

Tsukimichi

Moonlit Fantasy

3

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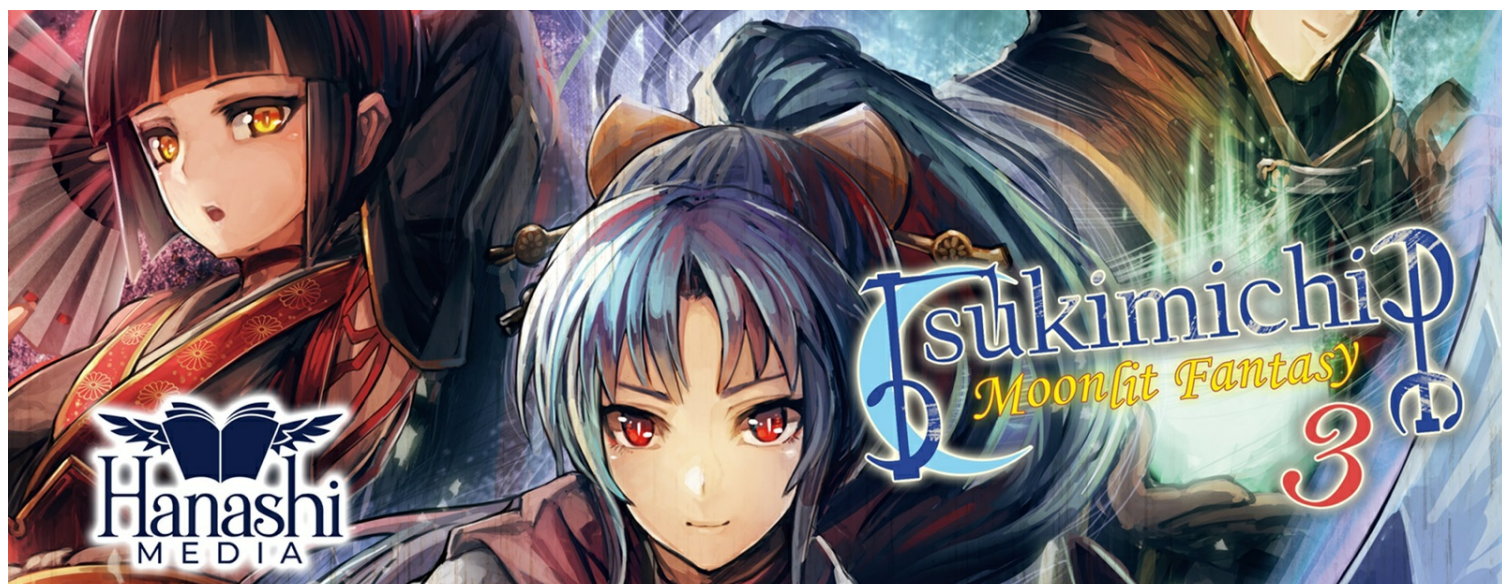
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Tsukimichi

Prologue

In the Merchant Guild in the frontier town of Tsige, the receptionist checked over my documents before handing them to me and then started explaining.

“Congratulations, your registration is complete. Your company name is the Kuzunoha Company, your representative is Raidou-sama, and your employees are Tomoe-sama and Mio-sama. Since you as the representative have registered with the Merchant Guild, there’s no need for your employees to register separately. If there are any changes to these details, Raidou-sama, please promptly report them to the Merchant Guild. If you’re hiring temporary staff, no notification is necessary, but for regular employees, you’ll need to notify the guild. For other situations that require notification or for licensed items, you can refer to this booklet.”

When she finished speaking, the receptionist handed me my Guild Card. And so, I, Makoto Misumi (alias: Raidou), successfully established my own company with two followers.

I gazed at the freshly minted Guild Card, a metal rectangle the size of a credit card with a shiny blue finish.

Next, I flipped through the booklet I’d been given. It wasn’t thick, but every page was packed with text. Paper was valuable, so they probably tried to keep the page count to a minimum. Still, I wished they would prioritize clarity a little more.

While the company had now been established, there was still quite a lot to think about. I had decided to mainly trade in fruit like apples and peaches, as they were products of the Demiplane, and medicines, but the other details were still a bit fuzzy.

When the receptionist had asked about my company's business plan and policies, I'd had to dodge the question by saying we would formally visit and introduce ourselves once we officially started trading.

Apparently, having this information helped the guild introduce registered companies to customers smoothly, so it was best to report it ASAP. Well, that made sense.

I decided I would consult Rembrandt, one of Tsige's major merchants.

For Kuzunoha Company's opening operations, I wanted to secure a storefront. And we would need to become more familiar faces in the city. Greeting rounds were essential... and although I hadn't seen them in this world, making business cards to distribute would probably be a good idea.

Creating a magick speech bubble, I asked the receptionist, *"Excuse me, but I would like to establish a store. Can you provide information on how to prepare for that here?"*

I couldn't speak the common language of this world. But since I had visited the Merchant Guild in Tsige several times, the receptionist wasn't surprised by my method of communication. She smiled warmly and explained, "Yes, we can provide much of that information here. If you want to open a store, the first thing you need is land. I can look into it now and have some potential locations to show you by tomorrow. How does that sound?"

Wow! Can they really respond that quickly? Looks like I have to decide immediately.

"Yes, please."

The receptionist nodded. "All right. If you have any preferences on location, it would be best to let me know now. Do you have any?"

"No... I'm not familiar with this city. I just came here from the Edge. Could you suggest a few good places for business?"

“Of course,” she replied with a smile. “If you have no specific requests, I might be able to show you some places by the end of the day.”

All right, the search for land seemed to be progressing smoothly. *“That would be helpful,”* I wrote. *“Besides the land, could you also tell me about any important considerations for owning a store?”*

“The basic information is in the booklet I gave you earlier... Oh, but since you mentioned you just arrived from the Edge, there are a few things you should definitely know.”

Hmm... that sounds important, I thought. I wrote another speech bubble. *“Could you tell me more?”*

“Yes, Tsige is part of the Kingdom of Aion,” she explained. “So, if you open your first store in Tsige, your company will be affiliated with the Kingdom of Aion.”

The Kingdom of Aion? Well, that’s the first time I’ve heard that name...

“What kind of country is the Kingdom of Aion?” I asked. I figured it was a pretty straightforward question, but the receptionist’s face took on a slightly troubled look.

“Well... it’s a normal monarchy...” she began hesitantly. “However, there are some aspects that can be a bit troublesome for us at the Merchant Guild.”

I was getting a distinct impression that she didn’t want to talk about the subject, but it seemed too important. *“What do you mean by ‘troublesome’?”* I pressed.

For a moment the receptionist seemed to waver between saying more and wishing me a nice day.

“Please keep this between us,” she whispered, leaning closer.

She was incredibly beautiful—but then again, who wasn’t in this world? Naturally, having such a beauty close to my face made me nervous. *Better get used to it if I’m going to be here a while.*

“The Kingdom of Aion is very keen on espionage,” she spoke, her face close to mine. “It’s common for them to send spies to other countries, but there are

only so many professional spies. To augment their numbers, they sometimes ask merchants who travel between countries to engage in espionage.”

Wow, OK... But how do they recruit these merchants? I wondered. “Is there some kind of notification to the kingdom once someone registers with the guild?”

The receptionist leaned in closer to reply. It occurred to me that to anyone watching our conversation, we would look as suspicious as spies ourselves.

“No, the registration information is shared only within the merchant guilds of each country, so registering doesn’t place you under the Kingdom of Aion’s control. There are also merchants who travel freely between countries without setting up a store, like caravans. The problem arises when you set up a store...” Her voice grew even quieter, and I found myself leaning over the counter to hear.

“To open a store, you need land... which requires the kingdom’s permission. In exchange for that permission, they gather detailed information about the company. From that, they assess your company’s scale, financial power, and growth rate. If the company plans to expand to other countries, then they invite the company to join in the espionage effort.”

I see... Just how dedicated is the Kingdom of Aion to espionage?

“From what you’ve told me, it seems Tsige isn’t the best place for a first store.”

“Not really. Since a new company opening its first store is unlikely to already be spying for anyone, or even under the influence of a foreign power, those are their first targets. But every country does that. The government collects detailed information about the company of anyone who buys land and opens a store.”

“Wait, so are merchants at risk of being forced into espionage in any country?”

A cloud passed over the receptionist’s face. “I can’t say how dedicated other countries are to espionage, but this kind of thing happens all over the world. However, Aion is particularly focused on gathering information. The number of

inquiries related to espionage that are brought to each merchant guild is significantly higher here than in any other country we know of.”

Why do merchants have to take on espionage missions while doing business in other countries?

I'll just say no.

Just because I live in the Kingdom of Aion, it doesn't mean I have any patriotic feelings. Don't underestimate a modern person.

“I see... By the way, would it be problematic to refuse such an invitation?” I asked.

“You can refuse,” she replied weakly, *“but it might significantly hinder your future business activities within Aion...”*

I didn't want her to look so defeated. Please, Merchant Guild, fight hard for freer business practices!

I thought Tsige would be a good place to take a breather, but it turns out to be located in a country that's enthusiastic about espionage. I didn't sign up for this. Honestly, I don't want to get involved in any more trouble.

The receptionist must have seen how despondent I looked, because when she next spoke, her tone was gentle.

“But there is a sort of loophole. It might be quite difficult to implement, but if you rent part of another company's store, you can start your business without having to apply to the kingdom.”

Oh, if that's the case, maybe I could ask Rembrandt for help!

“Thanks for all the help,” I told her. *“I'll consider it. From what you told me earlier, it sounds like there's a possibility of being forced into espionage no matter where you register. Is there really nowhere that's free from that kind of thing? I just want to establish stores in different countries as a merchant.”*

The receptionist pondered my question for a moment until an idea seemed to come to her.

“There is a city that doesn't belong to any country. If you open your store there, you just might achieve your goal.”

Oh! A global company with branches in every country, capable of swiftly supplying goods anywhere in the world. There is actually a place where I could maybe do it!

“Really? Please, tell me more!” I said eagerly.

The receptionist smiled as she read my speech bubble. “Raidou-sama, you have quite a unique perspective. Indeed, opening branches in multiple countries... It aligns perfectly with the merchant guild’s ideals,” she added, noting it was just a possibility and not guaranteed. Then she told me the name of the city.

“The Academy City of Rotsgard.”

※ ※ ※

“Young Master, sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Young Master, I’m sorry for being late.”

In high spirits from what I’d heard at the Merchant Guild, I met up with Tomoe and Mio. I had told the two of them to come from the Demiplane to Tsige before I went into the Merchant Guild. They’d apologized for being late, but I thought their timing was perfect.

After reuniting, we quickly had lunch and then contacted Toa’s group, who were busy with requests based in Tsige. When I mentioned that we were heading to the Adventurer’s Guild to report on the request we completed the other day and collect our reward, they responded enthusiastically with “We’re heading there right away!”

Toa was an adventurer we’d met at a base called Zetsuya, which was located at the lost Edge of the World. We’d traveled to Tsige together with her, her younger sister, Rinon, and her party members.

Then, when Tomoe, Mio and I had saved the family of one of Tsige’s major merchants from a Cursed Disease, we’d ended up kicking the ass of the city’s top-ranked adventurer.

Incidentally, the reason we'd saved Rembrandt's family was because of a request from the Adventurer's Guild. The request involved providing the materials needed for the treatment of the Cursed Disease, but not finding the shaman who caused it. From the way Rembrandt had spoken at the time, it seemed he and his butler had already dealt with the shaman themselves...

Given how suspicious the request had been, I'd thought the guild might question us when we gave our report, but they hadn't.

