

# Tsukimichi

## Moonlit Fantasy

# 4

Author

**Kei Azumi**

Illustrator

**Mitsuaki Matsumoto**

  
**Hanashi**  
MEDIA







# Tsukimichi

## Moonlit Fantasy

4

Author  
**Kei Azumi**  
Illustrator  
**Mitsuaki Matsumoto**

  
**Hanashi**  
MEDIA





ORIGINAL STORY: Kei Azumi | ILLUSTRATION: Mitsuaki Matsumoto

TRANSLATION:  
**ETHAN HOLMS**

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR:  
**CALEB TURNER**

EDITOR:  
**JASMINE THONE**

COVER DESIGN:  
**SKYLAR RUTAN**

PROOFREADING:  
**BRUCE LAMB**

LAYOUT INTERIOR:  
**WERNER JACINTO**

PRODUCTION MGR:  
**NAHUEL ROBLEDO**

PUBLISHING MGR:  
**ANDRES CABASCANGO/  
ANDRES MATA**

TSUKI GA MICHIBIKU ISEKAI DOCHU Vol. 4

Copyright © Kei Azumi 2013

Illustration: Mitsuaki Matsumoto

Original Book Design: ansyyqdesign

Originally published in Japan in 2013 by AlphaPolis Co.,  
Ltd., Tokyo

English Translation rights arranged with AlphaPolis Co., Ltd.,  
Tokyo

English Translation rights © 2024 by Hanashi Media, LLC

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events,  
real people, or real places are fictitious. Names, characters, and  
places are products of the author's imagination.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any  
means, including photocopy, recording, or other electronic or  
mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the  
publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in  
critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted  
by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher,  
addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator" at the address  
below.

Hanashi Media, LLC  
838 Walker Road Suite 21-2 103  
Dover  
<https://www.hanashi.media/>

ISBN: 978-1-961788-22-0



# Tsukimichi

*Moonlit Fantasy*

# 4

Author:  
Kei Azumi

Illustrator:  
Mitsuaki Matsumoto







SHIKI

Originally an undead monster known as a lich. After forming a Contract with Makoto, he took on a human form. He's traveling with Makoto to the academy city, Rotsgard.

TOMOE

Formerly a dragon called Shin. After forming a Contract with Makoto, she gained a human form. Her weapon of choice is the katana.

SOFIA BULGA

A swordsman who held the number one ranking in the Adventurer's Guild before Tomoe and Mio appeared. She has a wild personality and enjoys combat.

MITSURUGI

A mysterious boy who appeared alongside Sofia in front of Makoto. Despite his youthful appearance, he speaks arrogantly.

KOMOE

A clone of Tomoe, created as an extension of herself. Unlike the original, she's extremely cute.

MIO

Originally a giant spider, she gained a human form after forming a Contract with Makoto. Recently, she's been feeling lonely due to being apart from him.

MAKOTO MISUMI

The protagonist of the story. A high school student who was summoned to another world due to his parents' circumstances. He travels with his three followers, but...

LILY

The princess of the Gritonia Empire. She manipulates one of the summoned heroes, Iwahashi Tomoki, as she pleases.





Contents:

**Prologue**

**Chapter 1**

**Chapter 2**

**Chapter 3**

**Chapter 4**

**Chapter 5**

**Side Story: Phantom of Nostalgia**

**Back Matter**



# Tsukimichi

*Moonlit Fantasy* 4

TABLE OF  
CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Side Story: Phantom of Nostalgia





# Tsukimichi

## Prologue

**“H**ave they left? It’s been a while since we’ve had such a hectic day, hasn’t it, Morris?”

A middle-aged man stood on a walkway atop Tsige’s outer wall, stroking his beard as he gazed down the road extending before him. Normally, only the guards patrolled this area, but as Tsige’s unofficial leader, Rembrandt had unrestricted access.

To the east and west, the frontier city of Tsige was rimmed by high cliffs. The northern and southern sides, however, were fortified by robust stone walls. The southern wall, facing the Wasteland—a wilderness teeming with powerful monsters—was especially stalwart. However, the section where they stood now, in the northeast, was different.

From this vantage point, a beautifully paved road extended straight ahead, the city’s walls continuing alongside it. It was strikingly distinct from the untamed fields and forests that stretched out in other directions.

“Yes, that’s right. Though, if I may say, it’s been quite an eventful period.” This was Morris, Rembrandt’s butler, who stood by his side.

“Hm. That boy became a full-fledged merchant in less than a year and managed to gain enough influence to use the Golden Road.”

“Born under a lucky star,” Morris remarked. He shook his head, but a small smile played on his lips. The powerful merchant and his renowned butler spoke



with uncharacteristic lightness as they discussed a certain boy who had recently crossed their path.

Though the boy had long since disappeared from their sight, they continued to gaze down the road. This was the Golden Road: the safest—and most expensive—route in the world. It stretched from Tsige, at the southern edge of the Kingdom of Aion, to the northern trading city of Robin in the Gritonia Empire, and was maintained by the four great nations that it connected.

Every city along this route was protected by high walls, which served to safeguard the road itself at least as much as the cities. The Golden Road was vital for merchants transporting large quantities of goods and for important state figures to travel securely. Over time, their walls had been reinforced into strong fortifications to protect these cities from external threats.

Due to the significant costs associated with using the road, it was rare to see commoners on it. Adventurers were only occasionally spotted, usually escorting prominent persons.

“Indeed,” Rembrandt agreed.

“If he keeps transferring without rest, he should reach the academy city in about three days,” Morris estimated.

The towns that served as relay points along the Golden Road were equipped with magick teleportation circles, allowing travelers to move from one city to the next. One might think this would be the more secure and faster option. However, teleportation had its drawbacks: the success rate for transporting goods was low, and damage to cargo was common. As a result, merchants preferred to use the Golden Road.

Even if they weren’t transporting anything, important figures tended to choose the road over teleportation circles; traveling the Golden Road was a status symbol.

Today, Raidou—the boy who’d been the subject of much discussion recently—had left Tsige, opting to reach the distant academy city of Rotsgard via teleportation circles. Unconcerned with status, he’d chosen the simpler method. Although Rembrandt and Morris couldn’t see him once he stepped



into the first magick circle, his next stop at a relay city and his destination both lay along the Golden Road.

Both men's gazes lingered on the path Raidou had undoubtedly traveled.

"Still, it would've been nice if Lisa and the girls had at least come to see him off," Rembrandt sighed. "I'm sure he would have been happy to see them."

"They must have their reasons. Even if Raidou-sama doesn't mind, perhaps Madam and the young misses are more concerned about what kind of state they're in," Morris suggested gently.

"True, their complexions and hair haven't fully recovered yet, but they're able to stand and walk. Out of courtesy to the one who saved their lives, I'd think..."

Rembrandt's wife and daughters had suffered from a magical affliction known as a Cursed Disease, and it was Raidou who'd saved them.

"It's exactly because they see him as their benefactor that they want to wait until they've fully recovered to thank him," Morris explained. "The maids tell me they're doing everything they can to get back to normal as soon as possible."

"I see... That makes sense," Rembrandt conceded. Then, after a pause, he continued, "By the way, Morris—"

"Yes, what is it?" Morris said, interrupting him. Noticing the shift in his master's demeanor, he'd adopted a slightly more formal tone.

The warmth of a man thinking about his family, or of a grateful father, was gone from Rembrandt's eyes. In its place was the sharp gleam of a businessman. "It's about Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono. What do you think of them?"

Unbeknownst to Rembrandt, Tomoe and Mio, Raidou's followers—Tomoe, once a dragon, and Mio, formerly a giant spider—were both beings of extraordinary nature.

"As you would guess from their levels, they're formidable. I wouldn't stand a chance against either of them. If I had to choose, dealing with Mio-sama might be a little easier... In any event, they're more than competent. They could be



pretty troublesome if anything were to happen, but given their current standing with Raidou, I doubt they'd use their power against us," Morris replied thoughtfully.

"Well, I suppose I have no choice but to trust Tomoe-dono when she says they understand their role as our guests. Now, what about the staff from the Kuzunoha Company who've taken up residence in our shop?" Rembrandt asked.

"From the few conversations I've had, the dwarf seems like a typical craftsman—very diligent. The younger dwarves working under him mostly handle customer service, so even if the craftsman himself is a bit stubborn, it shouldn't cause any issues. There was also someone who came once with Tomoe-sama. At first, I thought they were hyuman, but then I saw their brown skin and red eyes. So, they might be a demi-human. Still, they were polite and didn't seem like the type to cause trouble. In fact, the Kuzunoha Company has been thriving, with their goods selling out daily."

"Raidou-dono managed the staff shortage at the opening by hiring demi-humans... Do you think he plans to continue without employing hyumans?" Rembrandt tilted his head in curiosity.

Most of the demi-humans working at the Kuzunoha Company looked similar to hyumans, but there were no hyuman employees at all. While it made sense to hire demi-humans with specialized skills, like dwarves who excelled at weapon smithing, hiring all demi-humans was still highly unusual.

In this world, only the hyuman race was recognized and "blessed" by the Goddess who'd created it. Hyumans, believing themselves to be the chosen race, saw demi-humans not as equals but as tools to enrich their lives. This view was reinforced by a lingering fear that the demi-humans, with their superior abilities, might one day replace hyumans and take over the world.

"Raidou-sama seems like he's fluent in the languages of several different species of demi-human. He might be prioritizing cost and capability over tradition. That's just my personal impression, but it seems he has no tolerance for discrimination," Morris remarked.

"Cost and capability, huh? Well, you're right, in a dangerous place like Tsige, meritocracy is slowly but surely taking hold," Rembrandt agreed. "Considering

Raidou-dono's spent time not only in Tsige but in the Wasteland, too, it's no surprise he leans that way. Even I've come to care less about whether someone is demi-human or hyuman, as long as they're competent."

"As you said, Raidou-sama clearly doesn't care about race. I don't see anything wrong with that, in itself..." Morris said, his tone cautious. "However, there's still a strong undercurrent of disdain for demi-humans in our society. This kind of extreme meritocracy goes against the current order of the world... If it spreads too far, it could eventually lead to conflict between hyumans and demi-humans."

Rembrandt adopted a calming tone, trying to placate Morris's concerns. "Even so, for now, it's unlikely the Kuzunoha Company could become a catalyst for that kind of problem. After all, they're still renting space from us—they don't even have their own base of operations yet. I doubt they'd do anything reckless. And if it looks like things are starting to heat up, we could have a talk with Tomoe-dono and the others. Besides, I can't imagine the Kuzunoha Company avoiding hyuman employees entirely."

"You're right. And with Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono around, any potential backlash, particularly from adventurers, should be kept in check for the time being," Morris agreed. But he still held some reservations about the future of the Kuzunoha Company—and he knew his employer did too.

"Speaking of which, Raidou-dono mentioned he'd be meeting another one of his followers in the next town. I'd like to meet this person at least once... It'd be nice if he could bring them along the next time he returns," Rembrandt said thoughtfully.

"We've done some investigations ourselves, but we couldn't find any information on this follower or even any real connections from him to Raidou-sama. The same goes for Raidou-sama himself. With so much still unknown, one might begin to wonder if they're legendary beings, the kind you hear about in stories," Morris remarked, curiosity peeking through his professional tone.

Rembrandt cast a disapproving look at the other man. "Morris, even though Raidou-dono isn't here, don't you think that kind of speculation's a bit inappropriate?"



“My apologies. But I couldn’t think of any other way to describe such a mysterious existence.”

“Well, it’s fine. Honestly, having someone of his caliber come up so frequently would be quite troubling. Now that I think about it, maybe your speculation isn’t that far off. For now, let’s leave the investigation as is. We knew there was a chance we wouldn’t find anything.”

“That’s why we worked so hard to find something—anything—about him. I apologize for the lack of results,” Morris said with a small bow.

“It’s all right. By the way, after they registered with the guild, there was an inquiry from the castle regarding Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono’s levels...”

At the mention of the castle, Morris stiffened.

If the Kingdom of Aion was starting to take an interest, it could mean that Raidou’s actions would be heavily restricted in the future.

“Morris, why are you so tense? I just gave them the usual response: ‘No issues to report. They haven’t started any significant merchant operations yet. We’ll let you know about any developments as soon as we know more.’”

“Master...”

“Don’t look at me like that. When you settle down in a place this remote, your sense of allegiance to the kingdom starts to fade. Well, maybe it’s because I’m an immigrant too. Besides, it’s not like the government officials here have ever done anything for Tsige. When you weigh a benefactor who saved my family against a bunch of useless, money-grubbing parasites, there’s no contest, is there?” Rembrandt glanced questioningly at Morris.

“I guess you’re right. The kingdom officials here don’t care about much beyond lining their pockets. In reality, we merchants practically run this place like an autonomous city. However, talking about this—”

“I get it. We’ll keep this conversation private. We can’t afford to be caught unawares.” Rembrandt flashed Morris a mischievous grin, like a child who had just pulled off an especially sneaky prank.

“Please don’t bring up the time Tomoe-sama caught me off guard,” Morris said, looking uncomfortable as he recalled the incident.

He had once tried to test Tomoe’s abilities by sneaking up on her when he’d spotted her in front of a bookstore in town. Just as he’d entered the shop and thought he’d managed to catch her by surprise, Tomoe had vanished from sight. In an unexpected twist of fate, Morris had found himself the one outmaneuvered.

The threat he’d felt from Tomoe in that moment was far beyond what he had anticipated, and he’d quickly resolved that they should never become enemies.

Morris had dutifully reported the experience to Rembrandt, who had burst out laughing. But the report had also made it clear that if Tomoe or Mio ever got serious, Morris wouldn’t be able to act as Rembrandt’s last line of defense.

“If even you couldn’t manage, then there’s nothing I could do either. Don’t worry about it,” Rembrandt had said at the time.

“I’m sorry. Forget I mentioned it... Raidou-dono will only grow stronger in Rotsgard. By studying diligently in that city, he’ll come to understand his surroundings even more than he already does. Although, part of me, after so many years as a merchant, hopes his mindset stays the same.”

Rembrandt anticipated that Raidou, who would absorb all kinds of knowledge in the Academy City of Rotsgard, would undoubtedly grow even stronger as a merchant.

It wasn’t a bad development for Rembrandt. No matter how Raidou evolved, he showed no inclination of allying himself with the Kingdom of Aion or setting up his base in Tsige.

As long as they didn’t directly compete in terms of region or product, Rembrandt saw Raidou and the Kusunoha Company as a highly attractive partner.

There was also the matter of Tomoe and Mio. Even Rembrandt, with all his experience, had never encountered adventurers with levels in the four digits. Just being in their presence brought an overwhelming feeling of pressure and tension.



Given that they could easily wipe out entire towns if it struck their fancy—and were even more problematic than dragons—it was no surprise.

Rembrandt realized that negotiating advantageous deals against the Kuzunoha Company would be nearly impossible without extraordinary courage. For an ordinary merchant, it wouldn't be uncommon to end up conceding to Tomoe and Mio's demands instead of making headway.

In fact, since the arrival of the Kuzunoha Company, Tsige had already undergone significant changes. The Adventurer's Guild, which had been flooded with requests related to the Wasteland—already quite numerous but rarely completed—were starting to see progress. Ever since Tomoe and Mio began frequenting the guild, the completion rate for Wasteland requests had been rising.

Naturally, as this reputation spread, the latent demand for Wasteland-related work would start to be unearthed. However, the shortage of manpower to meet that demand was unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

“By the way, Master, was it really appropriate to discuss the matter of the heroes with Raidou-sama?” Morris asked. “I remember some of that information was supposed to be confidential.”

“My wife and daughters are incredibly grateful to Raidou-dono. They've asked me to do whatever I can for him, and sharing information at that level isn't an issue,” Rembrandt replied.

“Still, giving away information too easily could make us seem less valuable. I think you should try to be a bit more restrained,” Morris advised.

“It's fine. If I can gain even a small fragment of trust by sharing something like that, I consider it a big win. Besides...” Rembrandt trailed off.

“Besides?”

“Raidou-dono won't betray us. I'm certain of it.”

“No matter how you look at it, there's no such thing as a merchant that would act like that. Even Raidou will seize opportunities and act to expand his trading company when the chance—”

Rembrandt cut Morris off. “No, I don’t know why, but that’s just what I feel. I’m sure of it... Even though Raidou-dono seems easy to read, he’s someone whose true depths are impossible to fathom.”

Rembrandt gave Morris a smile that said even he didn’t fully understand his own feelings.

“I spoke out of turn,” Morris said after a pause.

If this was Rembrandt’s intuition and judgment, Morris had no further objections. The long years they had worked together, along with their numerous successes, had made Morris trust his master’s instincts completely.

He decided to push ahead with his report. “Additionally, there’s an update on the hero from Gritonia.”

“Hm, let’s hear it.”

“Sure. He’s been achieving satisfactory results in the Gritonia Empire. At the same time, it appears he’s also being used by—no, *cooperating with*—the Second Imperial Princess’s ‘research.’”

At the mention of “research,” Rembrandt tensed.

There had been longstanding rumors that the Gritonia Empire was conducting hyuman experiments to enhance their military strength. However, Rembrandt had no idea that these experiments continued even after the hero’s arrival—and that the hero himself was involved.

“It’s possible Gritonia is planning to use the hero sent by the Goddess as a weapon,” Morris said.

“That wouldn’t be out of the question.”

“But are heroes really that compliant? I understand a controllable hero would be a valuable asset for any nation, but...”

Rembrandt knew that beings with immense power often had strong wills and distinct personalities, making them hard to control.

“I hear he’s still just a boy. For a country like Gritonia, one of the two great powers, it wouldn’t be difficult to satisfy a growing boy’s desires,” Morris explained.



Controlling a hero by indulging their juvenile whims—it was a simple yet effective way to manipulate someone with such power.

“The hero might truly be a pitiable figure,” Rembrandt mused. “Used as a tool in the war against the demons, with immediate gratification as the bait.”

As long as the hero remained unaware of his own situation, it wouldn’t be a problem. But if he sought power or titles in exchange for something, it would only lead to foolishness. Perhaps that’s just how things were. Not everyone could be like Raidou-dono.

Rembrandt sighed inwardly. He didn’t have the same feelings toward Raidou, a young man who was also establishing a trading company and seeking power. Raidou possessed qualities Rembrandt valued, including his incredible aides, Tomoe and Mio.

“Also, neither the hero of Limia nor the hero of Gritonia has shown any sign of approaching the academy,” Morris continued.

“Given the current state of affairs, I would guess they’re being kept as trump cards on the front lines,” Rembrandt mused. “I didn’t think it would happen, but it seems we can avoid any disturbances reaching the academy.”

“Right. I was concerned because the young ladies are planning to go back to school. It seems the two nations are preoccupied with the upcoming battle in the demon war—taking Stella Fortress back.”

“Stella Fortress... I still don’t know how we lost it in the first place. That’s the one that’s being guarded by that four-armed general, right? I heard the hero of Limia is going to go over there to try and help recapture it. Her name is... Hibiki Otonashi, if I recall correctly.”

The reports had nothing but good things to say about the hero of Limia. They said she went out of her way to visit the neighboring smaller countries and help resolve their problems, just like the heroes in tales of old. To Rembrandt, these were overblown rumors; he had dealt with too many people to believe any such saintly hero existed.

Rembrandt found the hero of Gritonia, Tomoki, with his worldly desires, much more understandable than the angelic Hibiki of Limia.

“Yeah, it’ll be the first joint battle for the two heroes. We’re setting things up so we can gather as much information as possible.”

“That helps. Whichever way this battle goes, the situation at Stella Fortress will be a crucial factor in understanding how this world is changing. I want to predict the conclusion as accurately as possible.”

“Right, it’ll be interesting in a few days. By the way—”

Noticing the change in Morris’s tone, Rembrandt interjected, “Ah, about my daughters. The doctor said full recovery will take two to three months, if everything goes smoothly.”

Morris bowed. “That’s good to know. I’ll adjust our preparations accordingly.”

“Well, it’s about time to take action.”

“About Stella Fortress, how should we report to the kingdom?”

Rembrandt thought for a moment, then decided. “Leave it. The four great nations probably already know about this mission and have it covered.”

“Understood. However, the preparations for the girls to go back to school... I never imagined that day would come. Come to think of it, it was actually the young ladies’ idea for Raidou-sama to attend the academy.”

“Of course. By the way, how do those girls, um, feel toward Raidou-dono?” As a father, Rembrandt had some complex emotions about the subject. Raidou had saved his daughters’ lives, and the interest they showed in him—the first time they’d shown such curiosity in an outsider—was a constant source of worry.

Despite their state of delirium, they had clearly remembered Raidou and expressed a desire to know more about him. At that point, Rembrandt barely knew more about the boy than they did; all he could say was that Raidou wasn’t planning to base himself in Tsige, so he wouldn’t be staying long. So his wife Lisa and their two daughters had asked him to make sure Raidou stayed in the city until they could properly thank him. However, logistics had so far conspired to prevent them from seeing him again.



Eventually, Rembrandt's daughters had mentioned going back to school and, upon learning from Morris that Raidou was a novice merchant, asked their father to encourage him to enroll in the academy in Rotsgard—where they, too, would be attending.

At first, this request seemed excessive to Rembrandt. Apparently his daughters were more infatuated with Raidou than he'd thought. Nonetheless, as a doting father and devoted husband, this concern weighed heavily on him.

When his wife added her own encouragement, no worldly laws or reasons mattered. In other words, Rembrandt had agreed with a broad smile. And that's how Raidou received the recommendation of Tsige's top trader for his admission to the Rotsgard Academy.

"I have nothing more to add. However, it's certain that both of them hold an exceptional interest in Raidou-dono," Rembrandt reflected.

*"Interest, huh... You can say that again. They didn't even change their minds when they saw his face."*

Rembrandt sighed. *When he took off his mask...* It felt rude to say it, but his appearance was... unattractive, or rather, unsightly, disappointing... *No, hmm. Yeah, his intense individuality left me speechless.*

Had Raidou not just saved his family from an unspeakable disease, Rembrandt might have used even harsher words to describe what the kid looked like. However, his own love for his family remained unwavering, even if their own appearances had become less than perfect.

Because of this, Rembrandt decided to view Raidou's visage with understanding, thinking that there were many such appearances among non-humans. He even felt sympathy for Raidou, given that his looks might pose a disadvantage in business.

*Maybe when the curse changed their faces, that changed how they looked at other people,* Rembrandt thought. *They used to be quite particular about appearances. Well, I guess this is a positive development, then. I'll just see how this situation unfolds.*

“Whether it’s admiration, gratitude, affection, or love, they’re teenagers,” Morris pointed out. “The answer may not be clear to anyone yet.”

“Well said.”

As always, Morris’s insight was spot on, and Rembrandt couldn’t remember a time when things left to his care had gone wrong. He was a highly reliable and reassuring presence. Thus, on this occasion too, Rembrandt didn’t confirm the exact details of enrolling Raidou.

It was a lapse in judgment.

Later, an error was discovered in the copies of the documents Morris had prepared for Raidou’s application to Rotsgard Academy.

Raidou, Approved.

※ ※ ※

Tomoe and Mio sensed the disturbance immediately. It felt like a sudden, overwhelming sense of loss, and it came on the third day after their master’s departure for the academy city.

In that moment, their connection to Makoto had been severed. However, there were no changes in their physical condition. For Tomoe and Mio, who were bound to Makoto by a Contract of Domination, this was not the worst possible outcome. The Contracts still remained in effect.

“What is this?!”

“Young Master?!”

Makoto’s loyal followers looked at each other, each wondering whether the other was feeling the same sensation.

They were on a narrow road, some distance away from Tsige. It wasn’t the Golden Road but a regular path. On Makoto’s orders, both Tomoe and Mio were leisurely traveling north, heading toward the sea.

Their goal was to measure the distance from Tsige to the port town, and if possible, create a Gate of Mist that would connect that port town to the

Demiplane. Additionally, they were gathering geographical information about the scattered villages along the way to help with making maps of the surrounding area. However, for the two of them, this journey was more like a sightseeing trip.

Tomoe had entrusted the information-gathering mission to the forest ogres, who were traveling the same path ahead of them. Forest ogres were a type of demi-human, and some lived in the Demiplane, the alternate space created by Tomoe. They were scheduled to rendezvous with Tomoe and Mio along the way, collecting information thoroughly as they traversed uncharted paths, and were awaiting the two at their planned lodgings.

“Mio, you felt it too, didn’t you?!” Tomoe exclaimed, her voice sharp with urgency.

“Yeah, I can’t sense Young Master’s presence anymore!!!” Mio replied in panic.

Although they hadn’t mentioned it to Makoto, the fact was that the servants bound by Contract could roughly sense their master’s location. Not wanting to interfere with his journey to the academy city, Tomoe and Mio generally avoided contacting Makoto, but they *always* kept track of his whereabouts.

What’s more, they’d received a report from Shiki, another of Makoto’s followers, that he should reach the academy city by today. These pieces of information had helped the two—especially Mio—cope with the loneliness brought by Makoto’s absence.

*“Tomoe-dono, Mio-dono, can you hear me?! Makoto-sama has vanished!!!”*

Shiki’s message came not a moment too soon. In this world, telepathic communication was as common as a phone call. Despite being new to their group, Shiki had been chosen to accompany Makoto, and he was mindful of his two senior companions, maintaining a good relationship with them so far.

*“Wait, ‘vanished’?! Shiki, what do you mean?”* Tomoe demanded, doing her best to keep her voice steady. *“Calm down and tell us clearly what’s happening.”*



*“Shiki, Shiki!!! What about Young Master? Where is he?!”* Mio wasn’t even trying to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“Enough, Mio! Quiet down for a minute,” Tomoe snapped, her tone firm but controlled. “I’m trying to listen. If you keep yelling, we won’t get anywhere!”

Tomoe turned her attention back to Shiki. *“Okay, you said he vanished? First, where are you right now? How far did you get today?”*



*“Young Master and I...” Shiki began, his voice trembling with worry. “We were together when we took the teleportation circle in Orbit. That town’s one teleportation away from Felica, the city near the academy city. But when we got to Felica, I was the only one who came through. Young Master wasn’t there. I went back to Orbit right away, but I couldn’t find him anywhere in the city. And I asked the staff at both teleportation circles, and they hadn’t seen him either.”*

*“Are you sure?” Tomoe asked.*

*“Yeah, I’m sure,” Shiki replied. “I was in a panic myself, so I used some, uh, rather forceful methods to get them to talk. I don’t think they were lying.”*

Tomoe couldn’t remember ever hearing Shiki sound so anxious. As a scholar and researcher, he always kept a cool head and approached things logically, no matter how intense the situation. However, the bizarre circumstances surrounding their master’s sudden disappearance had shaken even him.

*“So, what about you?” Tomoe asked. “Can you still sense him?”*

*“No. It’s strange. Not long after he disappeared, our connection was cut off. I haven’t felt him since.”*

*“I see. It’s the same for Mio and me. But it’s clear that you have more information about the situation than we do. All right, try to stay calm and tell us everything that happened before and after Young Master disappeared.”*

Tomoe knew if she wanted information, she’d have to keep a brave face for Shiki. Panicking the guy could make him rush and potentially miss crucial details. For Makoto’s sake, she needed to restrain herself.

*“All right,” Shiki replied, taking a deep breath.*

*“Is there any chance that Young Master went back to the previous town or got to Felica ahead of you?” Tomoe pressed. “You mentioned using ‘forceful methods’... Was it some sort of hypnosis, or...?”*

*“That’s it, exactly. I didn’t think about the aftereffects—I just did what needed to be done, so there’s no way they could have lied.”*

*“Got it. Then did anything happen while you guys were getting ready to teleport or while you were teleporting?”*



Tomoe didn't mind that Shiki had used strong hypnotic suggestion. Most people would probably consider it reckless, but neither Shiki nor Tomoe cared if it left any lasting effects on some unknown humans. Tomoe chose to look past his methods, not out of consideration for Shiki's state of mind, but rather out of complete indifference to the consequences of his actions.

*"Shiki! Just find Young Master, no matter what,"* Mio cut in, finally unable to contain her panic. *"There must be some trace of him from where you are, right? There is, isn't there? Find him NOW!"*

*"Mio, calm down! Just be patient a little longer!"* Tomoe commanded firmly. *"Shiki, don't pay attention to her—take your time and think carefully."*

*"Well, we were getting ready for teleporting... No. During the teleportation, well... we were just waiting at that point. Then, we were enveloped in light and — Ah!"*

*"Yes?! Has something come to mind?"* Tomoe asked quickly.

*"The light... I think the teleportation light was a little different than usual. It was faint but... Yeah, I think there was a little bit of gold mixed in with the usual light blue..."*

*"Gold, you say?"* Tomoe echoed thoughtfully.

*"Also, there was a sort of roughness—a strange, uncomfortable feeling. I'm sorry, it's just something I sensed. But since I got to Felica all right, there couldn't have been an issue with the circle itself, right?"*

Tomoe fell silent as she processed Shiki's words.

*"Tomoe-dono?"* Shiki prompted after a moment, uncertainty in her voice.

Gold.

That color meant something. It wasn't a color associated with any magick wielded by humans or non-humans. In fact, to Tomoe's knowledge, there were only two beings in this world whose natural magick had a golden hue. One was another Greater Dragon, like her. And the other was... a god.

*"Gold... Gold, huh. Is there anything else you remember about the change in color?"* Tomoe finally asked.

*“No, not particularly.” Shiki sighed in frustration. “It was just for a moment, and this is based purely on my personal perception...”*

To interfere with the magick formula of someone else’s teleportation magick circle, insert themselves into it after it was already activated, and abduct only one of the two people being teleported—if this had been done intentionally, the power required would be immense. Not only that, it would also require a deep understanding of magick itself.

As Tomoe thought about the two beings who she imagined could be responsible for taking Makoto, the possibility became more concrete in her mind.

*“Shiki, can you investigate that teleportation circle?” she asked.*

*“That would be difficult. Other people are already using it.”*

*“I see... In that case, Shiki, you should head to Rotsgard like we planned. You have the documents that Young Master was supposed to hand in, don’t you? Go ahead and do it for him. Also, if you’re at the academy, Young Master can teleport there directly. If we were to teleport again from Tsige, it could raise unnecessary suspicions about Young Master.”*

*“But...! How can I go ahead when we don’t even know if Young Master’s safe?!”*

*“That’s right, Tomoe! Shiki was the closest to Young Master! What are you thinking?”* Mio added, her voice filled with frustration.

*“The teleportation circle leaves a trace of where it takes you,”* Tomoe explained. *“With those traces, it’s clear that both you and Young Master were headed toward Rotsgard. Shiki, hypnotize the officials and the locals to reinforce the idea that you and Young Master were together. Then go on to Rotsgard.”*

Mio frowned. If they knew Makoto was safe, Tomoe’s plan wouldn’t have seemed so bad. As it was, her idea was badly misaligned with the situation.

*“Are you saying you know Young Master is safe?”* Shiki asked suspiciously.

*“Shiki?! How could we know that?”* Mio retorted sharply.

*“Mio, we should assume that Young Master’s been kidnapped,” Tomoe stated calmly. “As for who did it, I’ve narrowed it down to two suspects. I think.”*

*“Wh-What?!”* Mio spluttered.

*“The golden light and the ‘rough’ feeling you described, Shiki—assuming those are accurate—we can make some deductions. However, we don’t have enough clues to make a definitive conclusion, and we can’t just do nothing,”* Tomoe reasoned.

*“Of course!!!”* Mio agreed vehemently. Simply sitting back and watching how things developed was *not* an option.

*“Our Contracts with Young Master themselves are still intact, so it’s reasonable to think that the place where he was taken is blocking any connection with us or anyone for that matter. So, considering that plus the golden magick, there are two suspects I’m thinking of. One is a Greater Dragon; Luto the Myriad Color. The other... is the Goddess.”*

If Tomoe had been her usual self, she might have considered other possibilities and reached a different conclusion. However, with Makoto in danger, she wasn’t thinking clearly.

*“A Greater Dragon and a goddess, huh? I suppose it’s possible if we’re talking about golden magick. But still, would the Goddess really do something like this?”* Shiki questioned, his voice regaining some calm. Shiki had never thought of the Goddess as reckless. Perhaps it was his lingering perception of Her from his time as a human, but Shiki still held some reverence toward the Goddess.

*“I’ll get in touch with Luto,”* Tomoe promised. *“However, if it isn’t Luto and it really is the work of the Goddess... Unfortunately, there’s basically nothing we can do.”*

Mio was indignant. *“What?! You mean you would just give up?”*

*“That’s why we should each do what we can and wait for Young Master,”* Tomoe said. *“Shiki, go to the academy city like we planned and wait for him. I know it’s frustrating that you can’t come and go from the Demiplane on your own yet, but for now, that’s all you can do.”*



*“G-Guh! But, but, Tomoe-dono! Can’t we at least do a search around here?”* Shiki asked, his desperation clear. *“We still don’t know for sure if it was the Goddess or the dragon!”*

*“That’s... No, you’re right,”* Tomoe conceded after a moment of thought. *“All right, search the area around Felica. Once you’re done, head for the academy city, and do your own search there.”*

*“All right!”* Shiki responded with conviction, then broke off their telepathic connection.

“Mio, you heard all that. Shiki will do what we asked, and I’ll go see Luto. You should—”

Mio didn’t wait for instructions. “Yeah, I’m going with you, Tomoe!”

“No, I’d like you to go back to the Demiplane and stay on standby.”

“No! I won’t! If this is Luto’s doing or whoever’s, I want to be there to teach them a lesson myself!”

Tomoe shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“I don’t want to stay behind or be left ‘on standby’! Why should I—?!”

This time, Tomoe cut off Mio’s anguished cries. “If—if this is the Goddess’s doing, like I said before, there’s not a lot we can do. If a god is our opponent, and they’ve already made the first move, and we don’t know where Young Master is, we’re literally powerless. I don’t know what kind of interference is at play, but even providing support has been blocked. We’ve lost this match.”

“‘Not a lot we can do’? Then there must be *something* we can do! Tell me what it is!” Mio demanded, still frantic and overwhelmed with emotion.

Seeing Mio so agitated... Tomoe realized that this was exactly what was helping her stay calm. A counterbalance. She even felt a quiet sense of gratitude toward the other girl.

“Believing and praying,” Tomoe said softly, “that Young Master will create a way to call for us, or that he’ll escape on his own.”

“But... Young Master’s probably confused about what’s happening too. How could we just...?” Mio looked at Tomoe, despair in her eyes.

“If he manages to escape by himself, where do you think he will go?” Tomoe asked.

“To the Demiplane?”

“Exactly. If that happens and Young Master is injured, someone skilled in healing will be needed. Shiki is the best for that, but right now, we can’t afford the time it would take to bring him back to the Demiplane. I’m counting on you.”

“Tomoe...” Mio whispered, seeing her friend’s hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

“I’ve got a lot of feelings going through my head right now too,” Tomoe admitted. “I feel like screaming. To be honest, it might be better to call Shiki back within the next few days and prepare for the worst. But on the other hand, I’m hoping that my assumptions are all wrong and that Young Master’s somewhere around Felica, taking a nap after some mischief.”

Mio stared silently at Tomoe.

“I’m scared—terrified beyond words. I’ve never felt this way before,” Tomoe continued, a slight tremble in her voice. “The thought of losing Makoto-sama is... It’s unbearable. Especially with such a sudden attack, I can’t accept it. If Luto is the one who kidnapped Makoto-sama, I won’t bother asking for excuses—I’ll make them pay and bring Young Master back. Luto might be stronger than me, but I don’t care.”

