious.

“Well... sometimes it can be just a tool for negotiation. Would that disillusion you, Sensei?”

“Who knows? But I’m afraid I’ve lost the mood to read today. I’ll leave it here.”

Love as a tool for negotiation, huh? It wasn’t a connection I’d ever made before. Hearing it from someone like Eva, who didn’t seem like the type to say such things, made it even more shocking.

I handed her the book and left the library.

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“So, Jin, what did you want to talk about?” I wrote, as I found myself stopped by one of the students after leaving the academy.

Jin was a swordsman who hadn’t missed one of my lectures. He also practiced magick and seemed particularly impressed with Shiki’s style; I’d often seen him sparring with the former lich as he learned the fundamentals.

Out of the five students, I had managed to remember the names of two: Jin, and Abelia, a girl who used a combination of archery and magick. Jin primarily fought with a sword, using magick as support, while Abelia equally used her bow and magick. As far as I could tell, both showed some potential. Abelia, however, seemed more driven by her feelings for Shiki than by the desire for strength. Maybe that’s why her learning and progress had been faster than expected—love does tend to boost learning abilities.

Jin had approached me, and before I knew it, we were having lunch together.

Apparently, Abelia was at a spa today.

A spa.

The first time I heard that word at the academy, I was dumbfounded. *They have spas here?* After hearing more about it and doing some research in the library, I found out that the concept of a spa had been brought to this world by the Goddess, as part of her obsession with beauty. The idea spread, and now, spas were as common as beauty facilities.

Before introducing something as ridiculous as that, shouldn’t she have brought over some more useful technology for humans? I was genuinely baffled. For similar reasons, there were surprisingly familiar names for cosmetics in this world, and I’d even been asked if my company could source them.

I’d politely turned those requests down with: “We don’t stock those products yet, and we don’t have plans to at the moment.” Honestly, I didn’t want Tomoe to get any ideas and start talking about things like rouge or powder. She and Mio already had enough on their plates, and I didn’t want to add to their troubles.

For now, I lacked the energy to even think about Abelia, spas, or cosmetics.

After some deliberation, I decided to have lunch at Ironclad. I didn't go there as often as Shiki did, but I liked the taste of their food and the atmosphere, and I found it relaxing. It was Jin's first time at the restaurant, and he looked around curiously, his nose twitching as he caught the scent of the dishes being prepared.

I requested a private room in the back, and once we were seated, Jin finally spoke up.

"Oh, that's right. Sensei, you're from Tsige, aren't you?"

"That's right," I wrote.

"Well, there are two students here at the academy who are currently on leave," Jin began.

"Go on," I wrote.

"They're not scholarship students, but they're pretty skilled. Talented, even..."

"If they're so skilled, why are they on leave?"

"Apparently, they fell ill."

Ill? He started by mentioning Tsige and now these two sick students. They're around student age, so... Could it be...?

"Are you talking about Rembrandt's daughters?" I wrote as realization dawned on me.

"So, you know of them. I figured as much. I'd heard that the Rembrandt Company is pretty powerful in Tsige, so I thought there might be a chance you were familiar with them," Jin replied, his expression uneasy.

"But what about them?"

"I'm not sure if they were really sick or not, but it seems they're going to return to the academy soon. That's why I wanted to give you a warning, Sensei."

"A warning? And, Jin... you don't seem too happy about the idea of your classmates coming back. Normally, you'd appreciate skilled people, wouldn't

you?”

“Well, yes, that’s true... But, Sensei, you wouldn’t know about this, but those sisters...”

“If you’ve got a warning, then spit it out,” I urged, growing more puzzled by his hesitation. *Why is he being so vague? What’s he trying to say?*

“Their personalities are the *worst*. They’re classic nouveau riche, flaunting their beauty. And to make things worse, they’re excellent students, which only adds to their terrible nature. Not just students—there are even instructors who’ve been completely ruined by those two,” he said, a bitter edge in his voice.

...

Wait, what?

Were they really that awful?

Hold on a second. Now that I think about it, I’d never really had a proper conversation with them. The only thing they ever said to me was to run.

As for their supposed beauty, well, all three of them—including their mother—had looked like monsters when I’d last seen them.

I’d assumed that since Rembrandt was a decent guy, his daughters and wife would be good people too...



So, they're nouveau riche with bad personalities? Seriously...

"You didn't know? Well, Sensei, you've been... how should I put this, targeted from all sides lately," Jin said sympathetically, interpreting my silence as confirmation.

"Don't remind me. It gives me a headache."

"When those sisters come back, you should really make sure you don't get on their radar. They've got a serious thing for good-looking guys, so you'll probably be safe, but you never know. And if Shiki catches their eye, it could mess up the lectures, so seriously, be careful. Oh, and this hotpot? It's amazing. I had no idea it would be this good," Jin said, happily savoring his meal.

...

Did he just insult me? Not only that, but I had the distinct feeling that his real concern was Shiki, not me.

"I'll let Shiki know as well," I wrote, trying to move past the subtle jab.

"Thanks, Sensei! Is this place a regular spot for you? It's got a real old-school charm. Mind if I come here regularly too?"

"Do what you want. Oh, and Shiki comes here a lot as well. Since you're here, why don't I order his favorite dish for you if you're still hungry?"

"Really?! I'd love that! Wait, what about you, Sensei?"

"I just remembered I have something to take care of. Feel free to relax, I'll cover the bill," I wrote, standing up.

As I left, I made sure to order Jin a cream hotpot for the "they've got a thing for good-looking guys" comment. With that small bit of payback settled, I stepped outside, my head swirling with even more worries.

But... the Rembrandt sisters, really? Are they actually that bad?

I'd seen how much Rembrandt doted on his daughters, and I'd believed without a doubt that they were lovely girls. Maybe he was just the type of father who found his daughter adorable, no matter what she was like.

Well, if they're really coming back here soon, I guess I'll find out for myself.

I only had to fend off two more marriage proposals on my way back to the shop.

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Apparently, Jin's information about the Rembrandt sisters was pretty accurate.

After asking around, I confirmed that their reputation at the academy was overwhelmingly bad. In fact, I couldn't find anyone with anything good to say about them.

Since I couldn't leave Rotsgard and head back to Tsige myself, I asked Tomoe, Mio, and Beren—who was managing the Tsige branch—to investigate the matter. That had been a little while ago.

And now, today, Tomoe had asked me to come back to the Demiplane, saying there were several reports ready to be discussed.

To be honest, I hadn't spent much time in the Demiplane lately. Actually, I hadn't spent much time there at all, except to practice archery once in a while. It wasn't because I had a problem with anyone there. The reason was much simpler.

"Shiki, are you ready to go?" I asked. *Guess I can't put off the inevitable any longer.*

"Yes, I'm ready. I've organized everything I need to report. As for the shop, I think Lime and the others can handle it for a day," Shiki replied calmly.

"Wait, are we opening tomorrow?" I asked, feeling a pang of worry. *Wouldn't it be better to close for the day?*

"It's not an official holiday, and we haven't been open for long. It's not ideal to close randomly. I've told them not to make any major decisions and just to hold any incoming requests, so there's no need to worry."

I guess I'll trust him, then. If the manager says it's fine...

"All right... Let's go," I said, and without waiting for a response, I created a Gate of Mist.

Carrying a sense of unease, I returned to the familiar Demiplane.

The moment I stepped through the gate, I was immediately hit by the thick, heavy air. The scent was rich, and the warmth seeped into my skin. Just standing there caused me to break into a light sweat, and the humid air filled my lungs. Was it just me, or was this thick air harder to breathe?

Yes, the climate in the Demiplane, which had once been unstable, had settled a few weeks ago into an unbearable tropical heat—far worse than the rainy season back in Japan. I’ve never been to a tropical rainforest, but I imagine this is what it would feel like.

A perpetual summer wouldn’t be so bad if it were mild, but the suffocating heat here was far beyond any reasonable summer. This was why I’d been avoiding the Demiplane.

It might seem trivial, but seriously, it’s rough!

For a while, I’d hoped the climate would change again, but there was no sign of that happening. I couldn’t help but worry that this extreme weather might start affecting our agricultural work here. I’d asked Tomoe to look into it, and she’d promised to give me a report once she had enough data. In the meantime, I knew that no news was good news... at least for the plants.

“Still hot here,” I muttered.

“Indeed. With the academy feeling like spring, it makes the heat feel even more oppressive here,” Shiki agreed.

“And yet you look perfectly fine. You’re not even sweating.”

“I’m not particularly bothered by the heat. Raidou—uh, I mean, Young Master.”

“You can call me whatever you like here,” I said, shrugging.

“It seems Mio-dono doesn’t like it when I call you Raidou-sama,” Shiki admitted, scratching his forehead with a wry smile. He really did pay attention to the little things.

I just gave him a small nod in response, brushing aside the thick, clinging tension as I stepped into my home. I couldn’t believe it was nighttime. *Seriously,*

what's going on here?

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“Welcome home, Young Master!”

The moment I opened the doors to the hall Tomoe had summoned me to, I was greeted by a chorus of voices.

Whoa! My heart's pounding! What is this?! What's going on?!

I stood there with my mouth open, looking around the room. It was packed with the residents of the Demiplane.

Is everyone... here?

There were dozens of people gathered around a massive table, with no regard for species. Everyone was mingling together.

Wait, did we always have such a huge table? No, definitely not. That must have been made recently. It's impressive... but wait—

The table was big enough for over a hundred people to sit around it comfortably. *What kind of tree did they cut down to make this? Was it a world tree or something?!*

And this hall... it wasn't just a meeting room. It was like a banquet hall fit for royalty!

As I scanned the room, still shaking my head in disbelief, I saw that everyone was smiling warmly at me. Tomoe, Mio, and even Ema, the orc, began walking toward me.

Tomoe's expression clearly showed she was pleased with her successful prank, even if she didn't say anything. *Damn it! She's having way too much fun with this!*

“Shiki, are you okay?” I asked, turning to him.

“Yes, Young Master,” he replied, as calm as ever.

...

He wasn't fazed at all. In fact, he was smiling. *Wait a minute...*

Were you in on this too?!

"Welcome home, Young Master," Tomoe and Mio said simultaneously. Ema, standing a few feet behind them, bowed deeply.

"Ah, uh... I'm back," I muttered, still confused.

"You did great, Shiki. Just like we planned, you kept him completely in the dark." Tomoe grinned, clearly enjoying herself.

"I'm sorry, Young Master. Tomoe insisted on surprising you... and, well, you haven't been coming back to visit us lately. I hope you'll forgive this little prank," Mio said, sounding apologetic, though she'd clearly been part of the plan.

...

Ahhh! I've been played!

"Haaah... I really was surprised. I'm back! And, uh... sorry I haven't been coming back much!" I said, after letting out a long sigh.

"Well, we understand that the heat is a bit much for you, Young Master. Still, everyone would like you to visit more often. Now, here," Tomoe said as she handed me a glass.

It had the distinctive smell of alcohol. The liquid inside was cloudy and pink. I recognized it as a popular fruit-based drink from Tsige.

I could feel the expectant gazes of everyone around me. *Ah, right. This is a banquet, and I'm the main guest, so holding a glass means...*

"Cheers!" I declared, raising my glass high.

Cheers and the clinking of glasses erupted from all around the hall.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? Tomoe, Mio. And you too, Ema," I said, turning to them.

Mio, at some point, had already filled a plate with food. *Wow, she's fast. But it's a party, so there's nothing wrong with her digging in and enjoying herself.*

“Indeed! You’ve been leaving all the investigating to us, while you’re off at the academy teaching kids and running a business,” Tomoe remarked with a teasing grin.

Mio stayed quiet, her focus on her plate.

“Everyone misses you, Young Master. Please, come see us here a little more often,” Ema added with a gentle smile, though her words carried a slight reprimand.

They were right, of course. I had been avoiding the Demiplane lately. It wasn’t just the heat—it was that sticky, heavy warmth that made it so miserable. But still, I couldn’t keep using that as an excuse to stay away forever.

I guess I should come back more often.

Things were going well with my studies at the academy. But it wasn’t like I needed to know every single thing about this world. I didn’t even know everything about Japan, where I’d lived my whole life.

Once I’ve figured out the basics, I need to move on to the next stage. After all, I’m not learning just for the sake of learning.

I experienced a twinge of guilt whenever I read a book, knowing that Tomoe was basically copying everything straight into her head. It was as if I was just the light scanning a document in a photocopier. I reassured myself by thinking, *It’s not like I’m selling the knowledge, so it’s fine... right?* I know, that makes me sound kind of like a small-time crook.

Hmm, Mio’s been a lot quieter than usual. But she was talking normally just a while ago, so I don’t think anything’s wrong.

Just as I was thinking that, Mio approached. “Um, if you’d like, I brought this for you,” she said, holding out a plate of food.

Wait, Mio’s bringing me food? She must’ve changed after interacting with adventurers and townspeople. You’ve grown, Mio!

“Thanks, Mio,” I told her. “Wow, this looks a lot like something I had in Tsige. Hmm, but the flavor is even richer—it’s just how I like it. This is delicious!”

The finer points were a little different, but it seemed like someone at our branch in Tsige had liked the dish enough to recreate it here in the Demiplane. I wasn't complaining; I hadn't seen any Tsige cuisine in the academy city yet, so the food was a welcome flash of nostalgia.

"What's wrong, Mio?" I asked, noticing she hadn't touched the food yet. "Aren't you going to have some?"

Despite my urging, Mio kept her eyes shut, as if enduring something. *What's going on? Mio's really acting strange today.*

"Mio?" I asked again, concerned.

"Hahaha! Young Master, Mio is just overwhelmed with emotion!" Tomoe interjected, laughing heartily.

"Um, Tomoe? Overwhelmed?" I repeated, confused.

"That's right. You see, the dish you just ate was actually made by Mio herself," Tomoe explained with a wide grin.

What?!

"She *made* it? Mio?" I asked, completely taken aback.

"That's right. It seems she's developed an interest in cooking recently. She's been studying under the chefs in Tsige, learning how to cook from them. She's even been helping us recreate some traditional Japanese dishes. Unfortunately, those weren't ready in time for today. But most of the dishes you see here? They were made under Mio's supervision."

I glanced around the table again, taking in all the food laid out before me—the large main dishes, the neatly sliced and arranged fruit, the soup simmering in the pot...

Mio made all of this...

That's amazing.

To think she'd only been cooking for a few months, yet she was already able to replicate dishes at a level close to what I'd eaten at restaurants. When I'd had a similar level of experience with cooking... *Ah, right. I remember that*

disaster with the rice cooker steam that left me with severe blisters. I'd rather forget that episode...

I couldn't help but feel a pang of despair at the difference in our learning abilities, but at the same time, I genuinely admired Mio's talent.

"Mio, you're amazing. That was really delicious," I said.

Mio trembled slightly at my words, then she slowly opened her tightly closed eyes. Her face was glowing with satisfaction.

"I never realized how wonderful it is to make food for someone, Young Master!" Mio said, her voice brimming with enthusiasm.

"Huh? But you've been practicing for a while, haven't you?" I asked, suddenly puzzled. "Didn't you start cooking because you liked it?"

"No, I didn't understand it back then. But today, I finally learned what true joy is..."

"I-I see?" I responded, a bit taken aback by her intensity.

"Yes! Next time, I'll make something even more delicious! Much, much more delicious!" Mio declared, and then, without warning, she turned and walked away. I thought she was going back to the table to eat, but instead, she headed in the opposite direction and left the hall entirely.

Wait, what just happened?

"Good grief, Mio," Tomoe sighed. "From the look of things, she's going to skip the report meeting altogether. Well, all she had to report was a few food-related matters and some news from Tsige, and I'm already aware of that, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"Tomoe, uh... where's Mio going?" I asked.

"Probably to Tsige. There's apparently an adventurer there with rare cooking techniques, and she's been learning from him in exchange for helping him with some other stuff." Tomoe chuckled. "Judging by her enthusiasm, that adventurer is probably in for a long night in the kitchen."

What a hassle. For an adventurer, cooking is likely just a side skill. But if Mio's taking care of things for him, I guess he must have some talent in his actual

field. Well, I shouldn't worry. She seems more focused on the cooking than anything else, so at least the adventurer isn't in danger.

"Well, as long as she's enjoying herself, I guess it's fine," I decided.

"Your flexibility is much appreciated, Young Master. Now, there are quite a few people who can't wait to see you. Shall we go say hi together? We can have the report meeting afterward, when we can relax a little more. Oh, don't get too drunk, okay? Just tipsy at most. Shiki, that goes for you too," Tomoe warned, grinning playfully.

"Going to be a long night, isn't it?" I muttered.

"I won't drink tonight. The reports later will probably impact our next actions," Shiki said earnestly.

Tomoe didn't miss a beat. "Shiki, you're always so serious. A little drink can help stimulate creative ideas, you know. Ema, can you have some food brought to Young Master's room along with the reports later?"

"Yep, I'll take care of it. Everyone's so excited to see Young Master again. I'm sure quite a few will overindulge tonight, so I'll get some people to help take care of the inevitable drunks," Ema replied as she bustled off into the crowd.

Ema's going to end up taking care of everything tonight... She's fond of drinking herself, so I feel a bit bad for giving her this job. I'll make sure to have some food and drinks sent her way later to make up for it.

Tomoe, though... She really does act like an old-time detective when she's like this, planning out strategies over drinks. If her abilities are as sharp as her enthusiasm, we should hear some good reports tonight...

"Well, Young Master, the eldwar and the others are already eagerly waiting. They've been doing excellent work, so I hope you'll take the time to commend them," Tomoe urged, her smile genuine.

"Yes, I will," I replied.

I had no objections. Everyone had been working hard, and even though I hadn't been around much, I could see how dedicated they'd been.

Tomoe didn't even need to remind me—I was already eager to thank everyone personally.

With Tomoe and Shiki by my side, I made my way to greet the residents who had lined up to see me.

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“Young Master, I'm sure you must be tired, but can we begin the reports?” Tomoe asked.

“Yes, of course. Go ahead,” I said.

The party was still going for a few heavy drinkers, though most of the guests had either passed out or were satiated for the night. Those who remained were no doubt planning to stay up until morning.

For the report meeting, we'd all left the hall and gathered in my room. Inside, there was a decent spread of food, along with drinks and water—enough for a light snack as we discussed the night's reports.

And so, the critical meeting began.

“To start, there's one important... or rather, potentially important thing to report. It's about the investigation of the battle site where you fought Mitsurugi,” Tomoe began.

“Oh? What did you find? You said it *might* be important?” I asked, curious about what they had uncovered. That place held many potential clues—traces of Mitsurugi, Sofia, and the ring that could seal the Goddess's powers. What had they discovered?

“During the investigation, we encountered a hero,” Tomoe stated calmly.

“A... a hero?!” I stammered.

A hero, as in one of the people the Goddess kidnapped from Earth, like me?!

“Yep. The one I met was the hero of the Gritonia Empire, a man named Iwahashi Tomoki. Judging by his appearance, he seemed about your age, Young Master.”

“Wait, Gritonia? Didn’t you say you were heading to Limia?” I was confused. The two countries were neighboring powers, but Tomoe had been investigating a location near Limia’s capital. What was a hero from Gritonia doing there?

“It seems he was up to something unsavory. To be blunt... he was a scoundrel. I didn’t sense he’d be any threat to you at the academy, so I decided to leave him be.”

I’m listening to a report about a hero, right?

“It appears the hero of Gritonia is driven by base desires. He may very well be planning to start a war between humans once the demon threat is dealt with. And accompanying him was the imperial princess—”

“Wait, hold on. The imperial princess? The hero of Gritonia was traveling with her?” I interrupted, struggling to wrap my head around the situation.

“Yes, and they seemed quite close. In that regard, you could learn something from him, Young Master,” Tomoe teased with a mischievous grin.

So, he’s getting involved with a princess? From a major empire, no less? This Iwahashi guy sure is living it up.

And he’s supposed to be around my age too. *I’m not sure whether to feel relieved or nervous about meeting a hero who’s my age...*

“And?” I prompted, choosing to ignore Tomoe’s comment.

“When I read the princess’s thoughts, I caught a glimpse of the word ‘gun,’” Tomoe explained. “There were also images of gunpowder, so it looks like they might be trying to create firearms. But I couldn’t fully access her memories. As expected of an imperial figure, her deeper thoughts were well guarded.”