I couldn't believe the guild's information network didn't know about it. It was certainly convenient, but an organization shrouded in so much mystery made me uneasy. *I should probably read that adventurer's guidebook... Maybe I'd learn more about the Adventurer's Guild.*

The top-ranked adventurer in question, Lime Latte, looked like a small-time thug with a nasty aura, but after the incident, he hadn't run to the guild crying or spread rumors to his friends and underlings. Maybe he was more decent than I'd thought. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen him since then.

In any event, there was no particularly intimidating atmosphere at the Adventurer's Guild, and I made it to the reception counter with no issues.

Once there, I received an extraordinary reward (though considering the nature of the request, it wasn't actually that extraordinary) that had already been delivered to the guild.

And then, the main event, the one that everyone but me was eagerly anticipating.

The little attention we got while receiving the reward would likely become a thing of the past once this event began.

Yes, it was time for Tomoe and Mio to register as adventurers.

My two followers appeared to be human. However, Tomoe was a Greater Dragon known as Shin, who had been sleeping at the Edge of the World. Mio was a giant spider that people feared and avoided; I'd even heard her referred to as a "calamity." In other words, both were former monsters with powers incomparable to those of humans. The revelation of their strength would no doubt cause a commotion in the guild, but what else could we do?

Before registering the two, I had my level checked... and wasn't surprised to find that, despite the numerous battles I'd been in since the last check, I was still Level 1. All I could think was that it was due to the curse of the Goddess who dragged me into this world.

Tomoe wanted to register before Mio, which created a bit of tension, but since it didn't matter to me, I let Tomoe go first.

There weren't many people in the guild at the moment to spread the news, but in a few days, Tomoe and Mio would likely become quite famous.

Tomoe startled the staff by suddenly requesting a form that could measure up to Level 1600. Instantly, and again it was no surprise, the whole place lit up with excitement.

As for Tomoe... the last time we'd measured her level, at the Adventurer's Guild in Zetsuya, it had been 1320. With such a high level, it wouldn't increase quickly, so it was probably still the same.

"Tomoe-sama, you are Level... 1340," the staff member announced.

"What?!" Tomoe and I exclaimed simultaneously.

Toa looked at me like I'd just sprouted an extra ear. I guess she'd never actually seen me talk out loud.

Putting that aside, why had Tomoe gone up by twenty levels? And why did she look dissatisfied with this change?

Could it be that she had secretly been hunting when we'd be carrying out our separate activities? I thought her "warrior training" was just an excuse to stay away from me, but had she actually been serious about it?!

The murmuring in the guild was deafening. A circle of people quickly formed around us.

"Th-Th-Th-That can't be! I slashed so many! I should be over fifteen hundred!" Tomoe protested.

"No, um, please don't shake me!" the receptionist cried, her body wobbling back and forth in Tomoe's grasp.

Tomoe had mentioned the specific number fifteen hundred... That must have been based on Mio. When her level had been measured before, she'd been exactly fifteen hundred.

"Tomoe, stop."

"Ah! I got carried away for a minute there... Young Master, I apologize," Tomoe said, regaining her composure.

The receptionist's face had paled, and I couldn't blame her. If I hadn't intervened at that moment, she might have been in serious trouble.

"Mio, get it done quickly," I instructed.

"Okayyy," Mio responded cheerfully, giving Tomoe a sidelong glance as she passed by. As much as she clenched her fists in frustration, Tomoe's results wouldn't change.

Mio grabbed the paper that could measure up to Level 1600, and it quickly turned bright red.

"M-Mio-sama, you are Level... 1500. Oh!" the receptionist announced before fainting. Poor thing. She'd done her best.

Apparently, Mio's level hadn't increased. Despite all the battles she'd fought in the Wasteland, she hadn't gained a single level. *So, what did Tomoe do to raise her level by twenty? Did she make a mountain of corpses in some corner of the Wasteland? Should I go back to collect the materials? No, they're probably already in the stomachs of other monsters.*

Their bones and fangs might still be there. If that's the case, I'll have Tomoe tell me the location later, and I'll have the lizardfolk and orcs go collect them. There's no need for me to go. It's not because I would lose my sanity if I saw the carnage Tomoe created, right?

The unconscious receptionist was carried away, and another staff member handled the post-level-measurement tasks. The rest of the registration process went without a hitch.

Thus, for the second time, the strongest adventurers were born.

Toa and her group immediately registered their contact information on Tomoe and Mio's freshly issued guild cards, happily soaking in the envious gazes of everyone around them.

It must be like becoming friends with extremely powerful and famous players in an MMO.

No, they were actually assuring their futures. Maybe it felt less like a friend request and more like attaching a thick lifeline.

"By the way, Young Master, as standard employees of the company, do we not need to register with the Merchant Guild?" Mio asked.

"In the future, I might ask you to register, but for now, it's fine," I explained. "It seems there's no problem as long as I'm registered."

Our conversation appeared to surprise Toa and her group even more.

"R-Raidou-san, did you... did you pass the Merchant Guild's reissue exam?" Toa asked.

What is she... Oh! That's right. On our way to Tsige, we talked about the Merchant Guild, and I told Toa I'd lost my Guild Card. Whew, that was close.

"Yeah, I retook the exam and got it yesterday. See?" I said, showing my new Merchant Guild Card.

"Wow, that's a tough exam!" the dwarf priestess warrior exclaimed, looking at me with eyes that clearly regarded me as some sort of freak. "As expected of your superhuman abilities."

"Well, I'm planning to start my business here, so I hope for your patronage."

"I'll visit as much as possible," the elf girl replied with a firm nod.

"Will you sell sweets?" Rinon asked hopefully.

I hated to disappoint her, but we would have to hold off on processed goods like sweets, as well as everyday items and miscellaneous goods. For now, we would focus on fruit and medicines from the Demiplane. It would be great if we could make use of the dwarves' blacksmithing skills, but I planned to put that off for the time being as well. Since the dwarves were reclusive and lived in

remote areas, forcing them to make commercial weapons might cause resentment. I didn't want to deal in weapons that badly.

"Um, Raidou, will Mio-sama and Tomoe-sama start getting ready to open the store right away?" Toa asked.

Why is she asking that?

Oh, she probably wants to know if I planned to have them take on requests and form parties as adventurers until the store is set up.

We had a lot to do to get the store ready, so they would need to help with that for a while rather than boost their adventurer ranks.

"Yeah, as members of the company, there's a lot we need to do before the store opens, like finding a location and getting to know our fellow merchants in Tsige."

To start with, I would have them check out the locations the Merchant Guild recommended for the store. Gathering information about Tsige would also go faster with more people. The option of asking Rembrandt to rent out part of his store was there, but eventually, I wanted my own place. Securing some land wouldn't hurt.

"What?!" Toa exclaimed. "Are you saying these two will be looking for land and making introductions?"

"Of course," I replied. "Whatever their adventurer levels, they're my followers. As regular employees of a small newly established company, it's only natural."

"N-No, no, no! Raidou, it would be better to have them complete requests from the Adventurer's Guild and build publicity that way..."

OK, so Toa probably wanted Tomoe or Mio to join her party. Sure, eventually, they might tag along with others to learn the ropes of being adventurers, but I figured that could wait.

"Haha, we don't need adventurer recognition right now," I assured her. "For the time being, I have no intention of having them work as adventurers."

Shouts of disbelief and outrage echoed around the guild. I even heard a few sharp insults directed my way. But the commotion died down quickly when

Tomoe and Mio shot them stern looks.

I turned to my two followers. “Let’s go. We have a mountain of stuff to do to get ready. It’s going to get busy.”

“Sure!” Tomoe responded.

“Yeppp,” Mio replied cheerfully.

“Big brother, sounds funnn,” Rinon chimed in.

Well, maybe Rinon could be useful. *“Hey, Rinon, I have something I’d like you to do. We need your drawing skills.”*

“My drawing skills? Sure, I’ll do it if it’s for you, big brother!” she agreed enthusiastically.

Great, now I can go ahead with my plans for this world. Just wait, people of this world—soon, the Kuzunoha brand will deliver a healthy life with our medicines!

I needed to think about the logo too... Rinon was right; this was a lot of fun!

Tsukimichi

Chapter 1

“**H**mm, the Academy City, huh? And a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ business,” I muttered as I recalled the events of the day. I was on my way back to the inn from the Adventurer’s Guild.

“Young Master?” Tomoe asked. “What’s the Academy City?”

“Ah, it’s a place the Merchant Guild told me about,” I explained. “If we open the first Kusunoha Company store here in Tsige, it’ll be affiliated with the Kingdom of Aion, which is obsessed with espionage, so... I’m having second thoughts.”

Tomoe paused, thoughtful. “Got it,” she said with a nod. “Well, you’re right, this city does have a high degree of autonomy, but it’s still within the territory of the Kingdom of Aion. Seems their obsession with espionage to monitor other countries’ movements hasn’t changed.”

OK, so Tomoe had always known which country’s territory we were in. I wished she’d thought to share this detail with me earlier...

“Right,” I said, then explained my plan. “Merchants who open stores here might be forcibly ‘invited’ to participate in espionage activities. I want to avoid that, so I thought we might start by renting space in another store here and eventually move to the Academy City.”

“Hmm... And what kind of place is this Academy City?” Tomoe asked.

“Well, if you don’t know about it, then it must be a relatively new city. It sounds like it’s a special, neutral city that doesn’t belong to any country. So, if

we open our business there, we might be able to do business without getting involved in espionage. And we could operate in any country we wanted. That's all I know from what I heard at the Merchant Guild."

From what the receptionist had said, espionage wasn't limited to Aion. But, from the way Tomoe talked, the Kingdom of Aion had an especially long history of engaging in such activities. *How annoying. But as a city so close to the Wasteland, Tsige doesn't really give off that impression at all.*

"The world seems to have changed a lot while I wasn't paying attention," Tomoe remarked. "It appears the world map has also been revised quite a bit."

Considering the time period that Tomoe's information was based on, it might align with what the Goddess mentioned about demons and something else causing trouble and putting humans in danger. That would explain a lot.

A world map, huh... Paper is precious in this world, so maps must be quite valuable, but I'd love to get my hands on one. I'm sure there are places with beautiful scenery, and I want to see them. So far, I've only seen barren hills, the Wasteland, and rugged volcanoes in this world. But it must have a beautiful sea, mountains...

The Wasteland was just brown, and the Demiplane reminded me of Earth, so at least that was nostalgic. *I've got to experience the rich nature unique to this fantasy world!*

"By the way, Young Master, about tomorrow..." Tomoe prompted.

"Ah, tomorrow. Can you go to the Merchant Guild and check out the land they suggested? If you find a place you think will work, you can buy it. But like we talked about before, don't say anything about constructing a building. It sounds like if the discussion gets to that stage, too much information gets leaked to the government. So, if they ask about what we're planning to do with the land... just dodge the question appropriately."

"Sure. But is it really OK to just buy the land?"

"Yeah, for now. Tsige has walls, so it has limited land, right? We don't know how long it'll still be available. I want to secure it ahead of time since I

eventually want to have a store here. As for immediate plans, I'll check with the Rembrandt Company tomorrow. Although..." I trailed off.

"Something bothering you?" Tomoe asked.

Tomoe was fully in "meeting mode," showing no signs of joking around. This ability to switch modes made me think she was quite suited for business. (Although, in appearance, Mio did seem more businesslike since she was the one not carrying a sword.)

"Yeah, it's about the registration for business types," I replied.

"The 'jack-of-all-trades' you mentioned earlier should be fine, shouldn't it?"

"Well, yes. It is a convenient business type given my current dilemma."

"Focusing solely on medicines would be limiting, so it sounds reasonable to me."

"But still, I feel like the term 'jack-of-all-trades' has a negative connotation," I confessed.

A jack-of-all-trades business could deal in anything. However, compared to specialized businesses, the guild would offer fewer conveniences. For example, if a jack-of-all-trades wanted to purchase raw materials for medicines or foods, they would have to do so in quantities set by the guild. On Earth, buying in bulk would lower the unit price, but discounts didn't apply to jacks-of-all-trade businesses. Specialized businesses, on the other hand, had no such restrictions, and they could receive discounts even for single items, across all types of merchandise.