Hearing Tomoe call Makoto “Makoto-sama” instead of “Young Master” told Mio that Tomoe was serious. Gone was her usual theatrical, carefree demeanor.

“All right. I’ll... I’ll wait for Young Master in the Demiplane. If he gets back, I’ll let you know right away,” Mio promised, her voice steadying as she made her decision.

“Thanks. I’ll come right back when that happens. Heh, there’s nothing that would make me happier than seeing him come back to the Demiplane. But,” she added, returning to her usual tone as her moment of vulnerability faded, “that would mean all of Shiki’s work will have been for nothing.”

“Well, since he’s just a newcomer who’s been allowed to accompany Young Master, he’ll simply have to bear it,” Mio said, managing a small smile. Tomoe smiled back.

Waiting and trusting in their master...

It was a painful thing to do.

While saying they would trust and wait sounded noble, it really meant they were powerless to act and could only watch over the situation as it unfolded.

That’s why they smiled—to dispel their anxiety.

As Mio passed through the Gate of Mist that Tomoe had created, which led back to the Demiplane, the anguished expression returned to her face. “Young Master, please be safe,” she whispered, her voice filled with hope in spite of everything.

Tomoe, too, worried about Makoto’s safety as she vanished from the spot. After all, she might have to fight soon.



# Tsukimichi

## Chapter 1

**A** dull, burning pain.

My left hand throbbed, as if it had grown a heart of its own. Each pump sent waves of heat and pain coursing throughout my body.

*Damn it, what happened?*

I'd been blown backward, rolling across the ground. Something had come at me, and I had instinctively blocked it with my left hand. Then there had been a tremendous impact, and I had been flung away.

*No, it was before that. Calm down and remember. I can't even understand what's happening right now.*

I was in an unfamiliar place, the air around me full of strange sensations. I needed to assess the situation first.

"Hah, hah..." My shallow, ragged breathing grated on my ears.

*Shit... How can I calm down right now? It feels like my head's out of sync with my body.*

"Hey, this is pretty disappointing, you know?" a voice said.

I looked up and gasped softly. The tip of a large sword was pointed directly at me.

I still had no idea what was going on. But I knew one thing for sure—this situation was bad.

“The Goddess already sent two heroes, so maybe she ran out of steam by the third one,” the voice continued.

Well, that was a relief—whatever this was, they seemed to be letting their guard down.

...?

*Goddess? Hero?*

*No... Did she say “Goddess”?*

“Goddess?” I murmured, my voice barely a whisper.

“Hm? Did you say something?” the woman asked.

“That’s right... The Goddess’s voice. Right before this happened, I definitely heard that woman’s voice,” I muttered, attempting to piece together my fragmented memories.

“What are you muttering about? Don’t tell me you can’t speak the common language? Ah, I see, a demi-human. But still, for the Goddess to use a demi-human...” The woman’s voice dripped with disdain. “Is she running out of people instead of steam?”

Despite the sword still aimed at my throat, I found myself growing calmer as we spoke. It was quite unlike the time I’d killed a hyuman adventurer, when I had been on edge for days on end. As I focused, the unhelpful thoughts began to fade away.

*Pain, huh? Well, no wonder I was feeling anxious.*

Since coming to this world, I’d never been seriously injured. The worst injury I’d suffered was when Mio had bitten me. I had lost consciousness then, too, but by the time I’d woken up, I had already been healed.

*So this is the first time I’ve felt an injury during a fight. Maybe that’s why I’ve been so confused and flustered.*

Bit by bit, triggered by the word “Goddess,” my memories started to come back.

“Now that I think about it, that voice. That’s right. It was her... That damn woman...” I muttered.

There was no way I could mistake her voice—the last voice I’d heard before I was thrown into the Wasteland of this world. Before all this confusion, I think she had said something like “I found you.”

*Was I summoned because she had something to say? Did she interrupt my teleportation from one town to another? If that’s the case, then what’s this about? She certainly didn’t tell me anything. Even if she did, I wouldn’t be inclined to help her with anything, and after all she’s done to me, she wouldn’t come to me with a request, would she?*

Careful not to let the woman in front of me notice, I sent out a telepathic message to my followers. “*Tomoe, Mio, Shiki! Can anyone hear me?! If you can, please answer!*”

There was no response.

*Is it too far, or is something interfering?* I couldn’t tell, but I didn’t feel any connection. This was a first for me.

Tomoe and Mio had gone separate ways from me when I departed Tsige for the academy city, Rotsgard, so they were probably heading toward a northern port town by now. As for Shiki... Right. Shiki had been with me. We had been teleporting from town to town... and then I’d heard that voice. It had been during teleportation, I think. It must have been when we were two or three transfers away from Rotsgard.

*So, is Shiki still in that town?* Even though he was probably the closest one, I couldn’t reach him telepathically either. And to make matters worse, this place —

“You sure seem calm. If you’re resigned yourself to your fate, I guess that makes things easy for you!” the woman taunted.

“Ugh!”

The sword pointing at me moved. The tip, which had been drawn back slightly, suddenly lunged forward, aiming to pierce my throat. I was crouching, but I managed to leap backward just in time.

The woman's eyes widened in surprise. Clearly, she'd been expecting an easy kill. She took a step back, more cautious now.

It might have been a mistake to put my left hand in front of my throat again, just like before. But this time, I wasn't defenseless. I also used two spells: one for a barrier and another for physical enhancement.

The sword had glanced off my left hand. But unlike before, there was no sharp pain—only a dull impact, like being poked with something sharp through a blanket.

Said hand was still throbbing painfully, burning, a second heart beating loudly. But when I looked at it again, I understood why.

"Oh, two fingers are missing," I muttered to myself. "And another one's about to be torn off. No wonder it hurts."

It was the kind of injury that would make you call 911 immediately. My palm was bright red. My middle and index fingers were severed near the base, and my ring finger was barely hanging on. Thankfully, my thumb and pinky were intact.

Since I couldn't remember exactly how I had positioned my hand, it was pointless to wonder how it had ended up like this. For now, I decided it was best to assume my left hand was unusable.

Fortunately, this world had magick. There was a chance it could heal back to normal, and because of that hope, I didn't feel utterly hopeless looking at the damage.

In the meantime, my breathing had steadied. My voice, too, sounded normal again. Until now, it had felt strangely distant, like I was hearing it from far away.

Never letting my eye off the strange woman, I tried to stop the bleeding. After all, magick wouldn't be able to save me if I bled to death.

Sadly I didn't know much about first aid. And the only thing I had that could be used as a tool was... my bowstring.

*I think it's in my coat... There it is. This should work.*



Whether it was proper treatment or not didn't matter right now; I just needed to stop the bleeding. With that in mind, I tightly tied the string a bit below my elbow.

*If I'd known this would happen, I would have taken a first aid course back in my home world.*

"Huh, you're not dead. I see. You were summoned by the Goddess, after all. What kind of defense do you have to be able to block this sword twice? That face of yours—don't tell me you're a hyuman-based chimera, not a demi-human? If that's the case, the Goddess sure went to great lengths," the woman remarked, sounding intrigued.

This woman—without a doubt, she was the strongest among the hyumans and non-hyumans I'd encountered—was incredibly powerful. None of the adventurers I'd met in the Wasteland were anywhere near her level.

I didn't exactly appreciate her being impressed by the fact that I wasn't dead, but it was slightly gratifying to surprise someone like that. And calling me a chimera? I'm not some mixed-up beast with bits and pieces thrown together. Far from it. And I wanted to tell her not to make assumptions.

*"Who are you? Why are you targeting me?"* I formed the words in the air.

I wanted to know who she was and her reasons for attacking me, even if I wasn't sure I'd understand her answers.

"You're definitely an odd one," the woman said, her eyes widening for a moment at the sight of my magick speech bubbles. "So different from the last two."

*"I don't remember giving you any reason to attack me,"* I wrote next.

"Is that because I'm hyuman? Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not on their side," she replied.

...

*OK, it sounds like she completely misunderstood me.* She probably thought I was asking why she'd target someone on the hyumans' side. But I hadn't *chosen* sides in this world.

I didn't bother responding with another speech bubble. Instead, I glared at her, not wanting to show even the slightest opening.

Suddenly, I felt something wet running down my cheek. Was that cold sweat? When I wiped it away, it was red.

*Blood?*

*Did I hit my head? Maybe the sword hit me, or I hit the ground when I was thrown back...*

I examined the woman. She had blue hair like Tomoe, with bangs that fell to the right side of her face, covering one of her eyes. She had a well-proportioned figure (which was standard in this world). She was rather petite, and despite her tough demeanor, her appearance was more cute than beautiful.

Her armor only covered the essentials—she had shoulder pads, chest plate, and guards for her knees and elbows. The rest was light clothing that exposed her skin and inner garments. On her lower body, she wore what looked like denim shorts.

If we had passed each other on the street, I might've turned around for a second look—her legs were that stunning. It made me think that, even on the battlefield, beauty was essential in this world.

Her most notable feature was her enormous sword—significantly longer than she was tall. Maybe the fact that she was small made the sword seem even more impressive. Unlike a katana, this sword had a broad blade, which emphasized its size even more.

The blade had a greenish tint, making it clear that it wasn't some mass-produced weapon one could buy anywhere. And even I, who had zero art knowledge, knew that it belonged in a gallery, it was so beautiful.

*So, that's the sword she used to slash at me and knock me away, then tried to stab me in the throat.*

*If I were just an ordinary human, that swing would have separated my head from my body, or I'd have ended up like some kind of sacrificial offering, with a nice big hole in my throat.*

I was deeply grateful for my abnormal level of defense.

*Thank you, magick. Thank you, everyone, eldwar.*

I focused on the situation again and expanded my barrier magick. At the same time, I strengthened my Realm and deployed it. Since I'd been able to block that last attack without injury, I could have avoided losing my fingers too.

In other words, I had let my guard down. It was my mistake for not deploying barrier magick and Realm together from the start, like usual. How careless of me.

It was pathetic, really.

I didn't know how often I would find myself in a situation where I'd be ambushed by someone wielding such a massive weapon like this in the future. But that wasn't all I had to worry about.

Goose bumps covered my entire body. A shiver ran up my spine, like when you get hit with a blast of cold air. I was tingling all over.

*I know this feeling.*

*Killing intent.*

It was a clear, targeted bloodlust directed at me.

It reminded me of the times my archery master, Munakata-sensei, used to make me practice as I faced his own killing intent.

*"You need to get used to it,"* I remember him saying. *"Otherwise, your movements will slow down when it matters most."*

I always wondered how often I would end up needing this skill in my everyday life in Japan. Little did I know how useful it would turn out to be in this world.  
*Thank you, sensei.*

The woman's voice cut into my thoughts. "Not talking? Well, I guess it doesn't make sense to chat on the battlefield when we're enemies."

*"..."*

Her killing intent was getting stronger and stronger. Still, I was grateful that my thoughts weren't consumed by panic.

## *Battlefield.*

That was the word she'd used. This was new information. Maybe the strange atmosphere here was related to the fact that it was a battlefield.

I was standing on a riverbank in an unfamiliar location. Directly in front of me, a fairly large river flowed past. Looking left, there was just more water, but to the right, there was a bridge off in the distance.

Other than the woman and me, there was no one else here.

After a brief moment of hesitation, I decided to switch from strengthening my Realm to using it for exploration instead. It seemed dangerous, but the woman didn't appear to be planning an immediate follow-up attack, and my curiosity about this new locale got the better of me.

But then...

*What's this?* I could sense something rapidly approaching us.

A group of what looked like soldiers and another group of non-hyhumans?!

*Wait, maybe this woman isn't being overconfident; maybe she's actually waiting for reinforcements.*

Even though she clearly had the upper hand in this situation...

Sure enough, a humanoid figure had separated itself from the cluster of non-hyhumans and was now heading straight for us at high speed. I could sense remarkable magical power coming from it.

This one seemed strong too. Or rather, it was terrifying. Because, like the woman in front of me, it was radiating a murderous intent directed right at me.

*Should I escape to the Demiplane?*

No, that wouldn't work. I might accidentally bring these two with me. Before I went anywhere, I needed to figure out who this woman and the humanoid figure streaking toward me were.

At the very least, I needed to put some distance between us before I could use a Gate of Mist.



Before long, her reinforcements arrived.

“Sofia, even with my assistance, you still failed to finish the job? That’s unlike you,” a voice said.

It was a child speaking. But he was referring to himself in a very archaic manner.

*Damn it, such a classic fantasy trope—a character whose appearance doesn’t match their age. This kid does not seem as young as he looks.*

“Hm? I executed a perfect attack. It’s this sword that’s too soft, Mitsurugi,”<sup>1</sup> Sofia replied.

*Mitsurugi. That must be the kid’s name. Sounds kind of Japanese. And the woman’s name is Sofia. That’s more normal.* But her name was the only normal thing about her.

“That sword was forged with nearly all of my power back then. There should be no deficiencies,” Mitsurugi argued back.

It felt incredibly *off*. Not just his manner of speaking, but the fact that I could sense the same sharp killing intent from this kid as well. Mitsurugi was even more casually dressed than Sofia, looking no different from a child playing in the city. He had silky orange hair and no weapon or staff. If you put a backpack on him, he’d pass for an elementary school student, or a specific beautiful boy from a famous choir.

“But really, it felt like I was slicing at a massive hunk of metal. Tough and endlessly bothersome—what kind of punishment game is that?” Sofia complained.

*This is bad. Seriously bad.*

These two clearly weren’t done yet. Especially Sofia—her smirk made her look incredibly eager for a fight.

“Hmm. The sword may not have been perfect, but it’s still capable of killing a Greater Dragon. A little magical defense would be no more effective than a piece of paper. You just aimed poorly,” Mitsurugi stated matter-of-factly.

“It’s getting harder to hold back the demon army’s advance. That guy is definitely an obstacle, so we should hurry. Besides, it’d be annoying to get scolded later,” Sofia replied.

*The demon army’s advance has been halted?*

When I checked earlier with my Realm, the non-hyuman group had stopped. *So, that’s the demon army.*

*I see.*

The retreating humans were the ones they were fighting. If the demon army was advancing, they were probably moving south, which meant the human nations to the north would be Limia and Gritonia.

*Are we near one of those countries?*

*Wait, aren’t Limia and Gritonia the ones with heroes? Seriously?*

*If they’re being attacked—that’s not a good sign.*

“There’s no doubt he’s associated with the Goddess. That should suffice,” Mitsurugi said.

“Yes,” Sofia agreed.

*No, I’m the one who’s really in trouble right now. Forget about the heroes for now. Stay calm.*

At the very least, I wasn’t panicking like before. I couldn’t afford to. I was still in something of a dire situation—but there was a way out.

I reminded myself of what I needed to do: get back to the Demiplane through a Gate of Mist. That was the surest course of action.

So that’s what I would do. I needed distance and time—to carefully open a Gate of Mist without leaving any traces would take at least a few minutes. Survival was the most important thing, but I absolutely did not want to bring these two to the Demiplane. I didn’t fully know what they were capable of, but it was clear they were strong.

“Oh my, your coat changed color. A countermeasure against us? And so late in the game? You’re not some new recruit overwhelmed by the atmosphere of

the battlefield, are you? You're a pretty laid-back servant of the Goddess," Sofia taunted.

Yes, I had changed my coat color to red, prioritizing speed over defense. From what I could feel earlier, if I wanted to use my enhanced Realm, such a change would allow me to move more freely.

Sofia could mock me all she wanted, but I didn't care. It was true I was new to the battlefield and had been slow to act.

Dragons, spiders, skeletons—I thought I had been getting used to combat, but fighting against people was different. This also wasn't like dealing with that joke of a character Lime Latte from Tsige. Facing opponents with the same kind of killing intent as Munakata-sensei was something else entirely.

*I wonder... If I were in that same mindset, where I could kill someone without question—like when I faced that woman who caused all that trouble in the Demiplane—could I exude this kind of killing intent?*

Now wasn't the time to think about that.

Behind me there was a spread of dense forest that I had already checked out. If I used the red coat to catch them off guard and sprinted at full speed, I might be able to escape into it. This version of my coat also had higher resistance to slashing than the blue version, which would help counter Sofia's sword.

"That could just be an act to make us lower our guard," Mitsurugi pointed out. "Don't be careless... Look, he's already planning something. I can feel the magical energy converging."

*Sigh. He can sense magick before it's activated?*

*If that's the case, not using incantations for spells might not give me any advantage over him.*

And yet, the boy hadn't begun moving immediately—was it confidence or carelessness?

*Please let it be the latter.*

I really hoped they weren't already prepared for everything.

Feeling uneasy about relying on just a single shot, I used my magick to create orbs that acted like turrets capable of firing Bridt in succession. I placed five of them on each side of me.

For all my fights, I had been incorporating keywords into the Bridt spell formation, making all sorts of modifications, but to be honest, I had been reaching the limit of what that allowed. I needed to get to the academy city soon and acquire some new magical knowledge. Something that could bridge the deep gap between my understanding and the cheats I was using—beginner-friendly magical knowledge, like the kind in the books Shiki had given me.

“Take this!” I shouted.

The moment I activated the spell, the orbs were drawn taut, forming into arrow-like shapes, and then shot toward Sofia and Mitsurugi at high speed. As soon as they launched, new orbs formed at the firing spots, were pulled tight, and launched as the next volley.

Seeing that everything was firing properly, I spun on my heel and sprinted toward the forest as fast as I could.

They didn’t react right away, and I managed to put some distance between us in those first few moments—

*—or so I thought.*

“What?!”

*A wall?!*

Glowing, sparkling, shining, a massive wall appeared in front of me, blocking my path. But I couldn’t afford to stop now. Thankfully, the wall was only a few meters wide, so I swerved around it and kept running. It wasn’t graceful by any means, but as I dodged around the wall, more barriers began to pop up ahead, one after another.

*Come on, not now!*

*All this speed, but I’m only going half as fast as I can because of all these walls! If only I had the instincts to dodge every light wall as it appeared while running!*

“Ugh, what a troublesome spell,” Mitsurugi muttered. “The barrage doesn’t stop.”

“Oh? A rapid-fire spell with this kind of power that activates instantly? I thought you had no combat experience, but maybe you’re more capable than I thought,” Sofia commented. “Mitsurugi, mind the ground! Also, keep blocking his path and handling that magick, would you?”

More and more walls appeared, filling my line of sight in a bewildering display. The forest, once within a few minutes away, now felt endlessly distant.

Then something glowing shot up from the ground at my feet.

“What now?!”

*Is this... a sword? A sword made only of blades? I can’t make any sense of it!*

I deployed a powerful barrier at my feet, literally kicking away the glowing blades as I ran.

*Shit, it’s hard to run like this!*

I couldn’t keep this up...

Curious about how my Bridt was doing at slowing them down, I glanced back over my shoulder.

“Hahaha!!! This arrow-like spell is amazing! It even has the nerve to home in on its target!” Sofia was laughing, dancing around in joy.

“It’s a bit heavy to take head-on. Well, as long as I can deflect it, it’s not a problem. But Sofia, if this is the Goddess’s secret weapon, shouldn’t we do something about it?” Mitsurugi asked, barely moving as he redirected the Bridt spells or blocked them with his barriers.

“I know!” Sofia replied. “But first, I’ll greet him again and see if he’s still alive! I’m actually starting to enjoy this!”

*What’s with these two?* I wondered in bewilderment.

The rapid-fire Bridt spells shouldn’t be low power. Even though I was feeding magick power into my ring and supplying it to my coat, the Bridt spells were supposed to be quite strong.



*And yet... what the hell is that?*

Mitsurugi skillfully manipulated his barriers, systematically deflecting or blocking the incoming Bridt spells. He didn't bother with the ones that veered off on their own. He seemed entirely unconcerned with what happened around him.

*So, barriers can be used to deflect spells by adjusting their strength or the angle they're hit at?*

*I never even thought of that.*

It was a technique I wanted to master, but now wasn't the time to study it closely.

Sofia's movements, meanwhile, were completely beyond my comprehension. I was amazed to see her slashing through the rapid-fire Bridt spells with her sword, dodging left and right with the agility of a beast to avoid the spells that followed her.

And then...

There were those glowing blades that had somehow ended up floating in midair.

I couldn't tell whether it was her or Mitsurugi creating them, but Sofia was using the glowing blades as footholds, moving acrobatically through the air and closing the distance between us at a terrifying speed.

I seriously wanted to believe this was some kind of joke.

Swinging around a sword that most people could barely lift with both hands and slashing through high-speed spells one-handed... What kind of monster did that? And to top it all off, she was performing acrobatic moves while sprinting through the air like some kind of circus act!

*I'm not even the Goddess's secret weapon or anything!*

*Oh, so these walls are made of those glowing blades.*

Several of said glowing blades were arranged in a crisscross pattern, forming barriers. Was this Mitsurugi kid an expert in special magick?

“No way...” I muttered, momentarily distracted.

Before I knew it, Sofia was right in front of me.

*Is she some kind of monster?!*

*She was just behind me a second ago! How did she get ahead of me?*

*How is it okay for such an absurd hyuman to exist?*

*Wait, is she even hyuman?*

Her skin color and general appearance said yes, but maybe she was actually some new type of demon.

As I felt my earlier panic and confusion returning with a vengeance, Sofia kicked off one of the blade walls, accelerating toward me. In seconds, she was leaping down at me, giant sword lifted triumphantly over her head.

“Gotcha!” she yelled.

Her words sounded carefree, but her sharp, precise sword movements betrayed her intent. Her speed was incredible; the advancing sword became a blur in my vision.

I thought she would attack after landing, but Sofia didn’t wait. She swung her sword down at me in midair with tremendous force.

Hoping to meet the attack head-on, I quickly checked my deployed barriers and threw more Realm into them to strengthen them. I trusted the eldwar coat, but it was clear that doing everything I could was the best approach.

“Ugh!”

“Wha—?!”

A loud, piercing sound rang out. Sofia’s expression twisted in surprise. I, on the other hand, remained calm since the outcome was more or less what I expected.

I had managed to block Sofia’s attack.

With a resounding *clang*, her greatsword was knocked straight upward, throwing her off-balance. Since her feet hadn’t yet touched ground, she had no way to brace herself. That, I had expected. However, my magical barrier

shattered to pieces, like it had been canceled out or something. That I had not unexpected.

I knew Sofia's weapon was no ordinary sword, but I had to face the possibility that it possessed the worst possible qualities for me—some sort of magick-destroying ability.

*Just my luck.*

"Damn it," I muttered quietly, clicking my tongue. It was an unconscious reaction—a straightforward and honest response to what my eyes had just witnessed.

At that moment—even though her stance was broken and she shouldn't have been able to do anything—Sofia swung her sword in a sweeping follow-up attack.

*What kind of physical ability and reflexes does she have to pull off something that ridiculous?!*

Sofia just widened her eyes and grinned.

While I was terrified, there wasn't a hint of fear in her eyes. Although she was seconds away from crashing to the ground, all I saw in her eyes was the same fierce killing intent directed my way, plus... Was that joy? Or more like curiosity.

I hadn't anticipated a follow-up attack, and my surprise cost me precious milliseconds. There was no way I could deploy another barrier in time. But when I blocked her first strike, Sofia seemed even more surprised than I was.

Clearly, she'd had a lot of confidence in her attack. She had been sure that hit was going to be the end of me. Yet, as shocked as she was, she'd wasted very little time deciding on a follow-up attack, executing it from that impossible stance...

"Shit!" I muttered.

*How can she not hesitate or waver when she's surprised? Or is it just that my reactions are too slow?*

I had never learned or practiced making split-second decisions in life-or-death situations. There was no way I could suddenly master it now.

*What should I do? What should I do? What should I do?!*

My barrier had shattered, but the enhanced Realm was still active. This meant that both my armor and my own defensive abilities were still reinforced. As Sofia's greatsword closed in on my chest, I raised my arms and crossed them in front of me.

I considered jumping backward, but the glowing walls would've blocked my retreat. I had no choice but to trust the eldwar coat. I braced myself, forcing my eyes to stay open as I awaited her attack. It was undoubtedly a poorly executed strike from a reckless position.

Even so, it wasn't a gamble I felt comfortable with, but somehow, I survived. I felt only a dull, bruising impact, not the sharp pain of her sword slicing through me.

At least I wasn't sent flying.





“Cross-arm block is amazing. This eldwar coat is amazing too,” I muttered.

I’d known the eldwar armor was something to be proud of, but it was awe-inspiring to have actually blocked an attack from such a brutally powerful sword. My reflexive defense, which resembled a boxing cross-arm block, had also worked out in my favor.

Meanwhile, Sofia had finally landed, with no more surprise attacks. She’d *landed*. Anyone else probably would have crashed hard into the rocky ground, but she managed to nail a smooth landing. Her sense of balance and her physical abilities were absolutely insane.

Sporting a grin that somehow looked both exhilarated and incredibly ominous, Sofia widened her eyes and glanced at me before taking a few backsteps to put some distance between us.

This woman was really something else. And beside her, at some point, her supposed companion, young Mitsurugi, had rejoined her. Had he already destroyed all those turret spells and caught up?

I guess it couldn’t be helped since I set them up without really considering the opponent’s defense or endurance. *But still, seriously? These two—Sofia and Mitsurugi. The names sound kinda familiar...*

“Hey, what was that ridiculous thing just now? It was hilarious. Your technique and movements look pretty stupid, but your toughness, reflexes, and magical power... Your basic stats are insane. You’re a mismatched freak,” Sofia sneered.

“I feel the same way,” Mitsurugi chimed in. “He’s strong, but his moves are ridiculously sloppy. It makes no sense.”

“If you know he’s strong, why don’t you give me some extra support?”

“I was busy destroying that attack magick. Don’t ask for the impossible!”

*It seems like they think highly of me... but also not so highly.*

*Sorry for being a laughable, amusing, incomprehensible freak.*

“Whew. Well, if we reset, the situation should change... Ghjkop kkjjgf—”

?

Suddenly, Sofia was no longer speaking the common language.

“Are you putting a layer over this whole area? At least give me a heads up,” Mitsurugi said.

“It’s not really a nuisance, is it?” Sofia replied. “Besides, this kid seems to have received quite a biased amount of the Goddess’s blessing. It’s going to be a pain if he stays this tough.”

It was too short to be a chant, and the spell hadn’t activated either. *What was that?*

Even though I’d never heard the language, the Goddess’s gift gave me some understanding of what it meant—which seemed to be something like “Trample over the prayer of the gods.”

If it wasn’t a chant, then was it some kind of key phrase?

I was sure that the basic activation keywords for magick-infused tools were supposed to be in the common language...

I kept watching Sofia. A few seconds later, the ring on her right index finger suddenly shattered... No, it was more like it crumbled to dust and returned to the earth.

The next moment I felt a strange rippling sensation emanating from Sofia, just like the one I experienced when deploying Realm. Naturally, I was caught in the wave, but nothing unusual happened to my body.

*Magick?* It felt weird for that.

*So, what exactly changed?*

Just to be sure, I tried deploying a barrier, and it worked as usual. Other spells didn’t seem to have any problems either.

*As long as I can still use magick, my lifeline isn’t cut off.* I didn’t know what they had done, but maybe I was lucky this time?

“Hmm... it worked,” Mitsurugi announced. “That concludes all the tests we were asked to perform. Fascinating. I never thought the day would come when

we could cancel out the Goddess's blessing. We probably can't overuse it, but from now on, we can limit her worldwide influence according to our needs."

*So "it worked."* That meant some effect had taken place.

*Damn, I can't see all the cards these guys have.*

"And since you and I never got the Goddess's favor in the first place, there's no downside for us," Sofia pointed out. "Being able to use it so freely is a big advantage. Plus, it's the same for demons and magical beasts. Basically, it only benefits non-human races, or at least, the benefits are definitely greater. Because of that, the Goddess will probably come up with a countermeasure soon, so it's hard to say how long we'll be able to use it."

"But the one who made that ring was—"

"Not another word, Mitsurugi. There's still someone from the Goddess's side here," Sofia interrupted, glancing in my direction.

*Interfering with the Goddess's influence?*

What kind of benefit would that have for a human like Sofia? There would be no advantage to it for her. What would be the point?

For demons, it might be a valuable research topic, sure. But still... I couldn't take my eyes off them.

As Sofia and Mitsurugi continued chatting, I thought about running away and creating a Gate of Mist, but if I tried to focus on chanting or something, I might end up with my head split open like a bamboo shoot.

*Why do they think I'm on the Goddess's side, anyway?* She put me through hell. I had absolutely zero intention of siding with her.

*Ugh, my left hand is starting to feel numb.*

*This is bad. Should I loosen the binding?*

*No, that's a bad idea.* I had no idea how much blood I could afford to lose. If my bleeding increased now, it would only make things worse. I had to endure it.

*In the worst case, even if my arm gets completely ruined, it should go back to normal with healing magick.*

*Shiki, you'll take care of it when I get back, right?*

I felt that I was far too young to become an amputee.

“No way. It’s not like I’m the Goddess’s servant or anything,” I muttered.

“Oh? And what do you mean by that?” Mitsurugi asked.

*What?*

I’d complained in Japanese, thinking I was talking to myself.

*Wait, what?!*

*Could he be Japanese?!*

Sofia was obviously confused too. “What’s up, Mitsurugi? Did you understand that? That definitely wasn’t the common language... I’ve never heard a language that sounds like that.”

Mitsurugi didn’t take his eyes off me. “Answer me, Red One,” he said. “What do you mean you’re not a servant of the Goddess? You were definitely sent to this battlefield by the Goddess. Aren’t you a guardian summoned from another world to protect Limia, like the two heroes?”

“Wait, are you Japanese?” I asked him, my words coming out in a bit of a broken mix.

“Japanese? I am no such thing. Nor do I have any intention of introducing myself to you.”

*No, that’s not it.* He didn’t seem to be feigning ignorance.

*So that means he’s not hyuman, then.*

And he’d mentioned Limia.

*Are we really near Limia?*

*Wow, I’ve been sent flying a long way.*

“Then, you’re not hyuman?” I pressed.

“Oh? Well, right now, thanks to this woman—” here he gestured at Sofia “—in a way, I’m taking on the form of a hyuman child. But you do say some interesting things. Are you implying you’d only speak if I wasn’t hyuman? What

a strange man. Judging by your appearance, I'd say you're a half-breed, a mix of a hyuman and something else. Am I getting close?"

*Seriously, how can you just assume someone's a half-breed based on what they look like?*

Sofia had called me a chimera, beyond even demi-human. It didn't sit well with me.

*Still, if he's willing to listen, this could be a good opportunity for me.*

"I have no reason to fight on this battlefield," I said, keeping my voice even and diplomatic. "And I don't have any obligation to side with the Goddess. How about this? Admit this was all a misunderstanding and we can withdraw. I have no intention of getting in your way."

"That's even more interesting. But it's not going to happen," Mitsurugi said. "You're going to die here. After all, you descended into this place in a blaze of golden light, flaunting the Goddess's power. There's no 'misunderstanding' about that."

I sighed. "It's true that I have some connection to the Goddess. Though, honestly, it's a connection I'd love to tear apart. But why does that mean you have to kill me? Like I said, I have no intention of cooperating with the Goddess. Even if this hyuman woman, Sofia, is siding with the demons, I won't tell anyone!"

Mitsurugi suddenly fell silent, staring at me in puzzlement.

*What's going on?*

Was all this talk of killing me because I was connected to the Goddess, or because they didn't want a hyuman like me to know about Sofia and the fact that she was on the other side?

*Was I completely off the mark?*

Without warning, Mitsurugi burst out laughing. "A *hyuman* woman, you say? Hahaha, ahahahaha!"

"What's so funny?" Sofia asked, annoyed.

"Sofia, listen. This guy doesn't know who you are."



*What? Why is that surprising?*

*I mean, this is our first meeting, right? You didn't even introduce yourselves. I was just suddenly attacked and ended up here. There's no way I could have known.*

"Huh. Well, if he's like the heroes, that's only natural, isn't it?" Sofia mused.

"But he doesn't seem to be a hero either. Anyway, Sofia, this guy just begged for his life. He wants us to let him go," Mitsurugi explained.

"Do you really need to check with me about that? Tell him it's not happening," Sofia replied coldly.

"But he also said that even if 'this human woman' was siding with the demons, he wouldn't tell anyone. That just made me laugh," Mitsurugi added.

*I don't get it.*

All I knew was that the situation had worsened. Their hostility and killing intent had intensified.

"The Goddess does strange things," Mitsurugi said, looking down on me. "Sending such an inexplicable person into a battlefield... The spirits still aren't fully active, so it's not like she's run out of pieces to play with... Hey, Red One. Surely, you wouldn't want to be killed without knowing the name of your killer, or die without giving your own name. So, I'll allow you to introduce yourself."

*Wow, talk about condescending. And he's treating me like one of the Goddess's pawns.*

"Um, I'm not planning on dying today. But in situations like this, shouldn't you be the ones to introduce yourselves first?" I asked, keeping my voice brave.

"Heh, you're quite the smooth talker for someone in your position... Hmm. Very well. In that case, I shall introduce us first, since you've given me such a good laugh. This woman wielding the greatest sword in the world is Sofia Bulga. She's known as the Dragon Slayer and is famous for her absurdly high level of 920. And I'm Lancer, although Sofia usually calls me Mitsurugi."

...

*What?*

*Sofia Bulga? The Dragon Slayer?*

Isn't that the person who used to be the highest level in the Adventurer's Guild?

*And Lancer?*

*I'm pretty sure the dragon from the Gritonia Empire that Sofia supposedly killed was named Lancer.*

*Now that I think about it, Mitsurugi sounds familiar too.*

*Hello? Hello?!*

*You've got to be kidding me!*

*Why am I being targeted by such insanely powerful people?!*

I began writing so Sofia could understand. *"I'm Raidou. A merchant."*

Though I was doing my best not to show it, I was panicking. It was a miracle I could even form a magick speech bubble. My heart was racing and wouldn't calm down.

I couldn't comprehend why the world's strongest human and a Greater Dragon—someone probably on the same level as Tomoe—were attacking me with every intent to kill.

"Raidou, is it? And you're a merchant? That's a pretty obvious—" Mitsurugi began.

"Hmph, Raidou, is it? My name is Sofia Bulga, and now the introductions are over. As you can see, I've allied myself with the demons, even though I used to be an adventurer. And I'm also the one who's going to kill you."

Despite her cute appearance, she really had some harsh words.

*What kind of mindset does she have?*

If she was against the Goddess, I thought maybe we could be friends, but it seemed these two were dead set on killing me. It was frustrating not having any idea why.

"Tch, I wasn't done talking," Mitsurugi said, shaking his head. "Raidou, it's time to say goodbye. You've seen things you weren't supposed to see, and you

reek of the Goddess.”

*What a terrible way to put it! I didn't mean to see anything! More like, you just showed me whatever you wanted!*

Before Mitsurugi finished speaking, numerous glowing blades began floating around him. The range of the floating blades gradually expanded into the sky and around me. Sofia readied her sword again.

“Heh... hahaha...” I had to laugh. It was all just too ridiculous.

*Like hell I'm going to let myself be killed here... wherever here is.*

*No more holding back.*

Not that I'd had the luxury to hold back from the start, but from now on, I wasn't going to entertain the thought even for a second. I had to buy as much time as I could to escape—no matter what.

Blood was still slowly dripping from my left hand. I was starting to feel nauseous.

*Damn Goddess.*

Summoning me to such a chaotic place...

I needed to find some way to resist her summons. Maybe Shiki could help with that. Might as well take the opportunity to study it in the academy city too.