“Guns? In this world? But magick’s so much stronger—what’s the point of making guns? Even for a nation like Gritonia?”

What are they trying to do? They’ll only fan the flames of war...

In a war against the demons, guns would be utterly ineffective. Sure, maybe it depended on how they were used, but with human armies that relied on simplistic tactics like leveling up and attacking head-on, there was no way they

could effectively deploy guns against the demons, who were likely far more advanced tactically.

I knew this was a bad development. Even if they were being foolish, if a militaristic empire's princess was behind the project, there had to be a reason. And whatever that reason was, it wasn't going to be peaceful.

In fact, there was a chance they might use the guns in a war between humans. If they developed small firearms, they could become practical assassination tools. A decorated gun might not even be recognized as a weapon.

So, that hero from Gritonia... Tomoki Iwahashi, was it? Why would he introduce guns to this world? What was he thinking?

Tomoe, who had been silent for a moment, finally spoke.

"We didn't get that far. To be honest, they were such an unpleasant group that I did consider just killing them without telling you, Young Master. But in the end, I held back. I figured I should ask for your decision first."

"So, you didn't fight them. All right. I'll meet with him myself before we decide how to handle this. Until then, leave him be."

Tomoki Iwahashi... I thought, now more curious about both him and the empire's plans.

As for the guns... I wanted to crush that idea before it became widespread. The thought of weapons from my world being introduced here, and the mass slaughter they could lead to, made my skin crawl.

Of course, I couldn't just barge in. Gritonia was a powerful nation, and I'd have to plan carefully before making any moves. Plus, I needed to find out why Tomoki had even considered creating guns in the first place. Otherwise, there was a risk that others might follow suit and start developing similar weapons.

This could turn into a real headache.

"All right. Now, about the information on the Goddess's power or the Dragon Slayer—there wasn't much to report. We thoroughly searched the area, but we didn't find anything," Tomoe added.

"I see. Thank you for your efforts. And you said there was information about me?" I asked.

It turned out the information in question wasn't much. I'd asked Tomoe to look into my own situation, given that both demons and humans had witnessed me during the battle. I needed to know what was being said about me within Limia.

"There hasn't been any information about you circulating," she reported. "However, it seems that shortly after the battle, there was someone who caused quite a stir. Most of the rumors are actually about them."

"Quite... a stir? What happened?" I asked, feeling uneasy. While I was grateful that attention on me had faded, this sounded dangerous.

Tomoe paused for a moment, working hard to organize her thoughts. Once she seemed ready, she continued.

"We couldn't get any specific details from the survivors, but it seems someone unleashed a devastating blow that created a massive lake, ending the battle by force," Tomoe explained.

"A lake?" I repeated, incredulous.

"Yeah, it combined with several nearby rivers and made a rather large body of water."

"What kind of monster can do that?! That's even worse than Sofia. Are you sure this wasn't the work of the Goddess?" I asked, only half joking.

Tomoe suddenly let out a snort, nearly spitting in surprise.

"Tomoe?"

"I'm sorry. I don't think it was the Goddess. There are lots of rumors about this individual, but no one knows what they look like. However, it's clear that they're being referred to as 'The Wicked One,'" she clarified.

The Wicked One...? Despite all the chaos with Sofia and Mitsurugi, someone else had made such a spectacle that my involvement was practically forgotten.

I'm lucky to be alive, honestly...

“The Wicked One, huh? To think someone like that was on the battlefield... This just makes it even more clear that I need to get stronger. Shiki, I know you’re busy, but make sure you don’t skip your training, OK?”

“Y-Yes! Of course, Young Master!” Shiki responded, sounding unusually formal.

What’s with him? He seemed overly stiff, even though the whole surprise was long over. He should just relax.

“Anyway,” Tomoe continued, “because of that The Wicked One, our investigation was slowed down. As for the device that sealed the Goddess’s power, I’m afraid we’ve hit a dead end. However, there was some promising information regarding telepathy that we uncovered. I plan to investigate further in the coming days.”

“Promising information?” I asked, intrigued.

“This came from the demons. It seems they’ve developed a revolutionary concept—there’s a special form of telepathy that can be used for secret communications. It might offer some clues for improving telepathy, like you want. That’s the key takeaway from this expedition.”

“Huh, special telepathy. That does sound interesting. But Tomoe, ‘key takeaway’? What about the spies, Lime, Tsige, and the Rembrandt sisters? You haven’t told me anything about that yet!”

“Ah, that. Well, about the spies, it’s just more effective to use people to gather information about hyuman cities—Tsige or otherwise. Lime just happened to be the first because he showed promise. As for the information on the Rembrandt sisters you asked for, they haven’t left home much, especially since they were sick for so long, so there wasn’t much to dig up. I thought about asking their dad directly, but all I got was a father’s bragging about his daughters. When I tried to peek inside his memories, they were so exaggerated and idealized that they were unbearable to look at. So, in the end, we’re not sure how accurate anything is. Since you’ll meet them soon enough, I think it can wait until then. After all, they’re just two hyuman girls—hardly a problem worth worrying about.”

Wow, so Tomoe couldn't find any negative rumors about them? *Are they just acting nice around their dad?*

"I'd say it's a bit more of an issue when it's making my life at the academy stressful," I sighed. "But you're right about needing people to get information in human cities. Since Lime started helping out, we've gathered a lot more intel on Rotsgard. It's been really helpful—thanks, Tomoe."

"I see why Mio feels the way she does," Tomoe replied, her face softening into a smile. "You're too kind. Thank you. I've trained Lime well. He's even beating Mondo in sparring matches now. I hope you'll use him to his full potential."

I really meant what I said—Tomoe had been working hard for me, even if her actions sometimes went beyond what I'd expected. And seeing her smile like that, understanding Mio's feelings, made it all the more endearing.

Mondo, huh? It had been a while since I'd heard that name. The muscle-headed forest ogre. I hadn't seen him in quite some time, but if even Aqua and Eris had gotten good enough to handle customers, Mondo's demeanor must've changed as well. I hadn't realized that Lime had gotten strong enough to go toe to toe with him, though. That was impressive.

"All right. I suppose it's my turn to report now," I began.

"Actually, before you do, there's one more important thing to report regarding the Demiplane," Tomoe cut in, her cute smile from earlier replaced with a mischievous grin. "I've already heard most of the standout updates from Shiki... including how popular you've been lately?"

"That's hardly an important report," I sighed. "More like the most trivial thing to mention. But if you've already heard it, then let's move on to the important update about the Demiplane."

Shiki... You've been meeting with Tomoe quite a lot lately, especially with this surprise party. You're supposed to be busier than me—do you even sleep?

Hmm, sometimes I see him reading late into the night. Could it be that he doesn't sleep at all some days?

Tomoe cleared her throat. “Right. Well, the cause of random climate shifts here has been identified. And we believe a solution is possible.”

“I”

Finally!

This had been one of the most pernicious issues we’d faced in the Demiplane—the climate would shift between summer and winter, or fluctuate between dry and humid. Even though its inhabitants were mostly quite resilient, never knowing what season it was going to be was uncomfortable to say the least. Moreover, the children and elderly had been particularly affected, sometimes falling ill. Solving this problem had been a top priority for us.

“The cause of the climate change is—” Tomoe continued her report, but what she said next made me gasp.

“Me?!”

My outburst echoed through the room, and I quickly covered my mouth, not wanting to disturb anyone who might have already fallen asleep. I motioned for Tomoe to continue.

“To be precise, we believe it’s the places where Young Master has been. Wherever you pass through a Gate of Mist seems to influence the Demiplane’s climate,” Tomoe explained.

What... The climate here is dictated by my actions?

Shiki spoke up, looking perplexed, “But if that’s the case, wouldn’t that mean the weather or temperature could drastically change even within a single day?”

“There are few cases of abrupt changes,” Tomoe clarified, “but it appears that there’s a specific time each day when the location where Young Master last used the gate determines the overall climate.”

“So, for example, if I’m in Tsige during the day and at the academy at night...” I began, thinking through the implications.

“We’re not sure how that would play out. We’ll need more time to investigate thoroughly. We still don’t know whether it’s directly related to your presence or

the location where the gate is opened. I'm not even 100 percent sure if it's tied to gates or not."

"Hm, this is an important issue," Shiki said thoughtfully. "I'll handle things here in Rotsgard for now. Outside of lectures, we'll do all we can to make sure you can spend more time in one place, Young Master."

While Tomoe and Shiki continued discussing potential solutions, I was simply too shocked by what I'd just learned to contribute much to the conversation. My mind was completely blank.

I mean, just because I've been traveling around the world, does that really mean the climate would change? Climate should be determined by so many factors—latitude, longitude, wind, ocean currents, Earth's rotation and revolution, and all that... but in the Demiplane, it seemed to be tied to where I was or something close to that.

This means I can't even travel freely without messing with the weather...

So, the unbearable heat we've had lately is because of the academy city's location? No, not the location, but because I've been spending time there.

"As a temporary measure, what if we fixed a Gate of Mist in a place with a more agreeable climate and avoided using it afterward?" I finally managed to suggest. It would be tough not to use the gate, but I couldn't let this chaos continue.

If it came to it, Tomoe could open the gate for me to transport goods to the store. *Wait, no. She's in the middle of investigating something related to telepathy. I can't interrupt that.*

"No, Young Master," Tomoe replied with a quick shake of her head. "It would be pretty inconvenient if you couldn't use a Gate of Mist. We should narrow down the conditions first, pinpoint the cause, and then decide how to handle it. I already have a few ideas in mind."

"That sounds like the best approach," Shiki agreed. "Fortunately, there's been no interference so far when you've used a gate. Not using it at all anymore would severely impact our supply chain. Keeping Tomoe-dono occupied for that purpose alone wouldn't be efficient either."

He's right. We hadn't noticed any interference from the Goddess or the temples that worshipped her. In fact, I was fairly confident the Goddess didn't even know the Gates of Mist or, for that matter, the Demiplane existed.

"How do you plan on identifying the cause?" I asked, wanting to hear more specific ideas. The sooner this problem was resolved, the better.

"What I'd like to try first is having you open several gates at once, Young Master, and leaving them partially active without fully closing them," Tomoe explained. "That way, we can see which gate affects the climate. Or, if the climate keeps reflecting the location of the academy, we'll know the issue lies with your presence."

"I see. If one of the gates causes the weather to change, it would support the theory that the location of the gate is the key factor," Shiki said, nodding.

"That's right, Shiki," Tomoe said. "By increasing the number of experiments, it'll be easier to pinpoint the cause. I've been tracking the weather patterns in the Demiplane ever since we left Tsige, keeping records of the cities Young Master has stayed in and the corresponding climate changes in the Demiplane."

"As expected of Tomoe-dono," Shiki responded, but he was clearly impressed.

Wow... Tomoe had been thinking about this ever since Tsige, and she was already gathering data to back up her theory. Meanwhile, I just assumed the weird weather was some kind of mysterious phenomenon. Shiki's sentiments echoed exactly how I felt.

"So, I just need to visit each city again through teleportation?" I asked.

"Young Master, doing that might alert the Goddess to your actions," Tomoe said, shaking her head. "I've already prepared several gates. I'll go with you, and once we're there, you can recreate the gates. That way, it'll be safer."

"Oh, right. Teleporting might be risky... Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I'll leave it to you," I said, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"No problem. I'll leave tomorrow, and you'll come with me. Then, you can go back to Rotsgard in the evening. By the day after, we should have some more information about the Demiplane's climate. I'll also make it a point to come back here every day to keep an eye on things."

I should have remembered the risks with teleportation... I knew better than to throw out ideas like that without thinking. Tomoe clearly had a lot on her plate; her ability to juggle multiple tasks at once was something I really needed to learn from.

“But, with so many gates left open, will the security be enough?” I asked, concerned.

Tomoe’s answer was quick and confident. “I’ll redirect the lizardfolk and the arachs to patrol the gates instead of the city. I’ll also adjust the position of the gates slightly on the Demiplane side for more accurate testing. For now, we just won’t allow any adventurers into the Demiplane.”

“Sounds good. I think rumors have spread widely enough, so there shouldn’t be any issues. As for the analysis, I’d like to—”

“You won’t need to worry about that, Young Master,” Tomoe cut me off, smiling warmly. “I’ll handle the analysis with Ema and a few others. You’ve already contributed plenty by bringing back so many books, and we now have more people who can analyze that kind of data. Just leave it to us.”

The books I read at the academy? They’ve already compiled them into a useful format? Tomoe worked so fast it was kind of scary. I was starting to worry that she might collapse from overwork. At the same time, a vague sense of unease crept in—*Am I going to become unnecessary? Everyone’s so capable, it almost makes me feel... useless.*

“If you need me, feel free to ask. I’m interested, and I’d like to help in any way I can,” Shiki offered.

That’s right, Shiki’s head is like a library, and he loves research. Makes sense he’d want to get involved.

“No thanks,” Tomoe replied. “I need you to focus on the soil improvement project and the koji brewing. You’ve also got the matter of the Demiplane’s fruit to handle.”

“Hm, true enough. In the end, we could only resolve that issue in a rather passive manner,” Shiki admitted.

“It wasn’t just the people in Tsige. In hindsight, others planting seeds from the fruit we brought back from the Demiplane was an entirely predictable outcome.”

Shiki grimaced. “Yes, although I didn’t expect them to grow so... aggressively.”

Aggressively...?

Apparently, someone had planted a fruit seed from the Demiplane—a type of apple, actually—just outside Tsige. Probably they’d hoped to cultivate the valuable fruit locally and give my company some competition. In hindsight, of course, I should have known something like this would happen.

Well, the seed sprouted. We’d only observed the growth for a few centimeters, so I never found out whether it became a full tree and bore fruit. However, even as a seedling it started having a serious impact on the surrounding area.

We learned about it through a request submitted to the Adventurer’s Guild. The land around the planted apple tree began to rapidly lose fertility, and even the ambient magick in the area started thinning out. It seemed that crops and plants from the Demiplane, when brought into this world, absorbed an immense amount of nutrients and magick from the surrounding land in order to grow.

I’d heard of plants in my world that could severely deplete the soil, but this was on an entirely different level.

By the time we realized what was happening, the fruit from the Demiplane had already spread quite a bit in this world. It’s possible that even now, someone still had seeds from the fruit. We’ve since warned the residents of the Demiplane to limit how much fruit they distributed. Though we hadn’t completely banned it, I sometimes wondered if that might be necessary.

Still, the plants themselves weren’t to blame, so I had the apple seedling brought back to the Demiplane and replanted in my garden at home.

“That reminds me, Shiki—how’s that experiment with the students going?” I asked.

We were conducting an experiment based on one of Shiki's hypotheses about Demiplane crops at the academy. It was technically a hyuman trial, but given our preliminary results with Demiplane residents, there didn't seem to be any major health risks. If anything unusual happened, Shiki was prepared to step in immediately with treatment.

"So far, the results are almost identical to those seen in the Demiplane residents," Shiki explained. "It seems physical ability may play a role, so we plan to continue the experiment. It's quite intriguing."

"I see. So, no signs of health risks yet?"

"No. If anything, it actually seems to have health *benefits*. The fruit's incredibly nutritious."

The residents of the Demiplane had shown a certain change. It was something Tomoe and Shiki had brought to my attention earlier, prompting a deeper investigation. Apparently, the orcs and the lizardfolk had begun exhibiting improvements in both physical and magical abilities. After examining the situation more closely, it was concluded that the cause was their diet.

The impact varied from person to person, but particularly with the consumption of fruit, their abilities seemed to increase—albeit in small increments. However, the strength boosts only worked for those who were physically inclined, and magick enhancements were only effective for those with some magical aptitude. Essentially, everyone saw improvements only in areas where they already had potential.

Shiki had proposed testing the effects on hyumans, but given the unpredictable nature of their limits and the possibility that they might not react the same way as the Demiplane residents, I initially rejected the idea. It just seemed too dangerous.

However, after a few lectures at the academy, some of my students began showing an unhealthy obsession with enhancement drugs. I reluctantly agreed to the hyuman trials after discreetly assessing the students' willingness, realizing that we needed to reach a conclusion sooner rather than later.

As Shiki reported, the results appeared to be nearly identical to those of the Demiplane residents.

So, the fruit from the Demiplane could potentially be status-boosting items for hyumans as well... Maybe we should stop exporting crops from the Demiplane altogether?

“Nearly the same, huh? But there’s a slight difference?” I asked.

“Yes,” Shiki confirmed. “Hyumans seem to show greater improvements compared to orcs or lizardfolk. For example, Jin’s been consuming the fruit since the experiment started, and he’s already seen a 30 percent increase in his magick power. That’s almost on par with the growth rates we’ve observed in the arachs, whose baseline abilities are far higher.”

“A significant effect, then... And since there’s no sign of an upper limit even for people from the Demiplane, it could become a real problem if this information spreads among hyumans...” I was suddenly feeling a lot more uneasy about this.

“Indeed. For now, we should attribute any improvements to ‘latent potential awakening’ and deflect suspicion. Thankfully, Young Master’s lectures already have a reputation for pushing some rather... extreme ideas, so this explanation should hold up for a while,” Tomoe said with a wry smile.

“The fact that the fruit has a similar effect on hyumans is fascinating, though,” Shiki added. “The plants in the Demiplane seem to have a natural capacity to store magick, which continues to surprise me. I’ll tell everyone here to stop any further fruit distribution for now. However, given the cost and difficulty of acquiring enough fruit for testing, I doubt anyone outside the Demiplane has managed to conduct similar experiments yet.”

“So, now I won’t just be a rich potential husband; students will be flocking to me because of my ‘famous’ lectures too. What a bright future,” I joked, though the reality of the situation was setting in.

With more events coming up at the academy, things were bound to get even busier from here on out.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 4

After finishing the climate test Tomoe had proposed the night before, I walked around the Demiplane with Shiki and Ema. People who were leading different tasks kept coming up to us, reporting on their progress—everything from agricultural work to construction, and even work centering on newly discovered materials.

When I asked about the expansion of the city we were building, they explained that all the necessary facilities were complete, and now they were leveling the land while dividing it into sections based on different uses. I figured it was probably easier to do the zoning now, before the city fully developed. Once a city was built, reorganizing everything would be a nightmare. And considering the massive scale of the city compared to the number of residents, it felt like they were being overly ambitious with the space. *Is this some kind of silent pressure to increase the population?*

Even though I had just asked them to build a miniature version of the city to accommodate adventurers, they were already working several steps ahead. The speed at which they got things done was impressive—it was like they were anticipating my next move. I kept hearing, “Yes, Young Master, we’ve already handled that.” *This is the ideal kind of work dynamic.*

As for agriculture, things had improved drastically since Shiki started making adjustments to the soil; efficiency had skyrocketed. My contributions to agriculture had been pretty basic—stuff like how to make simple rice paddies,

divide fields, and rotate crops based on the season. Nothing beyond what you'd find in a school textbook or pick up on a class field trip.

I'm sure I've made mistakes too. I'm not an expert, so I can't even tell what's actually useful. It's clear that Shiki has been way more helpful than I have.

Of course, the orcs working the fields had been doing this far longer than I. Their experience with the soil was vast, and they already knew a lot of what I had to offer. For example, they knew that growing the same crop in the same place over and over wasn't good. *Crop rotation failure, I think it's called? They've been tilling barren lands for ages. They're far more reliable when it comes to agriculture than I am.*

"By the way, Ema," I said, turning to her. "Even with Shiki working on the soil, are you still planting things like milk vetch and white clover in the fields you've left fallow?"

That was a technique I'd taught the orcs months ago. But now that we could fundamentally improve the soil with Shiki's help, I wondered if it was still necessary. *Maybe it's not as simple as I was thinking. With potted plants, you can just use a nutrient solution to fix things, but gardening and farming are a bit different, so I probably shouldn't be too confident with my knowledge.*

"Yes," Ema replied. "The crops here grow at such an accelerated pace that it's tough to use seasonal methods, so we rotate the fields by the number of harvests instead. When I consulted with Shiki-sama, he said there was still value in letting the fields rest, so that's why we keep planting them. Besides, the flowers are beautiful, and someone pointed out that they provide a play area for the children whose parents are working in the fields, so we should keep them for that reason, if nothing else. Thankfully, we've been able to maintain ample reserves, so there's no pressing need to stop."