The jack-of-all-trades business model was originally designed for large stores that had been in operation for a long time and sought to expand. In fact, only large stores typically applied for this status. The receptionist at the Merchant Guild had also advised me that there were no benefits for a newcomer to apply for a jack-of-all-trades business.

The reason was simple: for a newcomer, it would border on a financial impossibility to handle a wide range of items right away. Furthermore, due to this difficulty in obtaining multiple products, newcomer jack-of-all-trades would end up focusing on a single type of merchandise. However, even if they focused

on one item, their purchasing cost would differ from that of specialized businesses, causing them to lose out in pricing.

Even a novice like me could understand that starting as a jack-of-all-trades wasn't a smart move given my current situation.

"What we trade are products from the Demiplane," Tomoe pointed out. "No one else can compete with our unique supply, so there's no need to overthink things."

She was right; because of the origin of our goods, the usual procurement rules didn't apply. However, since I also wanted to deal with medicines, the hassle would arise when sourcing materials for those. That's what I was concerned about.

I was also worried that starting a jack-of-all-trades business as a novice merchant might make me stand out unnecessarily. But... that couldn't be helped.

"A jack-of-all-trades business... Well, I guess it's fine. Standing out is inevitable with Tomoe and Mio around, so the business type is a minor issue. By the way, where *is* Mio?" I asked.

"She went with two arachs to look for the flower you mentioned," Tomoe told me. "Ambrosia, I believe. They should be back in a few days."

"I see. So, Tomoe, you'll... Oh, I just thought of something!"

Although I hadn't planned on having Tomoe work as an adventurer right away, she always handled anything I asked with ease. It would be earlier than expected, but I could have her start adventuring now. I couldn't imagine her complaining about the difficulty, so it should be fine.

"Yes?" Tomoe inquired.

"If I had a good reason, would you go with Toa's team in your free time?"

"With those people?" Tomoe looked puzzled.

I understood her confusion. If the goal was to raise her adventurer rank, it would be more efficient to complete requests quickly on her own. Given their

lower rank, accompanying them wouldn't contribute much to Tomoe's rank advancement. But that wasn't the current goal.

"I need you to learn about the value, quality, and collection methods of materials," I explained. "That'll be important for us in the future."

"Materials, ah, I see. Now that I think about it, Mio already said she can handle the collection. In that case, Young Master, do you think I could also buy a few books on materials?"

"Of course," I replied easily. "Studying's important. I'll leave most of our money with you, so feel free to buy anything you think we need. I'll be busy checking the route to the Academy City and talking with the Rembrandt Company."

"All right, thanks. Shall I report back to you in the Demiplane then?"

"Yep. I've also set up a barrier to secure our room at the inn. Starting tonight, I'll begin switching between resting at the inn and in the Demiplane. It's more comfortable there. Report to me then. Oh, and one more thing—I want a world map. I don't care if it's expensive. Also, can you try to find a detailed map of the Kingdom of Aion? Let me know if we need more money for that."

We were only renting this room for communication with Rembrandt and Toa, so staying in the Demiplane at night wasn't an issue.

Wait, looking for that map might be risky.

In a nation so keen on espionage, it suddenly occurred to me that trying to obtain detailed maps could attract unwanted attention. I vaguely remembered from history class that geographic information might be considered a state secret. If they suspected us of being spies from another country...

It would probably be wiser to investigate and create our own maps.

"Never mind," I told Tomoe. "Let's not get a detailed map. Just find a general one, something commonly available. Something that wouldn't look suspicious for a merchant to have."

"Young Master, you worry too much," Tomoe laughed. "But OK. I'll be discreet."

Once again, I found myself grateful to have Tomoe around; she understood my subtleties. But just like in Zetsuya, I hoped she wouldn't intentionally misinterpret my intentions.

"I'm counting on you," I said. "Do your job well."

"I'll report back tomorrow night in the Demiplane," Tomoe agreed.

Ema, the orc, had asked if I could visit the Demiplane at least twice a day. She also mentioned that everyone would be happy if I could spend one entire day there at least once a week.

I didn't know when that would be possible, but when I did get an entire day in the Demiplane, I planned to practice my archery. It had been too long.

"All right, time to sleep. It's our last night in this room"

"Understood. Sleep well."

With the hectic days ahead to look forward to, I drifted off to sleep.

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The few days after consulting with Tomoe were incredibly busy, to the point where I felt dizzy from it all.

I went to the Merchant Guild and, despite the worried receptionist's protests, decided to register the company as a jack-of-all-trades. I explained Tomoe's situation to Toa and her group, who were surprised because it contradicted what I had said at the guild earlier, but they agreed to have Tomoe accompany them on their jobs.

Honestly, it didn't have to be Toa specifically.

I knew I was being lenient and playing favorites. After Zetsuya was destroyed in front of her, I felt a sense of guilt I couldn't shake off. Her sister had been the first friendly villager I'd encountered.

Toa had once been little different from those digging in the underground, working to pay off their debt.

Whether she just enjoyed her current good fortune or used it as a stepping stone for growth was up to her. If she raised her skills while working with Tomoe for a while, she would surely grow as an individual. However, if her wallet was the only thing that expanded...

Could I tell her to do whatever she wants and cut ties with her?

Our goals are different, so we won't stay together forever. Aiming for the Academy City will soon separate us. But...

I wasn't confident.

Toa... I never asked her age, but...

She looked strikingly like Hasegawa, my junior. Wild and untamed, just like her. They say there are three doppelgängers for every person in the world, and she must have been one of them.

The fact that Mio and Tomoe used respectful language toward me made the resemblance even more pronounced when compared to how Toa spoke to me.

I couldn't help but get involved.

To keep my feelings at bay, I'd kept a certain distance from Toa and her party since our celebration upon arriving in Tsige. My only reason for favoring her was her resemblance to Hasegawa. They were different people, and there was no reason any single person should receive special treatment. It wouldn't benefit either of us.

Even knowing that, understanding that, I still want to look after her... Sigh.

I wanted Toa to be independent and grow, but I also wanted to take care of her. Those sisters, Toa and Rinon, were quite the challenge for me. Probably the most challenging after the Goddess and the two heroes.

For now, Tomoe would accompany Toa on the Wasteland tours. Despite appearances, she was actually quite good with people. She was a Greater Dragon for a reason.

Tomoe was also handling the search for future Kuzunoha Company store locations very efficiently.

According to her, she'd visited the recommended properties for the store during her free time when she hadn't been helping Toa's group with requests. She'd said the agents were thrilled when she'd told them we planned to buy the land rather than rent it.

Meanwhile, in the Demiplane, I checked on the progress of urban construction and crop production, and I evaluated products we could handle. In Tsige, I had an appointment with the Rembrandt Company to discuss renting space for a store. Although I had several meetings with the actual store managers regarding renting as a tenant, the process was quite smooth—I'd probably earned myself some favor when I'd saved Rembrandt's wife and daughters. The meetings were more about introductions and discussing the operational policies of the tenants rather than a formal screening process.

At the same time, I also gathered information about the so-called Academy City.

Time flew by.

When the sixth day came, I could hardly believe it had been so long. I guess I was so busy, the days passed in the blink of an eye.

While Tomoe and I were active in Tsige, we received a report from Mio: she had discovered Ambrosia in the Wasteland. We immediately had her bring some Ambrosia plants back to the Demiplane. Ambrosia was a flower used as a universal ingredient in medicines. I wanted to see if it could grow in the Demiplane, so I went with her to plant the flowers in several locations that closely matched the environment it has originated from in the Wasteland.

The spots where we planted the Ambrosia were near the arachs' dwellings, so we entrusted them with the plants' care.

The arachs—possessing the upper bodies of humans and the lower bodies of spiders—proved to be quite skilled in tending plants. It was a good reminder not to judge by appearances. They had also quickly learned to speak, and now all of them could communicate normally.

Although we still needed to find people capable of running the store for Kuzunoha Company, everything else was progressing smoothly.

Meanwhile, Tomoe had learned a lot about materials from magical beasts and monsters. The land issue had been settled, so there was nothing to worry about. During her time with Toa's group, they had significantly increased their ranks and levels. Even after six days, their rate of advancement was astonishing.

Tonight, in celebration of Mio and the arachs' return, as well as my increased presence in the Demiplane, Ema took the lead in organizing a feast for everyone in the Demiplane.

The arachs were truly good people, much more affectionate than humans.

The human race was filled with beautiful men and women, so my face stood out without a mask. Moreover, I communicated in writing and couldn't speak the common language without it sounding like I was growling. Because of this, I found it hard to feel a sense of closeness with them. But I could blame that on the Goddess.

"Young Master, I heard you're staying in a town near the Wasteland. How is it in a human town?" one of the dwarves asked, his face flushed. He reeked of alcohol.

"It's a good town," I replied. "Lively. Since it's on the frontier, there's no prejudice against demi-humans, so it's a comfortable place. Though, Tomoe and Mio do stand out a bit."

"Hahahahaha!!! That's funny! Those two in a human town must cause quite a stir!"

"You can say that again. Especially Tomoe, who goes hunting and brings back mountains of materials. The suppliers in town treat her like a hero."

"I really envy your two followers, Young Master," the dwarf said with admiration. "Their days must be full of excitement!"

Excitement every day, huh? That's certainly true.

I see. The people here have been in the Demiplane all this time. It wouldn't be surprising if they felt stifled.



Should I make it easier for them to go in and out of the Demiplane, to visit Tsige and the Wasteland? I hadn't intended to keep them confined, but maybe they did want to go out once in a while...

"Young Master, what's the matter?" the dwarf asked, seeing my contemplative look.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering... Do you feel... stifled staying in the Demiplane?"

The dwarf looked at me with a puzzled expression. *Huh? That's not the reaction I expected.*

"Did I say something weird?" I asked hastily. "I just thought you might want to go outside of the Demiplane sometimes."

The dwarf's expression turned solemn as he began to speak.

"Young Master, look around. It might be dark now, but where in this world do you feel stifled or confined? This land is vast, and we haven't even begun to explore it yet. Those mountains you can see in the distance? And there's that big river that appeared recently; we don't know where it came from. Plus, we've only just started construction on our city."

"Eh? Oh? Uh?" I stammered.

"What's more, the land is fertile, and the crops grow well. We haven't come across any hostile or dangerous creatures yet. For us, this world is a paradise beyond compare!"

I was pleasantly surprised by the passion of the dwarf's argument. From my perspective, the Demiplane was a miniature world created through my Contract with Tomoe, but in reality, it was vast and still largely unexplored. To the dwarves, this place was an untamed frontier.

No wonder they didn't feel confined at all. That was rather reassuring.

"Plus, Young Master, you and your companions have extraordinary power. Even using all our knowledge and techniques, we can't match your abilities. To create weapons for such powerful beings is the ultimate honor for craftsmen.

Even Eld, the most senior of us, works tirelessly night after night!” The dwarf laughed heartily.

Wait, Eld, please don't work too hard! It's already tough enough for him since Tomoe nicknamed their group “eldwars” because she thought “elder dwarves” was too long!

“However, there is some desire to see the outside world. I am curious about the weapons used by humans,” the dwarf admitted.

“Ah, you're interested as a craftsman, is that it?”

“Yes, I'm curious about what level of craftsmanship humans desire,” the dwarf explained, adding that he didn't want to cause trouble for me by giving out subpar items.

Indeed. While we had allowed adventurers to wander into the Demiplane and buy various items, it would be good to have a few residents who were familiar with the outside world.

Unfortunately, we couldn't just let the arachs wander into town looking like they did. They needed more practice in disguising themselves as humans first. Given their capabilities, it would only be a matter of time before they mastered the art of transformation.

For the dwarves, on the other hand, there would be no problem with them going out immediately. There were already dwarf adventurers in Tsige, and even an elder dwarf didn't look any different from a regular dwarf.