*I'm getting really pissed at the Goddess for not saying anything at a time like this.*

*You're a god, aren't you? Say something!*

“Well then, here I come. Without the Goddess's interference, your absurd defenses should be nothing special. From here on, it'll be a slaughter,” Sofia declared.

*Huh? So, this is about her blessing, huh?*

*So, she threw me onto this battlefield and now can't make a move herself?*

*What an idiot.*

*Is she seriously that stupid?*

*Well, whatever the reason, she's still a pathetic fool. She could have just said more than "I found you," like telling me what she wanted. If she had done that, at least I could have prepared myself... or just bolted at full speed in the opposite direction.*

"The heroes seem to be cornered by the demon general as well. It would be best to wipe away any remaining traces of the Goddess's protection or blessings here," Mitsurugi continued.

*So, the Goddess has her enemies in this world too.*

I felt a bit relieved, but at the same time, I was utterly amazed at how stupid that bug was, allowing an opposing force to develop in a world she supposedly cherished.

*Tsukuyomi-sama did ask me to keep an eye on the heroes, so I'm a bit concerned about them. But my own life takes priority right now. Sorry, but you'll have to handle things on your own this time.*

*Anyway.*

It seemed Sofia and Mitsurugi had finally let their guard down; both looked much more relaxed than a moment ago. They must have been really confident in the effect of that ring. They could believe all they wanted that I was weakened because of this so-called interference with the Goddess's blessing.

Even though I denied any relationship with the Goddess, these guys didn't care to listen. They were sure of themselves and their actions, so they could think whatever they wanted.

*But you know what?*

*Things aren't going to go how you expect.*

Ironically, I'd be using rings too. Unlike theirs, mine were about to enhance me.

Still in my battle stance, I began to feel the anger welling up inside me. I removed the ring on my left hand and then all the rings on my right.

"Take this!!!" I shouted.

"What?!"

Both Sofia and Mitsurugi's faces registered surprise.

I didn't hold back the magical power swelling within me. I unleashed it with full force in front of me, chanting no spells, releasing everything I could muster.



# Tsukimichi

## Chapter 2

**F**rom the Edge of the World, a third person from another world, one who was not a hero, began to move. However, no visible ripples had yet been created.

The world was approaching a turning point, one that had been hinted at by a merchant named Rembrandt from Tsige. The Kingdom of Limia and the Gritonia Empire were launching a joint operation to capture Stella Fortress.

The two-pronged battle—bolstered by the heroes bestowed upon both nations and the steadily increasing morale, along with the revival of the Goddess’s blessing after more than a decade—had shifted the tide overwhelmingly in favor of the humans.

The Goddess’s blessing, in fact, was the very thing that allowed humans to exist as the dominant species of this world.

The start of each battle was reported to the Goddess, and representatives from each army delivered an address. The Goddess would then observe both forces and grant her blessing to the side she favored, while cursing the side she did not. Specifically, the favored side had all of its abilities doubled, while their unlucky opponent’s abilities were halved.

And so, with the favored side being four times as strong—unless the unfavored side had an overwhelming numerical advantage—battles in this world were often decided before they began. As a result, the side that failed to secure the Goddess’s blessing almost always surrendered.

This meant that winning the Goddess's favor was paramount. Fighters pursued beauty, and impractically ornate armor was crafted for the representatives delivering the proclamation, for the Goddess favored the beautiful and especially those who were aligned with her tastes.

It wasn't uncommon for royals and nobles to obsessively study the appearance of those who won the Goddess's favor, sometimes even incorporating their bloodlines into their own.

However, these rules only applied to conflicts between humans. When it came to battles involving non-humans, the situation was settled in a drastically different way.

During the proclamation that commenced a battle, the Goddess would unconditionally grant her blessing to the humans. There had never been a single instance where non-humans were blessed. Not one.

As a result, human combat abilities were indiscriminately enhanced, while demons and other non-humans were forced into a severely disadvantaged position. Out of necessity, demons led the way in researching tactics and strategies, amassing several times the military intelligence of the humans. Yet even then, the situation remained skewed in favor of the humans. This was simply how battles were fought. At least, that is, until the Goddess fell silent.

After that, the proclamations became meaningless. Even if the formal procedures were still followed, no blessings or curses were bestowed.

For the demons, this was an unprecedented opportunity. They quickly rallied magical beasts and demi-humans, amassing their forces to wage war against the humans. This time, they clashed head-on, wearing down each other's numbers and strength.

Without the divine protection they had so long relied upon, the humans were defeated again and again by the demons. Victory after victory, the demons' momentum became unstoppable. They even destroyed one of the five great nations, claiming vast territories in the process.

Stella Fortress was located at the southern end of the fallen great nation of Elysion.

Limia attacked from the south, while Gritonia came in from the east. Despite repeated offensives from both sides, the fortress had continually repelled them, proving to be an impregnable stronghold.

The fortress was bordered by wide rivers, swamps, and mountain ranges, making it impossible to bypass by marching northward. And yet, capturing Stella Fortress was a prerequisite for any further incursion into demon territory. Some knowledgeable humans were beginning to suspect that even the path to the fortress had been cleverly designed by the demons.

Nevertheless, the staggering number of lives lost in the battles for this fortress had driven both Limia and Gritonia to a point where they could no longer afford to consider the possibility of a trap.

To them, Stella Fortress had become a symbol of the hated demons—and it had to be taken at any cost.

“The impregnable fortress... Stella, the devil’s fortress that’s killed so many humans,” murmured a shadowy figure, gazing at the sprawling armies illuminated by the bonfires that had been lit at dusk. “It’s certainly the place you’d want to reclaim first. The descent of the heroes and the revival of the Goddess’s blessing... That’s why they’re considering a recapture operation, as bad as things look.”

A few figures were gathered around, listening.

“Yes. Some scholars believe this is a demon trap. But this place has seen too much blood. Limia and Gritonia, no, humankind can’t back down now.” This voice came from another shadow, stepping up beside the first. The words from this slender woman carried a hint of exasperation and perhaps a trace of self-mockery.

Another figure spoke up, standing a couple of steps behind the others. “Attacking from somewhere else would be a valid strategy; I understand that in my head. Still, in my heart, I support this operation... because I have some friends resting here.”

“So many knights have been slain here. This is a place we can’t avoid if we’re going to defeat the demons,” said another voice from behind the two figures.

The speaker was also a man, and the sound of metal scraping against metal suggested he was wearing armor.

“Doubled with the blessing, and halved with the curse. And the heroes... I understand the advantage, but I still have a bad feeling about this,” the first woman muttered.

“Don’t start saying foolish things now,” one of the other figures replied. “The dinner meeting with the Empire is coming up soon, Hibiki. Your bad feelings tend to come true.”

“Haha. Well, I didn’t get that feeling with the spider, so maybe it’s just me worrying for nothing. Also, it might just be because I don’t really like that Tomoki, the hero from the Empire,” Hibiki said.

“I don’t understand,” replied another man in the back of the crowd. “He seemed like a fine young man to me. A bit young, maybe, but he looked like a brave, disciplined kid.”

“Yeah, I agree with Woody,” a new voice chimed in. “I actually found him quite likable. There was something oddly... captivating about him. And to think that he can wield any magick tool and kill dozens, or hundreds, of demons on the battlefield... Heroes are really incredible.”

“I never really understand Hibiki’s tastes,” the slender woman sighed. “Even if I hadn’t met her first, I might have ended up being that boy’s sword. I felt the same heroic aura from him as I do from you.”

“I... I’m with Hibiki-nee-chan. I didn’t like him. There’s something different between him and you,” said a much younger voice, surprising the others.

“Chiya-chan, you’re the only one on my side, huh? Don’t worry, I won’t let my personal feelings get in the way of the battle. So, shall we go for dinner and a nap?” Hibiki suggested. “The attack’s happening at midnight, right?”

A dinner meeting a few hours before the battle—Hibiki thought it was a rather laid-back affair for the eve of an operation. Did the Empire trust her and the other hero that much, or were they that confident in the Goddess’s blessing and the fourfold advantage it bestowed?

While the dinner meeting was also intended as a final review of the operation, it was officially just a dinner meeting.

Hibiki, the hero of Limia, glanced back at the bonfires.

*We're taking that place, she thought. The demon general is a four-armed giant with crazy strength. Whether it's our troops or the Empire's that encounter it first, the plan is for the heroes to converge and take it down. Our combined forces are estimated to be about five times the size of the demons'. And if the enemy's abilities are cut in half, wouldn't that make it practically a twentyfold difference? I don't really understand numbers when it comes to military strength, but twenty times sounds reassuring. But still, the fortress's strength isn't halved, and the terrain doesn't become twice as advantageous for us. Four times is only a factor for each individual soldier, right? Ours are doubled, theirs are halved. That just means the demons are neutralized, and we're only at double strength.*

Hibiki recalled from the strategy meeting that the demons had superior individual combat skills. The final plan was straightforward: obtain the Goddess's blessing, attack from two directions, and if the enemy's general appeared, the heroes would take it down. She still wasn't quite sure why the Empire insisted on a night assault.

The demons likely had at least some awareness of the humans' movements. So, it would make sense for them to make some kind of different move compared to before, but there hadn't been any visible reaction from the enemy. That was the eerie part.

Magick was real in this world. Just because there were no cannons at the fortress didn't mean cannon-like attacks couldn't suddenly be unleashed by individuals. Hibiki figured it was better to overthink things than underthink them. Considering the potential applications, there was no telling what kinds of magick could be used.

Perhaps it was these worries that were making Hibiki feel uneasy.

※ ※ ※

“Welcome, hero of Limia,” a lively voice called out to Hibiki as she made her way to the tent that served as the dining hall for the dinner party.

“Oh, Princess Lily. Thank you for going out of your way to greet me. It’s an honor to be invited this evening,” Hibiki replied, flashing a bright smile as she instinctively recited the words she’d been practicing. Her traveling companions and the nobles who accompanied her had cautioned her more than once to show the utmost politeness.

Hibiki’s host was none other than the princess of Gritonia, a nation with power comparable to that of the Kingdom of Limia. Despite being a hero, Hibiki knew that she couldn’t afford any disrespect toward this woman, and she felt a bit nervous.

“Not at all. I’m sorry for summoning you like this,” Princess Lily said. “Since you’ll be our ally in battle very soon, I’ve prepared a little reception for you. Please enjoy it to the fullest tonight.” The princess smiled warmly, gesturing for the group to follow her through the open tent flap. A pleasant aroma wafted out of the tent into the evening air.





Hibiki frowned in thought. She wasn't used to being shown around by royalty. But she gave a bow and followed Lily into the tent, her party close behind her. Inside, a round table was set for dinner, and several people were already seated.

As soon as they caught sight of Hibiki and her companions, everyone stopped their conversations and stood up to greet them.

"Hey there! It's just before we grab some shut-eye, but let's enjoy the meal without any formalities!" said a cheerful voice.

"Hibiki-sama, why don't you have a seat here?" Princess Lily invited, guiding Hibiki to her place.

Hibiki sat, but she could already feel a sense of gloom setting in. The man who'd greeted her had been far too flippant with his words for her taste. It was strange that Princess Lily hadn't reprimanded him, and even stranger that none of her own companions seemed to be bothered by it.

Sitting next to Hibiki was—just as she'd anticipated—Tomoki Iwahashi, the Empire's hero and the man who'd made such casual remarks. But it would have been rude to refuse the seat Princess Lily herself had guided her to. Besides, those who demanded informality from others often were the least tolerant of it when it came their way.

Suppressing a sigh, Hibiki put on an even more forced smile than she had for the princess and turned to Tomoki.

"Thank you for being considerate, Tomoki-kun. It's going to be a night battle, but I'm sure we'll all do our best."

Hibiki's wording was quite conventional. Knowing Tomoki was younger than her, she had been addressing him with the more familial honorific of "-kun" since they'd first met.

"We're used to night battles, so we'll be fine. We might even be able to support Limia a bit," Tomoki replied with confidence.

"That's reassuring. We don't have much experience with large-scale night battles, so we're counting on you."

“Besides, this is just a mid-level boss fight. Let’s wrap it up quickly and get some recognition from the Goddess. Maybe She’ll even give us a new ability or something.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re the one giving the proclamation for the blessing, right, Tomoki-kun? I wonder if I’ll get to see the Goddess again. I haven’t seen Her since that first time, and I’ve got a lot of questions I’d like to ask Her.”

Hibiki had always felt a profound disconnect between the situation the Goddess had described and the reality she found herself in. Maybe if they met again, the Goddess could clear some things up.

Despite feeling a slight discomfort at Tomoki’s description of the battle as a “mid-level boss fight,” Hibiki maintained her friendly smile.

“Oh, by the way, Hibiki,” Tomoki suddenly spoke up, “what level are you now?”

By now, the rest of Hibiki’s party had found their seats and were chatting and enjoying their meals. Hibiki could barely taste the food she was putting in her mouth. She wasn’t in the mood.

Chiya, who had been distrustful of Tomoki from their first encounter, still seemed uneasy but was starting to warm up to a girl from the Empire who appeared to be about her age.

“Me? I’m at 430 now,” Hibiki answered.

“I see. I’m at 605,” Tomoki announced.

“Wow, that’s amazing. You must have been very active on the battlefield.”

“Yeah, that’s right. So, Hibiki, we’re three years apart, but could you stop using such familial honorifics? You don’t have to be so formal with ‘-sama,’ but addressing me a little more respectfully with ‘-san’ would be more appropriate for someone who’s more capable, don’t you think?”

Hibiki felt the smile beginning to falter around her lips. *Who was the one who just said, “Let’s enjoy the meal without any formalities”?! she thought in exasperation.*

“S-Sorry about that,” Hibiki stammered. “I guess I’m still talking like I would back in our world. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“Nah, I don’t really mind,” Tomoki shrugged. “By the way, I’m not great with speaking formally, to be honest.”

*Though you’re using “desu” and “masu” to properly end your sentences, you’re still rudely referring to yourself with “ore” and even “dono”! So, I’m not expecting you to use polite formal language anyway! And if you don’t care, don’t say anything! Just let it go, high schooler!*

Out loud, Hibiki replied, “It’s okay. You don’t need to worry about your manner of speech. Just talk however you like.”

“Oh, really? That’s great. I’ve been worried about slipping up and letting something inappropriate pop out. Tonight, our plan is to quickly draw out the demon general, so maybe you guys could join us from the start, Hibiki. What do you think?”

Right now, Hibiki felt they were meeting as representatives of their respective countries, which was essentially a form of diplomacy. But Tomoki’s complete lack of decorum left her feeling dizzy with frustration.

Hibiki took hierarchy seriously. If this were back in her original world, she would have immediately given such a disrespectful junior a stern lecture.

“That’s a nice offer, but we need to motivate the people of Limia and lead them into battle,” she said after a moment. “We’ll come join you when the time comes.”

Despite the incessant twitching in her cheek, Hibiki somehow managed to endure the dinner party. Had she been invited here just to test her patience?

When dinner was finally over and the group stepped out of the tent, Chiya came up behind Hibiki. She’d been watching her all evening, and now concern was evident on her face.

“Hibiki-nee-chan, are you okay?” Chiya asked softly. “Should I make you some calming tea?”

“Chiya-chan, you’re such a sweet girl!” Hibiki exclaimed, then she sighed in frustration. She muttered to herself, “Why can’t *that* idiot have even half as much charm?!”

The other members of their group tilted their heads in confusion, having only noticed her irritation. “What’s wrong, Hibiki?” one of them asked. “Did you not like imperial cuisine?”

“If that’s the case, you should have told them beforehand... It would be rude otherwise, Hibiki-dono,” another added.

Hibiki stopped in her tracks. “Wait, are you guys serious right now? What does any of this have to do with *me* being rude? Didn’t you see how rude Tomoki was? You’re all acting crazy!”

Chiya nodded vigorously in agreement.

“What are you so mad about? Tomoki-dono hosted a casual dinner party for us, promised to support us in battle, and even subtly pointed out that you were using ‘-kun’ to address someone more capable than you. His encouraging remarks were actually quite pleasant, don’t you think?” This was Navarre, who held a position almost equal to Hibiki on the battlefield. To Hibiki, her words sounded like a comedic bit.

“How can you not see how blatantly disrespectful he was...!” Hibiki looked around the group and was stunned to see that everyone was just looking at her in bewilderment. Even Belda and Woody, who were usually the first to caution her whenever she acted too casually, seemed to agree with Navarre.

*What is this? Does everyone lose their minds when they meet that guy?*

In fact, Chiya and Hibiki were the only ones who didn’t seem to be under the spell. What could it mean? Hibiki had no idea, but she knew she wasn’t going to be able to have a reasonable conversation with anyone else here. There had to be some reason behind it all...

“Well, let’s just set that aside for now,” Hibiki suggested genially. “I got a little carried away myself. Yeah, let’s just get some sleep. We’ve got a battle coming up. Chiya-chan, want to share a room?”

At this point, pressing the issue further would get them nowhere. By the time they woke up, the battle would have already started. Hibiki understood that it wasn't the time to sow seeds of discord among them.

Taking Chiya with her, Hibiki returned to their sleeping quarters and soon drifted off.

# Tsukimichi

## Chapter 3

The battle began quietly.

The customary proclamation to the Goddess went off without a hitch, and both the Kingdom and Empire's armies received Her blessing. At the same time, the demons were presumed to have been afflicted with a halving curse.

Hibiki had been secretly worried that Gritonia's hero might do something reckless, but the proclamation, which was essentially a standard speech, was so straightforward it felt rather anticlimactic.

As planned, the Kingdom's army began its advance and was soon confronting the enemy. Hibiki's group, positioned slightly behind the front lines, could feel the tense atmosphere of the battlefield.

The situation felt a bit different from what she'd expected.

The abilities of her allies had indeed been significantly enhanced. Even Hibiki, who'd been skeptical of the whole blessing thing, had to admit that she'd noticed the extra strength in their magick.

As for the enemy... their magical power didn't seem at all diminished. Still, the tide of battle was in the humans' favor. On the field, they had scattered the demons with several charges, like tearing through paper. Not once had their opponents managed to push them back.

The battle was nearing its end; all that remained was to take the interior of the fortress. Both the Kingdom and the Empire had pushed their forces right up



to the gates. The demons themselves had cleared a wide area in front of the fortress, which allowed a considerable number of soldiers to rush in.

The morale of the combined forces of the Gritonia Empire and the Kingdom of Limia was high, and victory seemed assured.

Still, Hibiki found it strange that this entire series of engagements had been achieved without the need for her group to be deployed. Moreover, there had been no report from the Empire of the four-armed general making an appearance. All this made Hibiki uneasy—her instincts were sounding an alarm.

“Hey, Navarre,” she said. “Don’t you think this is weird? There’s no resistance at all. Isn’t this supposed to be an impregnable fortress?”

“You’re right, it’s hard to believe our armies would be able to finish this without even joining the fight,” Navarre replied. “Maybe Stella Fortress isn’t as sturdy as it’s cracked up to be... or maybe the Empire’s hero has performed some remarkable feat?”

Hibiki chose to ignore the latter part of her comment, focusing only on the assessment of the fortress. If even Navarre, a seasoned mercenary with extensive battlefield experience, sensed that something was wrong, then something was definitely wrong. Although the alarm bells in her head were still ringing, Hibiki felt frustrated by her lack of experience, which left her unsure of what she should do.

Belda, meanwhile, was completely overtaken by excitement. “Once we get those gates open, the battle will be decided!” he exclaimed. “We’re so close to taking Stella! This is finally the first step toward liberating Elysion!”

In this state, Belda wouldn’t be capable of making a rational decision. Even Woody, who stood in the row behind with Chiya, looked uncharacteristically excited as he surveyed the battlefield.

Chiya had grown more accustomed to combat, but she still felt fear in this atmosphere. She managed to maintain a brave front mostly by staying close to the others.

Belda and Woody’s reactions told the story of the battle. It was a full-on frontal assault, with the forces of the Empire and the Kingdom in such disarray

that they were indistinguishable from one another. Despite the initial differences in their approach, both armies were united in their goal of breaking through the fortress's gates.

"I've got a really bad feeling about this. Woody, Chiya-chan, just in case, get a defensive barrier and a levitation spell ready for high-speed movement," Hibiki instructed.

In case of an emergency, failing to defend promptly could create a fatal vulnerability. This was especially true for an army, which needed to be ready to defend itself and move quickly, if necessary. Given the current situation, suggesting they hold back to assess the situation wouldn't be feasible. They were on the verge of victory.

"But I can't protect everyone," Chiya protested meekly. "I can barely manage this area."

The amount of mana used didn't directly correlate to the range a spell could cover. Chiya wasn't good at expanding her spells over a wide area.

Woody nodded in agreement. "I can handle levitation and high-speed movement for a party, but it's impossible on a battalion level. I'm not a spirit, after all." He didn't have as much mana as Chiya, and even though he was skilled in control, his available magick power wasn't vast.

"Then it's fine if it's just us," Hibiki reassured them. "It's not like we're doing anything else right now. Please."

Though puzzled, the two spellcasters complied with the hero's request, chanting their spells and putting them on standby. After all, they were part of a hero's party. This was the least they could do.

*If it was me, what would I do? If I wanted to strike when the Kingdom and Empire forces were gathered...*

Hibiki considered the cliffs on either side of Stella Fortress. The fortress had originally been built to block a narrow passage. She couldn't understand why the demons had cleared the narrow zone in front of Stella, making it even easier to attack after they took control.

Soldiers could be positioned on the fortress and cliff tops to launch attacks from above. However, this was already happening—the demon forces were constantly under attack from both the fortress and the cliffs.

Or was it the difference in elevation? The fortress was situated at a higher point, and the human armies were attacking from below on a slope. However, the incline wasn't particularly steep. Even if the gates were opened, they could set up a rockfall trap, but with the armies already pressing closer, that would no longer be an option.

Flooding the enemy was also a possibility, but it would require an enormous amount of water, and like the rockfall, it seemed too late for that now.

*What else could they be planning?* Hibiki wondered. *Maybe they'll try something like those traps you see in treasure-hunting movies, where the walls close in from both sides? But that's something you'd use if you were advancing through a narrow valley. What are they up to? As long as we're ready to retreat back to camp, we should be able to handle most situations.*

The truth was, there had always been a lot about this operation that Hibiki couldn't make sense of. It wasn't just the enemy army's behavior that was puzzling her now. There was also the way her companions had suddenly started praising the Empire's hero, and the fact that they had chosen to launch a night attack under a full moon sky. It seemed the Empire had insisted on this date quite forcefully, but even as the operation commenced, Hibiki still didn't understand their reasoning.

Reflecting on these thoughts, she glanced back at her own troops.

*Madness. This place is totally consumed by madness.*

Since the long-desired recapture of the fortress was finally within reach, the soldiers at the front lines could see nothing but the fortress gates and its fall. What's more, the battlefield at the gates—which should have only been occupied by frontline troops—was now filled with units that were supposed to be in the middle ranks or even in the rear. The Imperial Army was in a similar state.

Stella Fortress, a bastion taken by demons who had stolen away their families and friends. While Hibiki herself hadn't lost anyone to this place, she could

sense the weight of loss in the insanity radiating from those around her.

*So, this is war... I thought I understood it, but it's something else entirely. To celebrate death with cheers and screams of joy...*

Even Navarre, who was usually one of the more levelheaded among them, had a fire in her eyes that refused to be hidden. Hibiki wondered if herself and Chiya were the only ones feeling genuine fear.

She had thought that she could easily see the demons as enemies, as beings that must be defeated. But in a moment of reflection, she realized that she unconsciously equated the deaths of demons with the deaths of humans. This was a mindset from her original world—a belief that, fundamentally, demons were just people with different physical traits.

*Then again, maybe Tomoki-kun feels the same way. He did come from Japan, just like me. If I consider his behavior as an act of bravado, that is.*

Hibiki thought for a moment about the boy who took pride in his level. Adapting to this battlefield wouldn't be easy for someone from a world where death was so far removed.

"Ah, the gates—"

"They're opening!"

Navarre and Belda's voices cut through Hibiki's thoughts. Relief washed over her as she realized her fears were unfounded.

A roar erupted from the allied human armies, a war cry resounding across the battlefield.

Then it happened.

Hibiki's discarded worries suddenly became a reality as the ground collapsed beneath her.

※ ※ ※

Stella Fortress sat atop a hill, a sloping road lead from its gate to the flat plain below. As if cued by the roar that erupted from the humans, not just the

fortress but the entire hill collapsed at once.

Or, more accurately, it vanished. What lay beneath was pitch-black darkness—a chasm so unfathomable its black depths stood out sharply even against the darkness of night.

For several seconds, silence reigned. The ground itself—had it been a product of magick all along?—made no sound as it vanished.

*Wait, the ground just... disappeared?!*

Whether from shock or sheer disbelief, a strange silence spread across the battlefield. For a few seconds, the scene was devoid of any human voice. How many noticed what Hibiki had, that the ground around Stella Fortress was gone?

“Woody! Chiya-chan!” Hibiki shouted.

Because she had anticipated something going wrong, she was able to react first. Both of the spells she’d prepared were suddenly essential. Typically, only the support spell for high-speed movement would have been necessary, but Hibiki had been extra cautious, also readying a levitation spell to account for upward evasion. This turned out to be a brilliant move.

After another few seconds, the spells activated, and Hibiki’s party was saved from falling. A faint, light blue barrier formed around them, creating a protective dome of defensive magick.

“A-Aah... Aaaaaah!” cried someone from their side as their allies plummeted into the abyss.

Hibiki had no idea how deep the hole went, but it wasn’t hard to imagine the grim fate awaiting those who were unprepared for this. At the very least, half of the Kingdom’s army—the entire front line that had surged forward—had been wiped out in an instant. The remaining forces seemed to consist of the rear guard of mages, the archers, and a few knight units led by nobles.

Half had been destroyed, perhaps even more.

The thought was so horrifying it felt surreal.

Praying that those falling would somehow manage to save themselves, Hibiki pushed back against the rising tide of screams, trying to rouse her companions.

“Woody, just get us up and back as far as you can! Navarre and Belda, you’re with me—we need to pull back any troops that are left as much as possible. Chiya-chan, maintain the barrier!” she shouted, her voice clear and commanding.

Then she had another worrying thought. Glancing upward, she saw that her fear was coming true: arrows, stones, and a myriad of colored spells rained down from above.

“Navarre, Belda, we’re changing the plan. We need to defend until we get back up. Horn, come out!” she called, summoning her guardian wolf from her silver bracelet. “We’re surviving this!”

Her words sounded as much like an encouragement to herself as to her comrades.

※ ※ ※

Soaring through the sky and scorching the demonkin below with beams of light from his divine spear, Tomoki Iwahashi, the hero of the Empire, found himself in a state of confusion.

Just as the gates had opened and the countdown to storming the fortress and claiming the general’s head had begun, people suddenly vanished around him.

Looking down, Tomoki saw an enormous black pit that stretched wide like a gaping maw. Soldiers, weapons, and even some of the demons were being swallowed up into the abyss, and it looked too much like a special effect from a movie.

Suddenly, Tomoki sensed hostility directed toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something flash near the open gates to the fortress. Tomoki loosed a beam of destructive light from his divine spear, dispersing the magick being fired at him. At that moment, something crucial crossed his mind.

His companions.

Guinevere, Mora, Yukinatsu. The comrades who fought by his side and protected him.

Quickly activating a magical necklace, Tomoki scanned his surroundings. Before long, he breathed a sigh of relief as he located the signals of his three companions.

Thanks to the effect of the silver boots the Goddess had given him, Tomoki was able to float without expending any of his own magick, rendering this ridiculous trap ineffective for him. However, Guinevere, Mora, and Yukinatsu had been on the ground.

“All three of them fell?” he muttered, tracking their signals. It appeared they were all in roughly the same location, just a bit below him. He would have to act quickly to rescue them.

Tomoki put on a burst of speed and caught up to where his three friends huddled together, floating midair. However, the magick keeping them afloat seemed incomplete—they were slowly descending.

“You’re late, Tomoki!” Yukinatsu scolded, frustration evident in her voice. “The replica silver boots aren’t perfect, you know! You need to concentrate to keep the levitation going, and if there’s too much weight, we’ll start falling!”

“Hey, Yukinatsu, are you implying that’s because of me? I won’t stand for that!” Guinevere responded with a raised eyebrow.

“Come on, you two, don’t fight! Both of you weigh more than I do!” This was Mora, the smallest of the group by a long shot.

“That’s obvious!” came Yukinatsu and Guinevere’s voices in perfect unison.

Thanks to the alchemical efforts of Yukinatsu, all three of them had managed to avoid falling into the abyss and were safe. Tomoki felt his heart finally calming down, and their comedic banter was definitely helping.

“I’m glad you’re all okay,” he sighed.

“Tomoki... I’m your shield. I can’t die without protecting you,” Guinevere replied earnestly.



“Don’t make that serious face! It’s embarrassing,” Yukinatsu blurted out, cheeks flushing.

“We’re totally fine!” Mora chimed in cheerfully.

Tomoki nodded, satisfied, but his focus quickly returned to the situation at hand. “They sure went all out with this. A trap like this from a mid-level boss? That’s just arrogant. Mora, call Nagi. We need to retreat for now. We can’t make any decisions about continuing the battle until we know more about what’s going on.”

“Yeah, who knows how many soldiers we’ve lost,” Yukinatsu added, concern lining her face.

“This is a crazy trap. Whoever set it is out of their mind,” Guinevere muttered, still on high alert.

“Got it, I’ll call Nagi,” Mora confirmed, starting to chant toward a gemstone she held. “Thanks, Guinevere,” she added, smiling at the knight.

“No problem. I won’t let anything happen to you or Nagi. Let’s get through this,” Guinevere assured her, standing tall.

With her chanting complete, Mora summoned a dragon below their falling group—a wyvern, to be precise. This was Nagi, one of the flying dragons under Mora’s control. Its emerald-green scales shimmered beautifully, a striking sight against the dark void below. It was a mid-sized dragon and the closest companion Mora had among her summoned creatures.

“Nagi, go up! Once we’re above the pit, head back. Please!” Mora commanded.

“Gyao!” the beast cried, flapping its powerful wings. As the dragon ascended, Tomoki focused on deflecting the attacks raining down on them to shield himself and his team from the barrage.

“What the hell... The hole extends all the way back to the rear lines. Looks like only the rear guard made it,” Tomoki observed, surveying the battlefield from above.

“Tomoki, let’s save as many soldiers as we can by loading them onto Nagi,” Guinevere suggested. If they created a barrier to prevent anyone from falling off, Nagi could carry more people.

“Guinevere, we can’t do that,” Tomoki said, shaking his head sadly. “Our priority’s to get back and report to Lily first. That’s the most important thing right now.” Slowing down to help would compromise their mobility, and that wasn’t a risk he was willing to take.

“But!!!” Guinevere protested.

“I haven’t been able to get in touch with Lily since this started. Besides, this is war. In war, the best way to honor the fallen is to fight on in their place,” Tomoki replied, his tone resolute.

“Tomoki... I’m sorry. I got emotional,” Guinevere apologized as Tomoki’s words sunk into her heart. As always, his reasoning was clear, unclouded by emotion.

“No worries. As long as you’re back to your usual self, that’s all that matters. All right, let’s move out!” Tomoki encouraged, signaling them to get ready.

“Wait, Tomoki,” Yukinatsu interjected.

“What is it, Yukinatsu?”

“Aren’t we going to look for the Limia hero?” she asked. Despite the chaos, Yukinatsu wondered if they shouldn’t at least try to ensure the other hero’s safety. Sure, she was a hero, but who could say whether she’d managed to navigate the situation as calmly?

“Hibiki?” Tomoki shrugged. “She’s a hero too. She can handle herself. Worrying about her would be an insult. After all, she’s supposed to be the older and wiser one.”

Yukinatsu couldn’t help noticing how casually Tomoki referred to Hibiki, without the honorific he’d been using earlier, but she nodded. “All right. If you’ve got a plan, then that’s good enough for me. Let’s go.”

“All right, Mora, get us out of here,” Tomoki instructed.

“Got it! Nagi, go!” Mora commanded once more.

“All right, but since we’re already here, let’s make it count,” Tomoki added. He turned Nagi in the opposite direction from their retreat, aiming straight at the fortress, holding his beloved divine spear at the ready. As light filled the conical lance, it began to glow brightly from tip to base.

“Take this!” Tomoki shouted, unleashing the spear’s power. The beam of light shot straight ahead, piercing through the narrowing gap in the closing gates, resounding with a thunderous roar.

“Nice aim!” Guinevere praised.

“You’re quite the sniper!” Yukinatsu added.

“Good job, onii-chan!” Mora chimed in.

Tomoki grinned to himself, reveling in the cheers from his teammates. Still, he kept his guard up, using his necklace’s detection ability to scan the area ahead.

“Looks like the Limia hero is safe too,” he noted. “Her party’s over there.”

“Hey, you’re right,” Yukinatsu said, confirming with binoculars. “I should make a replica of that necklace next. It’s really handy.”

Tomoki was glad to know that Yukinatsu was feeling safe enough to express her usual interest in research. But he knew he would be the test subject, using the replica for hours on end while Yukinatsu made meticulous notes.

“Maybe some other time,” he replied evasively.

“Have you managed to contact Lily-sama yet?” Guinevere asked. As a member of the royal guard, it was no surprise she was concerned about the princess’s safety.

“No, I keep trying, but there’s too much interference. I wonder if this world even has jamming technology...” Tomoki muttered to himself. Meanwhile, their group quickly caught up to Hibiki’s team. Thanks to Nagi’s flight, they’d reached Hibiki’s group faster than they had escaped.

“Glad to see you’re all safe, Hibiki... -san,” Tomoki greeted, trying to maintain a polite tone. “Your movements seem slow. Did something happen?”

“Aren’t you the slow one?” Hibiki responded with a hint of irritation. “The demon general you were waiting for is here.”

Tomoki's expression froze. "The *demon general*? Behind us? How did they manage to flank us without anyone noticing?"

"And, believe it or not, they're waiting politely for us to form up," Hibiki replied sarcastically. "Hard to believe it's the same enemy who set up that trap, right? Anyway, we're pulling the rear guard back over here. Got it? *Quickly*," she added, emphasizing the word to mock Tomoki's earlier insensitive comment.

"How the hell did they do that?" Tomoki muttered, bewildered.

"Who knows? They must have used some method we're not aware of. Oh, by the way, there's been no contact with the units that were supposed to be behind the demon general. Isn't that something? It seems the demons can jam our communications. Which means there's also a risk they could intercept any telepathic communication. Just great."

"Compromised communications and leaked plans? This is a total disaster," Tomoki grumbled, finally grasping the gravity of the situation. His voice carried a heavy, dark tone.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Hibiki asked, her voice steady.

"What do you mean?" Tomoki snapped back.

"We were supposed to work together if we encountered a demon general, weren't we?" Hibiki's tone was light, and the genuine smile on her face was directed at Tomoki for the first time, but her voice carried an edge.

"The situation's changed!" Tomoki cried, frustration spilling out. "This is the time to cut through the enemy lines and get the hell out of here! If we keep fighting, we're heading straight for a bad ending!"

"'Cut through,' huh...? Fine. You all should retreat. We'll stay and fight. We'll take down the general, and the units that're left will join us. If we could communicate, cooperating to break out would be the best strategy, but... it looks like we've already lost this battle tactically. But... I'm kind of interested in that general."

Despite the dire situation, Hibiki's words sounded almost whimsical, as if she were discussing a dream or fantasy. Tomoki felt a widening gap between their perspectives, noticing for the first time the detached look in Hibiki's eyes.

“And you’re an idiot,” he said, glaring at her.