Ah, a play area, huh? It wasn't something I'd seen much of back in Japan, but I could see how fields of small flowers like milk vetch and white clover could be calming. I supposed keeping them for aesthetic reasons wasn't a bad idea.

Wait... because the seasons are unreliable here, rotating crops based on them doesn't really work, does it? I realized my earlier comments were based on hazy memories from history textbooks, not real experience. The only reason we

were managing was because the crops grew so quickly. Ema had mentioned that too, something about managing the rotations based on the number of harvests.

When we planted soybeans, they went from seedlings to full-grown plants—skipping the harvestable edamame stage—in just about a month. When I’d offhandedly mentioned something about controlling temperature and light to accelerate growth, Tomoe took the idea seriously, and suddenly we had a system where crops could be harvested in under a month. It blew my mind. That had been my glimpse of what Tomoe was really capable of.

“Ah, the seasons,” I muttered. “Still working on that. It’ll take a bit more time.”

“Oh, no! That’s not what I meant!” Ema said quickly, clearly flustered.

Oops, didn’t mean to make her feel guilty.

“Sorry, don’t worry about it,” I reassured her. “So, from what you’ve explained, it sounds like we’ve increased the yield quite a bit?”

“Yes! By following Shiki-sama’s instructions, we’ve managed to reduce the growth period to an average of about two weeks...”

“Two weeks?!”

Two weeks from planting to harvest? Even a month had seemed incredibly fast. Well, at this rate, the Demiplane shouldn’t have any issues with food or land. I had already received reports about groups wanting to migrate from the Wastelands. Maybe it was time to start increasing the population, after all.

I gave Shiki a long, scrutinizing look—not sure if I was staring at a genius or a freak of nature. He gazed back at me with a face that said, “It’s no big deal.”

“I simply compiled the knowledge you imparted, Young Master,” he explained, “and told the orcs how they could use earth magick to enhance the soil. We’ve already achieved self-sufficiency with the current farmland, but I plan to continue refining the process. Next, I’m thinking about focusing on crop variety improvement.”

Even the wild varieties they'd found were already perfectly edible, so I didn't think there was any need to push so hard. We hadn't even fully utilized the land yet, but it seemed like we had more than enough space to expand production if needed.

"Shiki, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but make sure you're getting enough sleep, okay?" I said, a bit concerned.

"If I ever feel the need to work through the night, rest assured that my body can function perfectly well without sleep, Young Master," Shiki replied, completely serious.

"Come on, Shiki, I wish you would stop making those deadpan jokes."

At least I hope it's a joke... I glanced at Ema, and her amused smile told me that even she wasn't taking Shiki seriously.

"W-Well, like I said, there are no major issues with the fields or the rice paddies," she said, trying to steer the conversation back on track. "But... there is something I would like your opinion on."

"Hm? What's that?" I asked.

Ema gestured for us to come with her.

Is it a new plant they discovered, or is there some other problem?

As we walked, orcs who were resting or working in the fields gave us respectful bows, and I nodded back. Soon, we had left the expansive fields behind.

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Ema led us to an area where a few plants had been recently planted. Judging by their size, around two or even three meters tall, they had probably been uprooted and transported here. Their tropical appearance stood out, but as I took a closer look, I recognized the fruit hanging from them.

Ah. So that's what this is.

I couldn't help but wonder why the forest ogres were here as well. They usually didn't help with gathering plants, yet they were standing nearby, along with Komoe-chan, who was unusually silent today. Normally, she'd be running over to me by now, but today, she was just staring at the plants with a seriousness that belied her age.

"This is a banana tree, isn't it?" I asked. "I didn't expect to find something like this here..."

I'd always thought bananas were intolerant of cold. But here they were, thriving in the chaotic climate of the Demiplane. It was actually the first time I'd seen them growing on a tree. Maybe bananas were tougher than I thought.

And judging by their yellow color, they seemed ripe.

"Yes, according to your memories, this is called a *banana*, and it does grow in warm climates..." Ema sounded uncertain, and I could see that the forest ogres and Komoe-chan seemed more restless than usual. There was something very odd about seeing Komoe-chan, who was typically so energetic, acting subdued like the forest ogres.

"Yeah, they grow in hot, humid places... kind of like what the Demiplane's become recently. But what's the issue?"

"I looked at some botanical texts, and they all say that bananas typically have black seeds inside their flesh. However, none of these bananas have any seeds inside."

Botanical texts? I didn't even remember reading books like that. But thinking back... do bananas have seeds? I don't think so... Wait.

"Ah, maybe... These bananas could be from a variety that originally had seeds but were bred to not have them."

"Originally had seeds?" Ema tilted her head, confused. "But if they don't have seeds, how are we supposed to propagate them? Won't they go extinct?"

"Ugh... well, I'm not exactly sure about the specifics of how they reproduce," I admitted, scratching my head. "But there are crops that have been selectively bred to be more convenient for people to eat. I think these bananas might be one of those types."

Given how easily we'd been able to grow perfect apples, pears, and peaches in the Demiplane, which were also results of selective breeding, I figured it wouldn't be that strange for a seedless banana to exist here too.

Still, I hadn't really answered the question of how to grow more.

Ema was deep in thought. "Well, they are easy to peel and they taste delicious, but... does that mean if the current plants die off, they'll become extinct?"

At her words, the forest ogres looked devastated. *Why are they so upset over this?*

Wait, are those tears in Komoe-chan's eye?!



“That would be a problem!!!” One of the forest ogres let out a pained cry, his voice trembling.

“Uuu...” Komoe-chan finally broke into sobs, her small frame trembling alongside him.

The obvious distress on their faces made me uncomfortable. *I mean, it’s just a fruit. Right?*

“Actually,” Ema began hesitantly, “the forest ogres were the ones who found this banana tree and brought it back. They’ve taken quite a liking to it, as you can see...”

So, it’s their favorite, huh?

I glanced at the forest ogre who’d spoken, and he nodded rapidly, like a broken toy. Komoe-chan, standing next to him, seemed to be just as invested. I’d always assumed she had a palate like Tomoe, but considering how young she looked, maybe her tastes were a bit different.

“We’ve never tasted anything like this,” the forest ogre continued passionately. “The ecstasy we felt upon tasting this fruit—there is nothing in this world that can compare to the value of a single banana bunch!”

Ecstasy? Seriously? That’s starting to sound a bit too... addictive. Komoe-chan, too, was being unusually assertive. After all, she was normally the shy one...

“Banana is yummy,” she declared, eyes shining with determination. “I really like it. After training, it’s the best!”

Could they not use words like ‘ecstasy’? It’s giving this a really weird vibe, like I’m handing out a drug. And I’d heard that Komoe’s silence during training made her even more terrifying than Tomoe or Mio at times—silently delivering punishment without a word. So, to see her so worked up now... I wasn’t sure what it meant.

“I-I see,” I managed, feeling a bit out of my depth.

“And that is why! We transported the tree carefully, without damaging it, and we’ve been studying it to figure out how to grow more. But no matter how hard

we look, we can't find any seeds. If this keeps going... the bananas will disappear forever!!!” The forest ogre's desperation was palpable.

It was like he was facing withdrawal symptoms; he was practically shaking as he clung to the banana tree, a pitiful sight despite the absurdity of the situation. Komoe-chan must have been steadily consuming the precious bananas after her training sessions, so the forest ogres were terrified at the thought of running out.

“Now that I think about it... bananas only fruit once, and then the tree usually dies, right?” I mused.

“Uwaaaaaahh!!!” the forest ogre screamed, his voice no longer coherent. His wailing echoed against the surrounding plants as he clutched his head in despair. Beside him, Komoe-chan stood frozen, her eyes wide in shock—though I couldn't help but find her reaction a little cute.

But if there are no seeds... How are they supposed to reproduce?

I glanced at Shiki for guidance, but he merely shook his head. Of course, he was an expert in earth magick, not a plant specialist. Though he'd been helping with agriculture, this was still relatively new for him since arriving in the Demiplane.

“Still,” I continued, “there has to be a way to propagate them even without seeds...”

The forest ogres looked at me with a mixture of hope and desperation, while Komoe-chan sniffled softly beside them. *Guess I'm going to need to come up with a solution before they completely lose it.*

I wonder...

Pineapples can be propagated using offshoots that grow from the side of the plant, and you can replant or transplant those to grow more. But there's no guarantee that bananas work the same way. That said, I had learned about pineapples from a TV show.

But bananas are tropical fruit, too, so maybe it's possible?

Hmm...

“So, it really is a tree that dies after one year. Some of us had a feeling that might be the case,” Ema said, her tone laced with disappointment. She wasn’t as devastated as the forest ogres, but she clearly shared their love for this new fruit.

I’d love to help them out, but...

Maybe grafting is worth a try? Joining parts of two plants so they can grow together. That’s another method that doesn’t require seeds. Of course, there are complications like plant compatibility, and my knowledge of grafting is pretty basic. Still, it’s worth mentioning, even if it’s not guaranteed to work.

“Well, it’s not a sure thing, but... there are a couple of methods I know about,” I began, explaining to Ema and the forest ogres about offshoots and grafting.

Ema seemed intrigued by the idea of grafting, while the forest ogres absorbed every word as if it were vital to their survival. It was refreshing to see them paying such close attention to what I had to say. Even Komoe-chan was nodding along, though in her case, I had a feeling it was more of a “sounds interesting” type of nod than true understanding.

The moment I finished explaining, the lead forest ogre asked Ema for her assistance with grafting. Then, he suddenly recalled that there might have been offshoots growing where they’d first found the plant, and with newfound energy, he sprinted off to check. Komoe-chan followed him without a word.

“They seem very different from the forest ogres we met when they first arrived here,” I remarked, watching them go.

“Yes, it appears they’ve been molded by Tomoe-sama, Mio-sama, and even Komoe-san. And quite thoroughly...” Ema said, a touch of amusement in her voice.

I couldn’t help but laugh awkwardly.

“Haha... Well, thanks, Ema. It’s good to know that grafting might be helpful to you. Feel free to experiment with it.”

“Thank you, Young Master, I certainly will. By the way, was there nothing about offshoots in the book?” she asked.

“Nope. But then again, the book is only based on what I remember, right? If I didn’t see it, the pages would be blank,” he explained.

That makes the most sense. If the book had been created from my memories, anything I hadn’t seen would be missing.

Still... forest ogres, of all people, becoming obsessed with bananas? It’s almost funny. They’re the only ones who know about the fruit, but all they’re doing is giving themselves another weakness.

I can already imagine the scene: Tomoe confiscating their bananas and making them cry through some grueling training. It’s inevitable.

Well, it won’t solve the problem, but I’ll ask Ema to give Mondo some bananas later. That should cheer him up a bit.

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The next stop was the dwarves’ workshop—my first visit there in quite some time.

Though not everything the dwarves worked on involved forging or the use of fire, their workshop was even hotter than the rest of the Demiplane, which was saying a lot. I generally found myself staying away unless I had a pressing reason to visit. Recently, I’d even had them come to me when it was just for simple reports.

“Ah, Young Master!” The elder dwarf greeted me with a deep bow. “Thank you for having us over last night. We all had a wonderful time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourselves, elder,” I replied, smiling.

“Each time you invite us, there are always new ingredients and dishes to try. It makes us want you to come back again and again. And I heard Mio-sama was the one who cooked last night’s meal! I have to say, I was quite surprised,” he added with a grin.

“She enjoys cooking, so feel free to indulge her anytime. Maybe Tomoe will join in one day for some sake tasting too. I’m sure dwarves would appreciate her company for the drinks.”

“Oh! Sake, you say? That would be wonderful! I must make sure my work is completed before that day arrives.”

I laughed along with him before steering the conversation back. “I’m looking forward to it too. But, elder, Ema mentioned that there was something urgent you needed to discuss?”

The elder of the eldwar stood before me, an old dwarf whose short, stocky frame almost made him look like one of the other small races. He was as gentle as he looked, but when it came to blacksmithing, he could swing a hammer larger than himself without breaking a sweat. There was no mistaking his title—he had the biggest, toughest tools out of anyone here.

Respect for my elders had been drilled into me from a young age. Without thinking, my manner of speech naturally became more formal around him. No matter how much I wanted to speak casually, I couldn’t help it. It was just ingrained in me.

“Ah, thank you for your patience. I called you here because of the materials Mio-sama brought in recently. There’s something concerning about them.” The dwarf then turned to Ema. “Oh, and, Ema-dono, some of the tools you requested have been finished. Could you go check on them?” With that, he began rummaging through the items on his workbench.

Ema bowed politely to me. “Young Master, may I step away for a moment?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon,” she replied and left.

Meanwhile, the elder had set something on the table. It wasn’t just any ordinary material—what he placed down was the remains of some kind of monster.

“What... is this...?”

I could feel it—something strange, something unsettling. Shiki was reacting too, though quietly, in my mind.

“This was brought in along with Mio-sama’s kimono, which was torn during her last outing,” the elder explained, his brows furrowing.

“Mio tore her kimono?” I asked, surprised.

Are there monsters near the entrance to the Wasteland capable of that? I could only recall one time when she’d slightly damaged it—when a swarm of Scythe Ants had poured out of their nest, and some of their acid had burned her clothes.

“Yes, the back of it was shredded. Fortunately, Mio returned unharmed,” the elder added gravely.

“?!”

Wait—what?! A monster that can tear into Mio’s back? Even Shiki knows that’s a big deal. Mio is usually excellent at both detection and defense, as long as she isn’t caught off guard. Wait... unharmed?

“Yes, completely unharmed. It left all of us craftsmen feeling utterly powerless,” the elder sighed, shaking his head.

“So, it was just her clothes that got damaged?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

With a sigh, he pressed his fingers to his forehead as if trying to ease a headache and began explaining.

“I didn’t ask whether Mio-sama instantly regenerated or if she’d simply avoided injury from the start, but the fact remains that she was unharmed upon returning. Since you hadn’t been informed, Young Master, I assume she didn’t consider it serious enough to mention. In light of that, we’ve been discussing how to improve the protective function of her gear to offer better defense. However, the material that caused the damage to her kimono—this sample, actually—has become a concern.”

“Was it extremely powerful?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

So, that’s why Mio didn’t bother reporting it—she didn’t even take any damage. Still, this seems like a much more important issue than her cooking. I wonder if she even understands what armor is for. I’ll have to give her a little lecture later and make sure she properly communicates her requests to the craftsmen so they can make something sturdy. If she treats armor like regular clothes, that’s unfair to the craftsmen.

The regular clothes she usually wore were woven by the orcs, who put in great effort crafting them for both Tomoe and Mio. But the dwarves' creations were armor—meant to protect lives and withstand attacks. They were completely different from everyday attire.

“No, the material itself is... moderate, I'd say,” the elder replied thoughtfully.

Moderate. If *he* was saying it was moderate, it must have been a fairly rare find.

Shiki remained uncharacteristically silent, given that this conversation was about materials and weapons. He had been so thrilled with his staff, after all.

“After hearing from Mio-sama and examining both the material and the kimono, the general consensus is that it was a case of a monster with high adaptability that managed to grow into something strong by sheer luck. However, during its early growth stages, it somehow consumed a wind elemental—probably a midlevel spirit. Wind elementals, especially midlevel ones, are extremely rare in the Wasteland. I've never seen one myself. Considering the abilities of an average monster, it's hard to believe it could capture or absorb a spirit, even if it was weakened. My personal opinion is that there was some... intent behind this.”

“Intent? You mean someone deliberately created that kind of monster?” I asked, frowning at the thought.

Someone capturing a spirit and feeding it to an adaptable monster to make it grow stronger? That sounded like a dangerous scheme.

“Mio-sama encountered the creature outside the Wasteland, on one of the roads branching off from the Tsige highway. Which means the monster crossed the mountain range that separates the Wasteland.”

“So, because Mio was the one who encountered it, there were fewer human casualties?”

“That's right. The forest ogres scouted the area, and we didn't find any noticeable movements from the demons or other threats. But the uncertainty—that's what still leaves me uneasy,” the elder explained, his expression serious.

“Yeah, it’s not exactly comforting to think that something might be happening right under our noses,” I agreed. “All right, I’ll—”

—*look into it right away*, I was about to say when Shiki quietly raised his hand.

“Shiki-sama?” the elder asked, glancing at him.

“What is it, Shiki?” I asked, a bit surprised.

“It was me,” he said softly.

“Huh? What was?”

“That experiment... It was me!” Shiki exclaimed, his voice trembling slightly.

“What?” the elder and I spoke in unison, both stunned.

“It happened before I met you, Young Master. When I was inhabiting the body of the forest ogre, I performed a variety of experiments. I captured several midlevel wind elementals, and, well... I weakened them to the point where they couldn’t resist, then I had a monster consume them.”

I didn’t reply.

“I thought by having the monster absorb the elementals, it might evolve into something similar to or stronger than the existing spirit. But all I managed to do was enhance the power of the scythe it wielded... It was a failure. So, I lost interest and discarded it,” he explained, and I couldn’t believe how casual his tone was.

Discarded it? Shiki, what on earth were you thinking?!

“So, it was Shiki-sama who did this. Ah, now that we’ve identified the cause, I feel a great weight has been lifted from my chest,” the elder sighed in relief. “Now we can focus on improving Mio-sama’s armor without any lingering concerns.”

“I’m sorry, elder,” Shiki murmured apologetically.

“No need to worry. In fact, the material was used to craft a weapon for a random adventurer, and it provided some good training for Beren as well. Mio-

sama seemed a bit concerned about whether it would happen again, so this will ease her mind.”

“You’re going to tell Mio-dono about this?!” Shiki’s voice wavered with anxiety.

“Well... I plan to tell her, but I fear you might receive a scolding, Shiki-sama. Young Master, how should we proceed?” the elder asked, looking to me.

“Shiki.”

“Y-Yes?” he responded nervously.

“Well... you should just accept the scolding. You did ruin her kimono, after all,” I said with a sigh.

“Wha—?! A-Ahh...” Shiki’s face fell, looking utterly defeated.

Poor Shiki... He really does land himself in these awkward situations. But I’m sure he’ll get through it. I glanced at Shiki, who now looked like he was living through the end of the world, then at the elder, who gave me a nod of understanding.

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It felt like it had been ages since I’d been back to Rotsgard, but in reality, it had only been a few days.

Lately, I’d been spending more time in the Demiplane, working on the climate change investigation launched to explore Tomoe’s hypothesis. It turned out that that genius samurai-wannabe’s ideas were mostly correct. The very next day after her report, we started our experiments, and the climate in the Demiplane began fluctuating even more than before.

We’d warned the residents about the upcoming trials, so no real issues came up.

In any event, it seemed pretty certain that the last gate I opened was causing the changes. By the “last gate,” I mean the one both Tomoe and Mio could travel through, as it was left marked for others to use. Shiki also mentioned that he would soon be able to use it as well—reliable as always.

Apparently, as long as we erased the marks and used the regular, chanted gates, there shouldn't be any significant impact. There was little difference between casting a minor-chant gate and a chantless gate, so neither method would be much of a hassle. I changed the gate at the academy to an unmarked, chanted one, and soon the Demiplane had settled into a calm, early summer climate. The only downside was the slightly increased rainfall, though the lizardfolk seemed thrilled about it since they preferred tropical climates. Truth be told, they probably would have liked it even warmer. *I hope they don't feel like they need to walk on eggshells around me.*

For her part of the investigation, Tomoe had set out on another journey within the Demiplane. She was determined to map out several key points and find areas where the seasons rotated. It felt like the day the Demiplane would enjoy four seasons, much like Japan, was just around the corner. Unlike me, Tomoe could predict results based on the data she'd gathered, so I expected she would use that to create the desired climate patterns.

Today, I had a lecture to give at the academy. Now that the Demiplane had stabilized, I figured it should be fine if I focused more on my life in Rotsgard again.

As for Mio, apparently, she had been spending her nights in Tsige—sometimes sleeping there, sometimes not—and making the most of her time, even taking some cooking lessons. *Once she gets hooked on something, she's all in. That's just so typical of Mio.* I wasn't sure what kind of cuisine she was learning, but I was looking forward to her cooking it for us eventually.