“Then how about trying your hand at manning our store in Tsige for a few days?” I suggested. “We've officially established the company, and we're planning to rent space from one of the big merchants in town.”

I had already confirmed, thanks to the booklet provided by the Merchant Guild, that demi-humans could be included as company members. The registration process was exactly the same as for humans.

“Oh! That sounds exciting!” the dwarf exclaimed.

“Great, then can you gather a few volunteers for me? I'll come get them later. Dwarves are known for crafting excellent weapons, so we might even receive

requests for weapon-making.”

“Ho! Are we able to accept that kind of request?”

“I’d appreciate it if you did. I’m also interested in knowing what kinds of weapons are in demand in Tsige. It would be great if you could listen to the clients’ needs rather than just assuming the quality and capabilities of the weapons required.”

“Wow, this is really something to look forward to. It feels like setting up a stall at a festival, like Tomoe-sama once described!” the dwarf laughed.

Tomoe, what have you been teaching the dwarves? I wondered. Festival stalls, in my experience, were almost always a rip-off. But anyway, maybe this laid-back atmosphere was just right for a festival. Over-enthusiasm and debauchery could backfire.

The dwarf left to discuss the idea with his companions; from what I could see, the conversation was off to an enthusiastic start.

In fact... As I looked around again, I could see that the atmosphere was lively and cheerful everywhere.

Lizardfolk, arach, orcs, Tomoe, Mio, Tomoe... Wait, Tomoe again?

Whoa, am I drunk? Am I seeing double? No, there are two Tomoes, right?

Ah, the one hopping around with a sake cup is a clone or something. On closer inspection, it’s smaller and only about two heads tall.

This... clone, or whatever it was, seemed to be leading this shindig. When you thought about it like that, its drinking prowess seemed kind of cute.

In any case, it was a relief to see everyone getting along so well. And I found it heartwarming to see different species gathered around a fire, sharing drinks. I guess creating events like this was important when different races lived together.

Sharing a common culture could deepen bonds. If that was what Ema was aiming for, she might have a talent for leadership.

Though I’d prefer if she just liked festivals. It would mean fewer worries for me. Moderation is key. Moderation.

I wanted to take a hands-off approach to the Demiplane. I had never asked to be thrust into a king-like position. But I had to be honest, I felt that kind of pressure from Ema. I'd prefer if she acted as the queen, with me just being the person who lent them land.

Finally, the feast was winding down. The moms and the kids and many others were gradually disappearing, leaving behind the heavy drinkers.

I should head to bed soon.

Before I do, how about I shoot my bow for the first time in a while?

All right, let's do that.

So then—

Time to sneak away for some fun.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 2

I stood in a quiet corner of the forest, devoid of people and far from the sounds of the feast.

“Mmm, nice.”

After some stretching, I sat and took a deep breath of the forest air. Gripping the bow, I focused on my handmade target about a hundred and fifty meters away. This was less than my usual distance since I had placed the target in a spot obscured by trees.

I took my position.

Ah, this feels great. This moment.

Clearing my mind, I let everything but the target fade from my thoughts, then reached out with my senses.

I became one with everything along the direct line to the target. Myself, the bow, the target, even the branches and leaves in the way—all were absorbed into my consciousness.

I stood up quietly, nocked an arrow, and drew the bow. This was a perfected action for me, repeated tens of thousands of times.

“Fuuu...”

The tension in my body released with my breath.

The first shot.

It flew straight, embedding itself in the center of the target.

Again and again, I shot at the target.

Maybe because it had been a while, I got carried away and shot dozens of arrows, but I didn't feel particularly fatigued. Perhaps it was due to my superhuman body or simply my love for archery.

For health, for strength, for improvement—my reasons had evolved over time.

I had dedicated a significant portion of my life to archery. My sister and brother had practiced martial arts, but not nearly as much as I had worked with my bow and arrows. Part of it was that I had always been the weakest among my siblings, so I had trained harder than anyone. But that wasn't the only reason.

The truth was... I was just captivated by archery. My family had been concerned about my obsession, but shooting a bow was never a chore for me.

The first time I had shot an arrow in the Demiplane, I hadn't held back—and had ended up obliterating the target. This time, I accounted for that.

In the conclusion envisioned by my focused mind, the image of the arrow piercing the target was realized without a doubt.

“OK, great, the target is still in one piece... Yep, that's good.”

I couldn't help but feel uneasy about how little fatigue I was experiencing. Normally, I would be much more tired; my muscles would be sore, and moving around would be a bit painful.

I wiped the sweat from my face and looked up at the sky, trying to shake off my unease. The dark sky was clear, with stars twinkling brightly.

If there's a sky and stars here, does that mean there's a universe too? But the Demiplane is just an empty space created by Tomoe's abilities. It's hard to imagine she could create something as big as a universe. So, does that mean the universe beyond this starry sky is from another world, or...?

“Young Master?”

I jumped in surprise. *Why do I become so vulnerable whenever I focus on my archery?*

This voice...

“Tomoe, and Mio,” I greeted them. They were standing just a few meters behind me, and I hadn’t noticed their presence at all.

Both seemed tense. Had something happened?

“Was that the archery training you’ve been doing, Young Master?” Tomoe asked, her face serious. Mio looked like she was about to cry. The two approached me, their expressions unchanged.

“Uh, yeah, that’s right. But what’s going on? You guys don’t look so great.”

“So, you have been practicing like that all this time,” Tomoe said, a bead of sweat running down her forehead. It was more of an observation than a question.

What was happening? Mio was on the verge of tears... And then, with no warning, she wrapped me in a tight hug.

“Whoa?! What’s going on?!”

“Young Master, you’re alive! You’re really alive!” Mio exclaimed, rubbing against me to confirm my safety.

Confirming my safety? Could it be an enemy attack?

“Hey, Tomoe! Is it an enemy attack?” I asked urgently.

“No... We were just watching your training, but only from partway through,” Tomoe explained.

“Huh? And what about it?”

I had no idea what was going on.

“Young Master, when you were focusing before shooting your arrows, if I can even call it focusing, while you were sitting...” Tomoe began.

“Yeah?”

“Your consciousness suddenly thinned out. It was like it blended into the surroundings,” she explained.

“Uh...”

So what?

“That’s not normal!” Tomoe shouted with unusual intensity. “That means your consciousness effectively *died!*”

Her angry outburst startled me. This was just my regular training, something I’d done weekly, if not daily, for more than ten years. I couldn’t understand why she was talking about death.

“Huh? Why would that mean I died?”

“Spreading your consciousness to merge with your surroundings only happens when you’re dead!” Tomoe insisted.

“Really?”

I wasn’t sure about the technicalities of it, but this was a technique I’d developed myself, and I always used it when I practiced archery.

“All of a sudden you just disappeared from the feast, so we went looking for you secretly so the others wouldn’t worry. Then, your presence got faint, and it was like you dissolved and vanished!” Mio sobbed, tears streaming from her eyes.

Wait, she’s crying? Did I do something horrible?

“Ah, well, I’m sorry for leaving the feast like that, but it was just my usual archery practice to calm myself... I was only shooting arrows, so there was no need to—”

“Young Master, you said it was to calm yourself? Are you saying that spreading your consciousness is a way to *calm* yourself?!” Tomoe asked, her hand pressed to her forehead. Her temples were throbbing, and veins stood out prominently.

I get that they were worried, but was that really something to get so angry about? Can’t they see I’m fine?

“Yeah, I calm myself by emptying my mind and then extending my awareness to the target. I feel like I’m merging with everything between myself and the—”

“Young Master!”

“Hold on, I’m explaining myself!”

“Are you saying you dispersed your consciousness that far and then reassembled it?!”

“Yeah, exactly! I was trying to explain that, so don’t interrupt me!” I snapped.

Tomoe stood for a moment in stunned silence, then sighed deeply and began to speak.

“Ah. Young Master, this explains some of the mysteries we’ve been facing recently.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Everything stems from your archery training. Kyudo, was it? That’s it.”

“What do you mean?” Now I was truly puzzled. What was this, detective time?

Tomoe began, “First, the increase in your magical power, which should be impossible. Normally, magical power has a set limit. Even with rigorous training, it usually doesn’t double what you’re born with.” Glancing down, she placed a hand on her forehead. She then looked up sharply, like a cut-in from *Persona 4*.

“By the time you made a Contract with Mio, your magical power had increased quite a bit compared to when you made a Contract with me,” she continued. “And it’s continued to grow at a ridiculous pace.”

“It’s increased?!”

“Yeah, incredibly so. Young Master, you’ve been increasing your magical power through that unique concentration of yours.”

I was speechless at Tomoe’s statement.

“Young Master, there’s more,” she added.

“What is it?” I asked, bracing myself.

“Just now, the Demiplane expanded,” she announced.

“What?!”

OK, that's a big revelation you just shared! Wasn't that the unresolved issue I'd tasked you with investigating?!

"What you were doing, it looked to us like you were attempting suicide. However, after your concentration, you started shooting arrows normally, so we decided we'd just watch. But now, after hearing your explanation, we know for sure."

Tomoe's serious tone and demeanor told me she wasn't joking.

"Young Master's dispersion and reassembly of his consciousness coincided with a rapid expansion of the Demiplane," she went on. "It happened five times just now. This hasn't occurred recently, but it happened right after your training."

"Wait, so does that mean new rivers and mountains have appeared?"

"No, it just expanded. Most likely, new terrain will form when you gain new followers," she replied. "I mean, that's my hypothesis, at least."

"Seriously? So, I can't even practice archery in peace anymore?"

"As long as you don't deeply concentrate, it should be fine. The cause isn't the act of shooting arrows... It's more the concentration involved."

"So, it's the deep concentration. That's a problem," I muttered.

"We'll think about countermeasures eventually," Tomoe assured me. "But the more pressing issue is your magical power."

"Wait, what?" There's something worse than the expansion of the Demiplane? And it's my magical power?

"With your current magical power, you could form Contracts with beings of our caliber en masse. However, when you made a Contract with me, it took almost half your magical power."

What?!

"Listen carefully. Your current magical power is—"

What?

"—likely on par with the Goddess... if not surpassing Her," Tomoe concluded.

What?!

Magical power comparable to a deity? Is she really saying I have the same level of power as a god?

Just when I had managed to control my magical power to some extent, now it would be even harder to conceal it! The burden on me would increase again!

This is insane! It takes the issue with the mask to a new dimension, that's for sure. And I was just thinking about taking it off too. But now another problem has come up. What am I supposed to do?

“Why don't you try suppressing your magical power as much as possible,” Tomoe suggested. “You should replace Draupnir every day, since it absorbs your magical power. I'll have the dwarves prioritize crafting new armor to help with that too.”

In the worst case, she added, they could create a new item prioritizing absorption effects.

“How did it come to this?” I wondered aloud.

“Most likely because of the dispersion and reassembly of your consciousness,” she explained. “Each time, you experience a state kind of like death and rebirth. During that moment, your magical power surges from zero to a massive amount. In those miraculous circumstances, there are a few cases where the maximum magical power has increased.”

So, because I died and came back to life, my magical power doubled? And because I repeated that process, it kept doubling again and again? That's not a good thing at all.

“And in the Demiplane too—”

There's more?

“This changes things. If we accept this hypothesis and combine it with what I've discovered, it's possible that you, Young Master, unconsciously created a world that's a lot like your original one based on the expanded Demiplane from our Contract.”

“I created a world?!”

“My hypothesis is based on the fact that there are things here that we don’t recognize but clearly exist in your world.”

“Th-That’s not enough evidence to conclude—”

Tomoe looked up at the sky as she responded, “No, but the way the stars are arranged here is totally foreign to me. If this sky reflects the one you know, then it strongly suggests that this place, the Demiplane, is a world you made. That would explain why the Demiplane changes with the Contracts you form with your followers. It’s like adding rules to a world formed by its creator.”