“Not at all. And I’m not asking for your help, am I? To be honest, you and I don’t make a good team. Your strength lies in midrange firepower, while as a party we’re great at close-quarters combat. We’re better against fewer enemies, while you handle larger groups more efficiently. Even if we’re fighting the same enemy, our approaches are completely different.”

*Not to mention, our attitudes in a lot of ways,* Hibiki silently added to herself.

“So, you’re saying we can’t work together?” Tomoki pressed.

“Just this time, there’s no point,” Hibiki replied firmly. “At least, I don’t see any benefits in teaming up. And honestly, I don’t want to get killed by an ally.”

“Are you sure about this?” Tomoki asked again, now more concerned than angry.

“I am. But I do have one condition. Lead the army, and use your firepower to take out as many enemies ahead as you can. That way, the troops that survived will have a better chance of escaping. We’ll use the path you open to lure the big guy away. It’s a division of roles. Let’s go with that plan this time.”

“Got it. But make sure you keep that demon general occupied.”

“Of course.”

Their conversation ended there, and both parties quickly moved to brief their respective teams. There were a few moments of dissent, voices raised in protest, but eventually, all objections faded, and a determined resolve settled in on both sides.

The next clash between the two forces was imminent.

※ ※ ※

“Tomoki! Iwahashi Tomoki! Wait! Didn’t you hear what I said?” Hibiki shouted in frustration.

“I heard you! I understood everything! The enemy is most vulnerable when our rear guard is slowly retreating! I’ll clear a path, so just shut up and let me do

it!” Tomoki yelled back. He urged Nagi forward, putting more distance between them.

“If you engage before the retreat is complete, it’ll only increase our casualties!” Hibiki called after him. “The enemy’s already prepared; there’s no way we can catch them off guard!”

“Any small opening is enough! We’re on the battlefield; everyone is prepared to die! Hibiki-san, you’re too soft!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! What good does it do to create more chaos for our own troops? How many soldiers do you think will be able to escape through that narrow—”

“Oh, for crying out loud! Enough with the noise! Haven’t you figured it out yet? What’s more valuable: making sure a hero survives or saving a few more soldiers here? We’re special! We were *chosen*! If you want to throw your life away, be my guest. But don’t drag me into your self-righteousness. I’ll take care of Limia as their hero; you can rest easy about that!”

Hibiki and her group weaved through the retreating rear guard, while Tomoki soared on dragonback through the air. Nagi’s speed was impossible to match, and the distance between them widened rapidly. Hibiki could only watch helplessly as Tomoki pulled ahead, leaving nothing but charred remains in his wake.

“What a bastard,” she muttered angrily. “Isn’t a hero supposed to inspire the troops, lead from the front, carry the banner? Prioritizing your own survival over everything else? That’s not something I can accept.”

“But, Hibiki, what Tomoki’s saying does have some logic. If you were lost in this battle, even saving hundreds of soldiers wouldn’t make up for—” Navarre tried.

“Navarre, shut up,” Hibiki snapped. “I don’t want to hear it. Not from you. I still want to think of you as my partner.”

“Hibiki...” Navarre murmured, her voice trailing off.

“I understand. I get that Tomoki’s way of being a hero is one way of doing things. You know, ‘the hero’s job is to survive no matter what.’ But I don’t like

it. Besides, there's a saying, 'There's life in death's door.' If, while we're fighting the general, an opportunity opens up somewhere, we can break through in one go. That's what I'm thinking. It's wishful thinking, I know," Hibiki admitted, though she clung to this slim hope. She didn't want to completely surrender to despair without a fight. She hadn't received any reliable reports yet, so she held onto this little bit of optimism—a trait that showed her modern upbringing.

"It may be drawing the short straw... but someone has to do it, or what's left of our forces might get surrounded by the enemy. If that's the role of a hero, then I understand, truly," Woody said, seeming to have found his resolve in Hibiki's determination.

"I'll do my best. I won't collapse halfway like last time!" Chiya added, filled with renewed motivation as she recalled the fight against the black spider and her earlier failure.

"I'm sorry. The hero I chose is you, Hibiki. I'll stick with you to the end," Navarre declared firmly.

"That's right. I won't be crushed as disgracefully as I was before. And remember, we five managed to push back a calamity once. A mere demon general shouldn't be too much for us," Belda chimed in, his voice full of confidence.

Hibiki could now see Tomoki's party slowing down their overwhelming onslaught against the demon army. Were they waiting for her and her group, or were they just running into trouble? Either way, Hibiki had made up her mind. She would never accept Tomoki's version of heroism.

Putting on extra speed as she ran down the gentle slope, Hibiki spotted a Kingdom of Limia messenger and rushed over to him.

The young messenger was overjoyed at being addressed by the esteemed hero. He stood at attention and saluted her, his face full of admiration. "Y-You're the Hero! We're retreating the entire army like you instructed!" he reported.

"Thank you for your hard work," Hibiki said. "I'm sorry for the constant changes, but I need you to send out one more message to all the unit commanders. Tell them to stop the retreat and quickly reorganize. Tell them

that we'll carve out a path, along with the hero from Gritonia, and they should follow us."

"Of course, but..." The messenger hesitated.

"I know. It's difficult to change tactics so frequently, but, please, I'm counting on you. Also, pass on the same message to the Imperial Army. In a situation like this, it doesn't matter whether it's Limia or Gritonia. We *will* make it through this, no matter what."

"Yes, ma'am! Understood!" The messenger nodded firmly, saluting once again before turning and sprinting off to deliver the orders.

Hibiki took a deep breath and let it out slowly, watching the young man as he ran to spread the new orders. She closed her eyes for a moment, a habit she developed back when she used to compete against formidable opponents in kendo matches.

Then she filled her voice with determination and called out, "Let's go!"

Hibiki's party dashed through the path of corpses Tomoki had carved out. As much as she hated to admit it, the sheer destructive power he wielded was astonishing. There was no way she could have done something like that, at least not in so little time.

With the maneuverability provided by Mora's dragon and its sturdy defense, Tomoki's high firepower, including his divine spear, and the golems mass-produced through Yukinatsu's alchemy, along with her replica army supporting Guinevere's defense, and Tomoki's offense, their assault was unstoppable. They smashed through the barriers erected by the demon forces and plowed forward with far too much firepower—a truly overwhelming display. The barriers set up by regular soldiers were useless against them; only those with equivalent power could hope to stop them. In other words, against these demon soldiers, Tomoki and his team were basically invincible.

As she watched his figure disappear into the distance, Hibiki couldn't help wondering how many on this battlefield would be upset by the fact that Tomoki was creating an escape route solely for his own survival.

※ ※ ※



“This is the last one!”

The well-equipped soldiers standing before the four-armed general were incinerated by the light beams that swept from Tomoki’s enhanced spear. Following on his rider’s attack, Nagi unleashed a breath that sliced through the soldiers trying to close in, like invisible blades of wind cutting through the air.

Any enemy that attempted to grapple with the flying dragon and hinder its movement was promptly dealt with by the golems. The lifeless constructs, showcasing a variety of human and beast shapes, didn’t allowed anyone to get close to Nagi.

“What an inelegant hero we have here. Rampaging like a brat,” the demon general muttered as he untangled his crossed arms and clenched his fists. The purple-skinned giant stood about three meters tall—small for a giant but still towering over most.

His muscled physique and the sheer presence he exuded fit well on someone of his rank—and his calm, deep voice was almost as intimidating as the sight of his four clenched fists.

“I don’t care if I’m inelegant! Only an idiot would fight barehanded in a real battle!” Tomoki shouted, sending out a beam of light as a greeting.

“Hmph!”

The demon general swung one meaty fist, intercepting Tomoki’s attack. The clash dissipated the light, but the demon’s arm was scorched black.

“Guess it won’t be a one-hit victory, huh?” Tomoki said, but his voice had lost none of its confidence. “Whatever. You’re not my problem. I’m out of here. Not that I’d ever lose, but a promise is a promise!”

With that, Tomoki let his eyes leave the general, veering to the left and targeting the units stationed there instead.

“I won’t let you!” the general growled, ready to chase after Tomoki—but something caught his attention. He turned to look at the path Tomoki’s group had taken.

A crescent-shaped wave of red light was racing toward them, almost as if it were chasing after Tomoki and his dragon.

“Oh? This one seems like a warrior. It might be worth using my words,” the general noted with amusement. Casually flinging out another arm, he quickly sent the red attack flying. Standing behind the fading beam was Hibiki, her sword glowing red. So great was the power difference between them that Hibiki’s attack had left the general’s arm unscathed.

“Did I keep you waiting?” Hibiki called as she approached. “I’m sorry if my companion was rude earlier.”

The demon general, Io, didn’t seem to care about the male hero who had already moved on. Instead, he wore a confident, ferocious smile as he patiently awaited Hibiki’s arrival.

“Oh no, he was indeed a hero most typical of the humans,” Io remarked, his tone thick with sarcasm. “He understands the words, but he can’t seem to hold a conversation.”

“Don’t take him as the standard for all humans,” Hibiki said.

“Then prove it, but not with words. With strength.” Io stepped forward; fists raised.

Hibiki met his gaze, bringing her bastard sword up into a ready stance. “Very well. I’m Hibiki Otonashi, hero of the Kingdom of Limia.”

Io’s eyes widened slightly at her introduction, but he didn’t miss a beat. “How polite of you. I’m Io of the demi-gigant race, the general of the third division of the Demon King’s army.”

“Outnumbered or not, I intend to win,” Hibiki declared. “After all, I’ve dealt with calamities before.”

“The spider, was it? I’ve heard the reports. Quite impressive. But make no mistake—it’s not really a matter of being outnumbered. I promise that no one but me will lay a hand on you and your party.”

Hibiki paused, glancing at his burnt limb. “What? You’re still saying that, even after getting an arm toasted by that guy?”

“Oh, this? It won’t slow me down too much,” Io said dismissively. He gave a grunt and tiny cracks appeared on the blackened skin of his arm. He shook it off, and the scorched flesh crumbled away, revealing unmarred flesh underneath.

“Is that... high-speed regeneration?” Hibiki muttered.

“Exactly. Although it’s not as stupidly powerful as that black spider’s. I’m sure it’s not up to your standards.”

“Bringing up that nightmare... And you seem to know quite a lot. You set up all kinds of traps too!”

Hibiki wasn’t sure if demons could blush, but she was pretty sure that’s what Io’s face was doing. “Well, I can’t take all the credit for those,” he said. “A lot of what happened, has happened *to* me. The traps, for instance, were the work of a certain cunning vixen who fancies herself a strategist.”

“Oh, so you’re just passing the blame onto someone else? How convenient,” Hibiki retorted sharply.

“Are you making fun of me? I assure you, I’m not trying to shirk responsibility. Besides, I’m on track to become the hero who repelled tens of thousands of humans. There’s no reason for me to deny myself that honor. As a leader, one can’t always fight purely for personal desire. I was merely stating the facts.”

Io held out a thick finger, showing Hibiki a simple yet elegant ring.

“What? A wedding ring?” Hibiki asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Io chuckled. “No, no, that’s a funny joke, but I’m still a bachelor. This is one of those things that happened to me. I was told to use it when a hero was within range. Both of you are in range now, so this is perfect. Ghjkop kkjjgf.”

The moment the nonsensical phrase left his lips, the ring crumbled away like it was made of dirt.

“What...?” Hibiki gasped as she felt a sudden drain of power. All the enhanced abilities she’d experienced since the ritual of blessings she could feel leaving her body. Even the wolf that had been faithfully guarding her side faded and then disappeared entirely.

“Interesting,” Io remarked, his eyes widening in satisfaction as he watched Horn vanish. “So, it really did work. This might mean we can finally see our path to victory.”

“What did you do?” Hibiki demanded, struggling to keep her voice steady.

“I just took away your blessing,” Io said with a smirk. “It doesn’t last long, but it seems to have been effective. What a wonderful thing.”

“You mean to tell me you canceled out the power of a god with just that ring?!”

“That’s right. Sure, it requires a ridiculous quantity of resources, it’s single-use, and it only works under specific conditions,” Io explained. “But, really, do you think we would just sit back and let ourselves be under a fourfold disadvantage forever? In this battle, our powers haven’t been halved. Sorry to disappoint you, but we’ve already prepared countermeasures against the curse. To think you would assume things would be the same as they were ten years ago—that would be foolish, even for an idiot.”

“Ugh...” Hibiki couldn’t deny the logic in Io’s words. If she were constantly at a fourfold disadvantage, the first thing she would do would be to find a way to neutralize it.

“Now then, Hibiki. Let’s begin!” Suddenly Io’s voice was echoing across the battlefield, filled with an eagerness that was almost infectious. “Show me the power of a hero. Prove to me whether your strength can reach my king!”

Without a word, Hibiki and Navarre charged forward. In a situation where even retreating would be difficult, the life-or-death battle between the demon general and the hero was about to commence.

※ ※ ※

“What’s Hibiki doing down there?!”

Tomoki’s frustrated shout echoed across the battlefield from where he sat atop the flying dragon.

Just then, however, he felt his body become... heavier. His movements felt sluggish, as if his limbs were smothered under a heavy blanket. However, this wasn't the most concerning issue. Far more alarming was the complete lack of response from his spear, boots, and armor.

The necklace and storage ring could still be activated like normal, but everything else seemed inert. The once protective armor now felt like dead weight, and even the snug fit of the underlying composite suit was becoming uncomfortably oppressive.

Almost all of the weapons Tomoki tried summoning from the ring were unresponsive, save for a single slender sword. As someone who rarely engaged in close combat, he found this to be of little use, especially while riding a dragon.

*This has to be the demon general, Tomoki thought. So, that means Hibiki failed to stop him.*

*Is the power of the Goddess being sealed off?! How the hell can a mid-level boss interfere with divine powers?! And what about my Mystic Eyes? If I can't use anything blessed by the Goddess, then... could they be affected too? I need to get out of here, fast!*

Before Tomoki could act on his thoughts, a more pressing realization hit him—if the Goddess's blessing was indeed nullified, then a crucial assumption was now in doubt. As he looked to the sky, panic crept over him.

*No way, no way, no way, no way! Does this mean my immortality is disabled too?!*

The color drained from Tomoki's face.

This was no joke. The only reason he'd agreed to this crazy operation was that—at least under the cover of night—he would be immortal.

Of course, Tomoki couldn't *know* his immortality was gone, but the suspicion was enough. He now had to assume that any stray bullet or random magick attack could kill him.

For the first time in what felt like years, he began to fear death.

*No, I can't stay here—I'll die! But if I retreat now, it might look suspicious... Then again, I've already built up a lot of favor; even if I lose some by withdrawing, I can make up for it once I'm safe. If Nagi dies, I can just find another dragon. I need to pull back, no matter what!*

Tomoki had always distanced himself from death using his immortality, and his confidence on the battlefield was bolstered by his top-tier equipment. Despite his high level, he'd never truly faced death. He had only ever ventured out under the safety of a moonlit night, when his immortality was guaranteed.

“Tomoki, what’s going on?” Guinevere asked.

“Guinevere, the situation’s changed!” Tomoki shouted. “We need to get back to Lily right now!”

“But what about Hibiki and the others? And what about the rest of the Imperial Army... We could still provide some support,” Yukinatsu suggested, concern drawing lines on her face.

“Shut up, Yukinatsu! I have a bad feeling about Lily’s safety. We need to hurry, now! Nagi, move it!” Not that Tomoki cared one bit about Lily’s safety or was feeling any particular premonitions—he was solely focused on his own survival.

“Big brother...” Mora began, but she had no idea what to say. She had never seen him like this before.

She, Yukinatsu, and Guinevere all felt uneasy at Tomoki’s abrupt change, but they’d already committed to following his lead and escaping. They couldn’t bring themselves to defy him now, even if his urgency seemed overblown.

“Hurry! We need to get out of here, now!” Tomoki shouted again.

“Okay, okay. Nagi, we’re going to break through! You’ve got this!” Mora urged, doing her best to keep up with Tomoki’s frantic commands.

“We have no choice; Tomoki’s in no shape to fight right now anyway,” Yukinatsu grumbled. “Guinevere, I’m counting on you. Damn it! I’ll just have to dump all my replicas and golems to cover us!”

“All right!” Guinevere replied, ready to support Tomoki no matter what.

The three companions, still under the lingering influence of Tomoki’s charm, felt compelled to obey him, even if their temporary respite from his control had brought some clarity. The deep-rooted loyalty they’d developed over time held them in place.

While Hibiki and her team continued their fierce battle against Demon General Io, the hero of Gritonia, Tomoki, slipped through enemy lines and retreated back to the Imperial Army’s camp, where he believed Princess Lily would be waiting for him.

Once they cleared the enemy's front lines, they encountered no further resistance. It seemed the Demon King's forces, despite advancing against the allied armies, hadn't yet managed to seize control of the rear. It wasn't long before they encountered a unit that had likely set out from the camp.

"Tomoki-sama, you're safe! Thank goodness!"

Nagi, injured and exhausted, could barely fold his wings as he collapsed onto the ground. Tomoki and his companions dismounted, and Princess Lily rushed to greet the returning hero. She embraced him warmly, her words filled with relief and joy at his safe return.

Overwhelmed by the relief of narrowly escaping death, Tomoki felt himself go limp. Sweat poured from his body, and he couldn't stop trembling.

"Your Highness, please forgive us for this failure!" Guinevere exclaimed, dropping to one knee in shame. They had left for battle promising victory for all but had returned alone. For a knight, this was the ultimate humiliation. She bit her lip in frustration.

"Guinevere, I'll need a report from you. Come to my tent," Lily instructed, her tone serious. "Will someone take care of Mora's dragon? The poor thing looks so weak... Thank you for saving everyone, Mora."

"What? Hey, what about me? Don't I get anything?" Yukinatsu interjected. Tomoki rolled his eyes. Only she could ask that when Lily was in this kind of mood and get away with it.

"Yukinatsu, from the looks of it, you've spent a lot of money on this. But I'm glad you chose your friends over money. If you give me an invoice, I'll cover all of it. So, go ahead and get some rest," Lily reassured her.

"I'm not worried about the money right now," Yukinatsu said. "We need to reconsider our entire strategy. Can you handle that, Lily?" Guinevere nodded in agreement.

"I understand. That's why I came out here. It seems we'll be retreating sooner than expected," Lily responded. "Tomoki-sama, let's go back. Why don't you tell me what happened?"



After taking a quick glance over the battlefield, Lily turned and headed back to the camp, the others falling into step behind her. As they walked, she listened to Guinevere's report, all the while comforting and soothing Tomoki, coaxing him into revealing more about the situation.

*This has turned into a complete defeat, Lily mused, keeping her expression neutral. Now, it's crucial to focus on how we can retreat with minimal losses for the Empire. Fortunately, it seems the Kingdom's hero is still fighting, so we can use their army as a rear guard or a shield. That'll also wear down their strength. It's perfect. Ideally, the Kingdom's hero would die here, which would make things easier after the war... but maybe that's asking too much. At least our hero got back in one piece, and we've learned something about the demons' strategies. That's enough. We never planned to win this battle anyway. So, this isn't too bad. Besides, by now, the Kingdom should be... hehehe.*

"Tomoki-sama, you must have been through so much," Lily said, her voice full of sympathy. "I'm truly sorry for everything you've had to go through because of my inadequate intelligence gathering!"

"It's okay, Lily," Tomoki reassured her, but his voice wavered with uncertainty. "Even Limia didn't know what was going on. But still, maybe I should have teamed up with their hero. If we'd fought together, we might have had a better chance of winning."

"No, absolutely not! The real idiot here is that so-called *hero*, Hibiki. A hero's duty is to stay alive; that's where everyone's hope lies. Dying for some self-satisfaction is nothing but shirking your duty. Tomoki-sama, you're special. Even if it means sacrificing ten thousand soldiers, saving you is a small price to pay. You made the right decision; now I need you to have some confidence in yourself."

"Really? You're right! If I die, it's all for nothing, huh? Thanks, Lily. I'll keep my confidence up and get even stronger!!!"

"That's right, get as strong as you can. I'll always be by your side, helping you however I can."

*If the Goddess's blessing has been suppressed, then this one isn't worth much to us right now. It would be better to find out which magick tools he can handle*

*that are on par with the divine spear proficiency wise. Storing weapons that can't be used in a ring is just a waste of space... What a nuisance. Showing such a disgraceful figure to the soldiers is unacceptable, and the cleanup is going to be a pain. Even with all the favorable conditions and equipment, not to mention the level he's been given, he's still shaking like a scared little kid. The hero the Goddess gave us truly is trash.*

Lily hugged Tomoki once more, but her half-open eyes held a cold light that none of her three companions could see.

*Most of the imperial soldiers who saw Tomoki's disgrace will probably die out there. If any do come back, they'll serve well as test subjects. That'll achieve the same result—keeping them quiet. We're always in need of people for those experiments since the guns still tend to misfire quite a bit. No matter how many we have, it's never enough. As for Stella Fortress, perhaps we should leave it alone for another three months, or even six. Even though it was part of their plan, the fact remains that we pushed to the brink of breaching the fortress gates. With a favorable spin, we could buy that much time.*

Lily quickly organized her thoughts. The battle for Stella Fortress was a failure. Grateful for the Limia hero's willingness to act as a rear guard, the Imperial Army withdrew from the battlefield. Meanwhile, the Kingdom's army, awaiting the return of their hero, held the line, gradually retreating. Gritonia's hero, narrowly escaping the demons' deceitful tactics, apologized to the nation and promised to rise again.

This would be the narrative for this operation. Lily immediately began manipulating information within her army, coordinating with the Kingdom's officers to establish the withdrawal procedures.

Lily's clandestine efforts bore fruit almost instantly; the chaotic lines of communication with the front line helped. The Kingdom's soldiers, having received information directly from the hero and seeing no way it could be false, lamented and praised Hibiki's decision, and willingly accepting the role of the rear guard. Moreover, some of the younger soldiers in certain units, moved by what they heard, sought permission from their superiors to organize a rescue party for Hibiki. Lily, apparently touched by the brave youths' words, gave her blessing amid her tears.

Thus, as dawn broke, the allied forces began their retreat.

※ ※ ※

A few hours later...

“Morning already? They’re really holding out,” Io remarked nonchalantly, his voice echoing across the battlefield.

“When people are cornered, they tap into strength they didn’t know they had!” Hibiki shouted back, dodging Io’s attacks with growing frustration.

“That’s not entirely true. To manifest additional strength when cornered, one must have cultivated potential through proper training,” Io replied calmly. “You’re all exceptional warriors. I see now I greatly misunderstood the concept of a ‘hero.’”

The compliments rolled off his tongue effortlessly. At three meters tall, Io’s massive frame was surprisingly agile, moving with the grace of a seasoned martial artist. His refined movements defied the expectations set by Limia’s intelligence, which had pegged him as a simple brute who relied on raw strength.

Whoever had made that assessment—and given Hibiki the mental picture of a giant wielding axes or clubs in each of his four hands, swinging them wildly—was an idiot.

“Our attacks barely scratch him! This guy is worse than the spider!” Navarre cried out in despair.

True, a few of their initial attacks had grazed his arms, but even those had failed to break his skin. Somehow, it was as if his skin was hardened to deflect their blades. And Io never let them attack the same spot twice.

“Don’t belittle yourself, white woman,” the giant said now, patronizingly. “Your swordplay is remarkable, even if it’s a bit lacking in strength.”

“Oh, you think you’re some kind of martial arts instructor?!” Navarre growled. “Damn it... Ugh!”

Before Navarre could retort further, Belda threw himself into the path of one of Io's swinging arms, attempting to block the massive blow.

"A teacher, you say? That doesn't sound so bad," Io mused. "There aren't many who can withstand my attacks as well as you. How about it? Why not join the demons?"

Io shifted his position in a split second, taking a step that seemed to defy physics. Hibiki could sense but not see the force of magick that swept through the space he'd just been standing in.

"How is he dodging Invisible Wind? Is he reading my incantations?!" she shouted in frustration.

"No," Io responded, his voice steady and authoritative. "Once I understand the magnitude of the magick you're weaving, I can generally predict the attack. Your eyes give away where you're aiming and when you'll unleash it."

His words were grounded in the vast knowledge of a seasoned warrior. It was an advanced prediction based on experience—something only a handful could truly execute.

"Enough! I'm getting through!" Hibiki yelled, her resolve hardening.

"She's going for it!" Navarre shouted.

Hibiki's slashes intensified, each swing of her sword becoming sharper and more aggressive. For a moment, Io was pushed back, though not completely. Hibiki hadn't ascended to the level of the demon general; she'd merely taken a step beyond the expectations Io had initially set for her—a small yet notable surprise for a battle-hardened commander like him.

Hibiki felt her blade bite deeper than before, the sensation of it cutting through muscle and meeting bone. Her sword had sliced halfway through one of Io's arms.

"Impressive," the demon general remarked, his tone still composed. "But how do you plan to get past this next obstacle, hero?"

"What?! It won't—" Hibiki gasped as she tried to pull her sword free. The blade wouldn't budge.

“When I tighten my muscles, the blade can’t be withdrawn,” Io explained, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. “See how well you can move now!”

“!!!”

Hibiki’s eyes widened as she realized what was about to happen. Acting on instinct, she let go of her sword just as Io swung another arm.

A heavy thud resounded as Io’s blow connected, sending Hibiki flying like a stone kicked into the air. Chiya immediately rushed over to her.

“Gaah! Cough... Ugh...” Hibiki groaned, pain coursing through her body as she hit the ground with a resounding *thunk*.

*Ahhh, it hurts... It hurts so much...!* The intense pain clouded all her thoughts. But she did manage to wonder if this was because she’d lost the Goddess’s protection.

*No, she realized, this has nothing to do with her blessing! I was able to move almost the same as before. The real problem is Io—he’s just too strong!*

Desperately trying to keep her sanity in spite of the pain, Hibiki forced herself to think. She focused on her thoughts, clinging to them to pull herself back to clarity.

*My ribs are definitely broken. He punched me... in the stomach? What kind of gentleman punches a woman in the stomach? He deserves some serious payback for that. Ugh, I taste so much blood... It feels like it’s coming from my throat. Well, at least there’s magick here. Normally, I wouldn’t be able to eat anything tonight, but with healing magick, I can probably go straight for a steak. Lucky me.*

Hibiki let her thoughts wander aimlessly in an attempt to distract herself from the pain. She had already begun cast healing magick on herself—so had Chiya, in fact—and gradually, the double healing magick began to set things right inside her body.

Soon, Hibiki managed to stand up, albeit rather unsteadily.

“You let go of your sword at the last moment and even managed to put up a partial barrier? I thought I would crush you to pieces with that blow, but you

handled it remarkably well. Your instincts are truly impressive,” Io praised, his voice calm and even.

“What if you’d made it so I couldn’t have children anymore?” Hibiki shot back. “And seriously, you’re just *gross*, talking about smashing someone to pieces. No thanks!”

“A lively girl, indeed!” Io tossed Hibiki’s sword to her. “Here, take this thing back. You might want to consider finding a better one, though. This one isn’t suited to your skills.”

Hibiki caught the weapon easily, noticing as she did that Io’s previously injured arm was now completely healed.

“I’ll take your advice tomorrow,” she replied after a moment, trying to keep her tone steady despite the casual threat in his voice.

“Tomorrow? That assumes you’ll all still have your lives by then... and have somewhere to go back to. Neither seems likely.”

“What?!” Hibiki and her team all widened their eyes at his words, taken aback.

“Oh, you’re surprised, aren’t you? By now, a separate force has probably begun its march toward the capital of Limia,” Io continued nonchalantly.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Belda cut in. “There’s no way the capital would fall to a single force!”

The idea that Limia, one of the twin pillars standing against the demon race, could be so easily breached was unthinkable. Despite Belda’s words, however, he was visibly shaken to learn that his homeland was on the brink of war.

“True. The force is only about two thousand strong, certainly not enough to conquer a capital of a major kingdom under normal circumstances,” Io said with a sympathetic sigh. Although he seemed to agree with Belda’s assessment, his comportment was designed to stir doubt and unease.

“What did you do?” Woody demanded. His family was from the capital, and the mere thought of them being caught in the cross fire was enough to send his

mind reeling. He couldn't bear the idea of them being anywhere near the chaos of battle.

"Oh, nothing much. Just that a formidable ally is accompanying them. A force that could easily overpower *me*."

"Is the Demon King's army some kind of box of surprises?" Hibiki shot back. "If there were people like you all over the place, humans would have been wiped out long ago."

Io's response left no room for levity. "Brave hero, understand that we're just as desperate. Now, let's end this. I will not forget your courage. To think that five humans could defeat the Black Spider of Calamity, and all survive—it seems your strength is genuine. My friend and I once fought it off together, but I lost him in the process. A mistake of youth... One I still regret."

*What?!*

So, rather than responding directly to Hibiki's words, Io had simply declared the end of this battle and mentioned that Hibiki's party wasn't the only one with experience in defeating the Black Spider of Calamity. This revelation—that the feat they had clung to as a symbol of their strength wasn't unique—on top of the fact that Limia was about to be invaded was meant to unnerve them before he dealt his final blow.

And it worked. Shock spread like wildfire through Hibiki's party, shivers running down their spines.

*I was naive... I thought that ten times the effort would always yield ten times the result. But this is life and death. It's a game of hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of times the effort... I should've realized. I should've...!*

In the face of such an overwhelmingly unfavorable situation, what could they possibly do?

Defeating Io and saving the capital—it was easy to see that it was impossible. Completely, unquestionably impossible. They simply didn't have the power. It was actually just the kind of failure Hibiki had once sought. She'd always wanted to push herself to her limits, if only to find them. Knowing this was one thing; accepting it was another.

Hibiki's sweat-soaked hair clung annoyingly to her face. The prospect of losing after giving everything, of dying on the battlefield—this was something she had once believed she could accept. But she was beginning to realize what it truly meant to be defeated.

The death of Hibiki Otonashi, a hero and symbol of hope—what would it mean? Her defeat wasn't just about her anymore.

There were battles where losing was simply not an option. Hibiki, who had grown up in a peaceful country, who had always viewed these conflicts as something distant and removed from her reality, was feeling a harsh slap of reality. Her mindset up to now would no longer work; she needed to change.

But the sense of defeat Hibiki felt was far greater than when she had fought the Black Spider of Calamity. Now, even though her party was still in fighting condition, she couldn't shake the feeling that they had no chance of winning. Her spirit was on the verge of breaking.

“!!!”

In the distance, in the direction of Limia's capital, a sudden burst of light appeared.

A golden ray burst through the heavens, burning a path through clouds and piercing the ground with an immense display of magical power. Though it happened far in the distance, the spectacle was visible even from where Hibiki's party stood. The sheer magnitude of its magical energy was impossible to gauge from there, but the blinding column of light—it was unmistakably golden.

Something had happened. And since there was no way things could get worse, Hibiki had to believe they were about to get better.

Io's exclamation of surprise confirmed her hopes.

“What... What is that?!” the demon general exclaimed. *So, he didn't see this coming...*

“Maybe that's our secret weapon, huh? Everyone, let's struggle just a little longer!” Hibiki urged her team.

“I'm with you!” Navarre shouted.



“Of course!” Belda added.

“My magick isn’t spent yet!” Woody affirmed.

“I’ll do my best!” Chiya chimed in.

Not that any of them were naive enough to actually think that this mysterious golden light would be a miraculous turnaround. But Hibiki’s rallying cry filled her party with renewed determination. Even in their most desperate moment, they wouldn’t give up—that was the greatest strength of Limia’s hero and her companions.

*“Woody, my apologies. May I have a word?”*

*“What is it, Navarre-dono?”*

Navarre’s telepathic communication caught Woody by surprise; he could count on one hand the number of times they had exchanged private words.

*“I think I might have a way to break through this situation.”*

*“Really?! And I assume you’ll need my help?”*

*“Yes. I... I can’t ask Chiya for this.”*

*“I’m listening.”*

*“Well, this enemy is formidable, and all I’ve been able to do is add a few more strikes. My attacks just aren’t strong enough. I’ve looked for stronger weapons, but you can see how that’s turned out.”*

Even as Navarre continued to dodge Io’s relentless assault and strike back at vulnerable points, her words revealed a hint of self-doubt.

*“It seems pointless to make assumptions like that based solely on this demon general,”* Woody countered.

*“No, I understand my own limits. But it appears that the weapons I found after much deliberation might just come in handy.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

Thankfully, Woody and Navarre had sufficient skill in both support and offensive magick to continue their telepathic conversation without losing focus on the battle.

*“Ah, I’ve found a couple of relics that can dramatically boost our power—once. One can greatly enhance our strength, and the other can deliver an overwhelmingly powerful attack. The downside is that they can only be used once.”*

*“Navarre-dono, that sounds...”*

*“You’re a mage, so you might know of them. The Rose Sign and the Death Reward. They require quite a bit of magical energy to activate—which I can’t supply—but you certainly can.”*

*“Absolutely not. Hibiki would never approve of those.”*

*“I’m well aware that Hibiki wouldn’t approve. But can’t you see? We can’t afford to let a hero fall here. In a way, Tomoki’s decision was more mature than Hibiki’s.”*

*“Guh! That... may be true...”*

Hibiki wasn’t just valuable for her combat abilities; her charisma, her ideas, and the flashes of insight she often provided were all invaluable to the kingdom.

*“So, please, help me save Hibiki. You want to see your family again, too, don’t you? Alive and well?”*

*“That’s... That’s not fair, Navarre-dono. All right, which one do you intend to use?”*

*“Thank you! I plan to use both. I’ll fight to the limit with the Rose Sign and then finish with the Death Reward.”*

*“Both... You’re that determined... All right, I’ll help you with all my power. At your signal, I’ll gather everyone, and we’ll break through their lines so fast we’ll leave them no time to react.”*

*“You already know my final request. I’m truly... grateful.”*

Navarre took advantage of a brief moment while dodging a strike from the giant to fall back from the front line, retreating to a position just behind Belda.

*“Sorry, Hibiki, Belda. I’ve come up with a plan. Do you mind holding the line for a bit?”* Navarre asked.

“Navarre! If you’re telling us to handle this monster with just the two of us, you better be damn confident in that plan of yours!” Hibiki replied.

“You’re such a demon—no, you’re a real monster!” Belda shouted.

Naturally, complaints poured out immediately, but their expressions were filled with anticipation, not genuine dissent. It was a welcome relief from the heat of battle, and it made Navarre smile.

“Just for a moment, I promise!”

Navarre fell back to where Woody and Chiya were stationed as the rearguard. Woody’s face was tense with resolve, while Chiya’s eyes shone with pure determination. Seeing their expressions, Navarre smiled once again.

“Woody, I’m counting on you,” she told him. From her waist pouch, she pulled out a small, earth-colored object about the size of a coin. It resembled a miniature version of what was known as the Desert Rose.

Next, Navarre pulled out a single talisman, its thick fabric etched with intricate patterns. Woody looked at the two items, furrowed his brow, and let out a deep sigh. He could tell that these were no fakes; they were precisely the items Navarre had mentioned earlier.

“U-Um! What should I do?” Chiya asked, still struggling to catch up with the situation. She glanced between the two of them, seeking instructions.

Though still young, Chiya had grown considerably. Even facing a giant enemy, she was doing impressively well at keeping her composure and maintaining conversation. She had cut her hair short for practicality, learned swordsmanship from Navarre, and studied magick under Woody. Inspired by her admiration for Hibiki, whom she saw as an older sister, Chiya had been doing her best to grow stronger, eager to continue walking alongside her.