"Raidou-sama, the past few days of business have gone by without any issues. It seems we've really grown," Shiki said, looking pleased as he went over the sales report from when we were away. Aside from a few trips back to Rotsgard, he had mostly stayed in the Demiplane. Still, it seemed he was happy that the store had run so smoothly in his absence, and I was too.

"Yeah, you're right," I told him. "If they can start training the newcomers themselves, we'll be able to take it easy. By the way, Shiki, changing the subject—about Rembrandt's daughters..."

“Ah, you mean the matter of the letter Mio-dono brought?” Shiki replied, nodding.

“That’s right. Based on when they left Tsige, I think they should already be here. Have you heard anything?”

“Nothing specific, no. There’s only talk at the academy about their impending return to their studies. Since they’re the daughters of a prominent merchant, there might be some kind of gag order in place. Even Lime hasn’t picked up anything in town.”

“I see. Well, I’ll make sure to say hello to them when they get back to the academy. Oh, by the way, you’ve already submitted the paperwork for our lecture today, right?”

“Yes, it’s already been approved. I’ve confirmed everything in advance, so there shouldn’t be any major issues.”

Shiki really is dependable. Even if he makes a mistake sometime soon, I’ll let it slide. He got teased by Mio pretty hard over that monster incident, after all.

Yeah, maybe after today’s lecture, I’ll invite a few students whose schedules align and take them to Ironclad. Jin seemed to enjoy the hotpot, and maybe the others will too. Not that I’m trying to bribe them with food or anything, but it wouldn’t hurt to be nice once in a while.

I headed to the spot where my desk was, planning to review any last-minute updates before the lecture. The place was a sort of temporary faculty office for guest instructors, and it had plenty of space; they’d even given Shiki a desk when we’d applied for it.

We mostly only came here on lecture days or when the library got too noisy to focus, so it had been a few days since I’d seen my desk.

“Oh, what’s this...?” I muttered, startled.

A sizable stack of papers and letters had piled up on the desk. I felt a sudden twinge of despair. I’d made a point of getting here two hours early to get ready for the lecture, but going through all this would take at least that long.

“That’s quite a pile. I’ll sort through it, so would you mind looking at the important ones first?” Shiki offered. Before I could answer, he was already getting to work.

“Let’s do that. Any marriage proposals can go straight to the trash, please,” I wrote.

“Got it,” Shiki replied with a nod.

Thankfully, Shiki’s desk only had a few love letters, so I could trust him to handle things. Still, the letters on his desk... A lot of them had quite elaborate decorations, and I couldn’t help but wonder who was sending them. They seemed much more serious than anything I was getting.

Ah, the pile’s shrinking already.

The once chaotic mountain of paper was being neatly sorted. From a nearby desk, I could hear someone expressing their amazement—probably another instructor who had a class today. *Heh, they must be jealous. But sorry, Shiki’s mine, and I’m not sharing.*

As expected, most of the pile was trash. (Some of the more absurd proposals were practically harassment at this point.) However, a few serious letters had survived Shiki’s culling, so I started leafing through them.

Let’s see... Student registration requests, huh? Those turned out to form the bulk of the remaining requests.

Oh right, admin mentioned this. After my course had been running for a while, I could choose which students to accept based on their registration requests. Apparently, this process didn’t really matter for most instructors, since the majority just accepted everyone. So, the system was mostly designed for popular instructors, but it still worked nicely for me. I didn’t want students with no aptitude, or worse, those who had ulterior motives, to attend my class.

Huh, a lot of girls... and most of their majors and specialties are completely unrelated to what I’m teaching. This type of attention really isn’t necessary, thanks.

Nope, rejected. This one too. Don’t need this one either. Oh, a boy. Almost there, but come back after you’ve trained a bit more.

From an outside perspective, I probably seem like I'm super popular. To instructors struggling to get students, seeing me reject applications might look bizarre. But, honestly, I'm an unpopular instructor with only five students right now.

Hmm? An assistant instructor request? What's this?

It seemed to be a document requesting that I participate as an assistant instructor in someone else's class. *Ah, right. I forgot I'm allowed to assist in up to two classes per semester.* I hadn't been planning on doing it, though.

Let's check the syllabus.

Hand-to-hand combat. *I'm a mage and a merchant, though. Is this some kind of prank?*

Axe techniques. *I'm not not interested, but... still, this is kind of absurd.*

Practical Pharmaceutical Techniques. *So, Shiki must have wanted that.*

History of the Kingdom of Limia. *I don't understand the point.*

None of these seems useful. I set the assistant instructor requests aside with a sigh. But I decided to take them back with me, just in case; after all, I hadn't looked into the details enough to definitely say no.

Oh, more student registration requests? I glanced down to check who they were from.

Shifu Rembrandt. Yuno Rembrandt.

Ah, those are Rembrandt's daughters, aren't they? I thought they were already back at school. I guess that should teach me not to trust rumors.

No, wait—that's not it. According to the papers, both girls were set to return today. It looked like my lecture would be their first class after coming back. In that case, maybe it would be a good idea to go easy on them. They would need a bit of a warm-up after being out for so long.

Still, today's lecture was the fun one I'd told the students about in advance. The request had already been approved. Out of all the students who'd applied, I had only accepted one other person. Maybe I could divide the class and handle the Rembrandt sisters separately, along with that student.

Judging by their enrollment paperwork, Jin had been right—the Rembrandt sisters truly were talented. However, I wasn't sure how much of that talent they'd managed to hold on to during their long illness.

The older sister, Shifu, was nineteen—a couple of years older than me. As far as I could tell, she was a typical mage. Her preferred elements were earth and fire. *Interesting*. It was rare for someone to specialize in two elements. In addition, she had the blessing of an earth spirit. *She might end up learning a lot from Shiki*, I thought.

Her younger sister Yuno was fifteen. *Whoa! She uses a bow? That's unexpected... And a spear too? Even more unusual. Did they do research on me and Shiki and write something they thought would impress us?* However, Yuno's magick was still at the beginner level, focused mostly on enhancement spells.

Since I had a good relationship with Rembrandt, and the girls' abilities seemed harmless enough, I figured I'd allow them into the class. But I couldn't help wondering if they'd exaggerated their abilities to impress me or Shiki. Shifu's claim about having a spirit's blessing for earth magick seemed believable. But Yuno... A bow and a spear? I had never demonstrated archery during any of my academy lectures, so they'd probably heard about it from their father.

The other student I had approved was also a girl. No, I hadn't chosen her based on preference. At that point, my class had four guys and one girl. The lone girl, Abelia, had been complaining about the lack of female classmates (although she always made sure to warn potential candidates to stay away from Shiki). An even distribution of men and women seemed like it would work out well. Looking at this new girl's paperwork, her reasons for applying to my class seemed solid, and her abilities were fairly high. She came from a small country near the Gritonia Empire and hadn't been at the academy for very long. She was probably still testing out different classes. She might leave mine if it didn't suit her, but since she was a scholarship student, I figured she had the drive to improve.

I handed the approved application papers to Shiki and asked him to take them to the administration office. Though, even if they were processed right away, I realized the girls might not make it in time for today's lecture.

“Raidou-sensei, do you have a moment?” one of the other instructors called out just as Shiki stepped out of the room. That was unusual.

“How can I help you?” I wrote in glowing text.

“Well, it’s about the healing salve that you sell through your business...”

“Yes, we do handle healing salves.”

“With summer break getting close and the school festival soon afterward, my class will be doing more dangerous practical exercises,” he explained. “I was wondering if it would be possible to purchase around ten salves for precautionary use.”

Ah, so that’s what this is about. I wasn’t sure what could be dangerous about a school festival, but I figured they wanted to avoid having to come every day to stockpile ten salves and hoped I could provide them in bulk. We were limiting the number of items sold at a time, and healing salves and other medicines weren’t things most people bought frequently. If someone tried to purchase large quantities more than once or twice, Lime and the others would be keeping an eye on them. But if it was for treating student injuries, I didn’t mind helping out.

“I see, that makes sense. If you need them for class, I’d be happy to supply them. Why don’t you stop by the shop tomorrow, and we’ll have them ready for you.”

“Thank you very much!!!” the professor exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “Oh, I’m so relieved. The Kuzunoha Company has been building quite the reputation, and I’ve tried the salve myself—it’s incredibly effective. I wanted to keep some on hand as a precaution, but it’s been hard to get a good supply because of how popular they are...”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience—we can’t produce large quantities, which is why there’s a limit,” I wrote with a slight nod.

The limit had helped ensure that more people could access the products, but it did make things difficult for those who needed larger quantities. A few medical facilities had even reached out, asking to stockpile the salves. For now, I’d brushed them off by saying we were still considering it. If the academy

wanted to keep them on hand, it could become a problem. People might start assuming we could produce unlimited quantities, which could spark backlash. Still, any major deals would likely involve significant negotiations, and before it reached us, someone with vested interests would probably try to shut it down. *No need to worry about that just yet.*

“No, no!” the man said energetically. “With how effective the salve is, it’s no wonder there’s such demand. It’s also clearly priced too low. Thankfully, it’s rare to need such a powerful healing item, so ten salves will be more than enough until the school festival.”

“Just be aware that the salves stay effective for about three months. And we sell other products at reasonable prices too, so please feel free to visit the shop again anytime.”

“I understand, I definitely will!” The instructor returned to his desk; an obvious weight lifted off his shoulders. If he wanted to keep ten salves on hand as a precaution, he might be a fairly good instructor.

Maybe I should have Lime check if he’s really going to use them for what he said. It’ll be a problem if he’s trying to resell them. I should have said a few days instead of tomorrow, to give Lime time to look into the guy properly.

Just then, Shiki stepped back into the room, signaling it was time to head to the lecture.

There were... eight students that day.

Honestly, I hadn’t been entirely sure that the original five would even show up—although I had told them we’d be doing something fun in the next class, so that might have helped.

The three extra students had come from the batch I’d just approved. The admin office really had an efficient system (or they were just freakishly fast), although I was less impressed by the average student’s skills. *But I can’t shake the slight suspicion that the reason most of the humans here seem so lackluster is because stronger beings, like Sofia, are so exceptional that they make everyone else look terrible by comparison.*

Still, let’s hope the midtier students aren’t too disappointing.

“Starting today, we have three new students,” I wrote in a speech bubble, briefly glancing at the new arrivals before beckoning them over to where Shiki and I stood.

The Rembrandt sisters bore a striking resemblance to each other despite their age gap. Still, their hairstyles and overall demeanor were different enough to give distinct impressions. When I made brief eye contact with them, both smiled at me, though it lasted only a moment before they turned serious, ready to face the five returning students. They were carrying themselves well, and so far, I couldn’t imagine how they’d gained such a reputation as troublemakers. Jin and Abelia, however, were making no attempt to hide their displeasure at seeing the sisters.

“Can you introduce yourselves, please?” I wrote, gesturing to the three new students. After them, I’d have the five returning students introduce themselves too.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Shifu Rembrandt. I’m returning to school today, so some of you might already know me. I had to take a leave of absence due to illness, so I might take a bit of time to get back into the swing of things. I apologize if I inconvenience anyone in the meantime. As you can see, I’m hyuman. I specialize in offensive magick, particularly in the earth and fire elements. I also have the blessing of an earth spirit.”

Shifu was an entirely different person to when I’d seen her last. Then, she’d just stepped down from death’s doorstep and had hardly any hair. Now, when she gave her final bow, her silky blonde hair flowed gracefully along with her movement. It must have been naturally straight—her long hair looked quite beautiful as it cascaded down her back. The word “lady” suited her perfectly. That said, it was hard to imagine her in a battle. She probably wouldn’t engage in close combat.

“Nice to meet you! I’m Yuno Rembrandt,” her sister began energetically. *“I’m Shifu’s sister, and I’m also returning to school today after recovering from illness. I’m not quite back to full strength yet, but I’ll give it everything I’ve got! Of course, I’m a hyuman. I specialize in physical combat, although as you can see, I’m small, so I’m better suited for mid to backline positions rather than the front line. I switch between using a spear and a bow, depending on the*

situation. I can also use enhancement magick, though I'm not very good at it. Good to meet everyone!"

Yuno really was small, as she said—probably around 150 centimeters tall, if that. *It's even harder to imagine her being skilled with a bow or spear.* In this world, bows were generally large. But Yuno had mentioned it not only on her application form but also during her introduction, so it probably wasn't a lie. *Hmm...*

When she says "depending on the situation," she must mean depending on the party's needs. It wasn't practical to carry both a bow and a spear at the same time, after all. So, she must have been fairly versatile. Also, she was quite energetic. Like her sister, Yuno had blonde hair, but she kept hers short, barely reaching her shoulders, which gave off a more active impression.

"Hello, it's good to meet everyone. My name is Karen Fols," the next student said calmly. "I've just transferred from the Royal Academy of Husk, so I would appreciate it if you could help me out since I'm still getting used to everything. I'm hyuman, and I don't really have any special talents. I'm more of a jack-of-all-trades. I'm best with earth magick, but I can handle other elements to some extent as well. Thank you in advance for taking care of me."

Hyuman, huh?

As Karen introduced herself, I glanced around at the other students to see how they were reacting. They were far more relaxed than when the Rembrandt sisters had introduced themselves.

Jin, you might've been thrown off because they didn't act the way you expected, but your expression was still a bit rude toward them.

And as for Karen...

She's using magick to alter her appearance, there's no doubt about it. That's why the other students didn't seem to notice anything unusual. But to me, she looked anything but hyuman.

I glanced at Shiki, who nodded in understanding. If the two of us could see it, then it was definitely an illusion at work. Now, whether Karen was the one casting it or if it was the effect of something else, I couldn't say.

There was no point in bringing it up. It would only waste today's lecture, and I wasn't particularly troubled by it at the moment. I could ask her for more details after class or, if we ran out of time, later in the day when her schedule was clear. If she was genuinely here to attend the lecture, I didn't necessarily care what she looked like to everyone else. Though, I had to admit, I could see this leading to problems later.

"All right, everyone, let's get along," I wrote once the other five had introduced themselves. *"And to the Rembrandt sisters—just to be clear, even though I have a good relationship with your father, there won't be any special treatment or extra points given for that, understood?"*

I knew their father would be mentioned eventually, so I figured I should draw a clear line from the start. The sisters responded with clear agreement. *Good kids.*

"Now, as for today's lecture, as promised, I have something fun planned. However, it might be a bit much for the three new students. So, this time, we'll split into two groups. Shifu, Yuno, Karen, if the three of you would wait here for a minute. Everyone else, come with me."

Leaving some of the introductory material to Shiki, I led my five returning students some distance away. I'd leave things to Shiki later, but for now, I had to handle this part myself.

The five students wore tense expressions—a mixture of nervousness and focus.

"Sensei, what exactly are we doing today?" Jin asked. As much as he preached about how strength was everything, I'd noticed he had a natural tendency to take charge and often acted as the group's leader. He could be sharp-tongued, but he had a good sense of responsibility. We were the same age, and if we'd met under different circumstances, maybe we could've been good friends.

"It's combat training," I wrote, watching their reactions.

"Combat training... with you, Sensei?" Jin's eyes widened, and the five of them collectively grimaced.

“No, not with me. You’ll be fighting something I summon. Don’t worry, if you fight like your life depends on it, you won’t actually die. Life tends to work out that way. Worst-case scenario, Shiki will heal you. However, if your group gets wiped out, there will be penalties depending on how many times it happens.”

“You’re going to... summon something?” one of the students asked nervously.

“That’s right. It turns out I’m capable of summoning creatures,” I wrote nonchalantly, and immediately, their panicked voices filled the air.

“Wait, that’s way too much!”

“You said ‘wiped out.’ How many times do you expect that to happen?!”

“Are we going to have to skip the rest of our other classes after this...?”

How rude. It’s not like I’d do anything that would interfere with their other classes or cause trouble for the other instructors. Everyone will be physically fine in time for their next class!

By the way, “If you fight like your life depends on it, you won’t actually die!” — that was something my archery instructor used to say. I can’t tell you how many times those words flashed through my mind. It was a funny memory now... because I was still alive.

I casually mumbled the words necessary to create the gate. A thick cloud of mist formed in front of me, and soon a shadow appeared within the haze. As the mist solidified, a single misty lizardfolk emerged.

All five students reacted with a sharp intake of breath. Even a low-ranking lizardfolk could be dangerous in group battles, but this one was clearly not ordinary. He was covered in beautiful, iridescent azure scales, armed with a sword and shield, and dressed in light armor. The students had guessed, correctly of course, that they were facing a formidable foe. I was used to the sight, but the way his scales shimmered, shifting between green and blue depending on the light, was truly a sight to behold.

“Um, I’ve never seen a lizardfolk like that before... Just how strong is he...?” asked one of the boys, a dagger user. Since he’d be facing the creature in close combat, it made sense he’d be eager for more information. But I wasn’t going to give it to him.

“That’s a secret,” I replied. “After you fight him, each of you will need to hand in a report based on the information you’ve gathered. You’re allowed to talk and compare notes, but any mistakes will result in individual point deductions. Remember, you’re responsible for the accuracy of your report.”

“Can’t you at least tell us his species name...?” asked Abelia, the archer.

No way I’m telling you that. This academy has an excellent library. I haven’t seen any records of this creature in the texts, but there’s no way the information doesn’t exist somewhere.

“That’s a secret too. He’s my friend, the Blue Lizard. Now, let’s get started. If you die before Shiki gets here, I won’t be able to save you, so be careful.”

As I passed the misty lizardfolk warrior, I whispered into his ear, “Go easy on them, no breath attacks, and limit your strength to about 20 percent. But don’t hold back on your technique.”

The warrior gave a small nod of understanding.

With the sounds of the students’ desperate struggle in the background, I returned to where Shiki and the three new students were waiting.

“How did the intro go, Shiki?” I asked, using another speech bubble.

“I’ve told them the basics of the lecture plan, and they’re waiting as instructed. Now, I’ll head over to the others,” Shiki replied, already getting ready to leave.

“I’m counting on you.”

“If I don’t hurry, they might get seriously injured. Excuse me.”

Shiki gave a wry smile as he headed toward the battlefield—no, the “fun lecture.” Hopefully the students there would feel a little more at ease now.

Before me stood the Rembrandt sisters and Karen, staring in astonishment at the lesson in progress. I smiled to myself. *Don’t worry, I won’t be making you do anything like that.*

“Now then, since you three will be coming to my lectures starting today, you’ve probably heard some of the basics from my assistant, Shiki. Put simply, the goal is to increase the number of elements you can use, to speed up your

spellcasting, and to make sure you can make quick, correct decisions based on the situation. That's the focus of my lectures."

"So basically, you want us to be more versatile?" Karen summarized.

Well, yes, that's one way to put it. But the concept of versatility is broader than you might think.

"Exactly. But instead of becoming versatile by focusing on your strengths, you'll improve your weaknesses and your strengths. For you, Shifu, water, wind, and dark magick will be the main areas to work on. Yuno, I want you to focus on discovering the elements you're most comfortable with and boosting your repertoire of non-elemental spells. Karen, since you describe yourself as a jack-of-all-trades, you'll need to work on everything. And naturally, all three of you will be developing your strategic thinking to handle these new skills."

As they began to understand what I was asking of them, I felt their resolve harden. The air around them became tense.

"Today, the three of you will team up and attack me. All you have to do is attack. You can use any means necessary. Throughout the exercise, I'll be pointing out your combat tendencies and weaknesses. You've probably noticed I communicate through writing, so make sure you don't miss anything. If I see that you haven't improved on the points I mention, I'll start shutting down your attacks on the second attempt. Be prepared for the possibility of injury. We'll start in five minutes, so get ready."

This was something I'd done with the other students before. By the end, they usually wore expressions of despair. Sure, I'd tell them how to adapt, but there were always things they couldn't fix right away. Soon enough, they would realize they couldn't land any more attacks as I pointed out their biggest flaws, and their options would dwindle to zero. Predicting their moves, managing the time spent in battle, and balancing it with the rest of the lecture—it was always a bit tricky.

Five minutes went by.

As expected, the three of them had positioned themselves predictably. No one was playing the front line. *If their only counterstrategy is to interfere with*

my attacks, then it makes sense for them to avoid playing to their weaknesses by taking on a role they're not suited for.

"Begin," I wrote.

That single word set things into motion. Karen and Shifu began their chants immediately, their voices loud and clear. I could already predict the general scale of their magick. Chanted magick always came with sacrifices in exchange for power—it was a trade-off that never changed.