The night sky.

Yeah, no, this has to be a hopeful observation. This can’t be the sky I know. I can’t believe that I created a world just a few days into my otherworldly life.

The sky... The stars...

I only knew a handful of constellations: the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Orion, and a few others like the Hourglass Nebula, and the zodiac signs of Aquarius, Virgo, and Gemini.

“The Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Ori... on.”

No, no, no, they’re here?!

The constellations I know are scattered all over the sky! The arrangement is chaotic; it completely ignores the seasons, but they’re recognizable!

“It seems you do recognize the star arrangements. While it’s good to solve the mystery, this complicates things,” Tomoe pointed out.

“Could the Goddess be involved?” I asked.

“Yeah. Knowing Her temperament, if She finds out about this, She’ll probably move to get rid of you. She wouldn’t want someone capable of creating a new world existing in Her domain.”

That much was true. She might even use the heroes. But meeting a hero brought here from Earth to kill me was something I very much didn’t want. The thought of our first meeting being one where they tried to kill me was unbearable.

“For now, let’s keep this hidden and take measures,” Tomoe suggested.

A wise decision, samurai detective.

I need to completely control my magical power and hide it. I’ve got to avoid confrontation with the heroes at all costs.

I’ll also have to take a break from archery. Good thing I got to shoot a lot today.

Yeah, this is pretty fortunate. At least knowing this now reduces the risk of a final boss from my world suddenly attacking me.

Positive thinking, positive thinking.

Once Rembrandt-san introduced me to someone in the pharmaceutical field, I planned to head to the Academy City immediately.

Maybe I’ll even try living as a student. Haha, ha, ha...

Tomoe

After my master left the feast, I sensed his presence in the forest on the outskirts of the Demiplane. Mio and I tracked him down, but—

What on earth is going on?

When we finally found Young Master, he was sitting holding a bow. His consciousness seemed thin, as if he might disappear at any moment. Normally, this would be a state close to death. But I didn’t sense any smell of death on him. So, what was going on?

Mio immediately tried to rush to his side, but I grabbed her arm.

She turned to glare at me, her sharp eyes were filled with anger. Her fist clenched tighter.

She’s genuinely worried about him. Well, I feel the same, but I need to explain why I’m holding her back.

“Don’t worry, Mio,” I told her. “Young Master’s consciousness is thin, but I can’t smell death on him. In fact, he seems extremely calm.”

Mio continued to stare silently at me but seemed to accept my explanation. Her grip relaxed.

Young Master’s behavior had shown no signs of suicidal tendencies. On the contrary, he had been energetically working on the future of the company. These weren’t the actions of someone contemplating death.

Plus, he had been genuinely pleased with the flowers Mio found.

At last, Young Master stood up and nocked an arrow.

And then, right before our eyes, he performed an extraordinary ritual.

I had always thought he was fascinating to watch, but this was something else entirely.

The problem that had eluded my investigation—the expansion of the Demiplane—occurred at the exact moment when Young Master’s dispersed consciousness returned to him! And as he opened his eyes, stood up, and drew his bow, the timing couldn’t have been more precise. This was undoubtedly one of the direct causes.

At the same time, he made his presence clear as he stood there, and his arrow flew straight into the target over a hundred meters away. The entire process was breathtakingly beautiful. My eyes followed the smooth flow from Young Master to the arrow and then to the target.

When I saw his release and the way Young Master moved from stillness to action, I had no doubt the arrow would find its mark. It was extraordinary.

As I shifted my gaze back from the target to Young Master, I was left speechless.

His already-enormous magical power had surged dramatically.

Magical power didn’t just increase so easily. If someone could double their innate magical power over a lifetime, they would be considered an extraordinary mage.

It seemed as if Young Master increased his maximum magical power during the process of drawing and shooting his bow. Of course, I had never seen or heard of such a technique.

So, *this* was how his magical power had been increasing so rapidly.

Seeing it up close, I was convinced.

Young Master lowered his bow and sat down again.

Once more, his consciousness thinned. Mio's face grew grim.

Young Master stood and shot another arrow. Again, his consciousness returned. And again, his magical power increased.

Is he repeating death and rebirth in this short period? The Demiplane is expanding every time Young Master shoots an arrow.

Is the Demiplane's size determined by Young Master's maximum magical power?

If so, is the Demiplane I created different from this one? Could it be that this is a world Young Master unconsciously created through our Contract? When I first stepped into this place after forming our Contract, I thought I had created it... It seems my intuition wasn't entirely wrong.

Creating a world was an ability no one in this world possessed—not even the Goddess.

When the Goddess descended to this land, She made a Contract with all of its native beings to create a world where humans could live.

This included us Greater Dragons, the powerful monsters that existed back then, and in a sense, Mio too, as she was a drifter who happened to be there by chance.

Even the Goddess hadn't created something from nothing. While She wasn't the highest-ranking deity, managing a world did require significant authority.

So, what is my master? Did he unconsciously do things even the Goddess can't do?

If so, was it done solely by his power, or was the divine power he got when he came here involved? I've checked his memories, and the deity seemed like an ordinary god.

No matter which world he came from, he was originally human. No matter where his power came from, it seemed impossible.

Wait, if the hypothesis about the world is true, another of the investigations I've been tasked with might be resolved—the irregular climate here in the Demiplane. If my hypothesis is right, we might just have a solution.

In any case...

My master was incredibly intriguing. If he kept dispersing and reassembling his consciousness, he might even reach the level of a Creator God in terms of magical power. How absurd.

I never tire of him. It's hard to believe someone like him could die in a mere hundred years. Unbelievable.

I'd seen him grow at an extraordinary rate in this short period, particularly in terms of combat.

If it ever came to a confrontation with the Goddess, there would be no need to worry. In fact, if he managed to get a few more powerful followers, he might even achieve victory.

While it might be considered a victory, the term “god-slaying” didn't quite fit. Rather... it would be transcending the gods.

Young Master had insulted the Goddess vehemently, but I had never seen pure hatred or murderous intent in him.

It could just be that I hadn't seen him consumed by hatred and bloodlust, but I couldn't imagine him drenched in the Goddess's blood, driving Her existence to extinction.

Given how She'd treated him—abandoning him in the Wasteland—it was only natural that he should hold a grudge.

So, transcending the gods. A term for the act that wasn't god-slaying.

Whatever it may be, I approached Young Master, who was gazing up at the sky deep in thought.

Whether as the head clerk of the company, an investigator of the Demiplane, or a useful dictionary in this world—

I'll do anything for this wonderfully precarious, boundless master.

A Certain Female Adventurer

Recently, Tsige has been thriving.

The reason is simple.

A skilled adventurer, carrying an unfamiliar sword, has been rapidly completing requests at the guild. The names on the guild's leaderboard have been changing significantly. While the adventurer's own name isn't on the list yet, her acquaintance's party has rapidly leveled up, and all its members have made it to the top ranks.

This adventurer registered with two others but is the only one actively working. Her name is Tomoe, and her level is an unbelievable 1340!

That's higher than the famous Dragon Slayer Sofia, renowned as the most invincible warrior of this era, by a good four hundred levels. However, due to her low adventurer rank, Tomoe wasn't on the leaderboard. So, in the adventurer guilds, where rank mattered more than level, she was only noticed by a few. But in Tsige, she was already a significant figure.

A powerhouse capable of easily handling long-neglected Wasteland requests. Her level was so crazy that at first, a lot of people suspected her of cheating. But now, no one doubted her.

Every adventurer registered in Tsige was trying to get close to her. Yet, there were few stories of anyone being successful.

They were idiots. If they wanted to benefit from Tomoe's power, they needed to research her more thoroughly. Like I had.

I had my eyes on the other two who are with Tomoe: Raidou and Mio.

Raidou was Level 1. I didn't imagine he's a very strong fighter.

Also, this was information cleverly hidden by both the Adventurer's Guild and the Rembrandt Company, not easily obtained through casual inquiries. But apparently, Tsige's top ranker, Lime, once led a large group to attack Tomoe and her companions. Raidou supposedly only punched one mage who was with Lime, while Tomoe took care of the rest.

All this I learned from an adventurer I knew who participated in that attack. Neither of us could work out why someone as skilled as Lime would do such a thing, because despite his cheap appearance, he was kind and empathetic. He might have felt righteous anger toward the Rembrandt Company for taking low-rank requests from young, inexperienced adventurers.

For some reason, however, Mio stayed out of that fight.

Why? Well, Mio was Level 1500, which made one suspect she might be a spirit or something. If someone said she refrained from fighting because she'd kill even with minimal effort, I'd have believed it. It was terrifying, really.

Out of the three of them, I'm guessing Tomoe likely had the least say. She probably took orders from Raidou and Mio, going hunting with whatever parties they told her to.

In public, Raidou was a mysterious masked man who acted arrogant, but it was probably just a performance. After all, how could a Level 1 command those two? It wasn't even worth considering seriously. Well, he must have had some trait that made them stay with him. He might have been a shared lover for both of them, or, here's a wild guess, their boyfriend.

I still couldn't quite read the relationship between Tomoe and Raidou, but I'm certain about who the true leader was: Mio. Her level alone proved it. There's no way I'd get a favorable response from Tomoe. If I wanted to talk, it had to be with Mio.

At least that's what my intuition told me—and I couldn't tell you how many times it had saved me before. My party and I had reached Level 95 this way,

finally able to venture into the Wasteland. We'd worked hard to get here, and we were proud of it.

If you wanted to establish yourself as an adventurer in Tsige, you had to aim for the Wasteland. If you didn't, you were better off working in a different region.

The requests for the Wasteland were all incredibly difficult. We'd taken on a few, but we had yet to succeed.

The monsters were overwhelmingly strong. We could barely manage to defeat some with the three of us working together, and stronger ones were impossible. Hunting or collecting parts from them was out of the question.

Even requests for exploration or gathering were blocked by the sheer difficulty of fighting the monsters. But if we could have Tomoe take the lead, we could accomplish those requests. That woman, Toa, and her party weren't much stronger than us. Their string of successful requests, rising ranks, and levels were all thanks to Tomoe being with them. We followed them once, and even when they were all busy collecting materials, no monsters approached because of Tomoe. Any mindless monster that did attack was sliced in half the moment it entered her range. She made it look so easy, it was kind of funny.

We could utilize that too. If we could get close to Mio, we could enjoy the same benefits as Toa's party. We'd bring back materials, exchange them for money, and get better equipment.

Ah, how good would it be to wander the bases of the Wasteland with Tomoe? By the time we got back to Tsige, we'd probably be at levels two hundred to three hundred. Then the rank of knight would no longer be a dream. We'd start winning martial arts tournaments all around the country. Maybe we'd even be invited to the Imperial Combat Grand Festival.

First, we needed to get close to those three who suddenly appeared in this town.

Unfortunately, my two other party members were less than enthusiastic about using Tomoe's group or aiming for the Wasteland straightaway.

One of them wanted to handle requests outside the Wasteland until we got to about Level 100, then hunt individual monsters near the entrance to the Wasteland, waiting for an opportunity to stumble upon the rumored Mirage City. She thought this would be safer, and I had to admit, the Mirage City was certainly enticing.

Relying on something that might not even exist seemed less certain than my plan though. First, this party member usually hated monsters, yet now she was clinging to the rumor of the Mirage City, where monsters supposedly lived. What did she think she was going to do there? Besides, how many years would it take to reach Level 100 through only non-Wasteland requests and hunting monsters?

My other party member was even more useless, even more passive. His idea was to save money and start by acquiring good equipment. That's why I said if we could get Tomoe or Mio on our side, we'd have everything we wanted! With materials, we could get weapons cheaply—it was common sense! For a man, he spent way too much effort on self-preservation.

I knew better than anyone what risks waited for us in the Wasteland. That's why I needed to explain, again, the great rewards we could get in exchange for those risks. We'd been together this long. Considering their abilities and the teamwork we'd built, I didn't want to end up disbanding.