“Chiya-chan, it’s fine. You just focus on keeping those two—”

“No. Chiya, give Navarre-dono your full support. Use a powerful enchantment that won’t need to be recast for a while,” Woody interjected.

“A-All right!!!” Chiya responded, her voice filled with determination.

“Woody...” Navarre began.

“So, all that’s left is the Rose Sign. How are you going to hide the talisman?” Woody asked.

“I’ll wrap it around my hilt,” Navarre replied.

“Then I’ll secure it for you. Do you remember the activation key?” Woody questioned.

“That’s not something to joke about. Of course I remember,” Navarre replied, her smile shifting into a wry grin.

“I wasn’t joking. If you’re heading into a life-or-death battle, you should be prepared for anything.”

Magical energy flowed from Woody’s hands, causing the earth-colored item in Navarre’s grip to melt into a liquid before being absorbed into her body. Chiya quickly finished casting her support magick, imbuing Navarre with additional strength.

Navarre felt her body surge with power, her shoulders trembling from the overwhelming force. At first, she thought it was merely Chiya’s enchantment taking effect. But as the violent strength continued to build uncontrollably, she realized it was much more than that.

“Activation confirmed. Let’s begin,” Woody announced in a formal, clipped tone. But his words were unnecessary; Navarre’s eyes were already locked onto the battlefield and focused intently on Io.

The white strands of her hair fluttered in the wind, revealing the side of her neck where a crimson flower-shaped mark had formed.

“The Rose Sign... I wish I didn’t have to see it on someone close,” Woody muttered.

“Woody, this is what I want. You don’t need to look at me like that. Now... I’m off!” Navarre announced as she charged forward. Her entire body glowed faintly, beautifully. As Woody watched her go, tears moistened the corners of his eyes.

“Um, what was the plan again?” Chiya asked.

“It’s like preparing to use a finishing move,” Woody explained.

“Wow! I didn’t know Navarre could use a move like that!!!”

Woody paused in preparing his next spell to glance up at the sky. “Yes... but it’s only for this one time,” he whispered, his voice so quiet it melted into the darkness.

※ ※ ※

“What... What is this?!”

Navarre, who had fallen back just moments ago, now surged forward, cloaked in a shimmering aura. She deftly dodged an attack Io had thrown at her to keep her at bay, moving with newfound speed. As she dashed by, her sword flashed and sliced into Io’s side.

The giant’s abdominal muscles tensed, trying to deflect the blow as they had countless times before. But this time, the strike cut clean through. Blood spurted from the wound.

“It cuts!” Navarre exclaimed.

“Navarre, what kind of magick is that? I’m going to head back and get some too!” Hibiki shouted, already moving to retreat.

“Haha, Hibiki, that won’t work. This power requires a special catalyst! Just stay back and provide support!”

“Ugh, if you have a trick like that up your sleeve, use it sooner! And it’s all sparkly and kinda pretty too!”

“Let’s keep going, Io!”

From the outset, Navarre’s speed far outclassed Io’s. Though Io’s fighting style relied on masterful body techniques and utilizing his hardened muscles, he couldn’t completely avoid his opponent, who was smaller, faster, and now significantly stronger. With every strike that connected, Navarre relentlessly pressed her advantage, slashing at Io without pause.

Io was too busy with Navarre’s assaults to direct any attacks toward Hibiki, which meant the hero could strike freely. Though Io tried to pursue Navarre,

her speed left him frustrated, constantly evading his reach and cutting him down time and time again.

The wounds Navarre inflicted on the demon general were deepening, though they weren't fatal. The first gash on Io's side had already healed, but Navarre figured it might still be possible to weaken him through blood loss. Hibiki had learned from her earlier mistake and was now focusing on two-handed slashes that avoided getting caught in muscle.

However, amid this flurry of battle, the knight of their party stood still, a stunned expression on his face as he watched the unfolding events.

"Is that... the Rose Sign? No way! Why would she... How could she...?" Belda turned back to look at Woody. Knowing Belda's true identity as a prince, Woody could only avert his eyes, avoiding the accusatory look Belda directed his way. No one else on the battlefield knew about Belda's royal lineage.

That lineage gave Belda access to knowledge that an average person wouldn't have—knowledge that allowed him to understand the transformation Navarre was undergoing.

### *The Rose Sign.*

To most, it appeared as a simple piece of fired clay about the size of a coin. In truth, however, it was a potent magical item. Upon activation, a crimson rose-shaped mark appeared on the user's neck. Its effects were straightforward but dire. It drew upon the very essence of life, consuming it in exchange for immense power. This vital force, which normally depleted slowly over a person's lifetime, never to be replenished, was devoured greedily by the item, granting the user power far beyond their natural limits.

The effects of the Rose Sign lasted until the user died—and that never took long. It could be as short as a few minutes or, at most, around half an hour. In exchange for this surge of unimaginable power, the user's fate was sealed—they would die.

"That thing... you call it a tactic? Navarre, what have you done...?" Belda knew that a pure swordswoman like Navarre wouldn't be able to activate such an artifact on her own. He quickly deduced that someone had helped her—likely Woody or Chiya.

*It must have been Woody. Chiya wouldn't be acting so gung ho about it if she'd been involved. That fool... Does he think he's doing this to protect Hibiki-dono and me?*

Indeed, the situation was dire. For the party to get through it, it was clear that someone would have to make a sacrifice. But forcing one person to shoulder all the responsibility and die for it was something Belda could never accept. As a knight (albeit one in disguise), he hadn't yet embraced the royal philosophy of sacrificing the few for the greater good.

Unfortunately, the effects of the Rose Sign were impossible to ignore. The demon general, who'd had the humans on the ropes just moments before, was now on the defensive. The Rose Sign was no joke; there were even tales of past wielders using it to overcome the fourfold blessing and win duels.

"Navarre! No, don't— Watch out!" Hibiki shouted, but her warning came a second too late.

Or had Navarre heard Hibiki's warning in time? Leaping into the air, she swung her sword straight down, aiming for the giant's arm. Her blade bit deep, halfway into Io's arm, and then stopped.

"Got you!" Io tightened his arm muscles and prepared a brutal uppercut with one of his other hands.

"Not yet!" Navarre shouted, determination blazing in her eyes. She placed her left hand on the back of the sword she was holding with her right, pushing down with all her weight.

The sword surged forward with the additional force, severing the bone and cutting through the rest of the flesh.

Then, just as her opponent's punch rose toward her, Navarre did something unexpected. She placed her foot on Io's fist, using the force of his attack to propel herself away.

Io, now missing an arm, neither screamed in pain nor stopped his attack. However, Navarre could see the sweat pouring down his face, and she even saw the demon general grimace slightly as he caught a glimpse of his severed limb on the ground. This was the most blood anyone had seen from him yet.

“Impressive... You’re terrifying, white woman... Navarre, right?” Io’s tone carried a mix of respect and annoyance. “You knew my attack was coming, yet you still went for my arm so greedily. And, to top it off, you even used my punch to mitigate the blow. You truly are a demon with the sword.”

“Even the demon general calls me a demon, huh? Not bad at all. I’ve figured out how to cut off your arms. And if I can take out your defensive ones, I’ll have a clear shot at your neck.” Navarre grinned confidently as she flicked the blood off her sword.

The blade now shimmered with a faint glow, and the white aura emanating from her body grew brighter and more intense. The radiant aura seemed to disintegrate at the edges, like scattered scales turning to dust and drifting away.

“So, there are techniques in the world of humans that I’m unfamiliar with. I must admit, I’m genuinely surprised,” Io admitted.

“Oh, believe me, I’m just as surprised,” Navarre replied, but her tone was cold. “Even after all this, I can’t get the better of you. Your strength is something else. Truly worthy of a giant with four arms—you’re probably one of your kind’s geniuses, aren’t you?”

“I... I’m just an ordinary demi-gigant with two arms,” Io replied, his tone shifting to something more serious. “The arm you cut off wasn’t mine originally.”

Navarre’s expression hardened as Io continued.

“When I was attacked by the spider, I couldn’t save my best friend. After we drove it away, I took two of its remaining arms and grafted them onto myself. It took a long time for them to work properly.”

“I see. My apologies. But this ends *now*. I still have to deal with that vixen and whoever else is here. Out of the four demon generals, you must be the weakest. I can’t afford to waste any more time.”

The light emanating from Navarre’s body had reached its peak and was now starting to wane. Whether she was aware of that fact or not, she resumed her attack.



“The weakest? Hm, you humans have some strange preconceived notions,” Io said with a frown. “Why would we send the weakest general to the front lines first? In battle, I’m the *strongest* of the demon generals. None of them can defeat me in a one-on-one fight.”

Navarre’s fierce assault was now in full swing, but Io’s defense, which focused on hardening specific muscles of his body, minimized the damage. Although blood spurted from various wounds, it was evident that Io was regaining his footing.

Navarre was undeterred by his words. “That’s good news! If we can defeat you, we’ll make significant progress!”

She pressed on, fueled with determination to take down Demon General Io. Her grip on her sword tightened, and even as she evaded the next barrage of punches, she gradually shifted her position to create the perfect distance for a decisive blow.

Finally, Navarre executed a step-back, twisting her body away from Io. She could feel that her movements were being anticipated, as if she were following his lead in a rehearsed dance, and she didn’t like it.

Belda watched the exchange with a mix of admiration and anxiety. But suddenly he had a sinking feeling that he knew what Io was doing—and Navarre was unaware of the impending danger. His instincts had been honed by countless battles where he often found himself on the defensive, and they were rarely wrong.

Navarre’s decision to retreat was exactly what Io had anticipated. He was prepared for it.

“A kick?!” Navarre exclaimed, eyes widening.

Yes, Io had added kicks to his repertoire. His kicks—which seemed impossibly fast for the demon general’s large frame—had a longer reach than his punches, which meant that Navarre was suddenly back within range. Dodging was impossible.

“You shouldn’t let your guard down!” Io shouted, his voice booming.

“No kidding!” Navarre exclaimed, bracing herself.

Suddenly, a shadow darted in from the side, colliding with Io's kick.

It was Belda, who'd moved in just in time. The attack would have been too dangerous to block head-on, but by attacking Io's kicking leg from the side, Belda managed to deflect it just enough to alter its course. It was a wise choice.

The unexpected interference caused Io's kick to veer off-target, throwing his entire body off-balance.

Navarre's eyes gleamed as she saw the opportunity to strike. "Now I've got you!" she shouted.

Before Io's leg could recover from the kick, Navarre closed in. She moved like a dancer, graceful and precise, still bathed in shimmering light.

Io, having accurately read Navarre's aim, left one hand defending her attack while the other two arms moved to guard his neck.

"You're not stopping me! And you can't counterattack now, can you?!" Hibiki yelled as she charged in, slashing at one of Io's guarding arms with all her might and forcing it down. She didn't manage to cut it off, but she did reduce the number of arms protecting Io's neck by one.

"Thanks, Hibiki!" Navarre shouted, her focus unwavering.

Navarre slipped past Io's remaining arm, her sword driving toward Io's neck.

"Gah!" Io grunted as Navarre's sword thrust forward. She couldn't decapitate the demon general—the best she could manage was a thrust. But it was an extremely effective thrust, piercing cleanly through Io's neck.

The white glow that had enveloped Navarre's sword was now only thinly protecting her body. With the last of her strength, the white swordswoman tried to slice through Io's neck sideways. But nothing happened.

The sword that had pierced Io's neck didn't budge an inch.

"Impressive... I didn't expect you all to be this capable," the demi-gigant admitted, his voice filled with reluctant respect. "I have to apologize for underestimating you."

"Y-You... That body of yours..." Navarre stuttered, eyes widening in shock.

Io's pale purple skin had turned jet black.

"I never imagined I'd meet someone in this battle who would force me to show my true strength," Io said, his voice suddenly deep and dark.

Navarre felt a chill run down her spine at the words of the now black-skinned giant. With both hands, she tried to pull her sword from Io's throat, wrenching it sideways. The blade snapped. Ignoring this, she signaled Hibiki and Belda with her eyes, and they all put distance between themselves and Io. There would be no pursuit.

The giant stood up, broken sword still lodged in his neck.

"You've got to be kidding..." Hibiki muttered, trying desperately to keep her voice steady. "Is this phase two of the battle or something?" Their opponent had already been too powerful for them to handle. And now he was getting even stronger. What could they do but despair?

"Impossible..." Belda shook his head in frustration. "You're telling me Io wasn't fighting at full strength against Navarre even in that state?"

"My apolog—" Io began calmly, taking a defensive stance.

"Uwaaaaaagh!!!" Navarre's scream echoed across the battlefield, drowning out Io's words.

Startled back to his senses, Woody quickly began deploying the spell he'd prepared.

"Chiya, rapid movement! Cover us!" Woody shouted.

"Y-Yes!" Chiya replied. She brought her outstretched hand back and clenched it tightly, her eyes locking onto Hibiki and Belda. Navarre was not in her sight.

"Wha—"

"Huh?!"

Both Hibiki and Belda were pulled toward Woody as if yanked by an invisible force.

Woody closed his eyes, bracing himself. Even if the enemy had gone off script, he was still prepared to face the future he and Navarre had discussed.

His eyes flashed wide open, focused only on the path that Gritonia's hero had taken. Though some soldiers had returned and were blocking the way, it was still the least fortified spot.

He raised his staff.

"Hey, Woody?" Hibiki called out, suddenly concerned.

Woody ignored her. Instead, he activated his spell, using Chiya's support to advance at blinding speed across the battlefield, making their escape.

"W-Wait, Woody-san! Navarre-san is still back there!" Chiya shouted in panic.

"Chiya, whatever you do, don't stop supporting us!" Woody called, not turning back.

"Woody! What are you doing?!" Belda cried out, confused and angry.

"Belda-sama, I need you to hold the hero back. Just for a moment," Woody instructed.

Heedless of the distressed cries of his comrades, Woody put all his strength into his magick. He would keep his promise to Navarre and lead them out of the combat zone, if it was the last thing he did. The gentle green area of magick he created enveloped the party, and any demon soldiers who touched it were cut down, collapsing with screams of agony.

Even as they regrouped with the kingdom's remaining forces that had come forward to meet Hibiki, Woody's spell carried its powerful momentum halfway through them. The moment the spell dissipated, Woody lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground.

Meanwhile...

Understanding the meaning behind Navarre's scream, Io ordered a pursuit. But those who tried to follow the party, which was now retreating at an incredible speed, were mercilessly sliced to pieces. The arrows they fired were broken, and their spells were evaded and blocked.

"Woody-dono, I can't thank you enough," Navarre murmured.

"Was this your plan all along?" Io asked, his face contorted with frustration as he faced the remaining human woman in front of him.

“Yes, that’s right. My trump card is a bit too dangerous,” Navarre replied, holding up her broken sword. The light that had once enveloped her body was now just a faint, flickering remnant.

“You don’t seem capable of fighting anymore, yet you still wish to continue?” Io’s words hung in the air like a sigh.

“Of course,” came Navarre’s reply. “I still have more to give!” Her eyes burned even brighter as she clutched the broken sword and sprinted toward Io.

“Are you seeking a glorious death?” the demon general asked.

“I was always destined to die worthlessly and without mercy on the battlefield!!! But now, I get to choose where I die. I get to find meaning in my death, and, most importantly, I can leave behind memories with my best friends! This is more than a mere swordswoman like me could have ever hoped for!!!”

“What?!” Io gasped. The last thing he’d expected was for Navarre to run straight into his outstretched fist—but that’s exactly what happened.

To anyone watching, it was clear that this was a fatal blow. With a demigigant’s fist protruding from her back, what more could Navarre possibly do?

The woman coughed up blood, but a faint smile formed at the corner of her lips.

“Come forth, Death Reward,” she whispered.

“What?!” Io exclaimed again, eyes widening in shock.

“Hibiki... Thank you...” Navarre murmured, her voice barely audible. Even as the light of life faded from her eyes, her face remained locked in a serene smile. Io would never forget her final expression.

Navarre’s last words, too, had reached Io’s ears. But there was nothing he could do to stop what was coming.

Suddenly, blue flames spread around them, filling his vision in an instant. The flames began to contract, surrounding both Navarre and Io and turning everything they touched to ash. The color was not the vivid blue of a clear sky. Instead, it was a murky, dark azure, like the sky after twilight.

“What is this? What is this?!” Io shouted, but then realization struck him. This was a form of sacrificial magick, one that used the caster’s life as fuel. Because Navarre was a swordswoman—and the two magick users were no longer in play—Io had dismissed the possibility of her using magick.

The blue flames, so dense they looked like a solid wall, enveloped Navarre’s corpse and the black-skinned giant. Then they condensed further, drawing in tightly as if they would burst at any moment. The only sound in the area was Io’s desperate scream, echoing against the walls of fire. As if responding to his increasingly frantic cries, the blue flames suddenly shifted. They brightened intensely, and in the next moment, unleashed a massive explosion that engulfed not only the surrounding demons but also the humans attempting to retreat.

※ ※ ※

For a moment, all that could be seen on the battlefield was flame, and all that could be heard were echoes of the explosion. When both had faded, only a single black mass remained on the charred ground. It was what used to be Io.

His melted body, crouched as if huddling, now resembled a large stone. From nowhere, a blue-skinned woman appeared and touched the stone. She looked like a demon, but unlike most of her kind, she lacked horns. Her slender figure was clad in a provocative outfit that barely covered the essentials.

She gazed at the blackened mass with a bored expression.

“Io, get up. You’re not dead, are you?” she demanded impatiently.

“...”

“We still have to repair the Abyss, so hurry up. Even if it was a perfectly executed explosion, we can’t just leave it like this. Come on, get up!”

The demon woman kicked the black stone. She was irritated, but she clearly had no doubt about the demon general’s survival. The scene Hibiki had witnessed earlier, where Io’s burned arm regenerated before her eyes, now replayed itself across his entire body.

“He really did it this time,” the demi-gigant muttered as his form slowly reconstituted itself.

“So, you’re still alive. Killing you is quite a chore,” the woman sighed. “Let’s head back. We have a lot to report.”

“You go ahead,” Io replied flatly.

The demon woman’s face twisted into a frown of displeasure. Her next words came out cold. “Fine. Walk back yourself. I came all this way to pick you up, and this is how you repay me.”

“Navarre, was it? I’ll remember that name,” Io said quietly, staring thoughtfully at his arm that had pierced the human woman. There was no trace of her left—no body, no sword, no armor. Everything had turned to dust.

The woman, who had been watching Io in silence for a moment, spoke up again, “Oh, by the way, the blitz operation against the Kingdom of Limia was a failure.”

“What?!” The demon general’s voice rose in anger. While Navarre’s actions had been unforeseen, he had assumed that the overall operation had been progressing smoothly. To hear that the most reliable part of the plan had failed? That left him shocked.

“While you were lying around being an ugly rock, a few unexpected things happened,” the demon woman explained. “So, they failed. I’ll fill you in later with what I know.”

“Those monsters *failed*?”

“Yes. Right now, they’re weakened to the point where you and I could kill them. I wish I’d been there to see what happened.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“You never know what’s going to happen in this world, right? I mean, even I didn’t find this amusing in the end. If things were going to turn out like this, I should have just killed the Hero of Gritonia when I had the chance. Thanks to that ring’s effect, she and all the heroes turned into weaklings all of a sudden.”

With that, she turned and flew back alone to Stella Fortress.

Dragging his body, Io sent out orders to his soldiers to deal with the remaining hyuman forces, then followed the woman back to the fortress. Thus, the battle for Stella Fortress came to an end, leaving deep scars on the hyumans.

The world, once again, began to stir.



# Tsukimichi

## Chapter 4

“Uooryaaaaa!!!” I roared, pouring all the magical energy I could muster into the attack. I released it directly ahead, without any incantation.

“What the—?!” Sofia and Lancer exclaimed simultaneously.

The raw magical energy, though not formed into a proper spell, surged forward in a powerful shock wave. Despite its immense volume, the energy wasn’t very potent, but it was more than enough to send them flying. *The best part about using raw magick is you don’t have to think about it. You just unleash it.*

*Perfect,* I thought with satisfaction as both Sofia and Lancer were blasted away by the sheer force of the magick.

*Heh, “weakened”? That was just what you assumed. The future doesn’t always play out the way you think.*

Both the wall of blades—likely created by Lancer—and the glittering swords dispersed into nothingness, shattered by the blast. The ground around me and in front of me was riddled with cracks and holes, and my vision was quickly obscured by a cloud of dust.

*If they were opponents on par with the humans I’ve fought before, I’d use this chance to escape.* But these two, especially Sofia, were enigmas. I needed to be sure they couldn’t counterattack before opening a gate to the Demiplane.

Still...

It felt like a deep stretch after waking up or a good yoga session. A warm, pleasant sensation spread through my body. Even my spirits were lifted somewhat.

*Maybe it's because I've taken off the rings and gone back to my natural state after so long...* Although a considerable amount of my magical power was being drained by my coat, I could release vastly more magick than before—and my control over it had improved too. *Though considering my maximum capacity, it's still not quite there yet.*

*I can't afford to misunderstand. I don't have the skills to fight those two in close quarters.* Even if I could protect myself with enhanced defense, it would be pointless if I couldn't escape. Now that I knew they were a strange combination of a dragon slayer and a Greater Dragon, I absolutely could not bring them into the Demiplane.

*Acting on the exhilaration I feel would be out of the question.*

It was clear what I had to do: *I'll bombard them from a distance! I'll neutralize the two of them, or, worst-case scenario, kill them before making my escape!*

My left hand was useless now, its sickening color worsening before my eyes.

*I can use it to cast spells but not much else.* Even just pointing it in the right direction helped me visualize the spells better. *OK, my left hand is now dedicated to magick.* Meanwhile, I held an awkward short sword in my right hand, with a cord hanging from the hilt. Considering the situation, I realized I should have equipped it sooner.

*It's purely a lack of experience.*

This weapon was called an uchine.

I'd had it made by a dwarf because I'd felt uneasy relying solely on the short sword I'd used until now. It was good that it had ended up being ready before our journey to Rotsgard.

Actually, I'd used this weapon before, back in my original world. Munakata-sensei had taught me the basics, so I found that I could handle the short sword no problem, even when I fought Mio.

The uchine was a versatile weapon: a short sword for close combat, a weighted chain for midrange, and throwable as a dart for long-range. However, it had its fair share of limitations, which is why it was often overlooked as a primary weapon. Until sensei had told me about it as an alternative for archers when in melee combat (apparently some loved it because it could be attached to the end of a bow, like a spear), I hadn't even known it had existed.

Unfortunately, I was fresh out of bows, so that was irrelevant. Besides, I had only passed the tests for using it as a short sword or for throwing. Swinging it around by the cord was so completely out of my skill set; it would have just been asking for an injury.

*I think the knife techniques are mixed into the way I was taught to handle the uchine because sensei combined it with his own unique style.*

There were times during our training when sensei seemed to be reliving his glory days on the battlefield when he'd been on duty. Luckily, I had never been dragged overseas to do so, and as much as I respected my mentor, I'd have politely declined any invitation to join him. *No, I definitely would have.*

Still, there was no way I could match those two in a close-quarters fight. My eldwar armor had managed to block that sword, and while I didn't think my weapon was inferior, my skill certainly was. And that Sofia... she was something else. Performing a downward slash after splitting a helmet midair was unbelievable, even for a stunt. I was starting to think she was some kind of chimera, combining hyuman and feline traits—except this one was far beyond the size of a domesticated pet and much wilder.

*At the very least, I need to use this weapon to block one of their attacks.* Better the uchine than my arm. If I played to the strengths of the uchine, I just might be able to throw them off-balance.

I decided to keep it as a last resort.

I took my stance, as if I were about to shoot an arrow. The beauty of magick was that I could use it without having to put away the uchine in my right hand.

This wasn't like the amateurish shot I had set up earlier. This was going to be a perfect strike.

*That's right. When I put some concentration into a bullet, it's a whole different story in terms of power.*

*If they think they can deflect it, let them try.*

*If they think they can cut it down, let them see what they're up against.*

*The speed and power won't be the same as before!*

Even with the dust cloud obscuring visibility, my sensory field told me their exact positions.

*All right.*

I wasn't going to wait for them to regain their footing. *Sofia first! If you could stay down for good, that would be great!*

I focused on the bullet, sending my intent to hit right to its core. Immediately after I released it, the next bullet was ready to be fired like an arrow. I channeled plenty of magick through it and, imagining releasing my grip on the right hand, let it fly. This one was aimed at Lancer.

Fire was my element of choice. Since the bullet would explode on impact, I figured it might at least cause a momentary stun. Despite the dust from my magical wave still clouding the field, I saw through my sensory field that Sofia sidestepped sharply.

Just like Lancer earlier, it seemed she didn't care about the damage this might cause to the soldiers behind her.

*But that's pointless.*

The Bridt that I built with the image of hitting my target would land just like any arrow I shot—guaranteed to hit its mark. Even if it was blocked, even if its trajectory had to bend away from a straight line. The precision was far superior to any basic homing mechanism that only tracked its target loosely.

*If this works on Tomoe and Mio, why wouldn't it work on you?!*

And because it wasn't a physical projectile, its homing ability was extremely high. The Bridt chased after Sofia, not slowing down but speeding up as it closed in on her jumping away.

To be honest, I still found myself baffled by the Bridt's ability to change direction and accelerate to hit its target; it just seemed to work the same way my arrows did. There wasn't any clear logic to it. *Magick is still a big unknown for me*, I realized.

Sofia slashed at the Bridt with her oversized sword, slicing it cleanly in two in midair.

I gasped in surprise. So, even at that speed, the arrow couldn't beat her reaction time? Sofia was definitely not someone I wanted to face in close quarters.

Still, even though she might have had some idea about the homing from the previous rapid-fire Bridt, to cut it down like that on the spot... *Is she a genius or something?*

Even so, this time, the result was...

"Ahhhhhhh!" Sofia screamed, a very uncharacteristic sound for her, as she was blasted back by the explosion.

*Yes! It worked!*

"Sofia?! What kind of power is this... I can't... deflect it!!!" Lancer yelled, his voice panicked.

His defensive barrier was shattered by the blast, sending him flying as well. Even better, it looked like he was taking damage. *Just so you know, I'm not letting up! If we switch from offense to defense, who knows what will happen next!*

"Hey, Mitsurugi?! That guy's gotten stronger all of a sudden!" Sofia shouted.

"I think so too! But still... Could it be that he's cursed by the Goddess?! That's impossible, right? There's no way a god would curse someone they went through the trouble to summon from another world! And no one would be stupid enough to agree to that kind of condition!"

*Choosing fire for its explosive power was definitely the right call.* They seemed too confused to move, but now wasn't the time for analysis!

Next, I'd use water, which was more compatible with me and would increase the power even further. If I managed to neutralize them with that, I could open a Gate of Mist!

"It's coming again! That... unlimited, rapid-fire magick attack. What kind of cheat is this?!" Sofia glanced at me warily as she sensed my magick power gathering again.

*So, that line was more of a complaint about unfairness, huh?*

If she wanted to complain, I had way more grievances to air! *I mean, I'm the one getting abused by a goddess here!*

"Sofia, give me back the power of the sword!" Lancer shouted. "If it's fire-attribute attack magick, I'll handle it! Take advantage of the gap in his spells and finish him off in one go!"

Sofia nodded and moved to Lancer's side.

*Perfect. If they're both in the same spot, aiming will be easier. Saves me the trouble! If they're planning to block it, then I'll just focus on power...!*

"Go!!!"

I fired two shots in rapid succession, just like before. It was obvious that these were faster and stronger than the previous fire-attribute ones. I couldn't expect an explosion, but if the attack could freeze the area around them, they'd have an even harder time moving. That would make the situation more advantageous for me.

"Transforming to an opposing attribute?! On your own?! Damn it, he really is out of the ordinary. But, you idiot, if you've switched to water, that works in our favor!" Lancer exclaimed.

I could see something that looked like magical energy flowing from Sofia's sword into Lancer. So that sword... Was it some great sword for dragons only?

*What a dangerous weapon to use against a hyuman.*

A blue shield formed in front of Lancer, and it looked stronger than the last one. *Is he water attribute?* I wondered. *Or could he be like Tomoe, a dragon with multiple attributes, and one of them is water?*

The blue arrows collided with the blue shield. I wondered what would happen when the same attributes clashed. Would they cancel each other out?

“What?!”

The surprised shout came not just from me but from Lancer too.

At first, it looked like the two arrows had stopped when they hit the shield. But then, a split second later, they started moving slowly but surely *through* the shield. Ripples formed around the arrowheads, almost as if the shield itself was welcoming them.

*Is that what happens when the same attributes clash?! But this is lucky. It looks like the attack will hit. I'll take it!*

“This is bad, really bad, Sofia,” Lancer complained. “Hurry up and finish him off!!! Is he more compatible with water than I am right now?! That’s impossible! Only someone with ‘Invincible’ or ‘All-Elements’ attributes could achieve that, not a mere hyuman!”

“If you get frozen, I’m leaving you behind, Mitsurugi,” Sofia replied.

“Give me a few more footholds,” Lancer retorted. “If that happens, melt me out and save me.”

*Footholds? Come on, even the aftereffects of the arrows will be there. Using those blades in the air to leap forward is impossible.*

*Neither of you is going to be able to move from that spot. Enjoy being frozen solid together! While you’re doing that, I’ll just take my sweet time heading back!*

Meanwhile, the arrows had finished making their way through the shield.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

“Can I slice your head off now?” came a voice from directly above me.

*Again?*

I didn’t even bother to look up. Reflexively, I jumped backward.

The tip of her sword barely grazed the tip of my nose. Once again, my barrier wasn’t fast enough! The searing sensation that shot through my skin made me

grimace.

*Whenever I attack with full power, I can't maintain my defensive magick! I really need more practice with this!*

*But wait...*

Suddenly, there was Sofia, directly in front of me.

*What the hell?! You were just next to Lancer!*

*How did she close the distance like that?! It wasn't my fault! I was on guard!*

*Should I have held back and kept the barrier ready? But if I'd done that and they'd made the same move, the result would've been the same. Damn it.*

I started to shift my focus back to Lancer, then thought better of it and looked toward Sofia. *Focus, she's already getting her next attack ready.*

*She's coming! She's coming! She's coming!*

Sofia must've noticed the uchine in my right hand, yet she still aimed directly for me without hesitation.

"You managed to react again, huh? You really are an amusing creature!" she taunted.

*What do you mean, "managed to react again"? The only reason I'm able to dodge at all is because you keep announcing your moves!*

I couldn't tell whether Sofia was underestimating me or if she was just an idiot who couldn't keep her thoughts to herself. Maybe her brain and mouth were directly connected as a trade-off for her ridiculous intuition.

Her eyes blazed with murderous intent, and I could feel the intense pressure radiating from her. Her movements were fluid, and in an instant, she was right in my face. *Crap!*

I instinctively stepped back to avoid her attack, but instead of pressing her advantage, she turned her back to me. *Huh? Why?*

In my confusion, I lost sight of her weapon—which apparently she'd hidden behind her body—and she didn't chase me as I took a small step back.



*That's right, with the reach of that sword, this spot is still within her range... No, wait, my retreat actually puts me at the perfect distance for her!*

Sofia spun around, swinging her sword upward in a diagonal slash.

*I can't dodge this! It's too fast!*

*Counterattack or maybe block? But using magick in this tense situation...?! No way! I'm done for!*

Somehow, in spite of my panicking mind, my body moved instinctively. I stepped forward half a step, gripping the uchine with both hands and aligning the blade with the trajectory of her attack.

For the first time, the sound of metal clashing echoed between us. A powerful shock and vibration traveled through both of my hands. My left hand, which was barely holding on, only felt a faint, dull sensation. *Still useless.*

*I'm... alive?*

It was nothing short of a miracle. Maybe the intense training I had endured under my mentor had driven my body to move on its own. *I'm so sorry for ever complaining that this wasn't archery training, sensei.*

"You've got to be kidding me," came a voice.

*Not mine.*

Hearing Sofia's words snapped me back, and I opened my eyes. Because my head had been down, she hadn't noticed that my eyes were closed. *Pathetic. But I'm alive! I made it!*

*I need to be able to deploy barriers reflexively, even if not unconsciously, or I'm going to get myself killed eventually.* If she's the world's strongest monster, bar none, that's one thing, but if there are others like her, I'm definitely screwed.

*Also, I should look into double or triple-layered barriers or preemptively set up defensive spells. Wait, now I'm just thinking about defense...*

*Whoa. What happened here?*

Sofia's sword, a massive, broad-bladed, two-handed masterpiece...

The once imposing blade... had shattered.

And not cleanly cut in half; I couldn't quite make out what had happened, but it had broken into countless pieces. The blade didn't even have a quarter of its length left.

*Eldwar, you're amazing. What is this uchine? Not even a chip on it.* I never thought I'd see the day when a shortsword weapon could shatter a greatsword... *Why did I close my eyes?* This was clearly much more than a self-defense tool. *Incredible, truly incredible.*

"Did... Did I actually survive?" I muttered in a daze. Another thing I realized: there was no way I could write anything in speech bubbles in the middle of a fight. Which made sense, given there was no room for it, but I only just noticed it then.

That's when it hit me. I thought I was barely holding it together on the verge of panic, but I'd actually been completely overwhelmed from the start. I wasn't able to think clearly and couldn't do what needed to be done.

*How pathetic.*

*But why are there only the pieces of the greatsword? Where did Sofia go—?*

A hand landed on my shoulder.

*Crap!*

Had she ditched the useless greatsword and circled around me?

*I'm about to be hit from behind,* I realized in a panic. The moment I braced myself for it, I felt a slight pressure on my shoulder, and then my vision went dark.

"You really are ridiculous, aren't you?" A split second after Sofia's voice reached my ears, I was met with a soft sensation pressing against my face.

*Huh?*

For some reason, she was *hugging* me. *What is this? Her chest? Oh, right. Her chestplate must have been broken from my earlier Bridt.*

*Wait, what?*

I managed to tilt my head upward. Sure enough, there was her face, but she was inexplicably sporting a big smile. She wasn't wearing much in the way of metal armor, so I could feel a lot of her body pressed against mine. I'd imagined it would be more like a barbarian's body with all those muscles, but it wasn't like that at all. She was much more... of a woman than I expected.



Even the shirt and shorts she was wearing were probably stronger than most metal armor. Kind of like my coat—

*Wait, no! Focus on what's happening right now!*

I didn't know why she'd circled back to face me again after getting behind me, but this was an opportunity. I could still use the uchigatana in my right hand to strike her...

"Ugh!" she sighed, distracting me from my plan. "Such incredible strength. It's like a divine body with the mind of a commoner, I suppose. Ah, although, if you're facing off against both of us and still keeping your wits about you, maybe your mind is tough too. I bet you could stand up to a dragon's roar and intimidation as well. Not that you have much skill."

*Well, thanks for that. Not that it means anything to me; I'm not looking to make a hobby of fighting dragons.*

She was hugging me even more tightly now, pinning my arms at my sides. Still, I could probably break free from this hold. Despite swinging that massive sword around, her physical strength was strangely less overpowering than I'd expected.

*Sorry, but I'm not interested in staying in this bizarre situation any longer or reacting too slowly while I'm disoriented. Time to get out of here.*

"If you struggle, it'll be dangerous, you know?" Sofia whispered, her voice tickling my ear as she leaned in closer.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you don't get it? Well, I don't plan to explain it anyway, so that works out fine."

*Huh?*

Then Sofia murmured something else, so softly I couldn't make it out. Before I could ask her, I felt a sudden gust of wind. *Wind magick?* But in such close quarters, using attack magick like that would've harmed both of us. Besides, I was ready with my sensory field and magick.