Yuno quickly fired her first arrow at me. She'd chosen the bow, not the spear. She must have taken into account the possibility of getting caught in the magick that was being cast. If there were any counterattacks, she might have chosen the spear to protect her sister.

The arrow flew toward my shoulder. Her gaze had been aimed at my chest, so her accuracy was only slightly off. However, she didn't seem to have much physical strength—her attack lacked power. Since she was using a projectile, she hadn't infused much magick into the arrow either.

Naturally, the arrow was deflected by the barrier I had erected.

"What?!" Yuno exclaimed in shock.

"Without enough power, that attack is useless," I wrote in the air. *"Put more force into it. And if you're aiming for the chest, don't miss from that close."*

Of course, if she did the same thing again, I'd deal with it before the barrier could even deflect it. *Maybe this time, I'll burn it.*

A second arrow came. This time, the shot was stronger, thanks to the extra time she took to prepare. Still weak, though. She needed to focus on enhancing her physical strength. It seemed she was so intent on imbuing her arrows with magick that she'd neglected her own body. She would never survive in the Wasteland like that. Though, being Rembrandt's daughter, it wasn't like she'd be fighting out there anyway.

Once again, I deflected her arrow with a barrier.

"Ugh...!" Yuno groaned.

“Think of physical enhancement and imbuing your arrows with magick as a set. If you don’t improve, I’ll start burning your arrows,” I wrote.

Oh, now magick’s coming. That must be Shifu and Karen.

Karen seemed like she could have cast faster, but maybe she was intentionally waiting for Shifu. A simultaneous attack was harder to deal with. Of course, it also risked interference between spells, so it wasn’t always the best choice.

If they planned this, they must be pretty confident in their skills.

“Dem-Ray!” Shifu chanted.

“Frost Break!” Karen followed.

Fire and ice, huh? If Karen’s intentionally coordinating this, she’s quite the risk-taker.

I already knew what both spells were going to be based on the composition I’d overheard during their chants. This meant I also knew how to counter them.

Shifu’s spell was likely a heat ray, designed to pierce its target. Even if it was blocked, it would probably cause an explosion along its trajectory.

Karen’s spell, on the other hand, was meant to freeze and then shatter everything around it. It seemed like it was set to trigger after Shifu’s spell. The cold gathering around me now was most likely from Karen’s magick.

I blocked Shifu’s spell with a barrier, and I could feel the power building up to an explosion. However, the blast had been reduced to the force of a light breeze, which brushed past my face. That was one of the unavoidable side effects of using a partial barrier.

Karen’s spell finished with perfect timing.

Impressive! It was hard to believe she was coordinating with Shifu for the first time. She clearly had natural talent.

With a high-pitched crack, I found myself encased in ice.

Well, not quite encased—there was a small gap between my body and the ice, but the ice completely surrounded me. Yuno was still holding her bow at full draw, waiting for the perfect moment to fire.

Good. She's being patient, trying not to waste her shot.

"Well done," I told Karen. "The timing for your spell delay was excellent. Shifu, your spell was well thought-out, including the blinding effect from the explosion. As for how you can improve, you..."

Before I finished, I shattered Karen's ice prison dramatically.

"... need to work on speed. Either make the heat ray faster or have it track the target. Karen, your issue is the obvious environmental changes signaling your spell's activation. Also, the power—hitting with that spell would be difficult, and even if you do, the impact isn't strong enough."

"How can he block everything with such a small barrier?!" Shifu exclaimed in disbelief.

"I hid the environmental changes, and I thought the power was good too," Karen muttered in frustration.

"Yuno, I told you I'd crush any attacks that didn't address the points I raised. If you're out of options, then switch to your spear. If you plan your attack properly, you won't get shot in the back while you're doing it."

She must have been trying to catch me off guard. The arrow that flew in late from the side hadn't even hit my barrier—it had been incinerated midair. Still, running and repositioning while holding your bow at full draw like that was pretty impressive.

"Not... done yet!" Yuno shouted, refusing to give up.

"Next time, I'll get you!" Shifu added, determined.

"Maybe it's time I got serious," Karen said, her voice steady with renewed focus.

This would be an overwhelming defeat for Shifu, Yuno, and Karen. But it was better for them to experience failure early on and come back stronger.

Once you're ready to try again, come back next week, I thought as I continued to block, counter, and critique their attacks. I didn't hold back for a second.

"All right, that's it for today's class. Make sure you're not late for the next one," I wrote, addressing the five exhausted bodies and the three students on

the brink of collapse.

Wow, I really broke them today. By the last five minutes, those three could barely do anything.

As for the group Shiki had been watching, they had apparently been torn apart by the lizardfolk—four times. I'm sure part of it was due to their lack of experience in real combat, but it was still impressive... or rather, pitiful. Shiki had had to stop the fight and reset it four times, and they'd still got beaten down. *I hope the Blue Lizard didn't give them any lasting trauma.* I'd be needing his help in the future for more training, and I planned to gradually remove his limiters as the students grew stronger.

Keep it up, everyone. The Blue Lizard still has plenty of transformations left to show you.

"Ah, Karen Fols. I'd like to speak with you for a bit. What's your schedule like after this?" I wrote, glancing her way.

"Today... I only have your class, Sensei," she answered, looking tired but responding without hesitation.

Lucky her, I thought, having just a morning class. But that works in my favor—I was planning to invite some students out for lunch, but now I'll just bring Karen and Shiki. I can check in with the Rembrandt sisters later at their dorm.

"Good, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Th-There's more?!" Karen stammered, clearly shocked.

"Yes, and fortunately, it sounds like you have time. Come with me," I instructed.

"O-Okay."

Good. With her agreement, I half-dragged Karen as we left the training field. Normally, I'd have a debrief session with the five students and then push them to train until the last minute, but today, I decided to wrap things up early and leave them with Shiki for the debrief; after all, they were all pretty worn out.

Honestly, the looks in their eyes say that they want to talk about me a little after I leave. But that's good. Everyone needs to vent sometimes. Even if Shiki

reports everything they say back to me... but they don't need to know that.

Go ahead, complain all you want. We've got another fun lecture in two weeks.

Noticing my smile, Karen flinched in surprise, her body trembling slightly.

Shiki

"Shiki!!! I thought... I thought we were finally, *actually* going to die!"

"Lizard scary... Lizard scary... Lizard scary..."

"What was that lizardman?! He dodged everything, he was fast, strong, and tough! How am I supposed to write a report when everything about him was just incredible?!"

"That was no lizardfolk... That was a dragon..."

"Then that makes Raidou-sensei a dragon summoner? No, that makes him sound too cute. If I had to choose between fighting him or a dragon summoner, I'd pick the dragon summoner every time."

"Oooh, sister..."

"Stop whining, Yuno. We... We should've seen something like this coming... I think! After all, it's Raidou-sensei we're talking about!" Shifu tried to sound confident, though she was clearly shaken.

Sigh. Just like Young Master predicted.

Even from my perspective, the misty lizardfolk had held back significantly. The weapons he wielded weren't his normal choices, and he didn't use any of his breath attacks—neither water nor wind. His agility was far below standard, and of course there was none of the brilliant coordination he typically displayed in group battles.

Frankly, today he was on par with the weaker monsters that roamed the Wasteland. And yet, these five promising young humans fought him together and forced me to declare them defeated four times. *How disappointing.*

Young Master accurately predicted that they'd be beaten badly, but I thought they might do a bit better—not enough to pass, perhaps, but enough to hold their own. It seems that in trying to be kind to them, as per master's orders, my judgment of their abilities became too lenient. I'll need to reflect on that.

"Come on," I said, trying to reassure them. "Both Raidou-sama and the lizardfolk were going quite easy on you. Young Master doesn't set up impossible challenges. I can personally guarantee that."

"That's a flat-out lie! Shiki, I'm sure Raidou-sensei was enjoying himself!" Jin protested, clearly upset.

"Jin, you say that, but your movements weren't quite what they usually are. Facing a monster, especially one stronger than you, must have made you nervous," I pointed out calmly.

"Nervous" was putting it lightly—all five students had been utterly intimidated. And the misty lizardfolk hadn't even used his terrifying roar. *Such inexperience.*

"Well... maybe... you're right," Jin admitted grudgingly.

"Of course, it's true that Raidou-sama is strict. But... that's only because he has high expectations for you all. Honestly, I'm a little envious," I said with a gentle smile.

"Shiki, are you the kind of person who gets fired up from being pushed around? If so, maybe I should..." Abelia trailed off with a mischievous grin.

"No, Abelia. It's not like that. It's just that, for quite some time, I haven't had the privilege of being someone Raidou-sama has expectations for. So, in a way, I feel a little envious of all of you, getting one challenge after another," I admitted.

Young Master always expressed gratitude, but he rarely gave me tasks or challenges. That wasn't the nature of our relationship, of course. But when I saw him with the students, I did feel the occasional twinge of envy.

As they continued to complain about Young Master and the lesson, I scolded, corrected, and sometimes consoled or encouraged them. I'd gotten quite used

to this routine. Today, though, they were more vocal than usual about their frustrations.

Oddly, the Rembrandt sisters didn't seem to have any complaints. It was impressive—this was their first experience, and Young Master had certainly given them a harsh dose of reality.

The two had already caught their breath and were now busy checking their equipment.

"Shifu, Yuno—how do you feel? Do you think you can keep going?" I asked.

"Oh, yes... Shiki, right? We'll be fine. Both Yuno and I will be back next week," Shifu answered confidently.

"Yeah! We're just getting started! No way we're quitting now!" Yuno added with equal determination.

Well, they're more resilient than I could have expected. I thought I'd have to talk them into coming back next week. The sisters' eyes hadn't lost their resolve—in fact, it looked like they were already starting to recover. It was clear they weren't the fragile type. That would make things easier for me.

Interesting. All the rumors said they would be nothing but trouble; however, that doesn't seem to be the case. They look like they'll be worth teaching.

I'd probably see them again later today or tonight when Young Master and I visit them as clients of the company. I felt optimistic about building a good relationship with them. *Oh, right—I should ask the admin office for their address while I'm there. Young Master probably went straight to Ironclad.*

I glanced over and saw the five other students gathered together, seemingly analyzing their tough opponent, the Blue Lizard. *Troublemakers*, I thought, shaking my head. It was clear they had no intention of attending their next class at the academy.

"Shifu, Yuno—do you mind if we get your input too?" Abelia called over to the sisters. She probably wanted their perspective on the misty lizardfolk, even though they hadn't fought it directly. She didn't seem concerned about imposing on them, but her enthusiasm was commendable.

Thankfully, the tension between our original five students and the Rembrandt sisters seemed to have evaporated. Maybe being thoroughly beaten at the same time had brought them a little closer. They probably wouldn't be spilling their deepest secrets to each other just yet, but it could be a start toward building a bond. It was good to see that they were acting on what they believed was important instead of relying on rumors. That's the kind of youthful boldness that came from inexperience.

"Sure! We'd be happy to help!" Shifu replied.

"Good thing we cleared our schedules for today, huh, sis?" Yuno added with a grin.

I see. So, even though they wouldn't have known what to expect today, they were prepared for a tough class. But their smiles are so genuine. If they have some kind of plan they're not telling me about, I'd have to believe they were born with a knack for scheming. But, no, I'm sure the rumors were wrong.

By now, all seven students had fully thrown themselves into discussing Young Master's "fun lecture." He'd asked me not to give any advice, so I kept silent, but I admired their determination to improve. Even if they were still just fledglings, it was great to see them try to aim higher.

Well, if they're so focused on this, I'll let it slide that they're skipping their next class.

They were so deep in conversation that none of them noticed when I left for the administration office. There were a few tasks I had to take care of before meeting up with Young Master.

From here on, things might get a little unpleasant. I could feel my smile stiffen a bit.

That woman... What's she doing in Rotsgard anyway?

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"This is the place," I wrote, leading the way to Ironclad.

The place had just opened, and we were the only customers. But I knew from experience that it was the calm before the storm; in an hour, the Ironclad would be packed with the lunchtime crowd.

I could've taken Karen to the Kuzunoha Company, but that was our base of operations, and I didn't want to bring someone with unclear motives straight there. So, I'd decided to have this conversation here at Ironclad, where I had planned to come for lunch anyway.

Shiki would arrive later, after finishing up with the other students and grabbing the Rembrandt sisters' address. He'd probably make it around lunchtime, so we'd wait for him to order the hotpot. It wouldn't feel right to eat without him.

First things first, I set up a soundproof barrier so there'd be no risk of our conversation being overheard.

Hmm. She didn't seem to notice me deploying the barrier. I see... She and her kind can't sense it.

I had already reviewed Karen's profile. As I suspected, she seemed suspicious.

"Raidou-sensei, it's about time you explained what's on your mind. What's this thing you wanted to talk to me about?" she asked. Despite the intense lesson she'd just had, her voice was calm and steady. She was clearly masking her exhaustion with a composed facade; to me, it was obvious she was pushing herself, but her skill in this area was still impressive and had clearly taken a lot of practice.

And then there was her power. Out of everyone I'd seen so far at the academy, she was certainly at the top. No, even considering her as a student, there was something off about her level of skill. Her ability to cooperate with unfamiliar partners, her spell power, and her speed of incantation—all of it stood out. Even when I'd tried to provoke her into revealing more during the fight, I was sure she wasn't showing her full hand. That was something I was teaching Jin and the others to recognize—when someone was hiding their true strength. But it was a rare, almost alien, mindset here at the academy.

And then there was Shiki—the telepathic warning Shiki had sent me, saying to be cautious around Karen. Did he know something about her?

I think I succeeded in shaking her up a bit during the lesson; she seemed to get a little frustrated toward the end and subtly tried different tricks to test me, all without the sisters noticing. Even so, she was still in control and still leagues ahead of the others.

“There’s something about your abilities that feels... unnatural,” I wrote.

“My abilities?” Karen responded, unfazed.

“Yes. They’re beyond the level of a student—more like someone used to real combat.”

“Well, I am a military mage in my country. I’ve participated in several subjugation missions. If you’re suspicious, I can give you the details of my affiliation.”

She rattled off her supposed credentials, including some long, fancy title from the kingdom’s army. She did it with such confidence that it could all be true. Or, depending on the scope of her plan and how long it had been in motion, she could have had a lot of time to get her story straight.

My best guess? The real Karen Fols, with the background she’d just described, was no longer alive. And the person sitting before me was using illusion magick to take on Karen’s appearance.

She’s a replacement.

It would be easier to replace someone with an established history than to infiltrate small countries, climb the ranks, join the military, enter the Royal Academy, and then transfer to Rotsgard. Especially if that person happened to leave their homeland.

“I’m asking whether you’re really Karen Fols,” I wrote. *“I’ve read about Karen Fols’s background. As you said, due to some unexpected circumstances, she has served in the military and still holds that position.”*

“You know that much, and you still doubt me? I *am* the real Karen Fols. Oh, or maybe... you’re just saying all this because you’re trying to learn more about me? If that’s the case, I—”

“That’s what’s strange,” I interrupted her. “Would someone who’s been accused of not being themselves respond like that? Shouldn’t you be more upset?”

It wasn’t that I was angry with her. But continuing to act in the guise of someone who was likely dead—it felt like an insult to the deceased.

Of course, I could be completely wrong in my assumptions. But the more suspicious she acted, the more convinced I was.

“It was just too ridiculous for me to get angry,” she replied calmly.

“The unexpected circumstances during your military service—was that when you replaced Karen Fols?”

Karen let out a soft laugh. “You’re funny, Sensei. Your power is incredible, but I didn’t think you’d be the type to spout such idiotic ideas. I won’t be coming to your class anymore. And I think I’ll pass on this meal as well. Goodbye.” She stood up, never losing her composure.

“Karen, aren’t you even curious why I suspected you?” I wrote, watching her closely.

Normally, wouldn’t someone accused of being an impostor want to know why? Would they just walk away without asking? But instead, it felt like she was deliberately trying to avoid the topic, brushing it aside. Even now, she was ready to leave.

Karen stood before me with a faint, ambiguous smile that betrayed no clear emotion, much like a technique one might employ in negotiations. What had appeared to be confidence now seemed more like a practiced skill.

“True. It seems a bit harsh to jump to the conclusion that I’m someone else just because my abilities seemed unnatural. So, why did you say that? Will you tell me?”

Of course. That’s why I had invited her to this meal.

“Because I can see through the illusion you’re using to hide your true appearance.”

Karen chuckled softly. “Is that supposed to be some kind of pick-up line? Like, ‘I can see the real you’?”

“I mean exactly what I said,” I wrote, keeping my gaze fixed on her.

“I’m sorry, but I have to decline your confession—”

“You may not have horns, but that blue skin... What business does a demon have in the academy?”

Karen froze for just a split second, but I didn’t miss the brief flash of surprise in her eyes before she quickly masked it with a charming smile.

Both in Tsige and here in the academy city, there had already been several attempts to infiltrate the Kuzunoha Company with spies. Thankfully, Tomoe-sensei and Shiki-sensei knew something about spies’ techniques and habits, and I’d taken the opportunity to learn. Even if I didn’t naturally pick up on it, the kind of reaction Karen had had was often an attempt to maintain control and calm one’s own nerves while hiding their true emotions.

Karen didn’t seem likely to flee; I could probably stall until Shiki arrived. I probably could have just taken it easy and waited for him to have the conversation over lunch. Internally, though, I was feeling a bit of urgency.

“You’re joking, right? How could I possibly be a *demon*?” Karen said, giving a quick spin in front of me as if to say, “Look how hyuman I am!” However, from my perspective, unless I was being affected by magick that made her appear non-hyuman, which wasn’t possible, she clearly had a blue-skinned body.

“Yeah, everything about you. The blue skin, the red eyes, the blonde hair. You don’t look hyuman at all. And you should probably know, illusions don’t work on me.”

She said nothing.

“You killed Karen and took her place, didn’t you? A rare demon without horns.”

Karen didn’t respond, but I saw the slightest reaction as she read the last part of my message: the muscles in her face twitched slightly. That was my cue.

“Answer my questions, hornless demon.”

“To think I’d be found out this quickly... and so directly. Raidou, huh? What a strange instructor,” she replied, no longer sounding like Karen Fols.

“So, you admit it.”

“I do. Though I have no intention of telling you my purpose, I’m not Karen Fols. You got that part right. But...”

“What is it?”

“If you ever call me hornless again,” she said, her voice cold as ice, “I’ll kill you.”

As Karen—or rather, the demon who’d been impersonating her—dropped the mask, something blurred and disappeared from her outline. I guess she’d stopped maintaining the illusion. In its place, a powerful wave of killing intent rolled off her. Not as intense as Sofia’s, but still, there was something about the anger of a woman that I found particularly unsettling.

Growing up in a household dominated by strong women left me with a bit of a complex, and I doubted I’d ever fully shake it. But I could handle it well enough... so for the time being, I was able to let it slide.

“So, about Karen... It’s like I thought?” I asked, continuing.

“Yes, just as you suspected. But it wasn’t me who did it. It was one of Karen’s so-called allies who handled her. I just found her background convenient, so I decided to take it.”

“I see, one of her allies... Poor Karen Fols,” I wrote, though honestly, I didn’t feel much. I wasn’t particularly interested in how she’d died. Hyumans kill hyumans all the time—even in my world, we humans are our own most dangerous predator—and I had no personal connection with Karen anyway.

Without asking, I could already guess what this demon had done to those who were with Karen at the time. After all, hyumans and demons were at war.

“Oh, you’re colder than I expected,” the demon said, interrupting my thoughts. “Well, Karen had her fair share of enemies... even if everyone said she was a prodigy. So, can I ask you something in return? Are you hyuman?”

"I don't quite understand the purpose of your question, but yes, I'm human," I replied.

"Is that so? A hyuman, huh... Interesting. It's unusual, you know. Normally, when hyumans see a demon, their eyes light up with hatred, no questions asked."

"Actually, I'm—" I began to write.

But enough of that! I don't have time for it.

"I'm against racial discrimination. I don't care if your skin's blue; as long as we can communicate, I don't mind if you're not hyuman," I said aloud.

Her eyes widened. "You... you can speak the demon language?! But 'against racial discrimination'—what kind of phrase is that? From what you're saying, I'm guessing you mean that as long as we can communicate, you don't care about appearances?"