To convince them, I began to take action.

The problem was Mio; she was incredibly strong and rarely sighted. I had the impression that getting on her bad side could get one killed.

So, I decided to approach Raidou, whom I often saw around Tsige. I thought I'd win him over first and that way I could create a friendly situation where I could talk to Mio.

I made myself look as beautiful as possible. I put on makeup, and I dressed in the kind of clothes city girls wore. I approached him and tried to strike up a conversation, but he was always busy and never paid me any attention. For being Level 1, he kind of acted like a big shot.

What I did notice from my attempt at contact was that he didn't seem used to women. At first, I thought he was a kept man but that wasn't it. He actually got

all flustered just from a greeting.

Next, I tried disguising myself as a prostitute. I figured maybe if we got our physical relationship off to a quick start, that would help things go more smoothly. After all, around here a lot of people led dual lives, and for some men, all it took was being with a woman just once, and they'd develop some degree of attachment.

Boy, was that the wrong move. The moment I tried to lure him into a brothel, Tomoe and Mio came out of nowhere and whisked him away. They were both trying so hard, it was like they were competing with each other to see who could get him away from me first.

Could it be that he's ridiculously handsome under that mask? Until then, I hadn't seen him as the type of man those two would fight over. If so, seduction would be counterproductive. And since Tomoe or Mio were the ones I actually needed to get close to, the last thing I wanted to do was upset them.

If I'd had my party there to back me up, I might have been able to take a different approach. But the way I'd tried it, I'd failed to get close to them. Worse, they'd gotten a good look at my face, and I'm pretty sure they'd remember me. That'd make it even harder to get close to Raidou again.

Now that it'd come to this...

I had to think of another way. Somehow, I had to get close to Tomoe and Mio. And yet, all the methods I could think of were heavy-handed. Sure, I hadn't been killed, but I had left a bad impression on the two girls.

There was no choice. At this point, I needed their cooperation, and I had to ensure success no matter what. How could I get them to agree and also move them to action...?

...

...

I see.

If I move when they move...

It would be difficult with Tomoe, who often stayed with that Dark Thief, Toa. But if Mio or Raidou went into the Wasteland, we could follow them, just within the range where we'd be able to move behind them.

This is it. This way, my party might agree.

We might also get some of the monsters that Mio hunted. And since it'll be in the Wasteland, there's a chance we could stumble upon the Mirage City—if it existed.

Sigh. It was frustrating that I ended up with almost the same conclusion as those my useless party members. But tracking Raidou or Mio would have a much higher rate of success than tracking Tomoe. Of course, that meant the dangers to us would be higher, but as adventurers, the risk would still be within the acceptable range.

The plan was set.

Now, all that was left was to figure out when they were going to move.

Mio was truly difficult to track, so I decided to focus on Raidou. If I followed him, I was sure to encounter either Tomoe or Mio.

There was one lead on him: no one knew how he did it, but Raidou occasionally disappeared without a trace. Did he go somewhere else in Tsige, or outside the city altogether? We didn't know that either. But whenever he did it, Mio didn't seem to be around. It's possible they were illegally entering the Wasteland together... or maybe they'd gotten some special permission to enter through the official route.

I knew Raidou would never go into the Wasteland alone, not with his level and rank. He might have been able to get special permission if he was with Tomoe or Mio, but he wouldn't have been granted entry on his own.

He was a sharp one, though. I knew that's why I was being avoided. He often changed direction just before I reached him or lost me when I was tailing him. I'm not sure how he sensed me, but he was definitely doing something. Despite being Level 1, he noticed an adventurer like me trying to follow him, evaded me, and disappeared. It was all very suspicious.

So, I'll ask my two party-members to take turns with this task.

All three of us were born and raised in Tsige. With the two of them working together, it should be possible to track someone like Raidou, who wasn't even from here. Next... we'd need to be prepared to move into the Wasteland at any time.

I'll also have to think about how to outwit Raidou and the others if something happened.

We were on the verge of a challenge that could be the perfect opportunity to make a name for ourselves, with a huge prize dangling right in front of us. This was the chance of a lifetime. If I wanted to grow my career as an adventurer, I couldn't afford to mess this up.

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The day after hearing the unbelievable explanation about the Demiplane, Mio took me to a certain field within it. She'd been exploring the Wasteland with arachs when she discovered the Ambrosia flowers and decided to have them cultivated in the Demiplane. We were here to check on their progress.

Even so, I couldn't believe that Ambrosia was actually blooming in the Wasteland. Mio mentioned that she'd gotten permission to take a few plants without disturbing the original habitat. Speaking of which...

"Mio, was there a manager or something at the Ambrosia field?" I asked.

She smiled and pointed at the flowers as she answered. "I got permission directly from these children. I had a good chat with them."

Huh? These children? I don't hear them saying anything... Is this a special ability of hers?

"Mio, you can talk to plants?" I asked, impressed. "You already have so many hidden talents, like alchemy and detoxification."

"Well, it's not exactly as clear as a conversation, but we can communicate to some extent," Mio explained.

"I see... So, do you think they can take root here?"

“That’s what we’re going to find out. If not, we’ll take them back to their native habitat in the Wasteland and have Tomoe put up a barrier.”

Because if humans found them, they’d harvest everything. Mio’s assessment was spot on. *Aww, Mio, you’re growing up! I’m so proud of you!*

“But, Young Master, there’s one issue,” Mio began. “Well, it’s a minor one, but...”

“What is it?” I asked, concerned.

“Apparently, there are self-proclaimed, um, protectors of the Ambrosia. We took the plants without telling them, so we might need to explain things to avoid trouble,” she said.

“Protectors?”

If such people existed, they might start investigating if they found traces of our harvesting. Should their search extend to the vicinity of Tsige, the location of the Ambrosia field might be discovered. Given how valuable Ambrosia was—something I learned firsthand during the recent Rembrandt family incident—this could lead to conflicts among humans in Tsige. That would be bad.

“Yeah, and judging by the state of the habitat, they’re probably a stubborn, inflexible race like fairies. I’m not sure if they’ll listen to us,” Mio speculated.

“But if we have the Ambrosia’s approval, it shouldn’t be a big deal, right?” I asked.

“Well, like I said, they’re only *self-proclaimed* protectors. They don’t have a way to communicate with the Ambrosia, and they seem to be the only ones protecting the plants.”

When I thought of fairies, they seemed like they could talk to trees and plants, but apparently that was not the case. Discovering and protecting a plant believed to be extinct, that was quite commendable.

Fairies, huh... Small flying pixies, female tree-guardians like dryads, or maybe more like serious, stern male-types like knockers. If they were dryads, they would be the first female characters I’ve encountered that fit my taste.

Because people in Tsige are too beautiful for me to approach. I'm a coward. Not to mention, the real danger lies with the adventurers, not the merchants. Sometimes, I see women with barely any clothing.

Once I'd seen a woman with only a small cloth wrapped around her chest while her face had been covered like an Arabian woman's. I had wanted to point out that the cloth should be switched around.

Surrounded as we were by people with realistically moving animal ears and elves with impossibly slender bodies, there were plenty of folks to satisfy various preferences. Even the ordinary beauties wore revealing clothes. Fairies felt more approachable in comparison.

To add to that...

Because my two followers were high-level, recently, a lot of women had been trying to seduce me! The adventurer types seemed like they were hitting on me, but their real interest was in Tomoe and Mio. And then there were the women who approached me because they thought I had money, given my frequent visits to the Rembrandt Company. Both situations were honestly problematic.

When we returned to the Demiplane, Tomoe might have been okay, but Mio would sometimes come to my room with a covetous look (I don't think it was just my imagination). Tomoe had seemed to enjoy watching Mio act this way and had been relatively quiet recently. How exhausting. It was so important that... never mind. Even talking about it was draining.

So, I thought, why not skip the romance and dates and become an adult all at once? I'd heard that if you relieved stress quickly, you could gain wisdom.

You heard me right; I'd almost gone into a brothel in Tsige's red-light district. Well, more like I'd been almost dragged into one. At that time, I hadn't thought it was such a bad idea. I didn't even want to remember it.

Just before I'd gotten inside, Tomoe and Mio had popped out from who knows where and dragged me back to the Demiplane. Once there, they'd wasted no time making a fuss about which of them I should sleep with, or if they should serve me together. When they'd started undressing enthusiastically, I'd taken advantage of their distraction to try and get the hell

out of there—only to have been pursued by a toxic-looking pink mist and sticky spider threads.

Tomoe and Mio were... like family. The idea of being with them felt like incest.

To simply call them companions or followers didn't capture the depth and closeness of our relationship.

Toa was similar, although, in her case, it was because she resembled someone I knew.

For the time being, I couldn't expect to be with anyone intimately. It made my heart feel jagged. Maybe things would be different if I acted separately from Tomoe and Mio...

"Um... Young Master? Are you listening?" Mio's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I shook my head to clear it, resolving to put aside my sexual concerns for now.

OK, since we took the Ambrosia without informing the fairies who apparently manage them, we need to go say hi. Got it.

"Well, they don't sound like bad guys. Either way, we should meet and talk to them," I said.

"I'd hate to trouble you, Young Master... so I thought I might go alone," Mio suggested.

"No, I don't mind."

"That's... If you leave it to me..." She muttered, "Maybe I should have explored more and eaten them back then. I can't believe I'm troubling Young Master."

Wait, what was that?! There was absolutely no way I'd just heard her true thoughts... I refused to think about it. So, what was it?

One thing was clear: leaving this entirely to Mio felt dangerous.

"Mio, let's go together for a change. OK?" I asked.

"Together?!" Mio exclaimed.

"Yeah, together."

“OK, yes, I’ll go with you! Absolutely!” she replied enthusiastically.

Is she a guy? What’s with that level of excitement?

Fairies, huh. I wonder what they’re like.

I’d like to meet a considerate, maid-like older-sister type.

I mean, my followers are all so free-spirited... If there was a woman like that, I might even invite her to join us in the Demiplane.

No, more importantly...

... In this case, finding an older sister is secondary.

I’m actively wanting to recruit someone who will make things easier for me, against Tomoe and Mio.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 3

Fuu.

Fufufu.

Fufufufufufufufuhahahaha!

I knew it. I knew it alooong!

This world is not being kind to me!

Yes, this is Misumi reporting from the scene!

Right now, I'm blocking incoming arrows and spells with my barriers and weapons, while holding an almost-berserk Mio under my arm. On top of that, I'm protecting a party of three humans who appeared out of nowhere, all while negotiating a ceasefire!

I was holding on to Mio, watching the humans, talking to the fairies, dodging attacks, and sometimes counterattacking.

What kind of situation is this?!

Chaos. Pure chaos.

What's going oooon?! I desperately tried to suppress the urge to scream.

There were two enemies. Two of the rumored fairies.

One of them was targeting us precisely with their bow. The worst part was that each arrow they shot split midair, making the attacks incredibly difficult to dodge! Most of them embedded themselves into trees, but their accuracy was

definitely improving. I didn't know if it was the bow or the arrows, but what a troublesome enchantment!

The other fairy was holding a short staff, casting attack spells at us in the High Ancient language. One spell produced scattershot ice bullets that exploded midair to widen their area of effect, and another created invisible wind blades.

The only saving grace was that they weren't using fire magick, probably because they didn't want to risk causing a forest fire. But, man, they sure loved their splitting and multiplying attacks!

"High Ancient language" might sound impressive, but it was different from the highland orc language I used for spellcasting. As the name implied, "High" meant it had a better mana-to-magick power transmission rate than the lower ancient languages most mages used. If their ratio was five mana to one magick power, the highland orc language was one to one. So, you can see how much more impressive that is.

The fairies' armor was light green, exposing a lot of their brown skin. In fact, it was more like regular clothing with chest and shoulder guards added. Their arms and necks were visible, uncovered by any armor. In other words, the fairies prioritized mobility and relied on enchantments for defense.