I quickly checked my surroundings. The intense atmosphere of the battlefield seemed to have dissipated, and the clouds looked a bit strange. Then there was the increasing strength of the wind.

*Anyway, escaping comes first!*

I put all my strength into breaking free. But wait, what was this weird feeling in my legs...?

“Ah! You don’t need to rush; I’ll let you go!” Sofia’s words rang out, and suddenly my vision cleared. The sensation of her body pressing against mine vanished all at once. Instead, a strong wind slammed into me, buffeting my entire body.

?!

*Blue... A blue sky?!*

*The sky?!*

*I’m floating?!*

*No, I’m falling!!!*

“Sorry, but I’ve sealed your wind power,” came Sofia’s voice from above me. “From this height, even *you* would die. Or at the very least, you’d take significant damage from the fall. I’ll leave the rest to chance. We’re saying goodbye now. Ah, in the end, we had to rely on his ‘footholds’ after all. Melting them is such a hassle...”

She was floating, probably with some kind of magick, not falling like I was.

*Footholds? Are you seriously talking about running down from here? No, no, no, we’re way above the clouds!*

Her figure grew smaller as I continued to plummet. But then, suddenly, she vanished.

“See you, Raidou,” came her voice again, right by my ear.

*Sofia?!*

I turned to look, and there she was, right next to me. Could she actually use teleportation? *Isn’t that even more unfair than what I can do?!*

She promptly vanished again. On a hunch, I looked down and saw several glowing objects below me. Those were definitely the blades Lancer had created. Now that I thought about it, those floating blades hadn't been used in their attack. Could they be the footholds she'd been talking about? But then, how did Sofia...?

I caught sight of her waving at me, only for her to disappear once more, leaving behind one of the blades. *No way?!*

*Sofia can swap places with the blades?! Is that even allowed?!*

Lancer had no reason to set up blades this high just to attack me. The only explanation I could think of was that they were meant for this swapping technique.

*Ahhhhhh!!!*

*What am I going to do now? This is way too reminiscent of what happened with the Goddess!* And this time, the situation was even more dangerous with those shimmering blades scattered along my falling trajectory.

Amid these frantic thoughts, I continued to plummet. How many minutes until I hit the ground?! Was there some tradition in this world where they threw people into the sky when they became too much to handle?! *Wait, how much time did I have?*

*Of course.*

Maybe because this was the second time, I felt unusually calm. The tension that had been gripping me all along seemed to vanish as if it had been a lie. I had at least a minute.

I had already finished the chant to return to the Demiplane. I could open the gate anytime. There was still some time left.

The clouds made it impossible to see with my eyes, but I spread out my sensory field to scout below. On ground level, it looked like the demons were resuming their advance. Also, though it was quite far off, there seemed to be a battle happening to the northeast. Even though the accuracy was reduced to just vague impressions, I could still make out some of what was happening on the ground.

It seemed like they were trying to capture a fortress. There was definitely a battle near a fortress-like structure. I couldn't tell who had the upper hand, but since the attackers hadn't reached the fortress yet, maybe the defenders were still in a better position. I was... right above this, probably. It seemed like I had ended up a bit away from where Sofia and I had been fighting.

If that was the case, then there were multiple battlefields unfolding at the same time. Could it be that there were more monsters like Sofia out there?

Was I just a frog in a well, after all? This whole experience was really driving home the importance of experience. I hoped I would never have to face something like this again, but I promised myself I'd be more prepared next time, just in case. Having a lot of magick power was useless if you couldn't use it properly in actual combat.

At least I could think calmly, thanks to my defenses. If I couldn't immediately adapt my actions based on the situation, I'd be no better than a sitting duck. With every action I took, a new complication arose, making me doubt whether my countermeasures would even matter. Still, I could only believe that my efforts would pay off someday.

*And so...*

*Sofia should be directly below me. Her shattered sword is there, and Lancer is with her.*

*Might as well leave them a little souvenir.*

I thrust my left hand downward. My fingers were broken, and the congealed, red-black blood had turned my skin a dark purple. I had almost no feeling left in that hand. *You bastards did a real number on me*, I thought, shaking my head.

I reached my right hand into my pocket. I would have liked to have taken off my clothes and unleashed my magick at full power, but you try stripping in midair. Just controlling my posture against this fierce wind was tough enough.

As I fingered the ring with my right hand, I felt the corners of my mouth curl into a grin. I'd been too stressed out to realize this earlier, but maybe I was feeling a dark, ugly anger about my situation. A kind of rage that made me want to scream.



I deliberately infused the ring with more magick, pushing it to the brink of shattering from oversaturation.

I identified all of Lancer's blades positioned between me and the ground using my sensory field. Locking onto each one, I fired a Bridt. As soon as it shot out from my left hand, it split into dozens of smaller projectiles, which shattered Lancer's blades—probably Sofia's footholds.

This Bridt was probably slightly stronger than the ones that surprised those two earlier. After all, I could focus without anyone interfering here. Even if I was falling.

*This should stop them from reaching me.*

Next, I focused an intense amount of magick into the Bridt, including the rings that had caused a disaster in the Demiplane. With this much energy mixed in, even shooting it from here should have been enough to carve out the ground and blow it up at the point of impact.

I could see the six rings swirling erratically inside the spherical Bridt, just before they transformed into arrows. *Take this, Dragon Slayer and Greater Dragon! A little gift for playing around with me all this time!*

*Seriously, I've had more than enough of that crap from the Goddess!*

I sent them a Bridt like a dynamite arrow, only with rings.

"Oh, and by the way! I don't even need you to seal it! I couldn't use wind magick to begin with!!!" I shouted.

Thanks to the slight drop in altitude, my sensory field let me pinpoint Sofia and Lancer's location directly below me. With a final parting shot that nobody could hear, I unleashed the Bridt at maximum power. At the same time, I opened a Gate of Mist directly at my predicted landing point.

As soon as I passed through the gate to the Demiplane, it began closing—just like I'd set it up to do, thankfully.

If only the clouds hadn't been in the way, I could have shown them the full extent of my abilities. But if I'd waited until I was below the clouds, the ring

Bridt might have gone haywire in my hands, and there was also the risk of someone seeing the Gate of Mist. I had no choice.

*Ah.*

Suddenly, I felt a familiar sensation from my childhood, the one where I used to faint from anemia. My vision darkened from the edges, narrowing to a tunnel. That sickening feeling.

*Maybe I've lost too much blood. I've experienced this enough back when I was weaker, haven't I?*

By the time I realized this wasn't supposed to happen, it was already too late—as the tension left my body, my senses filled with the familiar smell of the Demiplane, and I passed out.

Even weirder was that instead of feeling the impact of the fall, I felt something warm wrapping around me.

※ ※ ※

A young child, looking extremely out of place on the battlefield, limped over to greet their partner returning from the sky.

"Is it over?" the child asked.

"Probably. I took him up to the highest of the footholds you made. I've never looked down on the clouds like that before. Don't you know how to hold back?" Sofia replied in a tone far from what one would expect from a woman.

"I never imagined my sword would shatter like that," the child replied. "It was like being in a nightmare. I'll admit I was a bit shaken."

"Imagine how it felt for me being right there. That pervert had a weapon that matched his twisted nature. It was a strange, clumsy-looking short sword I'd never seen before."

"I have no knowledge of it either. If possible, I'd like to recover it and reforge my sword based on that..." said the child—a Greater Dragon in disguise. He looked at the sword in his hand, or rather what used to be a sword. Only the hilt and a tiny piece of the blade remained.

“Thanks for getting it back for me,” Sofia said. “I honestly thought you might have died from shock, and gotten frozen solid in the ice, but you pulled through.”

“That sword’s a part of me. Of course I got it back. But when it shattered, the pain was like having my entire body ripped apart. Even though I was encased in that damn ice, I thought I’d die from the shock,” the dragon recalled, wincing at the memory.

“My condolences,” Sofia replied with a roll of her eyes. “Now, let’s give the demons the signal to advance, and we can take our time moving out. I’m not ready to fight again just yet.”

“My sword’s shattered, my armor’s broken and torn. You’re even more battered than when you fought me. It’s impressive—or maybe just ridiculous—that your fighting spirit hasn’t waned,” Lancer said. Although his words dripped with irony, they also held a grudging respect for Sofia, who was now his partner.

“Back when we fought, your comrades were killed, remember? Although they were just a bunch of reckless idiots gathered to kill dragons.”

“Hm, so no one’s died this time, I take it?”

“Yeah, almost all our gear is gone, and our bodies are pretty beaten up, but it could be worse. After all, we managed to deal with that pervert Raidou. With the hero gone, we can probably bring the Kingdom of Limia to its knees without much trouble.”

Even for Sofia, the famed Dragon Slayer with an impressive fighting resume, the self-proclaimed “merchant” who called himself Raidou was a complete mystery.

His barriers deflected her beloved sword, a weapon imbued with the power of a Greater Dragon and specialized in anti-magick. Those barriers were incredibly strong, requiring a full-powered strike just to neutralize them. And yet, despite their strength, Raidou clumsily struggled to re-form them.

He took an absurdly long time to assess the situation, far too long for a battlefield, and at first seemed intent on retreating like a coward. But then, he

used magick with a tracking capability Sofia had never seen before; he showed a level of persistence and stubbornness that defied logic. After all, tracking enhancements were generally considered too inefficient to be useful; they had a terrible magical energy-to-performance ratio.

Even Raidou's swordsmanship was barely above amateur level. His handling of the short sword was so poor it was almost an insult to the sword itself.

*But during that last clash... Why did he step forward? Sofia wondered. Until the very last moment, he showed signs of pulling back and retreating. And because of that, he managed to align his sword properly, and in the end, he even managed to break mine.*

The movement had seemed more reflexive than intentional... But that made sense. This guy was an amateur, right? Instinctive reflex didn't take lots of experience.

*Even in a situation like that, his body remembered and completed a sequence of actions? I can't believe he would have trained so much just to be at that level of skill. If that's the case, then...*

"Hey, something's..." Lancer murmured, pulling Sofia out of her thoughts. She looked up to the sky and immediately understood his confusion.

Dozens of blue streaks were raining down from the stratosphere. They burst through the clouds, falling indiscriminately toward the ground.

Each streak was thin, piercing the earth like scattershot. If Lancer hadn't erected a barrier, he and Sofia would have already been hit directly. Unfortunately, the barrier was already showing signs of weakening.

Meanwhile, the blue streaks were also descending on the advancing demon troops, and they were having a massive impact: just seconds into the attack, the army was already starting to descend into chaos. Luckily, there didn't seem to be any follow-up attacks for the moment, but they couldn't afford to feel secure.

"Damn it! What is this?!" Sofia shouted.

"Raidou, is he thinking, 'If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me'?" Lancer spat out.

“I’m going! I’m going to stop him. If this continues, it’ll affect our advance!” Sofia declared.

“Sofia, no! All the foothold blades were destroyed in that attack. Did he really manage to shoot down every single one of those scattered blades?!”

“Then make some more, fast. The next attack is... Wait...” Sofia’s voice trailed off. Her eyes were once again fixed on the sky, staring at the point where she imagined a man was waiting far above the clouds.

Lancer followed her gaze. “An attack just to destroy the footholds, to keep us from following,” he sighed. “That’s what that was for... The real attack is yet to come.”

He could sense the magical energy gathering above them, and it made the earlier attack seem like mere dust. And yet, that attack had been powerful enough to qualify as a wide-area attack spell. In fact, this latest assault had already thrown the Demon Lord’s army into disarray, proving its effectiveness.

The attribute was water. Lancer looked down at his own leg. It had suffered frostbite after becoming a casualty of his own magick. It could be healed, but for now, it was useless on this battlefield.

“How much more is that guy going to surprise us?” Sofia muttered. “No way he has enough magick power to do this on his own! You’re telling me he still has something up his sleeve?”

“The water attribute, huh? He seems to have quite a lot of confidence in his control over water,” Lancer noted.

As a Greater Dragon, he sensed something wasn’t right. *The water spirits aren’t lending their power here*, he mused. *In fact, the magical energy around us hasn’t diminished at all. To cast magick on this scale, he would need to gather all the magical energy in the area...*

Casting a wide-area attack spell required a tremendous amount of magical energy. No one could supply that amount of power alone; they would either need to draw from the ambient magical energy around them, or they would need the spirits to help.

“Water,” Sofia echoed. “If it’s water, then this should work...” She reached for the charm around her neck.

The item was designed to call upon the aid of water spirits, something Lancer was also familiar with. It could probably be used for virtually anything water related, given its high rank. However, it was a one-time use. They hadn’t used the necklace against Raidou’s “arrows” earlier. Both Sofia and Lancer had other ways to defend themselves. And saving the necklace for later had likely been the right decision, given Lancer’s injury.

Indeed, this could remove the spirits’ assistance from his spells, normally rendering them inert. Even if he managed to cast something, if the spirits forbade water magick, any attack he launched would be severely limited.

*Still... Sofia thought, there’s something off about all this.*

“Lancer, give me a foothold. I’ll get within range and disrupt his magick,” she suddenly decided.

“No, Sofia, that won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not a sure thing. We will use it but for defense instead.”

Having given Sofia his instructions, Lancer would just have to trust his instincts as a Greater Dragon. Next, he contacted the commander of the Demon Lord’s army—who responded instantly. After all, Sofia and Lancer were fighting on the front lines against one of his least favorite beings.

Even after the army had seen that awful golden light that bore the Goddess’s mark, the commander had skillfully kept them under control, ensuring they weren’t overtaken by rage. Although this was due in large part to Sofia and Lancer’s prompt handling of said light, the commander was still extremely competent.

“Get ready for a follow-up attack from above! Deploy the defensive barriers, quickly!” the commander ordered, and the Demon Lord’s army moved immediately to execute the command.

For just a moment, Lancer watched them with admiration. But there wasn't time. The concentrated magical energy was beginning to coalesce, taking the form of a spell. He anticipated it would be another one of those arrow spells, like a one-trick pony repeating its move.

"Defense, huh? Got it. Definitely feels off," Sofia said.

"Exactly. Can you reach there?" Lancer asked, pointing to the Demon Lord's army. His blades were already glowing.

"You got ready fast. Let's go."

"I'm counting on you."

Sofia nodded. She quickly grabbed Lancer and, switching her position with one of his blades, moved forward.

Suddenly, the full noise of the battlefield hit their ears as they found themselves in the middle of the Demon Lord's army. They hurried to get within the range of the defensive barriers being deployed.

"So, what about this? Should we use it now?" Sofia asked, holding up her necklace.

"Yeah, I think this is the right spot. Use it only within our range, just to be safe," Lancer instructed.

"?!"

"Just layering it over the barrier won't be enough."

"I've shared meals with these guys for days. You're ruthless."

"It's not like we became allies. Besides, I don't sense any guilt in you either."

"This is a battlefield, after all. We're just mercenaries, so it's only natural to prioritize our own lives. Let's follow my partner's judgment."

With that, Sofia sent her magick power into the blue gem set in her necklace. The gem glowed brightly and shattered, enveloping both of them in a shimmering blue barrier.

"It's coming," Lancer warned.

“Honestly, did we stir up a hornet’s nest?” Sofia said, her tone a mix of curiosity and regret.

“We didn’t have a choice. If we’d just stood back and watched, the demons would’ve been drawn to that golden light, and advancing would have been impossible. That color means the Goddess is involved. It’s like a symbol of fear and hatred for the demons. If our carefully assembled army turned into a mob, we wouldn’t have accomplished anything.”

“And even if it turned out like this? Maybe it would have been easier to let half the demons charge Raidou and get killed. Then we could’ve controlled the rest with fear.”

“That’s hindsight for you... If we’re going to talk about ‘what-ifs,’ perhaps negotiating with him would have been a viable option.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if, hypothetically, we were aligned in *all* our objectives, and if Raidou were agreeable to the means to achieve them, then it might have worked out,” Lancer clarified.

“I see. An impossible hypothesis,” Sofia replied with a smirk.

“At best, we could have agreed on opposing the Goddess. But even that’s probably the extent of it.”

“Yeah, it did feel like that. If he was willing to use any means necessary for his goals, he could have launched this attack right from the start. Ah... is it coming?” Sofia asked, her senses heightened.

“It is,” Lancer confirmed, impressed. “Your perception’s as good as the demons’.”

It seemed that even some of the demon soldiers had started to sense the impending attack. Cries of alarm sprung up like wildfire across the battlefield.

*Tremendous magical power. If this attack comes down, the humans who withdrew earlier will be caught in it too. Wait! Now I get it. It’s the magick power itself that’s been making me uneasy. The attack that’s coming is definitely that arrow spell again. It’s not a wide-area spell. That means he’s*



*managed to amplify a single-target spell to this scale without any help from the world's magick or spirits... So, his own reserve of magick is already—?!*

Lancer's thoughts were cut off there as his entire body was bathed in blue light.

※ ※ ※

A twisting blue arrow pierced a hole through the clouds. It wasn't very large; in fact, it was hard to understand how something so small had created such a massive hole in the clouds.

The change happened in an instant.

Something shifted inside the arrow, and a circular ripple began to spread from it, like the small waves formed when something falls into water. A few people watching would have said that the sky itself undulated as the arrow expanded and accelerated.

As soon as one ripple traced across the sky, the blue arrow grew larger and faster, again and again. Two, three, four more times, the arrow rippled, grew, and increased its speed.

Seconds later, now a massive spear of blue light, it struck slightly off-center from the circular formation of the Demon Lord's army.

The army, of course, had raised defensive barriers pointing upward. But it was as if those barriers didn't exist at all, as the spear drove straight down onto the heads of the troops.

The final reaction occurred, but this time it wasn't in the sky. It happened halfway into the ground where the spear had already embedded itself.

Soldiers nearby were blasted away, and the spear, almost as if trying to straighten itself out, unleashed a freezing gale. The howling winds instantly turned the surrounding demons into frozen statues. But then, instead of forming another ripple, the spear buried itself completely into the ground.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, from beneath every demon's feet—across the entire expanse of the battlefield—light erupted. At first, a single beam leaked out and shot toward the sky, followed by countless other beams of varying thicknesses. In moments, the landscape and the sky were both completely washed out by light.

Spectacular.

That single word was the only way to describe the attack.

The caster, Raidou—Makoto Misumi—likely hadn't anticipated such a result. He probably intended it as little more than harassment on the battlefield.

He had no idea.

There was a significant difference between the Bridt Raidou fired at Sofia and Lancer and the one he released high in the sky. The former was cast under the intense pressure and threat of death on the battlefield, while the latter was created with a much calmer mindset, allowing him to focus slowly and steadily.

The disparity in power was vast as well. The fact that he could maintain his composure at such a high altitude, especially given that this was his second time in such a situation, undoubtedly played a role in this peculiar outcome.

Furthermore, he was inspired by the explosion of the ring, an event suppressed by his follower Tomoe's sacrifice as a former Greater Dragon and the desperate efforts of the arachs. Even that explosion was merely the result of a chain reaction involving the collapse of four rings. Makoto Misumi had underestimated the power contained within the rings that had absorbed his magick.

With each ring that shattered, the Bridt's power increased exponentially. Raidou never anticipated that it would pass through all the traces of the residual ripples left in the sky and transform into a massive spear that would pierce the earth.

All the riverbanks, rivers, forests, and woodlands he had seen, even the plains where the demons had gathered, not to mention the barren, brown earth visible in the distance—everything was engulfed in light.

The retreating human army wasn't spared either; the distance they had moved was still within the massive circle created by the spear.

Everything it touched froze instantly, then shattered to dust. The energy was simply too much. Reduced to particles, leaving not even shadows behind, everything was colored a deep blue.

After what felt like both an instant and an eternity, the light gradually began to dissipate.

What remained was not a crater-shaped remnant of destruction but rather a massive pool of water, slightly smaller than the dome but too large to be called a pond.

A lake had been created.

The power of the attack was incomprehensible. It was far beyond the scale of something an individual could wield. It was more akin to a strategic weapon.

Where once there had been forests and plains, there now lay a vast mirror reflecting the sky on its surface, as if it had always been there. Water flowed into it from several nearby rivers and drained downstream as well. This was an attack that had redrawn the map.

A few shadows floated on the lake's surface. Most of them were completely motionless. But these weren't soldiers miraculously saved; they were corpses, with only parts of their bodies barely intact, or various remnants of said corpses. Considering the extent of the destruction, it was a miracle they were even recognizable as soldiers.

And yet, one human-like figure, still intact despite everything, trembled as she pushed away her wet hair from her face, annoyed by its interference.

It was Sofia Bulga the Dragon Slayer.

Nearby, there was also the silhouette of a child missing a leg. It was Mitsurugi, also known as Lancer.

"Mitsurugi, are you alive?" Sofia asked, her voice shaky.

"..."

"Hey, that necklace—it was supposed to provide total protection against water-attribute magick, but only once, right?"

"..."

“My decoys are all gone, my custom armor’s destroyed, and almost all my other defensive accessories are completely obliterated. Look at me—I’m practically naked!”

Sofia was right; what remained of her tattered clothing was just barely hanging on and far from functional.

“I lost a leg,” Lancer replied, looking down at the stump, his voice calm but edged with pain. So, Lancer hadn’t escaped unscathed after all.

“Raidou... That bastard is dead, right?” Sofia asked.

Lancer nodded slowly. “Probably. He might be floating in the lake, just like us.”

They spoke without looking at each other, both gazing up at the sky. Neither mentioned why they’d remained on the water. Perhaps they were happy simply to have survived.

“If he’s alive, we should find him and kill him. If he gets any better at this, we’ll be in real trouble,” Sofia suggested.

“He’s dead. He fell to his death. Let’s leave it at that for now. Besides, even if we search for him now, there’s no guarantee we could kill him. It’s more important to heal our wounds and restore our equipment. I won’t have our path disrupted by some mysterious creature that came out of nowhere,” Lancer reasoned.

“Was he going all out?” Sofia’s expression softened a bit, revealing uncertainty. Of course, given that he fought her—a Level 920 warrior known as the Dragon Slayer—he probably was serious. Still, she had a sliver of doubt.

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. Just like the blindfolded Goddess, I can’t explain what happened here at all. If it comes to this, I’d like to question her. Maybe I should have shown her what happened; maybe then we’d learn what she actually summoned.”

“Raidou, huh? I thought I’d have some fun with the hero for a while, but I guess that’s off the table now.” Sofia’s fierce grin was the same one she’d had when facing Raidou. Even though she could barely move, her mind was already on the next battle.

“Save it for later,” Lancer sighed. “After we take care of my business, then you can go after Raidou. It would be wise to regroup and prepare before facing him again.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Mitsurugi. We need to be in top shape to hunt that guy.”

“First, we need to get our strength back and get to shore.”

“Yeah, we can’t move very well right now.”

Still, they made no effort to get to shore, not yet. While gazing up at the sky, they laughed and floated lazily on the lake’s surface.

※ ※ ※

Based on survivors’ accounts—there were fewer than ten of them—a rumor began to spread among both humans and demons.

A third envoy of the Goddess, clad in red. Some described this figure as possessing a tall, slender body and an exceptionally beautiful face, while others claimed they were just a child. In any case, they relied upon the lake as proof of this being’s existence.

“The Wicked One.”<sup>2</sup>

Makoto Misumi had no idea that this was his new name.

# Tsukimichi

## Chapter 5

**W**hen I slowly opened my eyes, what came into focus was a ceiling I was rather familiar with.

*So, this is... my room in the mansion in the Demiplane, huh?*

It had been a while since I'd collapsed like that, since I'd felt that faint, dizzy sensation. Since I was a kid, in fact. I had been really weak back then...

Lying in bed, stiff as a plank, my posture was surprisingly straight. Even I thought it was impressive. I didn't care if anyone thought it was creepy.

I grabbed the wonderfully high-tech blanket—cool in the summer and warm in the winter—that covered me and sat up. Who'd believe orcs in a remote wilderness would be using something so comfortable?

Maybe I could sell these someday...

Man, my body felt sluggish. I could barely muster any strength. *How many days have I been out?*

"Mm, hmm..."

*Huh?*

*Wait, is someone here?*

Finally, I rubbed my blurry eyes and tore them away from the ceiling.

*What the heck?*

Well, I had only my groggy state to thank. Even though the full weight of reality hadn't yet descended on me, I could understand what was going on. There were three other people in the room with me.

First, attached to either side of me were Tomoe and Mio. *Are they sleeping?* Well, they weren't clinging to me, but they were pretty close.

Tomoe, on my left, was wearing something like a yukata. I wasn't sure who she was throwing punches at in her sleep, but at least she wasn't hitting me. Still, her yukata was a mess.

*I'm not going to comment on her underwear, but what's with that sarashi?*

I didn't look; it was just there! But I guess you didn't ask, did you?

On the other side, Mio was curled up like a baby, sleeping in what looked like a sheer, almost see-through negligee set...? *What is she wearing?* It was practically indecent. The only saving grace was that she was at least wearing underwear.

Having both an older sister and a younger sister, I'd seen this kind of thing before. If asked whether it bothered me at all, I'd have to admit it was a bit embarrassing.

*Waking up while everyone else is asleep... Guess my timing sucks.*

By the door to the room was a girl—a new clone of Tomoe.

She was still asleep, sitting up against the door, knees pulled to her chest. Had she been trying to stand guard? Not that it mattered much since the door opened inward, but still.

Then I caught sight of a sword, which looked like it was made by the eldwar, hanging on the door. So, the girl probably thought she was armed and ready.

She only looked like an elementary school kid, so everything she did was kind of endearing. I had casually named her Komoe since she was a tiny version of Tomoe, but now I kind of regretted it. Still, I guess it was better than calling her Mini-Tomoe.

Next, I looked over toward the window and noticed a faint light seeping through the curtains. Early morning? That would make sense, as it felt a little

cooler in the room. Actually, it was *cold*.

*It was spring just a few minutes ago... Has the Demiplane shifted seasons again?*

*But... How many days has it been since then? A day or two?* I had lost some blood, but I didn't think I was in trouble... After all, I'd managed to make it back to the Demiplane on my own.

*On my own, huh.*

Sofia the Dragon Slayer... She had an incredible strength that was almost inhuman. Sure, her power and speed were leagues above anyone I'd met before, but more than that, she was skilled at using what she had at her disposal—namely, her equipment and magick.

Could she only swap positions with Lancer's blades, or could she swap with anything? Or maybe it wasn't even related, and she could just teleport instantly.

What was clear was that, to some extent, she could maneuver around while ignoring distance. That was a real headache for someone like me, who specialized in long-range attacks.

I hated to say it, but Sofia was scarier than Tomoe or Mio. I would have believed it if someone told me she was over Level 2,000. To think she was only Level 920... It was dangerous to take those numbers at face value.

*Someone might say the same about me.*

I hadn't anticipated that my magick barriers would be so vulnerable to surprise attacks. Were they easily breached because I couldn't fully concentrate on them? Or maybe it was just that Sofia's weapon was that abnormal? Given how she defied common sense in so many ways, that was definitely possible.

*The ability of my sensory field, my vast magical power, eldwar equipment... If even one of those had been missing, I might have died.*

As I thought about it, I realized I'd only been learning magick for less than a year. It was like when I'd been practicing archery for less than a year—I had



barely been able to even hold a bow properly. I wasn't even at the stage where I could think about aiming at a target.

It's lucky that my focus shifted to defensive measures after coming to this world, mainly because I had another reason to hide my magical power.

My magick might have been vast, but if I could only use it a little at a time, it would be pointless. Like using a ladle to empty the ocean. Even if I couldn't use all of it at once, I needed to be able to handle a significant portion of it in one go.

Even if I could pull out a bit more in a life-or-death situation, I'm no masochist—I'd prefer to avoid struggling every time.

Getting caught up in that crazy battle was a painful reminder of just how little I knew about magick. But at least I was confident now that my decision to head for the academy city was the right call.

*Not that I needed to go through that kind of experience to realize it...* I guess it was just another bit of bad luck that had been plaguing me since I got here.

It also bothered me that I still didn't really understand where or how I had ended up fighting this time. I hadn't heard any talk of a war near Tsige, so it was probably pretty far from the places I'd been traveling. The one who dropped me into that battlefield was definitely the owner of that voice I heard when I had been snatched away from the teleportation circle.

*"I found you," huh? Screw you, Goddess.*

She threw me directly into the hyuman-demon war, like I was some kind of pawn. First a wasteland, and now a battlefield? I was really tempted to declare her an evil goddess. And after all that, she didn't give me any guidance or support. What a complete insult. I promised myself that if there was another summoning, I would resist with everything I had.

That said, it would probably fall on my followers to figure out how to pull that off. *If we're talking about spatial movement, Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki all come to mind... Who would be best for that? Probably Tomoe. But if it's about countering magick, Mio might be a good choice too.*

I decided to ask them when they woke up. I also needed to make sure Tomoe and Mio didn't rush into a vendetta. Not that I was against it or anything; I had my own feelings about that. It was just something to look forward to down the line.

*Come to think of it, where's Shiki?* I was supposed to teleport to Felica. If he went ahead to the academy, I could head there too... Being able to open a Gate of Mist to wherever my followers were was really convenient.

Before Felica, the town I stayed in the day before the battlefield... *What was it called again? Oh, right, Orbit.* It would be easier to go directly to the academy rather than teleporting back there first.

*Shiki is a worrier, so maybe he's come back here.*

*All right, I'll try reaching out to him.*

*Good.* I could once again sense the mental link with my followers, so I tentatively called out to him. Telepathy was super handy—kind of like using Skype.

*"Shiki? Good morning."*

*"Makoto-sama? Is that you, Makoto-sama?!"* came Shiki's eager reply.

*"Yeah, it's me. Sorry about disappearing like that."*

Shiki wouldn't know what had happened to me, so "disappeared" was probably the best way to explain it for now.

*"No, please don't apologize! Are you OK?"*

*"Oh, I'm just feeling a bit sluggish. I think I'll have you check on me later. By the way, where are you right now?"*

*Wait, I feel like I'm forgetting something.*

*"Thank goodness, really. You were right beside me, and I couldn't do anything. If you hadn't come back, I—!"*

*"Hey, Shiki. I'm asking where you are right now."*

*"Ah, sorry! I'm in line for the entrance exams at the academy city. I thought it wouldn't be wise to submit the paperwork until I knew you were safe, but the*

*day before yesterday, I'd heard you came back to the Demiplane... injured, but still. So, I checked with Tomoe-dono, and we decided I would stay here."*

*Tomoe, huh? Her judgment is always kind of paternal or maybe just logical.*

She probably assumed my injuries would stabilize quickly and that once I got to the academy city I would reunite with Shiki, who could take better care of my injuries.

Mio, on the other hand, would probably have dragged Shiki back without question, shouting, "Heal him now! Heal him right away!"

*Hmm...*

*The day before yesterday, I'd returned injured. That's what Shiki had said. So, I've been asleep for two days? Was I more seriously hurt than I thought?*

*Oh, right—the wounds! My left hand! My fingers!*

Suddenly remembering how deep the injuries were, I brought both hands up in front of my face to check them.

The disgusting purple color that had made me queasy just looking at it was completely gone. My left hand was back to the same healthy skin tone as my right.

All my fingers were there, moving normally. When I'd grabbed the blanket, I hadn't even realized I was using them. *I guess waking up has me off my game a bit. I'm not at my best right now. Totally out of it.*

But.

*Thank goodness!*

So, what did Shiki say he was standing in line for?

*"Hey, Shiki. What's this about entrance exams?"* I asked.

*"Ah, apparently you need a test to get into Rotsgard. I'm waiting in line for my turn right now. There must be a more efficient way to handle this, but... At this rate, Makoto-sama's test will be in about six days."*

I guess if they handed out tickets or something, people wouldn't have to stand in line. Although, it does seem like a lot of people would give up and leave

while waiting. If that was their goal, it was a pretty nasty trick.

*But still... an entrance exam? I'd thought Rembrandt's letter of recommendation would be enough for just an interview.*

Well, if the "difficult" merchant guild exam wasn't a match for basic education, there was nothing to worry about. In the worst-case scenario, if I could still learn things, there was no reason to get hung up on officially being a student.

I figured I should at least take the exam to honor Rembrandt's goodwill.

*Still, six days... I haven't seen how big the city is yet, but it seems like I'll have some time to look around.*

*"I see. Hey, Shiki," I asked, "you're really earnest, aren't you?"*

*"Huh?" Shiki was clearly still confused.*

*"I mean, you said you use hypnosis and suggestion a lot... so I was wondering why you're standing in line like this."*

*"...!!!"*

*"I bet you thought I wouldn't be happy if you used those tricks, right? You're so considerate."*

*"..."*

*"Shiki? Anyway, I'm going to head over there now."*

*"Y-Yes," Shiki stuttered, still sounding off.*

*Is something up with Shiki? Maybe he hasn't slept. When I reached out, he answered pretty fast given how early it is in the morning.*

If he'd really been standing in line all night, I had to give him credit. Come to think of it, back in my world, there was a friend in my class who always went to that festival in Tokyo, twice a year without fail. He would come back and say it had been hell, it had been a nightmare, but somehow, he'd always have a smile as he told us about it.

*Oops.*

*I'd better hurry up and get dressed. I've already worried them enough—Shiki and everyone else.*

*Then, I'll wake everyone up and let them know I'm okay. After that, I'll head to the academy city, have Shiki do a thorough check on my hand, and maybe do some sightseeing.*

Tonight in the Demiplane, I'd decided, we would have a detailed debriefing. I thought about creating a gate somewhere in Rotsgard where no one would notice. I'd been doing that in many of the towns I'd visited, in fact, so I could later use the Demiplane to travel back there without needing the teleportation circle.

Unfortunately, if I closed the gate completely after use—like I'd told Tomoe to do, to keep unwanted visitors out of the Demiplane—it would disappear. So, I had to leave some trace of it behind.

I'd also mentioned that in places that were convenient for travel or current bases of operation, it was okay to leave a trace. In those cases, we made sure to station guards like lizardfolk or orc warriors on the Demiplane side of the exit.

If the Gate of Mist wasn't completely closed, Mio could open and close it too. Shiki, however, was still struggling to master the operation of gates.

Considering that he was a former lich with considerable knowledge and skill, maybe I was being overly cautious about intruders. But, as they say, better safe than sorry, so I wanted to keep completely closing the gates as the default policy.

*Wait a minute.* It was just me and Shiki going to the academy, so there was no need to keep a gate open there for now. I could just open it whenever we needed. Either way, Shiki couldn't come and go freely by himself.

And... I felt eyes on me. From both sides, no less.

"Young Master!"

"Master!"

That much of what they said, I could make out. After that, I had no idea what was coming out of their mouths. Mio was just making noises, and Tomoe was

speaking, but she was rattling off words so quickly that I couldn't catch any of it. One thing was for sure—I wasn't getting dressed anytime soon.

I should have felt pretty lucky, being hugged by beautiful women on both sides, but strangely, all I felt was a sense of guilt for making them worry. Maybe it was because, even though it had only been a few months since we met, we'd spent quite a lot of intense time together.

*"Shiki, sorry. It might be a while before I can head over there."*

*"...? All right. Please don't push yourself too hard,"* Shiki replied, gentle concern in his voice.

*"Tomoe, Mio. Good morning, and sorry for making you worry."*

It looked like the debriefing would have to come first.

I decided to rearrange my plans.

※ ※ ※

"Oh, Lancer?" Tomoe sounded surprised. "That little brat didn't die, huh?"

I'd finally managed to pry her and Mio off of me and start explaining the situation, but both of them were predictably angry.