"More or less. So, what should I call you? And don't say Karen; she's dead. And I still have plenty of questions for you."

"There's no need for that," the demon replied, narrowing her eyes slightly, as if disappointed. Her expression softened into something that almost resembled pity, and she shrugged her shoulders—an oddly charming gesture, even more adorable than her usual allure, and I couldn't help but be momentarily captivated.

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"A hyuman who can speak with demons like it's nothing... You know, that's actually quite interesting. No, *very* interesting. But I'm sure you understand? I have to get rid of you. You'd get in the way of my work. That's why there's no need for you to know my name," she said, her tone dropping as she stared directly at me.

"Her name is Rona. She abandoned her family name. She's one of the Demon Lord's generals, Raidou-sama."

"?!"

"Shiki," I noted.

The charged atmosphere in the room was instantly dispelled by a third voice, like someone sprinkling water to cool the rising heat of a summer day. And just like that, it felt fleeting, like the momentary relief from a splash of water. As soon as Rona registered Shiki's presence and words, the aura of impending battle that had started to gather around her began to fade.

You're late, Shiki. But now, finally, we could have a proper conversation. It seemed that Shiki knew her after all.

So... Rona? A mysterious demon woman who abandoned her family name and had no horns. She certainly gave off an enigmatic air. With her mature presence, the academy uniform looked more like cosplay on her, and honestly, it was hard to know where to look. The way she wore it provocatively made it worse, making my thoughts stray further.

This was the first time I'd stood face-to-face with someone from the demon side. But it couldn't be a normal demon, could it? My first encounter had to be a demon general.

Yep, this is definitely a headache.

The killing intent in the room had lessened, but the tension hadn't gone anywhere. Shiki's footsteps echoed as he walked calmly over to our table and took a seat. Rona, who had stood up to leave in her Karen guise, paused.

It was as if Shiki's calm gaze had worn her down. Rona let out a small sigh before sitting back down.

And so began my strangest meal yet at Ironclad.

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"The Kusunoha Company, right? That the general store that opened not that long ago. You also have a branch in Tsige, in the Aion region, don't you?" Rona asked casually.

"You're well-informed," I said, impressed.

"You're one to talk. Raidou, I feel like you're a different person from the instructor who taught us a couple of hours ago. Which one is the real you?"

“This is the real me. Shiki, could you move that pot a bit farther away? That sweet smell is drifting over here. Rona, how are you so well-informed?”

“I mean, I’m surprised how much you know about me. Not many people know my name. Especially for a newly established company... your intel-gathering skills seem better than some nations. Oh, this is delicious,” Rona added, helping herself to the food.

“Hey! Rona, that’s the dish I’ve been pouring my heart and soul into making!” Shiki exclaimed. “And demons eating blue things— isn’t that basically cannibalism?!”

“Don’t be so familiar when you address me,” Rona teased as she continued eating. “And I’ve never heard of eating blue food being cannibalism. Oh, I’ll take some of this too. Mmm, delicious!”

“Just because it isn’t red doesn’t mean it’s OK! O-Oh... Are you planning on this being your last meal?” Shiki grumbled.

“Come on, Shiki. We can always order more. Rona, this chicken is perfectly cooked too,” I said, trying to diffuse the tension.

“You’re considerate, Raidou. The seasoning’s perfect! I might have to learn how to make this,” Rona said with a grin.

“Raidou-sama...” Shiki groaned in defeat.

The private room at Ironclad had become quite chaotic.

It seemed Rona, unfamiliar with the etiquette of hotpot, had taken a liking to the dish. But Shiki clearly wasn’t getting along with her and was having less than a great time. This was ironic, considering he’d been the one to suggest ordering hotpot and having a meal while we talked.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much I could do for him. But I didn’t get why he sounded so defeated. It wasn’t like we were going to starve.

So, Shiki knew Rona to some extent... although it didn’t sound like they had been friends. But he wasn’t revealing any information about her origins. From her perspective, Shiki was likely someone to be very wary of. Still, she did a good job of not showing it.

Our first hotpot dish was emptied in no time, and we ended up prioritizing our meal over any discussion, starting with another couple of hotpot dishes.

“Ahhh! That was great! I haven’t eaten this much in ages!” Rona sighed, satisfied.

“Now, shall we get back to our conversation?” I asked.

“A conversation, huh?” Rona replied, her tone playful. “But if it’s two against one, killing either of you would be difficult. Don’t you think this is a bit unfair to me? I’d rather start by hearing more about the Kuzunoha Company.”

“Conversations rarely start on equal footing. You should know that, Rona,” I said.

“Mmm, that’s right, Rona. Schemes, plots, traps, betrayals—they’re your specialty, aren’t they?” Shiki chimed in between bites of food.

OK, so he was a bit too distracted to read the room, but Ironclad’s hotpot was basically his soul food, so I let it slide.

“Just how much do you know?” Rona asked, genuine curiosity in her voice. “You mentioned the Tsige branch, so... did someone in the Wasteland manage to catch wind of our trail?”

“Oh? So, there’s a demon strategy unfolding in the Wasteland as well?” I asked. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

Truthfully, even the name “Rona” was something only Shiki had known. The rest of us still lacked the kind of intelligence network to gather that level of information. Maybe if Tomoe was up to something behind the scenes, we could establish a decent intelligence system in the cities where we had stores.

“Is Kuzunoha part of Aion’s intelligence agency or something?” Rona asked.

No comment.

Ah, that’s right. Tsige was technically a city under Aion’s jurisdiction. But with the officials they’d send to it being so utterly incompetent, it was practically a self-governed merchant city. To be honest, it felt like it was run by the Merchant Guild and the Adventurer’s Guild.

“Not at all,” I told Rona after a moment. “We don’t belong to anyone... Not to humans and not to demons.” And that’s exactly why I’d wanted to set up shop in Rotsgard, but this was the first time I’d said it aloud.

Until today, I’d never had a conversation with a card-carrying member of the demon army, so at best, I’d only mentioned wanting to do business without being tied to any particular country. I’m sure Rembrandt and others probably assumed I meant within the boundaries of human territory. But I also didn’t plan on discriminating against potential customers based on race.

“You’re human, yet you don’t belong to the humans?” Rona asked, confusion written on her face as her eyes searched mine. “Do you even know what you’re saying, Raidou?”

“There are already some humans working with your side, aren’t there?” I replied. “It shouldn’t be that shocking. I’m just more neutral than they are.”

That was a lie. The only one I knew of was Sofia.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect this. To think there’s a faction out there with more information on this war than us. I never would have imagined there were humans capable of strategy, tactics, or even understanding the value of information. I thought it would take at least another fifty years for you to realize that.”

Fifty years? Come on, Rona, humans aren’t monkeys. The war will probably be long over by then.

Although... I can’t deny I’ve had similar feelings reading books in the academy’s library, so I guess I can’t argue too strongly.

“Humans come in all kinds, just like any other race,” I said. “Now, speaking of information, what I’m most curious about is your objective here in this city—the one where we’ve opened our first store. Since you’re infiltrating it, I’d really like to know what you’re after.”

“Raidou, don’t make such a scary face. Honestly, given how disadvantaged I am in terms of information, I have no intention of opposing you anymore.” Rona leaned her elbows on the table, no longer on guard, suddenly resembling nothing more than a woman in a schoolgirl cosplay.

“Don’t be fooled by that modest expression,” Shiki warned. “This vixen wouldn’t hesitate to use charm, seduction, or even resort to drugs or dangerous magick to achieve her ends. Raidou-sama, do *not* let your guard down.” Almost before he’d finished speaking, he took another bite. “Mmm, delicious. I used to make fun of half-cooked dishes, but now I see their merit. A new discovery.”

“Honestly, this is just so awkward. What, do you have a dossier on me in Kuzunoha’s files or something?” Rona asked, a hint of frustration finally slipping through.

“I’ll leave that to your imagination,” I told her. “So, what now? I don’t expect you to believe me, but I’m not necessarily your enemy.”

“Earlier you mentioned being neutral, didn’t you? Surely, you’re not implying that you plan to profit off both sides in the upcoming war, dealing death to humans and demons alike?” Rona’s eyes sharpened, and just beneath the surface, I could once again see the killing intent from before.

Ah, I see now. She really is one of the Demon Lord’s generals.

Despite her demeanor, she was deeply loyal to the faction she served. *I can respect that. In fact, it makes me curious about the demon king she follows—what kind of leader could command someone like her?*

“We have no plans to provide weapons for the war,” I said calmly.

For now, at least. But it wasn’t just a lack of plans; I genuinely had zero desire to get involved in that way.

Rona gave a small nod. “I see,” she murmured. She was still sitting with her elbows on the table; now she intertwined her fingers and lowered her head, which left her face partially obscured with shadow.

Silence fell over the room, broken only by the sound of Shiki tending to the hotpot and eating.

I wondered if Rona was considering the possibility of forging a more positive relationship with us. Or maybe she just saw us as a resource she could use. Either way, she was certainly more reasonable than Sofia.

This was the perfect moment to talk, with her misconceptions about our capabilities working in our favor. Truth was, I wasn't confident enough in my negotiation skills or abilities to handle a professional intelligence operative like her. If things went south, I planned to pass the baton to Shiki.

For now, all I could do was wait for her decision.

"So, Raidou, you want to sell to demons too, right? You'd be happy if you could use me as a stepping stone for that. But if I'm plotting something here, it could mess up your lucrative business. That's why you want to figure out my real goal," Rona guessed, her tone sharp.

That was pretty much it. Though, getting a foothold in the demon market wasn't urgent. That could happen whenever. The more important part was the second half—I didn't want anyone interfering with our business.

"Yeah, that's right," I replied.

"I figured." Rona nodded, her expression growing more serious. "You're not worried about the war or the impact on any nation—you're just focused on making sure no one messes with your business."

Uh... did she really just zero in on the last part? Her face definitely looked tense.

"That's correct," I said, trying to keep the conversation going smoothly.

"All right. I'm not ready to trust you just yet, but I get what you're after. So, I guess the first step is getting to know each other better."

"Getting to know each other? What do you mean by that?"

Shiki set his chopsticks down, suddenly dead serious. "Let me make this clear, Rona. If you even *think* about getting physically close to Raidou-sama, consider this a warning—you will regret it for the rest of your life. And I have no doubt that disaster will hit me as well. So, I'll make sure to stop you with everything I've got."

"Getting physically close..." *Oh. So that's what she meant by getting to know each other.*

“You’re really going to keep addressing me casually, aren’t you, Shiki?” Rona shot back.

“I don’t see any reason to be formal with you.”

“Right back at you. Ugh, seriously. And, no, I didn’t mean it that way. Unless... *you’re* interested, of course. What I actually want is to understand each other’s strengths and thoughts a bit more. The lesson earlier wasn’t enough for that, was it?”

“Hah. If you couldn’t even get a glimpse of Raidou-sama’s real power from that, then you’re just oblivious,” Shiki muttered.

“Uh... so, what exactly do you want us to do?” I jumped in, hoping to cut off their pointless back-and-forth.

“Believe me or don’t, it’s up to you. But the reason I came here is—”

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“... so that’s the situation. Lime, sorry to ask, but could you investigate?” I wrote.

“With pleasure!” Lime responded without hesitation. “I’ll sniff out the culprit in no time. If this is true, it’s a sickening situation. I’m on it!”

Not long after Lime left the room, I felt two other presences from the Kuzunoha Company vanish—it must have been Aqua and Eris, the forest ogres. It seemed like they would be joining in the investigation too.

“You’d be wise to doubt anything that woman says, Raidou-sama,” Shiki commented.

“You seemed like you knew her pretty well,” I pointed out. “Was she an old acquaintance?”

Shiki’s expression darkened into a bitter frown. “Yes. She used to be an informant and collaborator of mine, mostly for exchanging information. But... she’s tricked me more times than I care to remember and dragged me into troublesome situations.”

I nodded sympathetically, hoping Shiki would continue. I could see from his face that he had been through quite a lot with her.

“She might remind you of Mio-dono, in a way. I don’t know all the details, but she apparently has some deep debt of gratitude toward the Demon Lord and has sworn a rather obsessive loyalty to him. She’s not as strong as Mio-dono, but she’s incredibly cunning. Think of her as a clever, devious version of Mio-dono, and you won’t be too far off. Oh, and please keep this between us. Don’t tell Mio-dono.”

A clever, devious Mio... That sounds terrifying. If it were me, I’d be completely doomed. There’s no way I could handle something like that.

From what little I knew about him, the Demon Lord seemed to be a much bigger person than I—both in terms of power and character. An impressive ruler, someone with extraordinary abilities. *Wait, could the Demon Lord actually be a woman?* Come to think of it, I didn’t even know their gender.

And then there was Shiki. If he was this nervous, he could’ve picked a different comparison. But to be fair, picturing Mio made things very clear.

“Rona, huh?” Now I was thinking out loud. “So, until this is all resolved, she’ll be attending the academy as Karen Fols?”

“Yes. She’ll probably be moving around in the shadows, gathering information,” Shiki replied, his voice full of suspicion.

“She did say she wouldn’t interfere with Kuzunoha Trading Company, but from what you’ve said, she’s not someone to trust.”

“Correct. That woman lies as naturally as she breathes.”

Wow, he seemed so sure when he said that. How bad is she, exactly?

“Well, just keep tabs on her movements, if you can,” I told Shiki.

“That was my intention from the start,” he assured me. “It seems she’s already gone back to her dormitory for the night. She’s completely unaware that she’s under surveillance. Right now, she’s relaxing without a care in the world.”

“Don’t go overboard on the details. Just knowing her location and general movements is enough. Now, let’s grab a gift and go drop in on the Rembrandt sisters.”

“Oh, that’s right! I’ll guide you. Will a tray of cut fruit suffice as a gift? Perhaps we should also bring a bouquet?”

I see. I didn’t visit them in the hospital (well, actually, I wasn’t allowed to), so maybe bringing flowers would be a good idea?

I had been planning to just take a basket of cut fruit, but now that I thought about it, that was a product my store sold. It would have come off as nothing more than advertising.

But... it is popular, after all...

“Um, Raidou-sama?” Shiki called, interrupting my thoughts.

“Hm?”

“If you’d like, I could take care of it and pick something appropriate for you.”

“Sorry. Please do that.”

It seemed like Shiki had immediately seen through my dilemma. He always knew, didn’t he? *I owe you again, Shiki.*

About ten minutes later, armed with a basket of fruit and a bouquet of flowers Shiki had picked up for us along the way, we were heading toward the academy dorms.

“Hey, Shiki, the Rembrandt sisters’ room... it’s inside the noble dorms, right?”

From what I’d heard, it was a pretty luxurious place to live. *Rembrandt must really dote on his daughters.*

“Yes, it would seem so,” Shiki confirmed.

“I’m surprised the office staff told me where their room was, even though I’m just a temporary instructor. I mean, it would be one thing if I were a regular student, but...”

“I... worked hard on that.”

“What do you mean, ‘worked hard’?” I asked, puzzled.

“That’s right. I went through quite a bit of effort to ensure there would be no lasting complications,” he said with a proud nod.

I’d better not ask.

I briefly contemplated sneaking into the noble dorm, but it would have been unnecessary and overly dramatic, considering I was just there to say a quick congratulations on their recovery and return to school. So, we stopped at the entrance, where they took a minute to confirm that I was indeed a temporary instructor and sent word of my visit to the sisters. Yuno and Shifu accepted immediately, and we were ushered inside with only a slightly sour look from the dorm manager.

When I knocked on the sisters’ door, I heard some rustling from inside, followed by approaching footsteps. A second later, the door opened.

“Shifu-san, Yuno-san,” I wrote, “I wanted to apologize for not being able to visit you during your illness. I introduced myself today in class, but again, I’m Raidou, a merchant who’s indebted to your father. I’m very happy to see that you’ve fully recovered your health. I know it’s a bit late, but this is a small token of our feelings.”

Accepting the bouquet and the tray of cut fruit from Shiki, I handed them over to the two sisters.

Both of them had changed out of their uniforms and were now dressed in casual clothes. Though the designs differed, it was clear that their dresses were made to complement each other—and they were high-quality pieces. It only took a glance to tell that they were custom-made.

Shifu and Yuno smiled brightly as they accepted the gifts, then they gestured eagerly for us to come in and take a seat on the sofa.

Honestly, I would’ve been fine just handing over the stuff without going inside... but here we are.

“Raidou-sensei, you seem so different from how you were during the lecture,” Shifu commented.

“Yeah, I was really surprised!” Yuno chimed in.

"In class, it's a place to study and gain skills, so I tend to get a bit stricter. I often rely on my attendant, Shiki, to assist me. I'd appreciate it if you kept this side of me a secret from the other students," I replied with a smile.

I can't exactly go around telling them it's a carrot-and-stick situation. Besides, it'd cause all sorts of trouble if word got out to the others.

"Shiki, was it?" Shifu asked, curious. "Our dad told us about two people named Tomoe and Mio, but have you been with Raidou-sensei for a long time?"

"Yes, I've served Raidou-sama for a long time," Shiki answered smoothly, sticking to the cover story we'd rehearsed earlier that day. "However, I didn't expect him to head to Tsige, so I wasn't able to accompany him there."

Thankfully, the sisters didn't press the matter further; Shifu simply nodded before getting up to make tea. Meanwhile, Yuno set out some sweets for us.

These are really well put together. As I sat back and sipped on my tea, I noticed the two sisters exchange a quick glance and give each other a small nod.

"I'm Shifu, the eldest daughter of the Tsige merchant, Rembrandt. Raidou-sama, I cannot express how grateful I am to you for saving our lives. I will never forget this debt and will etch it into my heart, and one day, I vow to repay you."

"I'm Yuno, Rembrandt's second daughter. Thanks to you, Raidou-sama, my sister and I are able to stand here in good health. P-Please, if there's anything we can do, don't hesitate to ask."

...

They're seriously grateful! Even Yuno's talking all formally, with a serious face, and saying something intense?!

The Cursed Disease they fought for so long had been a harrowing ordeal; it must have pushed them to their limits. I'd already asked Lime and others to keep searching for more cases of people afflicted by the curse so I could make antidotes. *Cursing someone with a disease that leads to death... Yeah, I can't forgive that.*

“All right then, both of you, from now on, just live your lives to the fullest and be happy,” I wrote with a smile. “That’s how you can repay me. Oh, and drop the ‘Raidou-sama’ stuff. Since I’m your instructor, just call me ‘Sensei’ or add ‘-san,’ okay?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Both of them stared at me in stunned silence. I wasn’t sure if it was because my response had caught them off guard or because I had answered so quickly.

I’d actually been thinking about this conversation ever since my time in Tsige. It seemed likely that the sisters would feel weighed down with guilt—but it wouldn’t make sense for them to be freed from the curse only to be shackled by a debt of gratitude. That’s why I decided I’d tell them to live their lives happily, without any obligations.

“Now, since I saved your lives, you have to follow my advice, okay? Don’t go against me just because I have an unattractive face. After all, you both—”

“P-Please don’t say that! We know the state you saw us in was more embarrassing than being naked!”

“Ugh, it’s true... That *was* more embarrassing than being naked...”

Well, they had been ghouls at the time. I remembered Rembrandt-san talking about how, once he was sure his daughters would recover, he was going to turn their recovery into a series of portraits. Even I had thought that was a bit insensitive. *(I wonder how that turned out...)*

“Speaking of which, your father mentioned he wanted to capture the moment when the three of you recovered,” I wrote.

“Sensei, Father has since deeply reflected on his foolish idea,” Shifu replied with a sigh.

“He received his punishment together with Morris—the one who carelessly checked the box to have you take the exam as an instructor rather than a student, you know?” Yuno added.

Oh... terrifying. These sisters... They might be scary.

Their voices had dropped to a chilling tone that sent shivers down my spine. My instincts urged me not to ask any further questions about the “punishment.” I had a strong feeling it was something their mother and these two daughters did together. But, no, I wouldn’t ask.

I also decided it was best not to bring up the ghoulish incident anymore. (Sometimes, time doesn’t turn things into fond memories.)

“Haha, I see. Well, it’s fine,” I wrote with a nervous laugh, hoping to change the subject. *“No need to worry about it. So, Shiki, shall we take our leave now?”*

“Yes, Raidou-sama,” Shiki replied calmly.