I thought only the high elves of the Cursed Island could pull off such a stylish color, but I was wrong. Beautiful people can make anything look good.

They had red eyes and white hair. Their bodies were slender, not curvaceous.

The archer was much taller than the mage. Despite their mismatched heights, they somehow complemented each other perfectly.

"Damn you, humans! Not only did you pluck the Crimson Lotuses that have grown here since ancient times, but you also reject our punishment!" the archer shouted.

Punishment? You're literally trying to kill us! If the only option is execution, I'm definitely avoiding it! For now, stop shooting!



The smaller one spoke up. “For your crime, pay with your life.”

What the heck is “pay with your life”? Isn’t that modern language?! This is a fantasy world, right?!

As I tried to figure this out, the two fairies relentlessly shot invisible wind blades and scattershot ice bullets at us—a devilish combination. I kept shouting at them as I tried my best to block the attacks with my barriers.

“This is all a misunderstanding! Look, my friend and I don’t even know those three people back there. Just listen to me! And stop attacking!”

The archer shouted back, “You’ve been protecting those three since the beginning! If they’re not your comrades, what are they? And you’re also using incomprehensible magick!”

No, this isn’t magick, it’s called Realm... but there’s no way I can explain that in this situation.

“Besides, I can smell the Crimson Lotus on you,” the fairy continued. “You’re either dead or alive.”

The one with the staff... are you a dog? Everything you’re saying is weird! If you’re a dog, act like a loyal one, will you—

“Woof,” the staff wielder suddenly barked.

“Why are you barking?!”

“I received a revelation to bark... from myself.”

“Revelations don’t come from yourself! Anyway, stop it. No, stop it already! It’s seriously dangerous!”

This one is completely out of sync.

“Hey, you! You’ve been dodging the whole time. Why don’t you defeat them already?!” shouted one of the three people hiding behind me.

How can you say that while I’m protecting you?! That’s clearly not your line!

“That’s right! We found a treasure like Ambrosia! We’ll share a bit with you, so just defeat those two!”

“Eeek! I’m gonna dieee! This time, for real, I’m gonna dieee!”

Shut up, hyumans, I thought in annoyance. From your timing and everything, you’ve been tailing us all along, haven’t you? And since when did you become the discoverers of Ambrosia?!

I should have shaken off these guys with their lousy tailing skills right from the start. Trying to keep an eye on them had been a mistake.

Unfortunately, I had thought they were totally harmless, so I let them be... and it had completely backfired.

The fairies kept their distance while sniping at us. As I continued to put up barrier after barrier to block, I glanced at the hyumans.

Huh? The one screaming about the treasure... she looks familiar. Isn’t she the prostitute I almost made a mistake with? So, she was an adventurer all along.

Just then, Mio spoke up from where she nestled under my left arm, “Young Master... am I allowed to eat them? I can take care of all of them, right? These small fries who ruined our time together, I can eat them, right? It’s OK, right?”

“Noooooooooo! Mio, no! Wait!”

Eat all of them? Fairies and hyumans are equal in front of Mio... but that’s not the point!

She wants to devour everyone around us! I’m completely surrounded! Truly, caught between a rock and a hard place. What do I do? How do I get out of this?

While I contemplated an escape route, a familiar voice suddenly echoed in my mind. Telepathy.

“Young Master. I’ve been watching for a while now, and this is quite an amusing situation.”

That voice... Tomoe! Oh, loyal servant number one! Is this a lifeline?

“Tomoe, Tomoe! Can you do something about this?!” I asked.

“Even if you ask for help, Young Master, who was having a tryst in the Wasteland with Mio...”

What is she saying at a time like this?! How is this a tryst?!

“No, that’s not it! I just came to talk to the fairies. If I left Mio alone, the fairies would already be in her stomach! And since when have you been watching?!”

Plus, I thought, if you’ve been watching all along and haven’t done anything to help, you’re completely out of line right now.

“Since that group of humans started tailing you and Mio, I’ve been watching over you from the shadows,” Tomoe revealed.

“Since Tsige?!”

“It looks like you’re having a lot of fun. Unlike me, who gets scolded just for trying to find some peace in the Demiplane.”

“Those guys started tailing us on their own! Tomoe, please! I’ll let you experiment with rice fields or swords as much as you want! Just help me!”

“I’ve been waiting for those words! Reward and punishment is the truth of the world! I’ll lead the three humans into the Demiplane, so why don’t you create a distraction? An explosion or something. After that, Young Master, you can calm Mio down and negotiate with the forest ogres.”

Forest ogres?!

So, they’re ogres, not fairies! And I’ve just made a pretty stupid promise! The Demiplane will become even more of a strange Japanese-like place.

Well, “ogre” certainly makes them sound fiercer. But they look way more like fairies. So, which is it, ogre or fairy?

From under my arm, Mio was muttering something.

“Kill, kill, kill...”

Here it is, the dead-fish eyes!

Mio had entered the super-dangerous zone. Tomoe, hurry up!

“Damn it, I’ll start with the humans in the back! Die!” The fairy, or rather, the forest ogre with the bow, launched an attack. Up until now, she’d been aiming straight at me, but as my barriers had been deflecting everything, she was getting frustrated.

She lifted her bow, angled it, and fired. The arrow flew over me, aiming directly at the humans.

“Huh?! Hey, do something, fast!!!” one of them shouted.

Don't worry, I'll save you now.

All right, it's a nice rain of arrows.

I created a dome of flames around the humans.

Several arrows appeared near the first. This was no multiplication spell. The archer was simply so fast it gave off the visual effect of the arrows duplicating. But they were still only made of wood.

The layer of flames erupting from the ground should be enough to burn them. Even if the arrowheads weren't entirely incinerated, if the force was neutralized, they wouldn't be a threat.

A little burn won't kill you.

I sensed the three humans vanish. It seemed they panicked at the sudden wall of flames and got swallowed by Tomoe without resistance or coherent words.

Finally, it was just me, Mio, and the forest ogres left.

“Mio, hey, Mio!”

No response; she may as well be a corpse... No, she's muttering something?

“It's fine now, I'll kill and melt everything, and drink it like juice...”

Great. Just seconds away from destruction!

Uuuuuu, there's no other way!

I hesitated for only a moment before creating a sharp-edged ice konpeitō, a star-shaped candy, in my right palm, and clenched it tightly.

I feel like there might have been a better way to handle this, but it's too late now.

Blood dripped from the fresh injury but not too much. I brought my hurt right hand to Mio's mouth and pressed it against her lips.

From under my left arm where I was holding her, Mio's muttering stopped. It wasn't because I had covered her mouth but because of the red liquid that touched her lips.

The sensation of Mio's tongue on my palm sent a shiver through me. *All right, all right, drink up. And stop chanting that creepy stuff like it's some kind of spell.*

This should calm Mio's rampage for now, as she'd be focused on something delicious.

Now then...

I had been constantly moving while calling out to the forest ogres, but I stopped and faced them directly.

"Hyuman, is this some sort of internal conflict?" the archer asked.

She probably thought I had burned the three hyumans to death. It would look that way from the outside.

"No, I just isolated them," I replied.

"There's no movement from them," the one with the staff pointed out, leveling the weapon at me.

OK, referring to the forest ogres as "the one with the bow" and "the one with the staff" is getting annoying, so let's call the archer "A" and the mage "B."

Suddenly, I sensed a disturbance in the air: wind magick. From the magick power gathering around B as she chanted, I could feel the spell's potency. It was different from the attacks so far—this was a big one.

"Mio, disperse it," I commanded her.

Dark magick had several unique properties not found in other elemental magics. Its most notable feature was that it was seen as the opposite attribute to the Goddess, who was said to govern light. Because of this, dark magick was generally... disliked. *For the record, I don't care about any of that.*

One of its unique properties is...

"Yes, Young Master," Mio replied.

She seemed to have returned to her senses and was observing the flow of magick power from the enemy. With just one glance, she had mostly figured it out. This was an impressive feat, likely driven by instinct.

Just as the converging magick power was about to turn into a spell, it suddenly scattered. This, of course, was Mio's doing.

Forest ogre B wore a bewildered expression, like she had no idea what had just happened. For good reason—this kind of feat was practically a circus trick. I'd heard Mio's explanation of the technique and had practiced it myself, but I was far from mastering it.

Dark magick consumed mana. Under very limited conditions, it could do so with incredible efficiency.

When dealing with fully formed and completed spells, the consumption was highly inefficient. To nullify such a spell, it would take several times the mana of the spell itself. So, it wasn't practical, and no one used it purely for that purpose... except for Mio, who did it like it was the easiest thing in the world.

When it came to mana gathered during chanting however, it was the opposite. The mana source near the chanting person—usually gathered in a staff or at their fingertips—could be consumed very efficiently by dark magick.

If the gathered mana at the focal point—like the staff, fingertips, or palm—was consumed before the spell was cast, what happened?

The answer was simple: the spell was canceled. What's more, the consumed mana didn't return to the caster, resulting in a net mana loss for them.

This essentially established a highly unconventional counter-magick. Not just a reactionary move but a proactive one—something that could keep you one step ahead of your opponent. This effect happened to magick of all other attributes.

Consuming the opponent's magick with dark magick was extremely difficult. You had to activate dark magick faster than the opponent could finish their chant. Yet, Mio, who had long been accustomed to the darkness attribute, performed this process as naturally as breathing. Her instincts were truly remarkable. And so, she could use this unique skill in actual combat.

If one were to face her, it would be more effective to use simple but powerful spells in rapid succession rather than long, high-power spells. Though... even those might get consumed. *Yeah, I'd rather not face her.*

“Well, if a show of power is necessary for us to talk—” I began, addressing the forest ogres who’d stopped moving, surprised by Mio’s unconventional counter-magick.

“Oh, you’re up for a fight?” Forest ogre A sneered.

“Wait. Something’s off.” B showed slight unease at her spell not activating. But it was too late.

“—then I’ll demonstrate by neutralizing you,” I declared.

My targets were the short staff and the bow. However, aiming in their general direction might result in shooting the forest ogres’ bodies.

“Mio, I’m going to create a flash,” I told her telepathically.

I intensified the power of a Light spell, making it explode between the two ogres for just an instant. A flashbang, basically.

As the two ogres twisted their bodies and covered their faces to retreat from the light, I aimed and shot at their weapons with Bridt.

It was a direct hit, and both the staff and the bow were obliterated. Apparently the second shot I’d prepared wouldn’t be necessary.

I’m exhausted.

Finally, we could start negotiating. If this were a game, a simple “Talk” button would have sufficed...

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“I’m Aqua.”

“Eris.”

I snickered, then coughed when they looked at me in confusion. They probably had no idea how much their names sounded like a sports drink.

A sports drink... I haven't had one in ages. There was nothing like it after a club activity.

Their names weren't the only funny things about the forest ogres; their height difference was also comical. Aqua was tall while Eris was as short as an elementary schooler.

Once we'd neutralized them, Aqua and Eris agreed surprisingly quickly to take us to meet their leader.

Suspicious.

Still, given the results of our recent battle, I didn't think they could cause me any serious harm.

The journey to the village wasn't particularly pleasant, and the forest ogres weren't talkative, so we didn't gather much information, but we did learn a few things.

First, the forest ogres were protecting the Ambrosia purely out of a sense of duty to safeguard rare plants. Aqua and Eris were just the ones on duty today; their village regularly dispatched people to protect the Ambrosia.

Second, we found out their village wasn't far at all from Tsige. After just a couple of hours, a small village came into view through the trees. Aqua stopped and gestured at it with her chin.

"Is that your village?" I asked, and she nodded.

From Tsige, it took just under half a day to reach the forest where the Ambrosia grew, and a few hours from the forest to the village. From the village to Tsige was about a half day's walk. So, Tsige, the Ambrosia forest, and the forest ogres' village formed a triangle.