"I think so. And he was with that Dragon Slayer who supposedly killed Lancer." I decided it was best to explain everything at once. Trying to calm them down after every little thing would just be a waste of time.

"I see... We don't know the exact details yet, but I would guess that the battlefield where you were sent by the Goddess was probably the battle for Stella Fortress. While you were away, I found some stuff out; apparently it was a terrible fight. The humans suffered a crushing defeat, although there were heavy casualties on both sides. But Lancer attacked Young Master... Oh, I see..." I chose to ignore the dangerous way Tomoe narrowed her eyes.

Stella Fortress. I'd never heard of it before.

Now that I thought about it, most of the people I saw had been gathered near the faintly visible structure. So that was a fortress. I'd only managed to figure

that out when I went up into the sky, right before I left. *So, it ended up being a defeat for the human side.*

Well, with a monster like Sofia siding with the demons, I shouldn't have been surprised.

She was a terrifying creature. My final strike probably didn't amount to more than a nuisance to her.

Come to think of it, that was the first time in my life I'd seen someone kill another person with such glee. And it was even scarier to realize that I hadn't just been a bystander; I'd been a participant.

"That damn Goddess dropped me in the middle of a nightmare," I told the girls. "And after saying she found me, she didn't say anything else! I really thought I was going to die!"

"How could she do that to Young Master... The Goddess, I will *never* forgive her, never forgive her, never forgive her, neverforgiveneverforgiveneverforgive..."

Mio was in one of her rare non-communicative states: off in her own little world, her eyes completely devoid of color, and eerily still. It didn't seem like her ears were working properly either.

On the upside, she wasn't about to rush off to cause trouble, so at least I didn't need to worry about calming her down right now. *Kind of a rude thought, I know.*

"Still, how could anyone manage to injure Young Master so badly? I never thought your armor and magical power could be overcome..." Tomoe mused. "Although, it's true you were hurt pretty bad. Hmm..."

"I think it all comes down to my carelessness and lack of preparation," I told her. "I was suddenly thrown into a battlefield, and a monster came out of nowhere. I was panicking the entire time."

I mean, it was so bad I couldn't even set up proper barriers, let alone use multiple spells at once.

Tomoe nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm..."

“There was this woman swinging a huge sword around, it was bigger than her, and she could slash twice in midair,” I continued. “On top of that, I couldn’t tell if she was using some sort of teleportation or another ability, but she could ignore distance and do whatever she wanted. It made me realize that maintaining effective barriers at all times and increasing the amount of magick I could use at once both need to be high priorities for me. The way it is now, I can’t fully utilize my advantages.”

Tomoe’s eyes narrowed as she considered my words. “The amount of magick you can use at once, huh? I guess you’re right; no matter the purity or density, I’ve never seen Young Master wield that much magick power at any given time. You have impressive efficiency during conversion, but given the total amount of magick you have, you should be able to handle the equivalent of several rings of magick without issue. When you fought Mio, you had a different aura than usual, after all.”

*Yeah, that’s true.* There really was a big gap between my potential and my actual abilities. *I really can’t use much of the magick I have. Just having a large reservoir doesn’t feel like much of an advantage.*

“If I learn the basics of magick at the academy, I think it’ll make a difference,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “Shiki’s there too, so I’m planning to study a lot in Rotsgard.”

Tomoe’s expression grew more serious. “About that. I still think we should go with you, Young Master. We never know when the Goddess might interfere again. Considering she said she ‘found’ you, it’s likely she was searching for you all this time.”

“...”

“Please, think about it,” Tomoe urged, her tone gentle but firm.

I understood her concern. If one of my friends or a family member suddenly disappeared and came back injured, I’d be worried too. I’d do everything I could to stop it from happening again.

“Tomoe, I get that you’re worried about the Goddess too,” I told her. “But that’s exactly why I want to keep you and Mio—and the fact that the Demiplane exists—hidden for now. Shiki might have already been exposed when he was by



me when I was taken, so it's safer to keep him with me. I need you to stick to the original plan, and find a way to resist the Goddess's forceful summons. Plus, I want someone I can trust to stay near Tsige."

Tomoe listened intently, her eyes searching mine for any sign of hesitation. I knew she wanted to argue, but she also understood the logic behind my decision.

*It's unlikely the Goddess knows about Tomoe and Mio, I thought, but if she's looking for me, and their existence gets exposed, things could become even more complicated.*

It could go either way, but the idea of showing all our cards to the Goddess, after everything she'd done, was terrifying.

Tomoe sighed. "So, finding a way to nullify the Goddess's interference and developing undetectable telepathy... If Young Master could call us quickly, that would solve a lot of problems, so it's best to pursue these goals simultaneously. Good grief, it seems we've had nothing but challenges so far, but I'm honored you think of us as your trump cards. We'll accept this setback and prepare for the day we'll be needed."

"Sorry about that," I said, feeling a bit guilty. "Ever since I arrived on that battlefield, I couldn't feel any connection with you guys. And the Telepathy wasn't working either. I was really panicking. It was probably the Goddess's doing, but I'm also worried about the effects of Sofia's ring after that."

"The first disruption was likely because of her barrier," Tomoe mused. "The momentary recovery we experienced before losing the connection again was probably caused by something that nullified her interference. There's too much we still don't know. But we won't find out for sure until we go to the battlefield ourselves."

Tomoe's mention of a "momentary recovery" piqued my interest. I hadn't noticed anything like that back then. I wondered if something happened on their end.

In any case, I wanted to understand what had occurred across the entire battlefield. But heading there myself for an investigation seemed like a bad idea just now.

“You’ve got a lot of work ahead of you,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. “I’ll do my best on my end to figure out a way to summon you guys if needed. I promise, if there ever comes a time when it’s okay to go wild, I’ll definitely call you two.”

Tomoe gave a small smile. “I look forward to that. However, I’d rather not go through such a terror-inducing experience again, so can you prioritize finding us a reliable summoning route? I hope my worries are unfounded, but only use teleportation circles when you have to, and travel through the Demiplane.”

“Ah, right, got it.”

“The war between humans and demons is way north of where we’ve been traveling. If that’s the case, we may need a separate team to investigate the battlefield.”

“I’ll leave it to you. I’m confident in your choice of people, Tomoe.”

*I should praise her a little more, I thought. I’ve been relying on her a lot. Besides, with Tomoe, there’s not much risk of her assigning the job to someone who might cause a huge problem. Maybe I’m overestimating her, but still...*

“Thanks for your kind words, Young Master. Now, would you be so kind as to say a word to Mio?” Tomoe asked, with an expression that clearly showed she didn’t want to deal with her.

I glanced over at Mio. She was surrounded by an incredibly dense miasma, and suddenly I didn’t want to get close to her either. Should I tell her to work with Tomoe on countermeasures to prevent this kind of thing from happening again?

*Hmm... yeah, no. I refuse! I’ll just ignore it!*

“No, I’d better get going. Shiki’s waiting for me, and it’s not fair to leave him there alone. Besides, he doesn’t know anything about what’s happened yet.”

Tomoe gave me a knowing look. “Very well. Just be careful of any surprises when you return to the Demiplane. Also, don’t try to cover it up. I know you already contacted Shiki first, didn’t you?”

“W-Well, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t pay too much attention to the order of things,” I said, suddenly feeling a bit cornered. “There wasn’t any particular reason for contacting Shiki first.”

*Great, so much for surprises when you get a warning ahead of time. And how did she know I’d contacted Shiki via telepathy?*

Putting that aside, I really didn’t want to deal with Mio right now. Even though Tomoe’s mention of a surprise worried me, I decided to endure it for now. With things at the academy bound to get busy, I wouldn’t know when I’d have a chance to stay in the Demiplane again. It might actually be fun to hear about what these two got up to in my absence.

That said, we’d need to stay cautious and keep an eye out for the Goddess, even when contacting each other. I couldn’t just stop using the gates, though.

*These gates are just too convenient. So far, there hasn’t been any sign that the Goddess has noticed my movements through the Demiplane. Maybe I should test things and see what happens if I use the Gates of Mist on purpose.*

*Given my actions recently, I doubt everything went according to the Goddess’s plan. Knowing her, I’m sure she’ll have some complaints, but if there’s no interference even after that, we might be safe...*

*Sigh, I haven’t even gotten to the academy yet, and it’s already like this.*

Either way, what I needed to focus on was clear: self-improvement. At Rotsgard, I needed to prepare myself for dealing with the Goddess, among other things. I’d barely gotten to learn about humans and magick before being thrown into chaos by that Goddess again.

*Honestly.*

*When the time comes, you won’t even need to look for me; I’ll come to you. Just wait. Once I know what I want to do, what I’m aiming for, I won’t have to hide anymore.*

*Whether I stand out or not, I can still do business and look for my parents.*

“Um, excuse me!”

As I was about to leave for the academy, a new voice called out to me. I turned to see a small girl standing at attention, hugging a sword taller than her body with both hands.

“Oh, Komoe-chan,” I greeted her. “Did I wake you up? I’m sorry.”

“Y-Young Master, p-please try not to overdo it! Have a safe trip!”

It was cute to see Komoe trying so hard to use the right formal speech. I wondered if she knew that she didn’t have to.

“All right, I’m off then. If Tomoe ever bullies you, just let me know, okay, Komoe-chan?” I said, waving my hand as I started creating the mist gate.

“I’ll do my best, Young Master!!!” she replied enthusiastically.

Komoe was a separate personality from the original Tomoe clone, even though I hadn’t had many conversations with that one. I’d assumed that split bodies shared the same consciousness as their original, but Komoe clearly had her own.

Maybe I was mistaken, or perhaps Komoe was an exception. But I wasn’t too concerned with finding out for sure. I was completely fine with treating her as a different person.



*Maybe I'm being too kind to her because of it, I realized. Even if I know it won't atone for what happened to her predecessor.*

*Ah, but...*

*It would be nice if Tomoe were this cute too.*

I focused on locating Shiki.

"Young Master, I too have a fondness for samurai, but please refrain from such inclinations," Tomoe told me, her face serious.

"I would *never!*" I shouted, taken aback. I sighed. It was too early in the morning to think about that. Nevertheless, I waved a final goodbye, activated the Gate of Mist, and transported myself to Rotsgard.

※ ※ ※

"Well, Young Master's gone now. Mio, how long are you going to stay like that?"

Although Tomoe's voice rang throughout the room, her black-haired companion just mumbled quietly to herself, biting her thumbnail. Soon Tomoe tired of waiting for a response and turned to face her little clone, who still stood by the door.

"Komoe, you don't need to guard this room anymore. I'll come by later. Why don't you go play with the forest ogres?"

"Oh, okay! I will, Tomoe-sama," Komoe responded obediently.

"You remember what I taught you, right?"

"Of course! If they get cut, fix them up!"

"Good girl. Off you go now... What is it?" Tomoe asked, noticing Komoe's curious expression.

"Tomoe-sama, I have a question."

"Ask away."

"What are 'inclinations'?"

“I’ll tell you someday, when you’re older. Now go on, don’t keep the forest ogres waiting.”

“Y-Yes, all right! I’m off!” Komoe said with a vigorous nod. Tomoe smiled as he watched her run out of the room.

From the entrance, several other denizens of the Demiplane—dwarves, orcs, lizardfolk, the arach, and even a few forest ogres—peered into the room, curious and concerned about Makoto’s condition. Despite feeling a bit overwhelmed by their worry, Tomoe was secretly pleased.

*Even the forest ogres came to check on him, she thought. I thought they’d all be in the training grounds standing at attention. Looks like I’ve been too easy on them. I thought I’d pushed them to their limits, but they still have some fight in them.*

At that moment, Tomoe decided to adjust the training regimen.

“Um, how’s Makoto-sama doing?” one of the orcs asked cautiously.

It was Ema, the orc chief’s daughter, who now managed most of the Demiplane’s administrative tasks. She was wise, skillful in negotiation, and adept at dealing with other races. Above all, she was fiercely loyal to Makoto. Both Tomoe and Mio held her in high regard.

“Oh, Ema. Young Master just woke up. You can tell everyone he’s safe,” Tomoe replied.

“But it seems we can’t see him?”

“He’s gone to the academy where Shiki is. It’s better to have him thoroughly examined. We don’t have anyone here skilled in treating hyumans. Shiki used to be hyuman, so he’s the most suited to that job.”

“I see. All right. Will he be coming back here tonight?”

“Yes, although I’m not sure if it’ll be tonight, but he should be back soon enough so everyone can see he’s all right. Although, I’m not sure if the dwarves are more worried about him or the state of his equipment,” Tomoe mused, squinting at a few elder dwarves who were peeking in.

“That’s so unfair! We’re just as worried about Young Master’s well-being as anyone else!” one of the dwarves retorted.

“Oh, I see, my apologies. In any case, go and let the villages know Young Master is safe. That goes for you too, lizardfolk and arach. Got it?”

Everyone nodded at Tomoe’s words and quickly left the entrance to spread the news.

“Honestly, what annoying people. Still, it’s great to know how much everyone cares for Young Master,” Tomoe murmured to herself.

“Young Master?! Young Master isn’t here?!”

“Mio. I see you’re finally back with us,” Tomoe sighed as Mio’s panic began to set in.

“Tomoe, where *is* Young Master?!” Mio demanded, her distress only growing.

Tomoe smirked. It was funny how quickly Mio became frantic after snapping out of her daze.

“He went to the academy city. While you were there muttering to yourself.”

Mio wasted no time leaping off the bed. “Wh-What did you say?!” she exclaimed. But the next moment, she swayed dangerously, flinging out a hand to steady to herself on the bed.

“Ow, tsss.”

“Dummy. You used such an intense regeneration spell; it’s no wonder your stamina and magick haven’t recovered all the way. You need to sit still and rest,” Tomoe said, exasperated. If she was being honest, though, she didn’t think she felt too much better than Mio.

“Ugh, how pathetic,” Mio moaned. “I want to go kill that Dragon Slayer and the Greater Dragon right away... but my body’s just not moving the way I want it to.”

“We’re not specialists in healing. Trying to do too much outside our expertise would lead to this kind of outcome.”



“That’s why we should’ve called Shiki! He’s quite handy when it comes to healing.”

“Don’t blame me. By the time I got back from hearing Komoe’s report, you’d already used a reckless regeneration spell on your own.”

“Th-That was...” Mio stammered.

Tomoe gave a deep sigh. “If I hadn’t eliminated the curse that was making Young Master’s wounds worse and supported your spell, who knows what kind of damage you’d have done to yourself. If it’d been just you, what would you have sacrificed to heal his wounds? I can’t even begin to imagine.”

When Tomoe had rushed to the scene, Mio had clearly been distraught; her bloodshot eyes radiated a madness that suggested she was willing to sacrifice anything to heal Makoto.

“I didn’t care what I had to sacrifice,” Mio said. Her eyes said that she felt some remorse... but no regret.

“You’re quite a handful,” Tomoe teased her. “So, you wouldn’t mind losing an arm?”

“Course not. If it meant I could heal him,” Mio replied without hesitation, staring back at Tomoe with a blank expression.

“...”

“In fact, I’d be honored. After all, everything I have belongs to Young Master.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Tomoe muttered, letting out another huge sigh.

“Wh-What do you mean by that?! And why do you keep calling me an idiot?!”

“I’m not saying it nearly enough. Idiot, idiot, idiot. You might be just fine talking like that, but if Young Master heard you, he’d be in tears.”

Mio blinked in confusion. “Huh?”

“Think about it. We’re supposed to be in a master-servant relationship with him. Normally, we’d be bound to obey his commands, our actions and even our thoughts aligned with his will. But Young Master lets us do whatever we want.

He's giving us the same respect he would give allies or even family. I doubt he even thinks of himself as in control of us."

"Allies, friends, family..."

"So, *that's* how much he cares about us," Tomoe continued, her voice softening. "It's natural to want to give everything for Young Master's sake. But that's exactly why we need to protect ourselves as much as possible while we serve him. If we want to keep being with him, we need to take care of ourselves too."

Mio said nothing, her head lowered.

"Hey, Mio, are you listening? I'm saying something pretty important here."

Mio looked up at Tomoe, but she barely raised her voice above a whisper as she answered. "And yet you went and picked a fight with some Greater Dragon..."

"What?!"

"Wasn't it with Luto? You went and challenged Luto, didn't you? Leaving me behind to watch the house. Isn't that something Young Master would 'be in tears' about? Do you think I should tell him about it?"

"Th-That's..."

"Just because the other party happened to be out and you didn't meet them, doesn't mean your intention wasn't the same. I'll make sure to report everything to Young Master."

Tomoe's earlier bravado was gone in a blink. "W-Wait! I may have been too hard on you. Rushing ahead because you're worried about Young Master is, well, it's understandable. So, how about we forget the whole 'telling him' thing, huh? It wouldn't be very... considerate."

"I don't care. I'm just an idiot, after all," Mio replied coolly. "Maybe you should go without watching any samurai dramas for a while."

"O-Oh no... What a terrible thing to say," Tomoe stuttered, visibly shaken. "Fine then! I'm going to go visit the place where Young Master fought soon. If I

find any information about the Dragon Slayer or Mitsurugi, I'll let you know first. Maybe... we could even have a little fun without Young Master knowing."

"And?" Mio prodded.

"And...?"

"..."

"All right, all right! I'll also help you edit those videos you like. How about that?" Tomoe offered, desperate to make amends.

"Really?" Mio asked, hopeful but suspicious.

"A samurai does *not* go back on their word!" Tomoe declared, puffing out her chest.

"In that case, I'll forgive the 'idiot' remark," Mio finally relented. "I'd appreciate it if you hurried up and investigated the place where Young Master fought."

"Y-Yes, I understand," Tomoe replied, sighing in relief.

*Guess I'll make that brat pay properly too. A bit of chaos with Mio could be quite entertaining.*

The exchange between Tomoe and Mio ended with a rare victory for Mio. Though they had agreed to move forward with the tasks Makoto had given them, the two followers also decided to keep their less-than-innocent plans a secret.

It wasn't until the sun was high in the sky that Tomoe and Mio finally felt well enough to move around. For now, things in the Demiplane were back to business as usual.



**A** familiar scene.

A nostalgic place.

I was back at Nakatsuhara High School, walking the path that led from our hilltop school down to the arcade area in front of the station.

“Want to walk together for a bit?” came a sudden voice from behind me. “You’re walking home today, right, Makoto?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.”

*Was I walking with someone? And why was I walking here in the first place?*

I turned to look at the source of the voice and saw a familiar face.

Yukari Azuma.

A member of my archery club.

For some reason, Azuma seemed tense... almost prickly.

*What’s this about?*

I felt uneasy, like a thorn was caught in my throat.

Azuma seemed to be choosing her words carefully; she hadn’t said anything else after her initial greeting.

*What do people talk about at times like this?*

I had no idea.

I needed to say something but what?

These two thoughts were playing on loop in my head.

“I never thought I’d stumble upon such a sweet, youthful scene,” Azuma said, a wry smile on her face as she glanced at me. Her eyeline was a little higher than mine, making me suddenly aware of my height.

Maybe being with Azuma, a friend from Japan, was why I was thinking about it now, something I hadn’t considered much since coming to this other world.

Being short was something I couldn’t do much about... but I really wouldn’t have minded growing a bit taller. At least 170 centimeters would be nice.

*Wait... what scene is she talking about?*

“But seriously, I’m sorry! I really didn’t expect you to be involved in something like that! I wasn’t eavesdropping or anything, I swear!”

“Ah, it’s fine. Though I kind of feel like you’re implying something rude but whatever.”

*... Oh. This is a dream.*

The suddenness of the scene, the way it was unfolding—it all made sense. Sometimes, when you’re dreaming, you suddenly realize, *This is a dream.*

This was one of those moments.

My thoughts, which had been hazy and unfocused, suddenly sharpened. As soon as I realized this was a dream, I remembered exactly where this scene went in my memories.

It was something that happened just before I had come to this other world.

After archery practice, my underclassman, Hasegawa Nukumi, confessed to me, and I’d turned her down. I hadn’t seen her as anything more than a junior, and looking back now, it was probably because of some stupid pride and bravado. I’d ended up hurting Hasegawa.

This scene was from right after that.

A sharp pain twinged in my chest.

*This is one of the things I left unresolved in Japan.*

When Tsukuyomi-sama summoned me to this world, all I could think about were my sisters and my family. I didn't have the time to think about myself or my school life. Looking back, though, I realized how many things I'd left unfinished in Japan.

Not that I'm not saying I regret coming to this other world. However, if one of my sisters had been lost, and I'd known it was because of me, I know I wouldn't have been able to bear to living on in Japan.

Azuma seemed surprised for a moment by my words, but then she gave a wry smile. *Right*. She had something she wanted to talk about, and she must have been waiting for me to come out at that time. She wasn't the kind of girl who'd deliberately eavesdrop on someone. She was straightforward and easy to talk to, not in a boyish way, but in a genuine, down-to-earth way.

She was popular with both boys and girls because she didn't act superior or fawn over people. I guess you could say she was just an average girl, not too skinny or anything, with a pretty normal build.

Hasegawa could have been a model. In fact, with her tall figure and rather early development, she stood out like a sore thumb from everyone else at our school. But to me, Azuma still appeared as an attractive woman in her own right.

If there were some kind of ranking for the ideal female friend, Azuma would undoubtedly take the top spot at school.

Incidentally, she'd ranked second in the (secretly conducted) "Big Sister" category of the unofficial school poll. And that was quite something, especially considering she'd received a significant number of votes from the third-year high schoolers. Even among older girls, she was someone they looked up to as a role model—or maybe something more. *Ahem, I should probably stop this line of thought.*

"Well, never mind that. So, you wanted to talk to me, right?" I asked, noticing her brow furrow.

My words were the same as they had been in reality. Right now, I was myself, but also not quite myself. After all, this was a dream—a recreation of my memories.

“Yeah, something like that,” Azuma replied, her voice a bit lower than before, sounding hesitant.

“Don’t tell me... Did you see me hitting the targets like Hasegawa did?!”

“Huh? What are you talking about all of a sudden? Sure, I’ve seen you hit the target plenty of times. Today’s not the first. I don’t think it’s anything to be embarrassed about, though?”

“Oh nooo! I thought no one was watching!”

That was supposed to be my secret time, something I did alone for my own enjoyment. That’s why I always volunteered to clean up the range after practice!

*I can’t believe this!*

As I squirmed in embarrassment, Azuma gave me a why-are-you-acting-like-this-now look that hit me right in the gut, making me squirm even more.

I was actually mortified.

“Well, it happened quite a bit, you know? Besides, you didn’t even bother to close off the range. It wasn’t much of a secret,” Azuma said matter-of-factly.

“But the archery range is on the edge of the school! Once practice is over and everyone goes home, there shouldn’t be anyone around!” I protested.

“If someone came back to get something they forgot, they’d see you in a second.”

“I made sure to check that no one was coming before I started!”

“Oh, come on. What’s with the whining? Even if you didn’t see anyone, someone could have just remembered they left something and come back, you know? That’s exactly what happened when I first saw you.”

“Get your memories straight!!!”

Azuma shrugged. “Most humans don’t have perfect memory, you know.”

“Ugh...”

“Shall we continue?” she asked, shooting me a pitying look.

—*Oh, that talk.* —

In the dream, I resigned myself to the conversation and nodded.

“Earlier today, before practice started... I got called out by the seniors,” Azuma continued. “They told me I should be the next captain.”

*Oh, right. She’s basically been the acting leader since early summer. So, no surprise there. But, so what? Everyone already assumed she was the top choice—the clear favorite.*

“And?” I asked indifferently.

“That’s it? Come on, give me some kind of reaction!” Azuma started to get flustered, but I could tell she was being serious, so I responded in kind.

“Well, I figured it’d be you.”

“Huh?”

“Who else would it be?” I asked. “Honestly, who could it be if not you?”

“Uh, well... there’s you,” she mumbled.

*She actually said it—she suggested me.*

*Why would she bring up someone like me, who’s obviously out of the running?*

“Listen, how’s someone who never competes in tournaments or matches supposed to lead the club? Besides, our club’s always had female captains.”

That was the truth. While I technically had permission from our advisor, I’d always been that odd member who didn’t compete. Before starting high school, I’d promised my teacher that I wouldn’t participate in external competitions. In any event, our club traditionally had female captains. With someone as well suited for the role as Azuma, there was no need to break that tradition now.

“With your skills, I think it could work out,” she insisted.

“Come on now.”

“And besides, you’re probably the most popular with the underclassmen.”

“Oh, come on!” I exclaimed.



Azuma was surprisingly negative that day. It was strangely out of character for her; she was normally so cheerful and easygoing.

“The seniors don’t know your skills or how much the younger members admire you,” she continued. “So even though I recommended you, they still want me to do it.”

This was the first I’d heard that Azuma had made this rather drastic suggestion. Since I hadn’t heard anything from the senior girls, I’d assumed I’d never been in the running. I had no idea she’d actually thrown my name into the ring.

As we walked, taking our time, we found ourselves about halfway down the long hill. Once we reached the bottom, we’d be in the shopping district, where there was usually a decent amount of foot traffic. But at this hour, we were the only ones here.

*—Yeah, it was somewhere around here...—*

“Hey.”

I was walking straight ahead without looking at Azuma, but when she spoke up in that short, hesitant voice, I could feel her gaze turn toward me. When I stopped and began to turn just my head to respond, she grabbed me firmly by both elbows, pulling me to face her.

Suddenly, we were standing inches apart. For a few moments, things were awkward. Then, I felt her grip on my arms loosen slightly.

“Makoto... won’t you be the captain?” she asked, her voice filled with a quiet desperation.

“Azuma, I can’t. Just like I thought, everyone in the club wants you to be captain. They believe you can do it,” I replied, trying to be as gentle yet firm as possible.

“But if you just showed them...!” Her voice rose with each word. “If they saw that shot of yours, the one where you keep hitting the target dead center, the seniors would back off in no time!”

“Azuma!”

Not sure what else to do, I shook her hands off and grabbed her shoulders instead. Her body, which had been trembling slightly, gave a big shudder and then stilled. Her eyes were shimmering.

It was disappointing, but I couldn't give her the answer she wanted. I knew Azuma had the capability to be a great captain. I just needed to help her see that too.

"I know it sounds cliché, but you can do it. Everyone else will support you. No, I'll make sure they do! Just give it a shot, okay?" I urged, squeezing her shoulders reassuringly.

"Really?" she asked, her voice trembling a little.

*Is she scared?*

Maybe. Or maybe my sudden outburst startled her.

I'd never seen Azuma look vulnerable before. It was actually kind of painful to witness.

"Yeah, I promise. And, of course, I'll help out too," I assured her.

"Then, will you be vice-captain?"

"Of course, I'd be happy to— Wait, what?!"

"You'll do it, right?"

*I walked right into that one.*

Or maybe I was just being used. But knowing Azuma, I could tell this was a genuine proposal.

*Let's be honest, though; there's no way I can say no to this.*

"You're sneaky, you know that? All right, all right, I'll be your vice-captain. I'm looking forward to working with you, Captain Azuma," I said, grinning in spite of myself.

"Heheee. In that case, can I ask you one more thing?" she said. The shimmer of tears lingered in her eyes, but she now wore a playful smile.

*Crunch.*

A jarring sensation echoed in my mind, like an alarm bell ringing.

—*What is this?*—

I knew what was coming next. It was a bitter memory, but I couldn't stop it.

I was about to experience her confession again, which would inevitably lead to me rejecting her. In the end, she would be hurt and cry, and I'd end up getting slapped.

"Hey, go out with me," she said rather than asked.

"Yeah, yeah, okay... Wait, what?!"

"Aha, it's worth a shot. Nice to meet you, boyfrieeend."

"W-W-W-Wait a minute!" I stammered.

"What's wrooong?"

"What do you mean, 'What's wrong?'?! You saw it, didn't you?!"

She'd seen it. She'd seen when Hasegawa confessed to me. And she'd seen my awkward response and what had happened afterward.

Azuma Yukari had been watching.

Was that why she had this expression? *This... seductive look?*

"Yep," she answered breezily.

I'd never seen Azuma Yukari with such a... *feminine* look on her face.

"But. You're just doing a trial period with Hasegawa, right? I'm fine with that too."

*What...?*

What does she mean by that?

"Whaaat?!"

She's telling me to date both of them. *Azuma is?*

Right after I'd been confessed to by another girl from the same club?

*Grinding, twisting.*

The alarm bells of discomfort continued to ring in my mind.

*No, this isn't my memory.*

I understood now. This was not a replay of something from my past.

*So, that's what this is.*

This dream was a continuation of that nightmare Tomoe had once showed me.

"Don't think too hard about it. Both of us understand that you need to try things out. You can taste both and pick whichever you like best. For you, I'd even settle for being the second choice."

Azuma took a step closer, her expression sultry. Her hand rested on my chest, her cheek following suit as she bent her knees slightly, pressing her face against her hand.

*Please, stop. It's just a dream. So, wake up already!*

*If it's a dream about my past, that's fine. I can handle that. It's something I've done. But if I'm dreaming about—about that—if I'm remembering Tomoe's illusion and not reality, that's just...*

*Am I really that weak? So pathetic that I'd rewrite painful memories as something more palatable?*

*No. Hell no!*

*I won't see what comes next. I refuse to.*

"I'm not going to watch any more of this!!!"

The thin ray of light piercing through the curtains struck my face, stinging my eyes with its intensity. It was usually annoying, but today, I was grateful for it.

*Thank God.*

I didn't have to see it. I flung the curtains wide open, letting bright sunlight flood the room.

"Wow, that's bright..." I sighed. "Is it noon already?"

I looked around the room. My newest follower, Shiki, who'd traveled with me from Tsige and should have been sleeping in the same room, was nowhere to be seen.

Yesterday, I recalled, we'd pushed ourselves to teleport further because the inn we'd initially planned to stay at had ended up being so sketchy.

Orbit was a fairly large town, with respectable-looking buildings. I didn't care too much about our lodging, but Shiki insisted on staying at a high-end inn. He wasn't normally the type to care about such things, so why did he suddenly seem so particular? As I thought about it more, I quickly realized the answer.

*Tomoe and Mio must have said something to him.*

When we were searching for the inn, Shiki was acting like he was just doing his job.

"Hm?"

There was something on the small table in the room... It was a piece of paper—a memo? I picked it up and read it. It said that we'd be leaving for the next town late at night and that he was going out to take care of arrangements and figure out our next accommodations in advance.

We'd only been traveling for two days, but it already felt hectic.

I got dressed and sat down heavily on the bed, letting out a deep breath. Then, my stomach growled. *All right, if it's around noon, that makes sense. I should go eat something.*

"Should I send Shiki a telepathic message... Nah, I'll just leave a note."

I grabbed the back of Shiki's memo and quickly scribbled, *"Today, let's go our separate ways. Once you're done with your work, take some time for yourself. We'll meet up at the teleportation point later tonight."*

With Tomoe and Mio not around, Shiki could relax.

Thinking casually about what to have for lunch, I decided to step out into the town.

※ ※ ※

I chose to take a stroll around the city on my own, enjoying the sights of a place I'd never been before.

*Come to think of it, this might actually be my first time doing something like this.*

I'd hardly spent any time alone since arriving in this world. Up until Tsige, my followers Tomoe and Mio had always been with me, and even after setting out for the academy city, Shiki had stayed by my side.

I wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, until a diner caught my eye. I stepped inside, asked the owner for his recommendation, and ordered that.

"But, man, that dream dredged up some unwanted memories," I muttered to myself when he'd left.

What was even more unsettling was knowing that the dream hadn't just been a real memory; it was a continuation of the illusion Tomoe had once shown me. Because of that, I found myself thinking about Azuma more than I would have liked.

"Hey, kid, why the hell are you eatin' with that grim look on your face?" a voice asked. "You're already hard to look at as it is! I don't remember serving anything that bad!"

*Oops.* I guess my bad mood must have shown on my face. And the fact that I'd mechanically shoved the food into my mouth probably hadn't helped. *"Sorry about that,"* I wrote. *"I haven't tried this before, but it's just as good as you said. Delicious, really."*

"Then how 'bout you try eatin' like you mean it?"

*"I'm sorry! The texture is pretty unique. Can I ask what this is?"*

The food had a chewy, konjac-like mouthfeel and a strong, savory juice. I'd never tasted anything like it before. I wasn't just flattering the guy—it was genuinely delicious.

"Look, kid, when you're eating, the best thing to do is empty your head and just savor the flavor. This here's the city's specialty—or at least it's going to be—slime cuisine. I gotta hand it to you for diggin' right in, but I guess you just weren't thinkin', huh?"

*"Slime... So, the core is edible?"* I asked.

“The core, huh? Kid, you an adventurer or somethin’? Can’t believe you go straight to the core when you hear ‘slime dish.’”

*“Isn’t that what it is? I thought the only thing left after you defeated slimes were their different-shaped cores.”*

By now I’d gotten pretty used to communicating in writing. The shopkeeper here didn’t seem to mind at all, which was a relief.

“Normally, yeah. But around these parts, someone found a way to kill a slime without messin’ up the body. And one way they decided to use the slime meat was to cook it.”

*“So that jellylike part is edible? That’s amazing.”*

“You sure don’t flinch, do you? Me, I couldn’t believe the first guy to try it was in his right mind.”

*“There are some monsters that can be used as food, after all. I’m not one to shy away from something without trying it first.”*

“So, not afraid of somethin’ like a slime, huh? That what you’re sayin’, adventurer?”

*Looks like he misunderstood when I didn’t deny being an adventurer earlier.*

*I should probably clear up this misunderstanding, even if it’s a bit of a hassle. But then again, I am registered with the Adventurer’s Guild. So, it’s not exactly wrong to call myself an adventurer.*

*Well, I guess I should at least correct him.*

*“I am registered, but my main job is being a merchant. I’m just on my way from Tsige to Rotsgard,” I wrote.*

“What?! Tsige to Rotsgard? That’s quite the journey!” he exclaimed.

*“I’m using teleportation circles, so it’s not as bad as it sounds.”*

“Heh. You look pretty young, but that’s impressive. You traveling alone?”

*“No, I have someone with me.”*

“A bodyguard, huh? A rich merchant using teleportation magick circles... What brings a guy like you into a place like mine, if you don’t mind me asking?”

*"I smelled something good, that's all. Plus, your restaurant looks new, and I was curious. I've got a friend who's a merchant in Tsige, and this trip to Rotsgard is basically just an errand for them."*

*That answer should satisfy him, right?* Saying I was drawn in by the smell of unagi probably wouldn't make much sense here. In that regard, the dish wasn't what I expected, but it tasted good.

*Still... I can't believe this is slime.*

It had the texture of konjac and the firmness of gizzards. And when you bit into it, it burst with an intense, meaty juice. It'd be great as a side dish with some quality sake or even as a main course.

*Not a bad find at all.*

"An errand, huh..." the owner said.

*"Yeah, I'm just a low-level employee, after all,"* I replied.

"Ah, guess I've been pryin' a bit too much. Sorry about that."

*"No worries. More importantly, about this slime..."*

"Hm?"

*"Does the Adventurer's Guild put out capture requests for them?"*

"Yeah, you've got it. Slimes are a pretty formidable species in their own right. In this town, it's mostly the top-ranked adventurers who take on those jobs."

*"So, it's a job for the top ranks, then?"*

"Nah, the demand's still way higher than what they're bringing in right now. If you're any good, we could use all the help we can get with those requests."

*"I see. Thanks for the meal. Keep the change."* I set a gold coin on the table, got up from my seat, and walked out of the shop.