I was grateful to Shiki for playing the role of a proper attendant the entire time, without interrupting once. And with the two kind sisters seeing us off with gentle smiles, we finally left the noble dorm.

We were at the other end of the hallway when Shiki spoke up. “Raidou-sama, about those two...”

“What about them?”

“Because they’re wealthy humans, I found it curious how little they seemed to care about outward appearances. Their gratitude toward you also seemed sincere. I believe this is the first time I’ve met ordinary humans who truly admired someone for their inner qualities.”

Well, there’s Lime, who’s under Tomoe’s influence, but even he’s already considered an outlier.

“Well, they probably started seeing things pretty differently after what the Cursed Disease did to their own appearances,” I suggested. “I imagine that made them value people’s inner qualities more.”

“Whatever the case, it’s heartwarming. Those two will certainly grow into remarkable people,” Shiki added with a smile.

“Oh, Shiki-sensei’s seal of approval? Well then, they’re sure to be promising rookies.”

With some light banter, Shiki and I made our way back.

The next morning, we found that Lime Latte had vanished without a trace.



On the outskirts of the Mirage City, the air was tense.

Fifteen warriors with dark-brown skin and crimson eyes stood in formation. Standing at attention, they exuded self-assurance—the confidence in their eyes spoke of countless battles lost and even more won.

These elite warriors had been selected from the forest ogres' village as a gesture of cooperation with Raidou—known to some as Makoto. Among them were Aqua and Eris, the two who had once left a deep impression on Makoto, along with their master, Mondo.

Until recently, these warriors had served as their village's last line of defense; it was thanks to Tomoe's reconstruction of the town's protective barrier that they were free to be selected.

During their initial inspection of the Demiplane, the forest ogres had been amazed by its natural environment. After discussions, it was decided that the selected ones would be allowed to reside in and govern the southern forests; the management of other scattered forests was still under consideration.

Today was the first day of their scheduled combat training, and they had all arrived early. They were waiting for three people from the Mirage City...

... and these were none other than Makoto, Tomoe, and Mio—the three strongest figures in the Demiplane. The forest ogres, in their innocence, believed that the three of them were simply coming to oversee the training. In a way, their ignorance was a kind of bliss.

“It’s good to see everyone here on time,” Tomoe addressed the assembled warriors. “Although I would expect no less from such a carefully chosen group.” Her blue hair, along with the traditional Japanese clothing she wore—unfamiliar to those in this world—made her an eye-catching figure. Her outfit, which was reminiscent of samurai garb, only added to the warriors’ fascination.

“I can’t believe we’re wasting our time babysitting these weaklings,” Mio grumbled, her voice thick with irritation. The way she wore her black hair and the attire she had on were also Japanese, though her kimono was more traditional. Not exactly the kind of outfit that seemed well suited to combat training.

“Why do I even have to be here?” another voice chimed in. “Shiki could’ve handled this just fine.”

This was Makoto, the supreme ruler of the Demiplane. He had much more important matters on his mind, like getting ready for his upcoming departure to the academy city. His face reflected his mood, and the fact that it was so early in the morning didn’t help at all.

Noticing the clear lack of enthusiasm from everyone except Tomoe, the forest ogres exchanged tight, nervous glances.

“Well, they’re here,” spoke the largest and most muscular of the forest ogres to no one in particular. “I don’t like how unmotivated some of them look” — here, he turned to Tomoe—“but today’s just about you watching us train, right?”

This was the forest ogres’ leader, whose fierce expression matched his well-built physique and whose names included “The Eccentric” and “Master.”

“No, that plan’s canceled,” Tomoe responded nonchalantly.

“What did you say?” asked the leader, showing no attempt to hide his displeasure.

“Still as spirited as ever, I see,” Tomoe answered with a grin. “Let’s see... Mondo, right? It’s a shame. You’ve got a fine name, but you’re a bit disappointing.”

“Are you picking a fight with me, dragon lady?” Mondo growled.

“Not at all. We’ve just decided to change the schedule today. Instead of watching you train, we’d like you to show us your skills. If you meet our standards, we’ll trust the warriors your village selected from here on out. But if you fall short, we’ll have to adjust and provide additional training.”

Although Tomoe’s explanation was logical enough, the smile on her face made it clear that Mondo’s accusation of picking a fight wasn’t entirely off the mark.

“So, you’re saying we’re not good enough?” Mondo shot back, his irritation rising.

“On the contrary, Mondo. We’re giving you the chance to prove your strength. You’ll form teams, and then you’ll face us in combat. That’s why I made sure to bring both Young Master and Mio here today,” Tomoe explained, her tone steady as ever.

“Hmph.” Mondo’s sharp eyes gleamed like a hawk’s. Though most people tended to wither under his intimidating gaze, it had more or less zero effect on Tomoe.

“Split up into teams of five,” Tomoe instructed, never losing her smile. “No doubt, you, Mondo, and your two disciples will be on the same team. I’ll give you the privilege of fighting against Young Master.”

“Now that’s what I wanted to hear! We’ve all been wondering just how strong Young Master really is!” Mondo declared, his interest piqued.

“Oh, I see. Well then, let’s move on to the next part—what exactly our standard is,” Tomoe continued. She didn’t pay much attention to the murmurs and insults spilling from some of the other forest ogres, though Mio’s eyes subtly narrowed, and she concealed her smile behind her fan. As for Makoto, his expression hadn’t changed, but his gaze betrayed the question on his mind: *How much longer is this going to take?*

“Your standard? As long as we beat you, there won’t be any complaints, right?” Mondo asked, his confidence undeterred.

“Of course. If you can defeat us, there will be no complaints. In fact, you’ll pass with flying colors,” Tomoe said. “Specifically, for the teams facing Mio and

me, if you can make us kneel or force us into a visibly compromised position, that'll be enough. As for Young Master... if you can land even a single hit on him, you'll pass. If you can't, you'll be following the afternoon training regimen we've prepared."

Tomoe's words caused a ripple of murmurs to spread through the group, growing louder by the second.

"Understood. But... I think you're going to regret underestimating us," Mondo growled. "I'll get the teams sorted out now."

"Make sure you have no regrets yourselves and give it your all," Tomoe responded with a sly smile. "The test will go on until noon. Anything goes, but rest assured, we won't deliver any fatal blows, and any injuries you sustain will be fully healed."

With that, she waved her hand dismissively at the forest ogres, as if to say, *Get ready.*

"Tomoe, are you serious about this going until *noon*?" Makoto asked with a sigh. "And doesn't that make it pretty tough on me, considering they only pass if I get hit?"

"Young Master, the forest ogres are, unfortunately, a bit slow-witted. They have enough intelligence to think for themselves but they don't instinctively understand what a truly strong warrior is," Tomoe explained. "They've been influenced by humans in a bad way. They even seem to have forgotten that they can't leave this place. By thoroughly showing them their place from the start, we can ensure that the... adjustments—er, training—go smoothly moving forward. I hope you'll help me with that this morning, but you won't need to be here for my bootcamp this afternoon."

"Bootcamp? There you go again, digging up strange ideas from my memories..." Makoto sighed again. "Well, since I won't be able to come here as often anymore, I'm willing to help while I still can."

"Why do I have to stay for the afternoon?" Mio interjected. "I want to spend time with Young Master."

“Mio, having both of us here will give them more of a reason to despair,” Tomoe explained. “These are the people who, whether they could succeed or not, tried to harm the Young Master. It wouldn’t hurt to discipline them a little, don’t you think?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I haven’t given them their punishment yet. If that’s the case...” Mio trailed off, now fully on board with the idea.

At first, Mio hadn’t noticed the malice in the forest ogres’ actions. However, after discussing it with Makoto, she understood they’d been trying to hurt him, and to put it nicely, they were no longer her favorite people. But Makoto had decided to allow them to serve him, so Mio had reconciled herself to the situation. Makoto had also made it clear that he wasn’t planning on bringing Tomoe or Mio to the academy city with him. Perhaps that’s why he seemed more lenient toward Tomoe’s requests than usual.

“Well then, I’ll make sure they don’t die. They’ll have to survive and transform through the training regimen I’ve devised for them... Hehehe...” Tomoe chuckled darkly.

She’d been working hard on creating a new clone ever since her first one had been erased. This new one would serve as the administrator of the Demiplane. It was smaller, resembling a chibi-like girl (about two heads tall), but also possessed impressive combat abilities. Tomoe had incorporated a dangerous crimson ring—created by Makoto—into the core of this new clone, which had led to a secret battle with Mio. She grinned as she thought about what tomorrow’s training would be like.

Despite their hostility toward him, Makoto couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the forest ogres as he watched Tomoe’s unsettling smile.

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The battle did not go well for the forest ogres.

They were utterly crushed—likely the first time they’d suffered such a humiliating and complete defeat, Makoto thought.

Although Mondo might have been a brute, he was not incompetent in battle. Before the fight, he had confirmed with Tomoe that if even one team met the conditions, she wouldn't interfere with their future training. However, he had failed to clarify one crucial detail—a mistake influenced by Tomoe's wordplay and provocative tone.

Naturally, Mondo had assigned the five least-trained warriors to face Tomoe, the next five to Mio, and saved the best—including himself—to fight against Makoto. Given his ranking of their abilities, this was a logical decision. After all, during their tour of the Demiplane, Mondo hadn't realized that the immense magical power he'd sensed during an "incident" (as it had been explained to him) belonged to Makoto.

Unfortunately, despite the hours they were given, neither the team facing Tomoe nor the one facing Mio had managed to remain standing.

Tomoe hadn't even unsheathed her weapon. Instead, she'd maintained a barrier of agonizing mist for about fifteen minutes—during which time Tomoe was casually mulling over what kind of design she should apply to the sheath and guard of the sword she'd been working on—leaving all five warriors incapacitated and foaming at the mouth. Their individual combat skills and teamwork had been meaningless. The air had been filled with their groans of torment and desperate cries, which quickly faded into silence as Tomoe released the barrier. It was a dreadful scene.

Mio, on the other hand, hadn't bothered to block a spell cast by one of the warriors. She'd simply let the magick hit her without effect. Without so much as flinching, she captured the remaining four warriors, including the caster, using her threads, as they attempted to attack her from the ground and the air simultaneously. Like insects caught in a spider's web, they struggled helplessly as Mio drained their strength almost to the point of death. By noon, even the strongest among them could barely move, stumbling around like a newborn fawn. Meanwhile, Mio hadn't moved an inch. After each of the five forest ogres had lost consciousness and collapsed, she found a convenient rock to sit on, checking the results of a new makeup technique she'd recently learned. This, too, was a dreadful sight.



As for Makoto...

When he faced the five most elite forest ogres, who made no effort to hide their killing intent, Mondo stepped forward with a proposal. He asked Makoto to land a strike on him first. His reasoning was that unless he understood Makoto's strength, he wouldn't be able to adjust his own power.

Makoto found himself developing a bit of a fondness for this lovable fool. (*These are exactly the kind of people who say things like "What?!" or "How can that be?!" in stories*, he thought with a wry smile.) Mondo's suggestion was actually what Makoto himself had planned to propose—if not for the condition that he couldn't allow even a single blow to land on him.

And so, Makoto decided to humor him. Estimating Mondo's strength based on what he'd seen from Aqua and Eris, Makoto delivered a single punch to the face that Mondo had so confidently presented. As expected, Mondo was sent flying and landed in a heap, not even twitching. The remaining four warriors just stood there, too shocked to react or mount a follow-up attack. One by one, they glanced over at Mondo's prone body as if confirming it were real, then they finally broke away from the shock and rushed over to check on their master.

Makoto, who had deliberately held back to avoid seriously harming Mondo, stared in disbelief at how far Mondo had been sent flying. (*He was weaker than I thought...* he mused, eyes wide.)

"He really was all talk..." Makoto muttered quietly, though no one else heard his words. He stood still for a moment, gazing up at the clouds, until the forest ogres returned. Mondo must have received some healing, as he at least appeared unharmed on the surface.

After treating Makoto to a round of insults—he had no idea why, but among the names they called him was "coward"—the five most elite forest ogres finally began their attack.

All Makoto had to do was erect a magical barrier around himself, reinforce it, and then wait. Whether it was focused strikes, widespread assaults, magick, swords, or arrows, everything they threw at him was deflected effortlessly. From the forest ogres' perspective, it was like attacking a boulder.

Makoto could have finished them off if he wanted to, but instead, he let them exhaust themselves with wave after wave of attacks until around noon. When he finally saw that Tomoe was getting restless, Makoto picked up the bow he'd left on the ground and fired five shots. With that, all five warriors collapsed to their knees. They had completely run out of strength; their breathing was ragged, and they seemed unable to muster the energy to even stand.

"Good enough?" Makoto asked Tomoe, not waiting for an answer before walking away.

Left behind were the fifteen forest ogres, their physical wounds healed but their confidence utterly shattered. There wasn't a trace of the bravado they'd shown that morning.

Tomoe nodded in satisfaction. "Well, since you've all failed, it's time for you to undergo my training."

"All right."

Mondo's voice contained resignation, exhaustion... and just a flicker of rebellion. Tomoe merely smiled.

"Tomoe, don't you think you've let them get a bit too cocky? Perhaps you should use your mist again for half a day to truly teach them their place. It might help them take the training more seriously," Mio suggested.

The five forest ogres who'd faced Tomoe turned pale and clutched their heads immediately. They had foamed at the mouth after only fifteen minutes—had they been subjected to it for half a day, their minds might not have survived. Out of all the groups, they were clearly the most mentally broken at this point.

"Now, now, Mio, don't bully them too much," Tomoe said, trying to calm her down. "Let's save that as a punishment for those who perform poorly."

"My magick, your magick... they take it head-on like it's nothing. Is there really any value in training them? And look at the group that fought against Young Master—he let them attack him over and over, and you saw how that turned out," Mio pointed out, her skepticism evident.

“They have plenty of potential. If we train them from scratch, they’ll turn into valuable assets,” Tomoe responded confidently.

“If you say so... but out of everyone in the Demiplane, I’m pretty sure these guys would be at the bottom of the list,” Mio muttered, unconvinced. She couldn’t understand what Tomoe saw in them, and there was no attempt to soften her words toward the forest ogres.

“I won’t deny that,” Tomoe admitted with a shrug. “They’re like kids playing with sticks, thinking they’re warriors. Even Young Master seemed to treat them with that mindset.”

“They’re going to need more than punishment at this rate... It’s starting to feel more like babysitting,” Mio sighed. She could already imagine the stress of dealing with opponents who would crumble with the slightest push.

No matter how harsh the words, the utterly defeated forest ogres had no grounds to argue. They could only follow Tomoe’s instructions and proceed through the rest of the training program.

The session continued until dusk, with Tomoe and Mio allowing no room for slacking off. For Mondo and his companions, the regimen was grueling. Much of the training seemed focused on testing their limits, which left the forest ogres puzzled. There was no training planned for the next few days, as they would be spending time surveying the forest. None of them could understand what Tomoe meant when she said they would be “valuable assets” after this.

“All right, that’s it for today!” Tomoe announced.

Several of the trainees sighed in relief, grateful that they hadn’t been subjected to the agonizing mist during the day. However, the real challenge was yet to come.

Once the group of fifteen had gathered in line, Tomoe casually delivered her next announcement.

“Well then, tomorrow we’ll start at dawn and continue all day. Make sure you’re prepared.”

“What?! You’ve got to be kidding!” Mondo shouted. “The next scheduled training observation isn’t for another ten days!”

What Tomoe had just said directly contradicted the rules: the forest ogres' training would be self-guided and occasionally observed.

"What are you talking about? I told you from the start that there would be no such thing!" Tomoe replied sharply.

"That's not what you meant! You were just saying you wouldn't stop at just observing the training!" Mondo retorted, his frustration growing.

"That's your own twisted interpretation. Besides, I clearly told you during the assessment, didn't I? If you fall below the standards, you'll have to go through our training."

"But we just finished today's training, didn't we?"

"You really are slow, aren't you, forest ogre? I did say we'd *begin* the training this afternoon, but I never said when it would end, did I? As a matter of fact, the shortest it'll last is about a month."

A month. Upon hearing this, a few of the forest ogres collapsed to the ground in despair. To be constantly watched and forced to undergo training at the hands of opponents so far beyond their level... It was nothing short of torture. They wanted to refuse outright, but they couldn't do it with strength. Their only option left was to flee.

"You're the one twisting words!" Mondo argued, desperation creeping into his voice. "Everyone knows that when training starts, it's supposed to finish by the end of the day, isn't it?!"

"Twisting words, you say? Fine by me. After all, the logic of the weak doesn't stand a chance against the whims of the strong," Tomoe declared coolly.

Mondo groaned. Through today's training, he had come to fully understand that no matter how much he pushed himself, he and his group stood no chance against the two women before him. Even if the fifteen of them tried to overwhelm Tomoe and Mio in their sleep, they would still be defeated. In fact, Mondo was starting to believe that if they made the wrong move, the two women might "accidentally" kill them.

Both Tomoe and Mio were undeniably, overwhelmingly powerful, and Mondo now understood this with both his mind and his body. He had also realized that

Makoto was just as untouchable. No matter how long and how hard they attacked, they hadn't been able to break a single one of his barriers. If Makoto had wanted to, he could have ended them at any moment. It was like Tomoe had said—to him, they were just kids playing with sticks.

“Oh my, you even made sure to confirm before the test that if any one team met the conditions, you wouldn't interfere again. How pathetic, clinging to such trivialities,” Mio taunted, a cruel smile on her lips. “I'm not one for complicated words, but do the weak really have the right to make any choices?”

Aqua and Eris kept silent, their spirits broken. Having been easily dismissed by Makoto and thoroughly humiliated during the training, they were physically and mentally drained. Just when they thought they were on the verge of success, they would fail, only to repeat the process. All they wanted now was to sleep, just like the other three who had faced Makoto. As for the remaining ten, their spirits were completely crushed. The five who had faced Tomoe were utterly shattered, unable to think of anything at all. Meanwhile, the five who had been taken down by Mio could only think of escaping.

Tomoe ignored Mondo's protests for the moment and surveyed the rest of the group.

“What a simpleminded bunch. Already worn out from just this much training. I'd say half of you are probably thinking of running away by now, aren't you?”

“?!”

“But... with those small brains of yours, maybe you should think a little harder. Where do you think this place is? How exactly did you get here? Surely you don't believe this place is connected to your village by land, do you? You're naive. Far too naive,” Tomoe said with a small smile.

“What... do you mean?” Mondo asked, his voice strained. Even he had secretly considered the idea of running away—not so much because of the harshness of the training, but rather out of concern that someone might actually die at this rate.

“What do I mean? This place exists inside a special barrier created by Young Master. The strength of this barrier is nothing like the simple one he used

earlier. If you want to escape from here, you'd have to be able to break that 'simple barrier' with nothing more than a finger."

Of course, this was a complete fabrication. The true nature of the Demiplane was still largely unknown, but the part about being unable to return to the forest ogre village was true. There was no land connection, and escape was indeed impossible.

"Break it with a finger... That's absurd," one of the forest ogres muttered.

Still, the group was beginning to realize how hopeless their situation was. If they hadn't been able to even scratch Makoto's "simple barrier," there was no chance they could escape. Aqua and Eris, too, were stunned as they finally understood that the barrier Makoto had used against them was merely a basic technique. It even dawned on them that Makoto hadn't needed to chant an incantation.

"Do you understand your situation now?" Tomoe continued. "There's no escape for you. And let me add this—whether your village survives or not, that's in my hands as well. Since none of you reached the standard, there's nowhere in this world where you can run. If you perform poorly, who knows what might happen to your village?"

Tomoe spoke as if she were the law itself, delivering an ultimatum.

"Well, you won't die," Mio chimed in. "But you'll either return to your village as broken failures or as capable warriors. If you have any pride, now's the time to show it."

Mio's words were part of a script Tomoe had asked her to memorize beforehand. Tomoe had asked Mio to help her play the role of a strict, unforgiving instructor. Since Mio hadn't been able to accompany Makoto to Rotsgard, she had considered dropping by the training sessions occasionally to pass the time or relieve her frustrations.

Tomoe's threats and Mio's push for action smoldered quietly within the hearts of the forest ogres. Tomoe wasn't concerned with their current pitiful state—it didn't matter if her words hadn't had an immediate effect. The important thing was that when they reached their conclusions later that night, the seeds she'd planted would take root.

After all, tomorrow would mark the official start of their training, now that Tomoe had a clear idea of their abilities. The training methods were a mix of Makoto's memories, stitched together through a combination of misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Tomoe had discovered the term "bootcamp" in one of the documents from the library and, combining her ideas with what she had gleaned from Makoto's memories, she had dubbed this training "TM Bootcamp" (with the "T" for Tomoe and the "M" for Makoto).

However, while the "T" part of the name was understood, the rest of the intense, nightmarish training and the periodic involvement of the fearsome "black-clad woman" soon led the forest ogres to associate the "M" with Mio instead. Over time, they came to refer to the camp as "Tomoe and Mio's Bootcamp."

"Kufu, with this, my plan for Toyama-medicine sales will take a step forward," Tomoe muttered to herself with a grin. "It's the perfect idea—raising the profile of the trading company while gathering intelligence at the same time. I've got one more trick up my sleeve to surprise Young Master."

Although Mio overheard her, she didn't bother asking questions; Tomoe's plans rarely made sense to anyone but her. Mio simply watched as the forest ogres staggered back to their quarters. True to form, she made no move to offer them any assistance.

"The customer is god!!!"

"Always prioritize future gain over immediate benefit!!!"

"Support Kuzunoha Company's medicine sales!!!"

"We'll rush to your side whenever you're in trouble!!!"

The next day, shouts like these could be heard in the outskirts of the Demiplane as the forest ogres threw themselves into training with unwavering determination. Though mixed in with these cries were screams of agony and wails of despair.

Their voices were too quiet, their smiles too facile, their self-awareness too lacking, and they were simply too weak overall. For these and sometimes less

logical reasons, they were frequently subjected to violence. Yet, through this brutal regimen, they were forced to improve their basic physical abilities, combat skills, stealth techniques, and even their knowledge of humans and information gathering—all beaten into their heads and bodies.

Tomoe's fearsome bootcamp, led by her relentless guidance, continued day after day.



Some time after Makoto had arrived in Tsige...

In this world, tableware was made from either wood or metal. The same was true in the Demiplane, both for humans and the non-humans who had lived in the wilderness.

At the dwarves' workshop, a wide variety of metal items were produced alongside weapons and armor. And now, in one corner of the workshop, a new facility had appeared—a dome-shaped kiln with a chimney.

The kiln was for making pottery. While some dwarves had memories of such a device, precious few had actual experience using one.

The reason was simple: pottery made from clay or stone was fragile. In the Goddess's world, where a wider variety of metals existed compared to Earth—and there was magick to craft them—tableware was generally made from metal or wood.

Although there were some regions in the Lorel Federation that used pottery, the practice wasn't widespread. As for porcelain or bone china, not even a close equivalent existed.

"Pottery, huh? I've heard of it, but personally, I don't see many advantages compared to metal utensils. If the taste of metal bothers you, you can always use wooden bowls," one of the older dwarves commented when Makoto brought up the subject.

In other words, in a world where various metals, woods, and magick were readily available, pottery had never gained much traction. Even when Tomoe had tried (or more accurately, had made others try) creating teacups from different metals and types of wood, they couldn't quite capture the right feel. Although the craftsmanship was impressive, and the final products closely resembled what she wanted, there was something off about them. Makoto agreed; he was impressed by the dwarves' skill, but the results still didn't match the atmosphere he'd hoped for.

That's when Makoto mentioned the idea of making pottery from clay. On coming to this world, he'd been surprised to learn that the kind of ceramics that were so common in Japan were barely seen here.

"More than anything, the issue is how fragile they are," the dwarf explained. "For everyday use, it's better to have something sturdy that you don't need to worry about breaking."

"I see... then there's no need to force the issue with pottery. I've never felt inconvenienced by the current options, and it's better to have something durable if we're going through the trouble of making it," Makoto said.

"Yes, but don't worry, we'll make something with the same texture as what you used to have, Young Master..."

"No! We *will* make pottery!" Tomoe interrupted, her resolve firm.

"Tomoe, don't be unreasonable," Makoto sighed. "Besides, I don't even know that much about pottery. Even if you dig through my memories, there's no guarantee that there's enough information to recreate it..."

Suddenly, he remembered something.

In school he'd been on a field trip to a pottery studio... and there was that time he'd spent helping his archery master, who made pottery as a hobby. It wouldn't be impossible.

"We could do it, I suppose," Makoto admitted reluctantly, "But we don't need it."

Instead of answering Makoto directly, Tomoe turned to the dwarves. "Isn't the challenge of making something new the true spirit of a craftsman?" Her

words carried a subtle threat.

Makoto pressed on. “Even though they’re already overwhelmed with the sword-making projects you’ve been pestering them about? Pottery isn’t something you can just randomly start doing one day by kneading some clay. It’s an art that’s reached incredible heights—it’s not as easy as you’re making it sound—”

“We’ll do it! Please, let us take on this task!” one of the dwarves interrupted, much to Makoto’s shock. He had intended to reason with Tomoe and lessen the burden on the dwarves, but instead, the dwarf was wholeheartedly agreeing with her.

“Wait, what? Really?” Makoto asked.

Tomoe ignored him. “Yes!” she said enthusiastically. “If you’re willing to do it, then just give me a minute. I’ll go get all the information you need right away.”

“Yes please, Tomoe-sama,” the dwarf said with a respectful bow.

“Leave it to me!” Tomoe declared, beaming.

“Wh-Why is this happening?” Makoto muttered. He couldn’t believe how quickly the conversation had shifted. He watched in disbelief as the craftsmen and Tomoe discussed the next steps.

What Makoto didn’t realize was that he had unknowingly touched upon the pride of the dwarves as master craftsmen. And so, a short time later, in one corner of the dwarves’ district in the Demiplane, a kiln was built.

“I see... So, the reason teacups sometimes chip is because they’re made from clay and are fragile. And after shaping this clay, you fire it to increase its hardness... Hmm, that’s quite interesting,” Tomoe mused.

“We’ve tried shaping the clay like you instructed, but even after it’s fired, there are likely to be small, invisible holes. That would make it unsuitable for use as tableware, I think,” one of the dwarves said as he presented a clay bowl. This was the leader of the craftsmen participating in the project.

Given his extensive experience with fire, he had noticed several things about the process. He turned to Makoto, eager to clarify his concerns.

“Yes, that’s right. After the first firing, the piece is usually coated with something called a glaze and then fired again to seal the holes and make it waterproof,” Makoto explained.

“A *glaze*?”

“It’s something like clay mixed with water and ash. You dip the dried pottery, or earthenware, into a container filled with glaze and then fire it again.”

“Clay, ash, and water, huh? I see. So, the goal is to create a thin membrane when it’s fired. Depending on the temperature, I imagine it could form a transparent coating, a bit like glass.”

“Y-Yes, I think that’s right. Depending on what you mix into the glaze, it can affect the color and patterns on the finished pottery too. But I can’t explain it in much detail,” Makoto admitted, a little embarrassed. “Sorry about that.”

“No, no! This is a fascinating technique. If we follow your explanation, we should be able to achieve a level of strength that makes it usable. And indeed... this may very well be something that deserves to be called art,” the dwarf said. He nodded contentedly to himself as he worked, his hands covered in brown clay.

Makoto was impressed; the craftsman seemed to be absorbing a wealth of information, well beyond what Makoto had explained.

“And why do you think that?” Tomoe asked, curious. “I still don’t completely understand what Young Master meant by calling this process ‘art.’”

“Tomoe-sama, this process seems to involve several uncertain elements, yet it’s still a refined method,” the dwarf explained.

“What a strange thing to say. That sounds contradictory,” Tomoe remarked.

“Not at all. You can control the materials and the glaze, which already allows for a wide variety of characteristics in the finished piece. However, factors like the firing time and even subtle changes in the weather during the process can affect the final result. In other words, while we can create something of the same material, even if we try to replicate a successful piece, there’s no guarantee we could reproduce it exactly the same way again. Magick could be used to copy the result, of course, but that might be an insult to the craft itself.”

“Hmm, I see. So, because it’s uncertain whether you can make the same thing twice, that’s part of its value,” Tomoe mused. “I can understand why people would want to take care of something that turned out well.”

Though Tomoe hadn’t fully grasped it yet, the fact that pottery and porcelain were fragile, as the dwarves had explained, also contributed to their value. Their transience—how easily they could be lost—was part of what made them precious.

“I’m really amazed by your skill,” Tomoe told the dwarf. “It’s like you’re breathing life into the clay... It looks like it has a lot of depth.”

“I hope you don’t get too carried away with it,” Makoto said with a chuckle. “I think it’s something that other races might enjoy too, so make sure there’s enough space for anyone who’s interested to try it. That way, it won’t all fall on you dwarves.”

“Got it. I’ll consult with Ema-sama and we’ll do as you’ve suggested, Young Master,” the dwarf replied as he got back to work.

Makoto glanced at Tomoe, and it was clear from her restless expression that something was brewing inside her.

Here we go, he thought, a knowing smile creeping across his face. Tomoe, who had been quietly observing as a supervisor, now seemed eager to try her hand at pottery after hearing the discussions.

“Tomoe, why don’t you give it a try? You know you want to,” Makoto suggested.

“Wh-What?! Well then, if you insist... I mean, it’s not like I’m *excited* about playing with clay, like a child, but of course, I should give it a try at least once,” Tomoe stammered, her face lighting up with joy as she chased after the dwarves.

And so, in the Demiplane, another new craft was born.

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“So, the issue is replication, then?” Tomoe mused.

The dwarf nodded. "Yes, Tomoe-sama. It seems replication isn't possible after all. This is quite unexpected..."

"Even with spirit magick?"

"I tried it outside of the Demiplane, but it still couldn't be done. Since there are no spirits in this Realm, that might be part of the issue."

"Well, if we make the kiln bigger and increase the production volume, it shouldn't be too much of a problem. Like Young Master said, even without much experience, anyone can make these once they get the hang of it. In fact, it might be a good idea to have everyone make their own tableware. Who knows, maybe an artist will emerge from one of the races," Tomoe added with a grin. "Besides, this is fun!"

As she spoke excitedly, she held a cup shaped like a traditional Japanese teacup, a *yunomi*, the result of the first test batch. Tomoe's own piece had been delayed and would come out of the kiln with the second batch.

"I must say, I was surprised when we took those pieces out," the dwarf remarked. "Even though we used the same method, just with different shapes, the final impressions were so varied. I expected a bit of inconsistency, but the diversity was impressive. And..." he trailed off, his eyes drifting to the *yunomi* in Tomoe's hand.

"There's a texture you don't find with metal or wood," Tomoe finished for him. "It's unique but quite pleasant."

The dwarf nodded. "Yes, that was a surprise as well. I'm truly glad we made these. We have you to thank, Tomoe-sama."

"You should be grateful," Tomoe replied with a smirk. "What about adding patterns, colors, or drawings? Is that difficult?"

"According to Young Master, there are methods where you can draw or apply patterns before or after the glazing process. As for colors... I believe they're influenced by the type of clay used, the stone powders mixed in, and the materials used for the glaze."

"And magick can't help with that?"

“Correct. It seems we’ll have to rely on trial and error. Even Makoto-sama doesn’t seem to know much about the finer details.”

There were two noteworthy points in the dwarf’s report to Tomoe. The first was that the pottery seemed highly resistant to magical interference. Something about the soil or the process in the Demiplane made it impossible to alter or enhance the pieces using magick postproduction. That said, the pottery itself wasn’t particularly strong—when subjected to external magical attacks, it shattered easily. The material simply resisted magical modifications, which was ultimately of little practical use and could be considered a pointless form of magick resistance.

The second point was the reason Tomoe had been so excited: residents of the Demiplane were already getting hooked on the pottery-making process. The satisfaction of kneading the clay, the anticipation of seeing the diverse pieces emerge from the kiln, and the many points throughout the process where the maker’s personal touch could shine had sparked an addiction among a growing number of dwarves.

Though they reported back to Tomoe with calm professionalism, even the lead craftsman—who was responsible for overseeing the project—had fallen under pottery’s spell. Some of the dwarves had even reported back to Tomoe that a few of their number had become “obsessed” with the craft.

“If adding color was easier, we could sell these as products from our trading company. But this one seems to be a stubborn, hard-to-get type. It’s quite a challenge,” Tomoe said, holding up the yunomi in front of her face and examining it with interest.

“One of the ideas we’re working on is to try using soil from outside of the Demiplane,” the dwarf replied. “The rest will depend on our research...”

“I’m counting on you. The new pieces should be coming soon, right?”

“Yes, they should be here any moment. Ah, looks like they’ve just arrived.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Let’s see how my handmade piece turned out,” Tomoe said, her eyes gleaming with excitement as she looked at the young craftsman approaching with a tray. The tray held a cloth-covered item with a noticeable bulge.

However, the young craftsman's hands were trembling so hard that the object on the tray was clattering against it.

Everyone in the room collectively held their breath, tension rippling through the air.

After a brief pause, as if the craftsman had steeled himself for what was to come, he removed the white cloth.

“...!”

On the shaking tray sat a single teacup.

However, the cup had a large crack running through it and a sizable chip missing. Something had clearly gone wrong in the firing process.

“It's... it's broken!!!” Tomoe exclaimed.

“Someone must have mishandled it! Tomoe-sama, I'm so sorry!!!” the young craftsman pleaded.

But that wasn't the case at all.



The lead craftsman had taken one look at the piece and known: it had already been like that when it was taken out of the kiln.

“No, just by looking at it...”

“Quiet! This could be the end of our pottery—”

“I’ll ask you this: was it broken because it was dropped, or was it already cracked when it came out? Tell me the truth,” Tomoe demanded, the fire in her eyes making it clear that she wouldn’t tolerate lies.

“It was already broken when we took it out of the kiln,” the young craftsman admitted, hanging his head.

“I see,” Tomoe replied.

The lead craftsman looked up at the ceiling, despair written all over his face.

Tomoe had failed.

If this mishap soured her mood, she might lose interest in pottery altogether, and that would be the end of the dwarves’ newfound passion for the craft. Having already been captivated by the art, the head craftsman had tried to avoid this outcome by getting one of the younger apprentices to lie and take the blame. He should have known that the apprentice was no match for the pressure of Tomoe’s gaze.

It’s over, the lead craftsman thought.

Silence filled the room, tension gripping everyone present.

“Phew. Well, it was my first time trying this, so I guess it can’t be helped! Actually, this makes me even more excited to keep working with clay!” Tomoe suddenly said, her face lighting up as she lifted her head.

Her bright words echoed through the room, changing the atmosphere in an instant.

“Don’t worry too much about it. I’ll be dropping by often to give it another go, so keep working on your research,” she added with a grin, taking the broken piece of pottery with her as she left the room.

As soon as she was gone, the whole group let out a sigh of relief, the tension finally broken.

“All right, everyone!” the lead craftsman shouted, springing into action. “Let’s gather all the results right away! And tell the team in charge of clay collection to gather samples from as many different places as possible. Make sure to tell the people inside the Demiplane and everyone outside as well.”

“Yes, sir!” came the unified response, as the group of craftsmen immediately got to work, heading toward the kiln.

And thus, the pottery craft in the Demiplane began.

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“Oh? Is that a metal dish? It doesn’t look like wood,” a customer asked, his eyes drawn to a piece sitting on a shelf behind the counter.

“Nah, it’s something I made out of clay,” the dwarf shopkeeper responded with a grin. “Just a little hobby of mine, but I ended up getting quite into it.”

“Out of clay?!” the customer exclaimed. “And you made it yourself? Impressive! You’re not just good with weapons, you can do all kinds of things, huh? But... can you really use something made from clay? I mean, I’d worry about it leaking or breaking easily...”

“It won’t leak water, I can tell you that. We’ve worked out some tricks to make sure of it. As for the weight and fragility, sure, it’s a bit heavy and delicate, but once you use it, you’ll see the charm. Want to give it a feel?”

“I’d love to! Whoa... it’s got a real nice feel in the hand. And that sheen—it’s hard to believe it’s made of clay. The color’s great too. It’s white, but there’s a faint blue tint... like it’s pulling me in.”

The dwarf stroked his beard with a smile. His gruff exterior made him look like a typical old craftsman, but the gesture hinted at a bit of bashful pride. “I’m still learning,” he told the customer. “The thing about these is that, unlike metal, you can’t mass-produce identical pieces. That’s what I find a little frustrating.”

“Well, I’ve heard replicating stuff with magick is usually a no-go for craftsmen, right? But I thought there were certain cases where you can get permission?” the customer asked.

“Yeah, we’ve got permission. But the thing is, with this kind of pottery, it’s different. It has a strange resistance to magick—changing or replicating it just doesn’t work.”

“Huh... the world really is full of strange things.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

The two of them were in Tsige, a frontier city, inside a small shop that rented space from a well-known, large trading company.

As their conversation trailed off, the customer studied the dish closely, adjusting the angle, moving it closer, then farther away, trying to absorb all its details. The shopkeeper made no move to interrupt, simply returning to what he’d been doing before the conversation began.

The only sounds left were the customer’s quiet sighs of admiration and the soft rustle of the cloth as the dwarf continued polishing weapons.

It was the customer who finally broke the silence. “Hey, I’ve got a question for you.”

“Hmm?” the dwarf responded.

“Please, let me buy this dish,” he said, a determined light burning in his eyes.

“That one? Hmm... I wasn’t really putting it up for sale,” the dwarf replied, looking troubled. He had brought the dish to the shop to display it and had enjoyed occasionally glancing at it.

“Please! You can name the price. I have to serve my food on this dish.”

“You’re a chef, then?”

“Y-Yes! I’m here on a break from work.”

“As a professional, do you think this dish is any good?”

“Of course!”

The dwarf pretended to consider for a moment, then he said, “All right, then! It’s yours. But the price? All I ask is that you serve me a dish on that plate—one you’ve made. How’s that?”

“R-Really?!” The chef’s face lit up. “I’d be honored! I’ll give it my best! There’s a restaurant run by a friend of mine where I’m staying. Could you come there?”

Overjoyed, he gingerly picked up the plate from the counter, cradling it with both hands as if it were made of gold. He was a middle-aged man, but he looked exactly like a child who had just been given his most longed-for toy. It’s a timeless truth about men: no matter their age, the joy of receiving something deeply cherished remains the same.

Seeing the man’s joy, the dwarf understood exactly how he felt.

“All right, let me know when you’ve made something you’re proud of. I’ll be there,” the dwarf replied, smiling.

“Thank you! Here, take my wallet—everything’s in it. If you like the food I make for you, you can give it back to me!” The man hurried off, clutching the dish to his chest and beaming with happiness.

From that day forward, ceramics began to spread, little by little. What would later be recognized as a trend sparked in Aion gradually began to catch on among humans as well. Makoto had never kept the method a secret, and the dwarves were more than willing to share the basic techniques with anyone who wanted to learn.

The first man to buy a ceramic dish from the dwarves became captivated by its charm, eventually moving to Tsige. Not long after, he opened a restaurant there. The reputation of his restaurant became the turning point for the growing popularity of ceramics. While the exquisite flavors of his dishes were certainly a factor, the rare and beautiful plates and bowls he used created a synergy that spread through word of mouth.

The pottery of the Demiplane, which had begun at Tomoe’s insistence, eventually caught the eye of connoisseurs. In time, its status would be no different from that of fine art in Makoto’s world.

The most exquisite pieces produced in Tsige came to be known as “Tomoos,” in honor of the one who had played a key role in the birth of this craft. But that’s a story for the future, one yet to be told.

Back Matter

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Azumi Kei was born in Aichi Prefecture. In 2012, Kei began serializing *Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū* (*Tsukimichi: Moonlit Fantasy*) on the web. It quickly became a popular series and won the Readers' Choice Award at the 5th Alphapolis Fantasy Novel Awards. In May 2013, following revisions, Kei made their publishing debut with *Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū*.

Illustrations by Mitsuaki Matsumoto <http://transpernaut.web.fc2.com>

This book is a revised and published version of the work originally posted on the website “Shōsetsuka ni Narō” (<http://syosetu.com/>)

Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of Tsukimichi Moonlit Fantasy Volume 5! We hope you've enjoyed Makoto's continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

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