*So, there's a method for defeating slimes without destroying their core, huh. Sounds interesting.*

*Maybe I should check out the Adventurer's Guild, just to see what this is all about.*

"Hey, hey!" the man called out as I left. "You sure you wanna leave this much?" I waved him off. Hopefully the extra money would serve as an incentive for him not to mention our conversation.

As I headed to the Adventurer's Guild at a brisk pace, I noticed the curious stares from the townspeople. Even though I'd decided to take off my mask, it still felt uncomfortable.

*I don't mind being mistaken for a demi-human rather than a hyuman, but I'd really prefer not to deal with these blatant looks of contempt.*

Still, it was much better than being suddenly bombarded with sword and magick attacks.

※ ※ ※

Even after I entered the Adventurer's Guild, the stares didn't change. But maybe because they were used to dealing with demi-humans, the adventurers there quickly averted their gazes. In that sense, a rough-and-tumble place like the Adventurer's Guild wasn't so bad.

I headed for the bulletin board where the requests were posted. It didn't take long to locate a request, posted by the city, to capture a slime. The required adventurer rank was B, much higher than my E.

*Is the rank requirement so high because it's a capture request rather than a subjugation or because capturing it without dissolving it is a particularly difficult method?*

Slimes usually dissolved into nothing when killed, leaving only their core behind. Physical strikes or slashes had little effect, so long-range magick attacks were the standard approach. The request notice didn't mention any methods for capturing them.

*What should I do...?* I wondered. This wasn't like the Rembrandt case. Since this was a capture, even if I had the power, it would be difficult to push my way through without the right rank. But it obviously was about more than power.

If I wanted to learn the procedure by watching, I'd have to wait for a group of adventurers to take on the quest and then tail them, but that sounded like a hassle.

*Maybe I'll just tell Mio a story about finding a delicious slime as a souvenir. I can always look into it in more detail later if I feel like it.*

Time to head back. I figured I would take in the sights of the city a bit and then return to the inn. *Taking a second nap once in a while isn't so bad either.*

Just as I turned from the bulletin board and was about to leave the Adventurer's Guild, I heard a shout from the reception counter.

"We don't have time!"

*Hm? What's going on?*

"The Moon over the Ruined Castle is coming to attack!<sup>3</sup> It's true!" the voice continued, her tone desperate.

*"Moon over the Ruined Castle"?! That's the name of one of my favorite songs. What does she mean, it's coming to attack?*

"All right, all right. I'll accept it as a quest," the receptionist replied, his tone calm and reassuring. "Of course, it'll be fine for you to pay the fee afterward."

Huh, that was pretty accommodating on the receptionist's part. In fact, it was the first I'd ever heard of the guild allowing a quest fee to be paid later.

"Those damn bandits will be here tonight or tomorrow! You have no intention of taking this seriously, do you?!" the woman insisted, her frustration clear.

"That's not it, miss. We'll handle it just like you asked."

"Then get some adventurers from here to come back to the village with me, right away!"

As the argument continued, I realized that the guild wasn't being accommodating; they were just trying to get this woman off their backs. They

had no intention of taking this request seriously.

The client seemed pretty desperate, but even if you told someone to deal with bandits who could attack tonight, unless the reward was exceptionally high or the adventurer was a complete fool, no one was going to take on that request.

It was obvious that the woman hadn't had enough time to prepare anything.

I glanced over at the client and saw that she was a human girl about my height. Her clothes weren't in the best condition, to put it nicely. They didn't match the style of this city, and her shoes were caked in mud. Her legs were dirty too.

*She must have walked all the way here without using a teleportation circle and rushed straight into the Adventurer's Guild as soon as she arrived.*

I had to admit, she was cute though. Which you almost didn't need to say in this world, where it was actually rarer to find someone *not* good-looking. Even most demi-humans, unless they were a race with animalistic features like orcs, were quite attractive.

She stood with her back straight, and she had a determined look in her eyes. There was a graceful, dignified air about her. Despite all that, she was being completely ignored by everyone around her. She was desperately trying to approach the adventurers who looked strong, pleading with them individually.

Of course, no one was going to pay attention to her. *Rather than listening to some unreasonable request from an outsider like her, they'd prefer to take on another high-paying job that would line their pockets and boost their reputation with the city.*

When the name "Moon over the Ruined Castle" was mentioned, a ripple of fear ran through the adventurers. Even though I found the name ridiculous—something I was getting used to in this world—they were apparently a formidable group of bandits. It was a common sight here.

I decided to head back, but just as I making my way toward the exit—

"Stop messing around! Is this all you people ever do, just talk?"

*Huh?!*

It was something the girl had said. “Just talk.” It was a phrase I heard all the time back in my school days, especially during club activities.

*Was she being sarcastic or just speaking out of anger?*

When I turned around to look at her again, for a brief moment, she looked just like Yukari Azuma.

*—No, that was just an illusion.*

With a blink, the illusion vanished. Azuma had a refined face, but she wasn’t as striking as this girl.

*Still... for some reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling of curiosity.*

As I stood there, unable to leave the guild, I kept watching her.

“Give it up, miss,” one of the adventurers finally said. “There’s no one here who’ll help you. You already know that, don’t you?”

*I guess that’s the end of it.*

“I’ll pay you properly!” she pleaded. “So why won’t anyone—?”

“We’re already getting ready to take down the Moon over the Ruined Castle,” the adventurer replied calmly. “But, right now, they have more strength than we do. Sorry, but we don’t have the resources to help your village.”

“If you’re planning to defeat them anyway, can’t you do it now?!”

*She’s asking for the impossible.*

The adventurer, however, spoke to her gently, trying to reason with her. He seemed like a logical person, not the kind who would recklessly throw his life away for free. For an adventurer, it seemed he possessed a healthy sense of balance.

“There’s only one thing you can do,” he continued.

“What?” she asked, her voice wavering with desperation.

“Go back to your village right away, and bring as many villagers here as you can. The Moon over the Ruined Castle will be defeated by the middle of next

month. Just hold on a little longer.”

“Do you think we can just abandon our village?! How are we supposed to live after they’ve had their way with it?”

“You’re a stubborn girl,” the adventurer sighed. “If people survive, the village can be rebuilt in time. Right now, you need to focus on saving lives.”

*He’s right.*

But the girl wasn’t backing down.

“There are people who can’t just pick up and move! How can you be so heartless? This kind of cruelty shouldn’t be allowed. We were just living peacefully, praying to the Goddess every day... So why?”

*The Goddess, huh?*

I doubted praying to someone like that would do any good.

“If that Goddess could save everyone just through prayers, there’d be a lot less people aiming to become adventurers,” the man remarked dryly.

“You don’t believe in the Goddess?” the client asked, her eyes wide with shock.

“I do believe in her,” the adventurer replied. “Right after my own skills, my comrades, and my friends.”

*An adventurer who doesn’t rely on the Goddess, huh? Seems like I’m seeing more and more of them these days.* They must think it’s foolish to rely on divine protection or blessings, only to have their expectations fail them and end up dead. I could completely understand that way of thinking.

“It’s because of people like you that the Goddess is angry with us,” the girl shot back. “That’s why She’s doing such cruel things to us humans.”

The adventurer let out a big sigh. Then, in a firmer tone, he addressed the girl again. “It’s up to you whether you leave everyone to die, or save as many villagers as you can and hope for a second chance. But don’t forget—we’re not the Goddess’s swords. We’re adventurers who risk our lives to earn a living. If you want us to act, you need to give us a good reason.”

The force in his voice made the girl flinch. She seemed to understand that she had been pushing too hard, driven by emotion. Maybe she realized that the adventurer was speaking the truth. His logic was sound and, from the beginning, her request hadn't stood a chance.

She bit her lip in frustration, then sighed, her shoulders slumping. *I guess she's given up.*

She slowly walked in my direction, toward the exit. Her head was bowed, and tears were falling to the ground in small drops.

"Move," she said softly.

"..."

When she reached me, she looked up and spoke more clearly this time. "Please move."

I stepped aside to let her pass. Her lips were pressed together tightly, so tightly that I could see blood starting to seep out. Tears continued to stream down her cheeks, and her eyes gleamed bitterly with despair and frustration.

As she left, I watched her through my Search Realm. Then, I turned and walked up to the counter.

"What's this? I don't recognize you," said the man behind the counter, eyeing me curiously.

*"I can't speak due to certain circumstances," I wrote. "I'm sorry for talking like this, but there's something I'd like to ask."*

"Heh, that's unusual. But impressive. So, you're a magician? Looking for a job, or maybe some party members?"

*"No, I just heard the commotion earlier. What kind of bandits are the Moon over the Ruined Castle?"*

"Sympathy will only shorten your life, you know?"

*"I'm just curious. They seem to be a group causing trouble in this area, not just with that girl's village, right?"*

“Curiosity, huh? That can shorten your life, too, if you aren’t careful. But fine, if you don’t know about them, you must be passing through?”

*“I’m from Tsige,”* I answered.

“Wait, Tsige... If you’re from a place like that, you must have some skills. All right, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to fill you in... But first, let me see your guild card.”

I handed it over.

“So, you registered as an adventurer in Tsige... Not something you see every day.” The man was muttering to himself as he looked over my card. “And here I thought you were just some ordinary E-rank at Level 1. But you’ve completed special-rank requests. You’re definitely not a regular adventurer.”

Tsige was a well-known town, even this far away, famous for its harsh environment on the edge of the wilderness. It seemed being an adventurer from Tsige carried more weight than I’d thought.

*Interesting, though I couldn’t help but notice... not all guild receptionists are young women, are they?*

“The Moon over the Ruined Castle is a vicious group of bandits wanted by six towns and villages around here,” the guy finally explained. “It’s said they have over a hundred members, mostly former adventurers who turned to crime. So far, they’ve destroyed fifteen villages and taken down two walled towns.”

*Wow, they must be pretty skilled if even city walls don’t stop them.* And for the smaller villages, which only had small militias, it would have been a one-sided slaughter. It would be stupid to rush into action based on that girl’s words without proper preparation.

*“They’ve been causing quite a stir, haven’t they?”*

“Well, there are a few reasons for that,” the man replied. “But like that guy was saying earlier, we’re getting ready to take *them* down. Their time is almost up.”

I waited a moment, but it was clear the man wasn’t going to offer any more information for free. I quietly placed a few silver coins on the counter, then wrote, *“That girl didn’t seem to have any notable skills, and her village is*

*probably just a small one. But somehow, she knows about the bandits' raid before it's happening. For a group that's been operating as long as they have, it's a bit sloppy to have their actions detected by a young girl, don't you think?"*

The receptionist pocketed the coins and gave a nod. "That's just how they operate. They don't make a big show during their first raid. Then, they announce the next attack and give the villagers a choice—hand over their valuables or lose their lives."

*So, they promise to spare lives if people give up their belongings? Are they bandits who value some form of honor?* It didn't make much sense to me. If you're killing people and looting, concepts like honor are irrelevant, right?

"Only occasionally," the man said. "There have been times when a village's residents were spared by handing over their wealth. But it's rare. Most of the time, they engage in looting, slaughter, and even human trafficking. They're infamous for a reason... Their so-called choice is usually meaningless."

*"What a disgusting tactic."*

"Exactly. But just so you know, I can't say more, no matter how much you pay."

*"That's more than enough. Like I said, I'm just curious."*

"Smart move. This city is a good place to set up camp. Welcome to town."

*"Thanks."*

*So, these bandits are a nasty bunch. Then again... some of the adventurers in this city don't seem to have the best manners either—like those ones from earlier who were tailing the girl as she left.*

Of course, my Search Realm couldn't tell me whether they'd overheard her talking about the job and assumed she was carrying a lot of money or if they were just angered by what she had said. Either way, it didn't bode well.

*I can't just ignore this, can I?*

I knew it was probably foolish of me. She was just a girl who'd happened to say something I'd heard before. It wasn't like she was a doppelgänger of Hasegawa like Toa, who bore a striking resemblance to someone I knew.



*Seriously, what's wrong with me today?*

※ ※ ※

“You were in the guild...”

I managed to catch up with the girl right after she left the city. It seemed some adventurers who'd been following her had attacked, and I made it just before things escalated into a very explicit scene.

At the guild she'd been alone, but now she was standing protectively in front of a demi-human boy that was bleeding and groaning in pain.

Without a word, I'd jumped into the fray and took down the four adventurers who'd jumped them. After that, I'd dealt with three more adventurers—or maybe they were just thugs—who had apparently been tailing *me* for some reason. They'd probably thought they could catch me off guard, but I'd quickly turned the tables on them.

It was likely the work of that diner owner. Now that I thought about it, when I mentioned being a merchant, he'd gotten a scheming look in his eye.

After tying up all the troublemakers and leaving them in a pile nearby, I approached the girl.

“What are you trying to do?” she asked, her tone guarded. Considering that I'd appeared out of nowhere and put on quite the show, I could understand if she was wary of me.

*“Just a whim. Sorry if you were hoping for a more heroic answer,”* I wrote.

“Just so you know, I don't have any money.”

*“I'm not interested in that. More importantly, your friend there seems to be injured. He's bleeding pretty bad.”*

“So what?” she replied, her voice sharp.

*“If you'd like, I could try healing him,”* I offered.

“Huh?”

She hesitated for a moment, clearly conflicted. But in the end, she decided to trust me, stepping back to make space between me and the boy.

Sometimes, time could make all the difference in a situation like this. Fortunately, in his case, it didn't seem like the wounds were too severe.

It was understandable that she had to weigh whether she could trust me against the boy's injuries. For most people, that wasn't an easy decision to make.

If the kid's wounds were too severe for me to handle, I'd have to call Shiki or give up. Thankfully, they were minor cuts, caused by a blade, with no signs of poison.

*"I can heal this with my Realm."*

"Can you really heal him?" the woman asked, surprised. "You look like a magician, but you moved more like a warrior."

*"I'm Raidou. I'm an adventurer, too, but my main job is being a merchant."*

"A merchant?!" she exclaimed, her eyes growing wide. This was the standard reaction.

I didn't bother explaining why I was communicating this way—it was too much of a hassle.

*"Also, it's not a matter of whether he'll heal," I added. "He's already healed."*

"What?!" she shouted, rushing over to the boy to see for herself.

From what I could see, she was just an ordinary girl. Her movements and magical energy were completely average. But seeing a human so concerned for a demi-human's well-being, not to mention how she'd approached him without hesitation to check on his wounds, was rare.

As I'd told her, his injuries had been healed without any issues. He might not be able to move vigorously for a while, but as long as he took it easy, he'd be fine.

※ ※ ※

“Um, thank you,” she said softly.

*“Like I said, it’s no big deal,” I wrote. “I’m on a journey, so don’t worry about it.”*

“I can’t just forget about someone who saved my dear friend’s life. My name’s Rana, from Tapa Village. The one you healed is Ehto. He’s a werewolf. Thank you so much, Raidou-san, for saving him.”

*A werewolf, this weak-looking guy?*

*Are there different types of werewolves, or is this just how they are in this world?* I hoped for the former. *I want to think there are real beastman-type werewolves out there.*

I decided to change the subject. *“By the way, it seems like the Moon over the Ruined Castle has set its sights on you.”*

“Yes. Since you were there, I’m sure you know that the Adventurer’s Guild won’t help us,” Rana replied.

*“They’re already wanted, and plans for their subjugation are in motion. I’m afraid they won’t move to save your village.”*

“I see... So, they’re leaving us to die.” Rana’s voice was barely above a whisper.

*“I’m sure there were some who wanted to help, but you can’t blame them for getting scared when you told them it could be tonight or tomorrow. Adventurers are human too, after all.”*

“I know... Deep down, I knew it was a hopeless gamble,” she said, her face contorted with frustration as she forced out the words.

*“I see. It seems I said something unnecessary.”*

“Raidou, you’re an adventurer too, right? In a village that was attacked by those bandits, the elderly were killed, the children and women were captured, and the men were either killed or taken away. On top of that, all the supplies and whatever little wealth they had to survive the winter were completely plundered. What do you think about that?”

It felt like a trick question. There was no way I could say I didn't care. But in this harsh world, living side by side with such catastrophes seemed unavoidable.

So, I didn't give her a direct answer.

*"Rana, the Moon over the Ruined Castle is said to be a group of about a hundred ex-adventurers who've turned to banditry. They're quite strong, and I'm afraid there's not much that can be done about them right now."*

They sounded like the kind of people that, if they set their sights on you, you'd have no choice but to accept as bad luck. Even though they were wanted criminals, they were still operating and had already destroyed over ten villages. That made me curious—just how powerful were they? Part of me wanted to see for myself.

What bothered me most was that they shared a name with one of my favorite songs. Honestly, that was my biggest issue with them.

To be even more specific, I wanted to capture their leader and force him to change the name.

"They said it was a warning when they came to the village and tortured Berkeley-san to death, the strongest man in the village. Then they even killed his wife, who was pregnant..."

*They killed a pregnant woman? That's vile, even for a gang of bandits.*

"They said it was too much trouble to take her with them..." Rana explained. "Then they told us they'd come back, and that we should choose between our lives or our money by then."

*"I heard there were villages that survived by handing over their money?"*

"Yes, but they took away the young women and able-bodied men to sell them. In the end, those villages were left with only the elderly and children. There was no way they could survive like that."

*"So, Tapa Village decided to fight back and resist rather than choose either option?"*

"No."

“?”

“The village decided to hand over our wealth and gamble on the slim chance of survival. It was idiotic. Truly stupid!”

I had to agree with her.

“Rana,” came a younger voice.

“Ehto!” Rana said, her voice gentle and kind. “You’re awake! Are you hurting anywhere?”

The werewolf boy looked like a hyuman with dog ears. Oh, and he had a tail too. Unfortunately for me, there were no paw pads on his hands or feet.

The two of them hugged, overjoyed that they were both safe. *Well, I knew from the start that trying to lecture this girl wouldn’t get through to her.*

For the time being, I decided to escort them back to the village... and after that, my course of action was already set.

I had gotten quite used to death during my time at the base in the Wasteland and in Tsige. I had even killed hyumans myself. I thought I’d already accepted it as part of everyday life and moved on.

So why did I feel like I wanted to help this girl?

She was just a random girl... who’d happened to say the same words as her.

*Sigh. It’s all because of that dream.*

Actually, it was all because of that horrible illusion that Tomoe had shown me, dredging up some bitter wish from my past that I must have unconsciously longed for. Having it laid bare and then having to see it again in a dream—that was the worst feeling. Truly the worst.

“*Sorry to interrupt your reunion, but let’s get you back to the village first,*” I suggested.

Seeing Rana’s suspicious expression at my proposal, I let out a deep sigh in my heart.

※ ※ ※

Tapa Village was even smaller than I'd imagined. It looked like it had about the same number of people as the Moon over the Ruined Castle, quite likely even fewer.

"Raidou, now that you're here, what do you plan to do?" Rana asked.

*"You're not going to go into the village?"* I asked. *"What about you, Ehto?"*

"I'm not from here. My village is over there," Ehto said, pointing toward the forest.

When Rana returned to the village, she'd asked me to wait outside. Ehto had planned to do the same from the beginning and just nodded silently. I didn't have any particular interest in the village, so I agreed to Rana's request and stayed outside. They probably had something going on that they didn't want outsiders to see. For now, I decided to expand the range of my Search Realm.

*"I thought you were living in that village with them,"* I wrote to Ehto.

"Rana and a few others might be okay with it, but generally, it's unusual for a village to welcome demi-humans, especially a small village like this..." he explained.

*"That makes sense. So, you're waiting for her out here instead of going in. By the way, I heard you're a werewolf, Ehto."*

"Yes, that's right."

*"So, I'm sure you noticed this, but—there's the scent of blood coming from the village. It's not just one or two people either."*

"What?!" Ehto's eyes widened at my words.

Of course, it wasn't like I actually smelled anything. When I wrote "scent," I was referring to what my Realm had detected. It seemed that a few people had been killed in the village while Rana was away.

"Raidou, are you really hyuman?" Ehto asked, looking bewildered. "How do you have a sense of smell that can detect what's happening in the village?"

So, he'd noticed what was happening there too. Judging from the circumstances, it was undoubtedly the work of the Moon over the Ruined

Castle. But that could be confirmed later. I would be getting the truth directly from them.

*“Yeah, I’m just a normal guy. Nothing more than a common adventurer and merchant.”*

“There’s nothing ordinary about your background,” Ehto replied.

*“Still, I’m surprised. Regardless of what’s happening in the village, you’re waiting out here obediently like Rana told you.”*

“What do you mean by that?” Ehto asked, his curiosity piqued.

*“I mean you’re quite the loyal dog. I wouldn’t have expected a werewolf to be more like a dog than a wolf.”*

“Raidou, a werewolf is a wolf beastman. Please don’t compare us to dogs.”

*So, he’s sensitive about that.* I’d assumed he was completely domesticated and had taken on the traits of a dog.

As we continued chatting about nothing in particular, I expanded the range of my Search Realm from the village to the surrounding area.

*Ah, there they are.*

I detected several groups, but there was an unusually large number of people in the nearby mountains. *That must be the Moon over the Ruined Castle.*

Talking with Ehto was a good way to pass the time. Since I’d carried both of them under my arms while sprinting here, the sky had only just begun to turn red. Now, it was twilight—the border between day and night.

If the Moon over the Ruined Castle were to make a move, according to bandit tactics, it would probably be around midnight. Before they started their rampage like a horde of demons, I’d make the first move. In Japanese, this part of the night was known as both “twilight” and “the time for great calamities.” It was the perfect time to blend into the darkness.

*“The way I see it, wolves are forest dwellers who maintain a certain distance from humans,”* I explained. *“Dogs, on the other hand, live with humans. They form packs with them. The way you’re behaving seems closer to the latter... That’s why I said what I did. My apologies.”*

“Uhhh,” Ehto muttered, clearly taken aback by my comment.

*“Well, I’ll be off then,” I wrote. “Make sure to take care of her and build a good relationship.”*

The bandits were boldly camped out in the mountains close to the village. As a result, here I was, about to do something like bandit hunting for the sake of humans. Not too long ago, I’d thought humans were incomprehensible and did anything I could to avoid getting involved with them.

It felt strange, even unpleasant, to realize the contradiction between my thoughts and my actions. But whenever I was uncertain, I wanted to act according to my feelings. That hadn’t changed.

“Where are you going?” Ehto asked.

*“Taking a walk in the mountains. I don’t plan on coming back to the village, so tell Rana whatever you want.”*

“The mountains? That’s suicide!”

*“What, do you know what’s in the mountains?”*

Ehto didn’t answer immediately. Instead, after a brief pause, he asked me a question in return. “Why are you doing this, Raidou? No offense, but it seems unnatural.”

*“People keep asking me that. It’s just a whim. Don’t worry, I’m not looking for anything in return.”*

“You won’t give me a reason, huh? Fine, then just consider this a monologue from here on... Is there anything we can do to thank you?”

*“No, there isn’t. Just forget about it.”*

Even if I came back someday, I’d probably have forgotten about this village and its location. My connection to Rana and Ehto was thin at best. As I’d told Ehto, this was really nothing more than a whim.

“Even if grudges fade with time, we don’t forget those who help us. That’s the rule of our village. There are some humans in that village who feel the same way. So, please...”



...

He was saying all this without even knowing how things would turn out. He really was like a loyal dog.

*And then, not forgetting gratitude while letting go of resentment—that's something I've heard before, back in the East. Are these guys doing this on purpose or what?*

*"Well, if my people ever come to Tapa Village or your village, treat them well,"* I wrote.

"Your people?" he asked, puzzled.

*"I told you, I'm a merchant. My company is the Kuzunoha Company. I'm its representative."*

"Already a representative, at your age?!"

*"I get that a lot."*

"All right. If we ever come across anyone from Kuzunoha Company, we'll make sure to remember this."

*"If we come across anyone..."* That was his way of saying "If we make it through this ordeal alive."

*"That's good. Don't worry; we don't sell expensive products,"* I added.

"I'll encourage the villagers to evacuate, at least. I have to do everything I can."

*"There's a bounty on those bandits. If you're up for it, you could try hunting them in the mountains once it's light out. You'll find plenty of things that can be turned into cash."*

*He's not just some soft kid,* I realized. Living in this kind of world, he's got some backbone.

For a demi-human, this world wasn't exactly a friendly place. But with a friend like Rana, Ehto was probably better off than most.

*There are a little over eighty bandits scattered in the mountains...* And if what I'd heard in the guild was true, that was not all of them. I needed to move

quickly.

※ ※ ※

All sound vanished.

Not just the bandits' own voices, but even the rustling of leaves and the cries of animals were gone. In this unnatural silence, one after another, the bandits were being taken down. If they could have kept calm in such a situation, they wouldn't have fallen to the level of petty bandits in the first place.

A man shouted for help, his voice desperate. He hadn't forgotten the emergency signals his crew used to alert each other. But both his shouts and the signals relied on sound, so his attempts to communicate were in vain.

Even the heavy thud of something collapsing right next to him was silent in this strange space, forcing him to turn and visually confirm what had happened. When he saw it, he lost all remaining sense and broke into a panicked run. He had no destination in mind; he only sought to escape from whatever hostile force was targeting him. But, of course, escape was impossible.

A long, thick arrow pierced the man's shoulder, and he crumpled to the ground, writhing in agony. He thrashed around for a while before finally going still, sweat pouring down his face, snot dripping from his nose, and frothy saliva dribbling from his mouth.

Poison? Or maybe magick. The arrow was obviously tipped with something harmful. Although the man was still breathing, it was shallow and uneven.

From one location to another to another, similar scenes were playing out all over the mountains. Unable to communicate with other teams, the notorious bandits of the Moon over the Ruined Castle, who were split into groups of five and ten, were helplessly being hunted down by an unknown enemy.

Arrows came from all directions—some from downwind, others from upwind. Each shot was terrifyingly precise, not a single one missing its mark. And yet, hardly any of the bandits ever caught sight of their attacker.

Chests, abdomens, arms, legs... Arrows hit various body parts, but every single vital area was intentionally avoided. This only further demonstrated the

exceptional skill of the shooter.

And now, all but one group had been defeated.



Out of this group of ten bandits, two remained standing. They were the only ones who had managed to regain their sense of hearing during the fight. They were also the only ones to catch a glimpse of their enemy—but they had no idea that he had already eliminated all of their comrades.

“Who the hell are you?!” one of them shouted.

“Do you even know who you’re messing with?!” the other demanded.

“...”

A man in a coat and mask stood before them, a bow slung over his shoulder. Rather than answer their questions, or make any other move, he stood with his arms crossed as if pondering something.

“But you’ve got bad timing, buddy,” one of the two survivors added. “Even if you’re good with a bow, we’ve got plenty of friends around here. You’re finished. If you don’t want to be tortured, you’d be wise to spill everything right now!”

*“Your comrades are gone. You two are the last ones.”* The words came in glowing letters in the air near the masked man’s head.

“Wha—?!”

*“I heard the Moon over the Ruined Castle had about a hundred members, but I’ve only found around eighty here. Where are the rest?”*

“Wait, you knew we were with the Moon over the Ruined Castle?” one of the men said, recovering a bit of his composure. “You’re out of your mind.”

The other bandit quickly added, “If you’re an adventurer, you should know who we’re backed by. Nothing good will come from crossing the lord, pal.”

*“I couldn’t care less about your affiliations. I’m not good at torture. It would be wise to answer my questions honestly,”* the glowing text read.

“Quit screwing around— Whoa?!”

“Gah!!!”

Enraged by the masked man’s calm message, one of the bandits reached out to grab him by the collar. Just as he moved to attack, he suddenly felt himself

being lifted off the ground.

The masked man swung the first bandit like a club, striking the second bandit, who had been reaching for a knife at his waist. When he released his grip, the momentum of the two bodies sent them crashing into a thick tree trunk.

More letters appeared in the air. *“This isn’t a bluff—you’re the last bandits left unharmed in this mountain. I told you I was bad at torture, and yet you still pushed me. That’s unfortunate.”*

The masked man lifted the now-unconscious bandit and propped him up against the tree. Then, he drew an arrow, nocked it in his bow, and let it fly, pinning the man’s arm to the trunk. The pain caused the man to regain consciousness, and he let out a scream that echoed through the forest before quickly fading away.

The other bandit knew he had only a moment. With a quick flick of his wrist, he threw the knife he still held straight at the masked man’s face. The deadly blade hurtled toward his throat, but the masked man did nothing but watch.

“Gotcha!” the bandit shouted, convinced of his victory.

The instant the knife touched the seemingly soft coat of the masked man, it shattered into countless fragments.

“What the...?”

The masked man gave a gentle sigh, then in the blink of an eye he grabbed the bandit’s face with both hands.

“Gah!” the bandit gasped.

A pale blue light emanated from the masked man’s palms. The final bandit’s body convulsed violently.

*This is bad!* ran the thoughts in his panicked mind. *It’s like my brain’s being scrambled... Oh man, this is stronger than any drug I’ve ever taken! Crap, this guy has no intention of holding back! He doesn’t care what happens to me at all!!! Damn it, at this rate I’m gonna end up a vegetable...*

“Ah... ah... gah...” the bandit stammered, his voice faltering.

It was a powerful spell, a type of hypnosis or suggestion magick. The bandit's strength drained from his body, and he slumped, staring blankly into the distance.

The masked man made more glowing words in front of his captive, and this time they were questions. The bandit, now completely subdued, answered each query without a hint of resistance.

By the time night had fully set, the midsized bandit group known as the Moon over the Ruined Castle had been quietly annihilated.

"Man, hypnosis is still tricky to control," Makoto Misumi muttered to himself as he walked back down the mountain toward the city. After the battle, he'd removed his mask. "But at least my targets were bandits. And since I didn't technically kill anyone, I don't feel too bad about it."

His expression shifted to a wry smile. "If it's anyone's fault, you can blame the dream I had, the one Tomoe showed me in the first place, and maybe even the strange coincidences that led to this, and finally, that ridiculous name of yours. I'm not perfect, but you guys were pretty unlucky too."

He stopped and turned back toward the mountain, pressing his hands together in a gesture of prayer. He stood in a spot where he could no longer see the village at the base, only the upper parts of the mountain were visible.

After a brief moment of silence, Makoto raised his head, and without looking back again, he sprinted forward.

※ ※ ※

"Hypnosis is a tricky spell, isn't it?" I mused. "Especially when it comes to controlling its strength."

"Huh? Young Master, what happened?" Shiki asked, concern clouding his eyes.

"Oh, not too much. Did you take care of the teleportation arrangements and the accommodations for tomorrow?"

"Everything's totally ready. You can trust me with it."

“By the way,” I said, “you know you can eat slime meat in this town? It’s surprisingly tasty. Next time we head back to Demiplane, I’m thinking of telling Mio about it. We should all come here to try it together.”

Shiki’s face lit up. “Oh, I’d love to join you for that. So, is the slime meat made from the core?”

“No, it’s actually made from the slime itself. The texture and flavor are quite unique—definitely a delicacy, maybe even a local specialty.”

“Oh! So, they kill the slime without it dissolving? That’s fascinating!”

We stood in line, patiently waiting for our turn to teleport. To be precise, I had stopped Shiki from using hypnosis to skip the queue. It had been quite an eventful day. It felt like I was on a free day during a trip and decided to join an optional tour.

“It would be nice if the towns we visit from now on have stories worth sharing,” I said.

“As for me, I think the inns here could be quite the topic of conversation,” Shiki responded.

“Yeah, it was a pretty good place, wasn’t it?”

Shiki chuckled. “Well, I actually thought it was kind of funny for a place that claims to be the best in town. It was so cheap that anyone could afford to stay there.”

Our opinions were completely opposite. Personally, my favorite part about the inn had been how utterly ordinary it felt.

“Shiki, the next place we’re staying at, it’s okay, right? Staying somewhere extravagant like a castle doesn’t help me relax!”

“All the inns I’ve booked are at least two gold coins per night. Tomoe-dono was quite firm that anything cheaper would be worse than staying in the wilderness.”

*What a dark sense of humor, I thought. Two gold coins per night—she must be talking about that log cabin in Zetsuya that we stayed in before.*



*Wait a minute.* At two gold coins per night, that inn wasn't exactly worth the price. I guess my attendants' complaints were valid.

"How much was that one?" I asked.

"Well, in the next town over, the most expensive room at the best inn was only six silver coins per night," Shiki explained. "We really had no other choice, though. I hope you'll forgive me."

*Ah, in that case, I think the service was more than adequate.* I had left the finances to Tomoe since she insisted, "Leave the money to me," but it seemed I'd been on quite the luxurious trip.

"What about the next place?"

"Two gold coins and five silver coins per night. We finally have a suitable inn for you, Young Master," Shiki said, smiling brightly.

*OK, there's no way I can ask to change inns at this point. Once we make it to Rotsgard, I should be able to settle into a nice, comfortable room that suits me perfectly. Well, for just a few days until we get there, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to indulge a little. Staying in a nice inn could be a valuable experience.*

"We'll be spending a lot of time together from now on, so I'd like to have all sorts of conversations with you while we travel, Shiki," I said.

"That would be wonderful," Shiki replied warmly.

As I imagined the peaceful journey ahead and the school life waiting for me, I felt an indescribable excitement growing in my heart. After all, this *was* a special trip. It'd be nice if everything went smoothly and we could just have fun.

Though I doubted my prayer would reach him, I found myself wishing to Tsukuyomi-sama for just that.

## Back Matter

### **Author: Azumi Kei**

Hailing from Aichi Prefecture, Azumi Kei started serializing “Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Douchuu” online in 2012. The series quickly rose to popularity, earning the Reader’s Award in AlphaPolis’s 5th Fantasy Novel Grand Prize. In May 2013, Azumi Kei made their publishing debut with a revised version of “Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Douchuu.”

### **Illustrations by Mitsuaki Matsumoto**

## Footers

[←1]

Mitsurugi can also be translated as “heavenly sword.” Makoto mentions that it’s a Japanese name, so it has been retained as “Mitsurugi.”

[←2]

Originally “majin.”

[←3]

The song is “Kojo no Tsuki.”

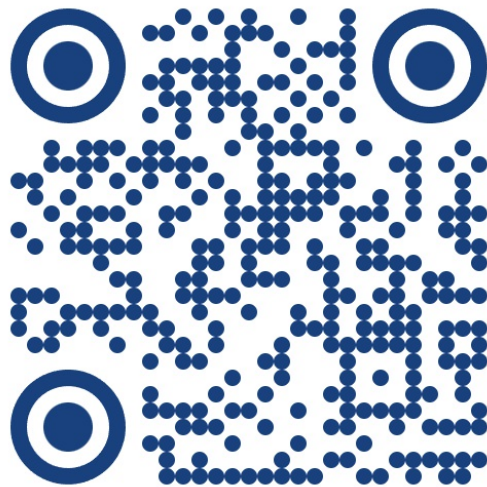
# Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of Tsukimichi Moonlit Fantasy Volume 4! We hope you've enjoyed Makoto's continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

To help us bring you more fantastic stories, please share your thoughts on Amazon. Your reviews not only let us know what you liked (or didn't!) but also help us decide which light novels to bring to you next.

[Click Here](#)

Curious about what else we offer? Scan the QR code to discover our diverse range of light novels and many more to come!





## Thank you for reading!

Stay tuned for upcoming releases and share your experience in our social media:

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Discord](#)

Need a break from social media? We've got you covered! Sign up for our newsletter and we'll send you a recap with relevant news.

[\*\*Sign Up\*\*](#)

# Table of Contents

- 1. **Prologue**
- 2. **Chapter 1**
- 3. **Chapter 2**
- 4. **Chapter 3**
- 5. **Chapter 4**
- 6. **Chapter 5**
- 7. **Side Story: Phantom of Nostalgia**
- 8. **Back Matter**