Yet Tsige had no information about this.

Curious, I used my Realm to investigate and found what seemed to be a barrier, though it was quite weak. It seemed to serve a concealment function.

It's not working very well on me, though. I can see the barrier just fine... and the village behind it.

Maybe Aqua had pointed it out to make sure I saw it.

As we walked on toward the village, I asked if they were using the barrier to hide from adventurers from Tsige. Aqua told us that some adventurers were adept at detecting barriers, leading them to discover the Ambrosia Forest and the forest ogres' village.

In those cases, she said, they resolved matters with force.

I shuddered. The fact that Tsige knew absolutely nothing about these incidents meant their use of force had been utterly successful.

Aqua went on to explain that the weakening of the barrier had led to increased clashes between the forest ogres and adventurers, along with the issue of the Ambrosia.

"We're here!" Eris interrupted with a dramatic bow. "Welcome to the Forest Ogre Village."

The way Eris spoke and acted marked her as quite the quirky character. If her arms weren't tied behind her back, I'm pretty sure she would have bowed like a butler.

"I'll take you to the village council," Aqua said in a much more businesslike tone.

Even while bound, she stood straight and walked without any sign of being intimidated by me or Mio. She gave off the impression of a disciplined soldier.

Led by the bound Aqua and Eris, we passed dozens of forest ogres that lined the path we walked through their village. To say it was an uncomfortable walk would be a severe understatement. I could almost feel the hostility drilling into me from their gazes.

Still, I couldn't help being fascinated by the place. It was built into a clearing in the forest. Some of the wooden houses were freestanding, while others were built like cabins onto the thick trunks of trees.

The village was filled with the scents of greenery, wood, and what I assumed were flowers or fruit. It was a lot like what I expected an elven village to look like. The resemblance made sense, given that elves were forest dwellers too. Maybe forest ogres were even a kind of dark elf?

I mean, who wouldn't want to see an elf village when transported to a fantasy world?

After a few minutes of walking, our two guides stopped in front of a large mansion.

“How far are you planning on taking us?” Mio asked, irritation lacing her voice.

Aqua and Eris didn't answer her question but gestured for us to enter the mansion. I thought we were almost there and would only have to endure a bit longer, but Mio wasn't one for such patience.

If she thought something, she said it. No filter.

I should probably learn to be a bit more like her.

“Here we are,” Aqua announced, stopping in front of a door.

I could sense several presences beyond the door. However, it didn't seem like they were preparing spells or setting up an ambush.

Still, not knowing what awaited us, it would probably be wise to let Aqua or Eris open the door. I untied their ropes. Whether aware of my intention or not, Aqua opened the door in silence.

Inside was a large table surrounded by chairs, with several forest ogres seated around it.

“We'll take our leave here,” Eris said. “I expect we'll meet again once you've finished talking with our leaders. Farewell.”

The way she said “farewell” was so blunt and detached that it didn't feel friendly at all. It was like listening to a bad actor's lines.

She's really hard to read.

After hesitating for just a moment, Mio and I entered the room.

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The forest ogres looked calm and refined, with brown skin, red eyes, and white hair. Or perhaps it was silver. The way it shone in the light, it was hard to

say for sure. Their ears, though... Their ears were short, not pointed elf ears like I'd expected.

Their bodies were slender. Even though they were forest dwellers, they weren't elves, yet they wore fashionable clothing that reminded me of what I'd seen some high elves wearing.

If I get the chance, I mused, I should give them some blue-dyed leather armor.

As if sensing my thoughts, one of the forest ogres spoke up. "From our appearance, you might think we're a race like dark elves. But they don't protect forests as we do. Even elves living in forests coexist with the spirits and draw power from them. Some tribes live by lakes, seas, or mountains, but they're distinct from us."

So, dark elves don't really live in dark forests? I wondered. Are they more like cave-dwelling folks or underground elves?

That completely ruins the cool image.

"Dark elves refer to those who have abandoned the protection of spirits in pursuit of magic—" came an unexpected voice. It was Mio!

Huh, it's rare for Mio to teach me something.

"We, the forest ogres, are the guardians of the forest," another elder cut her off, prompting me for an answer with their eyes. "We manage, benefit from, and expand the forest without relying on spirits. We're also known as 'forest keepers.' Although we've secluded ourselves in this Wasteland for ages and have likely been forgotten by the world, I'm curious as to how you know of us."

Forest keepers, huh? Well, I'm relieved they're not some laser-blasting golems like the strongest swordsman dreamed about. If they were, I might be dead by now.

Would it be all right to say that Tomoe told me about them? I'm not sure how she knows about the forest ogres, but if they don't believe me, I can always bring her here.

"Do you know the Greater Dragon Shin?" I asked. "Through our connection, she told me about your people."

The second they heard Shin's name, I could see a shock wave of surprise ripple through the circle of elders. *I hope Shin's name doesn't trigger any bad memories for them, I thought nervously. That was a bit of a scary reaction.*

After a moment of silence, one of the elders spoke.

"Indeed, it wouldn't be surprising for Shin-sama to know of us. In this desolate wilderness, where we live without the protection of spirits, we owe her a great deal. However, her dwelling is far to the southwest. It's not a place a hyuman like you could easily reach. Even from the place the hyumans call 'Zetsuya,' it would take a month of walking to get there."

Phew. Sounds like they don't have a bad impression of Shin. However, explaining how I met Tomoe might be troublesome.

"Ah, that's a long story..." *And, honestly, a bit of a hassle. Can I give them the short version? But I'm also curious about the favor they mentioned. I don't fully understand Tomoe's abilities or her past, given her long lifespan.*

"It's all right. We have time," said another elder said. They seemed to have a tradition of speaking in turns.

I might as well explain about Mio too. I'll leave out the part about her being the Black Spider of Calamity and just mention she's a monster transformed into a humanoid by our Contract.

Here, Mio was considered an unmitigated disaster by anyone who knew of her. Like an unstoppable phenomenon, she always appeared somewhere in the world no matter how many times she was repelled. She was treated almost like a certain vampire in Japanese literature who was a calamity in themselves.

Still, I feel like I've been explaining my circumstances more to non-hyumans recently... Now that I think about it, I haven't explained my situation to any hyumans. Not even to Rembrandt, beyond our business dealings.

I hope to meet a trustworthy hyuman someday... but who knows when that will be.

"So then..."

I began giving a brief account of my interactions with the orcs, the “monster outbreak” that led to the collapse of Zetsuya, and my battle with Shin.

Looks like we'll need to stay the night here.

Sigh.

Tomoe

Well, well, this situation is exactly what you'd call a blessing in disguise.

Since being forbidden by Young Master from viewing his memories, I'd worked hard to achieve my goal, and I'd been granted limited access to his memories.

I had hoped to learn about the history of his world through this opportunity, but it seems the permission was restricted to something called “television” and “videos.”

The historical dramas provided some insight into swords and rice cultivation, but they lacked detailed information on history and technology.

While pondering in the Demiplane, I saw Young Master and Mio heading out to the Wasteland, tailed by a few humans. One of my abilities allowed me to observe things happening far away just like they were projected images. Using this power, I secretly watched the situation unfold, and it turned into quite a chaotic scenario.

Mio had those dangerous colorless eyes, and three unfamiliar humans were running around in a panic. It was quite entertaining, but the two attackers seemed familiar.

If I recall correctly... before one of my several slumbers, I created a barrier for them at their request. That's who they look like.

They were called... forest ogres. Yeah, forest ogres.

Forest ogres were a rare species that had remained unchanged for thousands of years due to their isolation from the world.

A descendant of the ancient elves who broke away from the spirits while living in the forest...

Unlike their kin the elves, the forest ogres rejected the ideal of fully integrating with the forest. Thus, they abandoned their ability to communicate with plants. I imagine that by now, they probably considered themselves a different race from the elves.

And from the elves' perspective, they were even more incomprehensible than the dark elves.

If anyone were to understand them, it would be Young Master. The way the forest ogres live sounded a lot like the ancient way of woodcutters in his world.

If that was the case, they might be presented with an interesting choice.

Although my to-do list was a mile long right now, this took priority because it was more interesting. The current direction was set, and the situation was in motion. I had the leeway, and if not, I'd create it.

We'd been analyzing blacksmithing techniques and sword structures from videos, with the eldwars (a convenient abbreviation I coined for the elder dwarves) involved in discussions. Only those crafting weapons for Young Master and Mio were participating.

As for rice, we'd discovered what I think might be its original strain. It was a staple food in Young Master's world, especially in his country. Given that the Demiplane reflected that world, I guess it was inevitable that rice would show up here.

The highland orcs, led by Ema, had already begun cultivation experiments. They were currently using magick to shorten the growth cycle for quicker harvests.

Optimizing the environment and adjusting nutrients for each plant, using magick to accelerate crop growth—these were novel concepts. Following Young Master's guidance had yielded significant results.

I doubt Young Master had actually intended to offer such groundbreaking suggestions. He had found it amusing when the lizardfolk and orcs, who had

been listening to my clone, were left speechless. How he had derived ideas like these from observing alchemy scenes was beyond me.

It's like he's manipulating time, I realized. Seriously next level. Time manipulation magick was unquestionably within the realm of the divine. Yet, as Young Master had suggested, understanding and adjusting biological structures and mechanisms allowed us to achieve results similar to time acceleration magick but far more easily.

Young Master had referred to this knowledge as “science.” Science, I was coming to learn, was both wonderful and extremely dangerous. I had fully agreed with Young Master when he'd said that magick and science maybe shouldn't be combined.

Although, like Mio, I didn't particularly care about the world as long as it lined up with Young Master's desires, so it was probably not my decision to make.

Plus, I was currently considering something potentially dangerous from a global perspective: awakening the forgotten abilities of the forest ogres.

The Goddess and the spirits would be shocked. If the forest ogres were aware of their abilities, they might exercise restraint.

Having spent so much time in isolation and having lost much of their history, how would they react? They'd severed ties with the spirits, so naturally, they had no faith in the Goddess either.

Yes, if they share our vision, perhaps they could serve us like the ninjas of Iga and Koga.

Nufufufu, this is exciting.

Young Master's unconsciously filling roles left and right!

These days, he seemed a bit scatterbrained. He had a hard time focusing on anything, and he'd been acting recklessly... It was like he was hiding something, something he was anxious or impatient about. There was even a night when he had almost wandered into a brothel, which had been completely out of character for him.

This may be a serious issue. He'd only lived for less than twenty years and didn't know women. In any case, whether he waited a little longer or ran wild, he'd move forward.

Still, it was intriguing, very intriguing. Even in such a state, he continued to attract these kinds of people.

He may have an unconscious talent for stepping into trouble. I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

I'm surprised at how much of a hedonist I've become; lately, I find so much joy in life. Even the mundane human world shines like a golden dream to me now.

So, let's deal with this new problem: the three humans we've pulled into the Demiplane. Since I also operate as an adventurer in Tsige, it might be best to leave this to my clone. My face might be recognized.

As usual, I could leave the hospitality to the orcs, lizardfolk, arachs, and eldwar. Or maybe just the orcs and eldwar, who spoke the common language well and were a little bit... easier to get along with.

If they encountered the lizardfolk or arachs and panicked, that could be a problem for us. Judging by their behavior in the forest, they might not be the most tolerant people.

Now, what will our new guests think in their dreams? When they return to Tsige with their riches, what will their hearts hold toward us—obedience, rebellion, or desire?

Young Master usually wouldn't bring such people into the Demiplane. What kind of response will he have in such a rare scenario?

Special actions often led to special outcomes. If it were Young Master, he might call this a "flag." *Maybe I'm being influenced as well.*

Since Young Master had entrusted this matter to me, I had to fulfill my responsibilities properly.

I didn't know how he'd react to how I handled them, but it would be interesting to see him be indifferent at least once. And then there was the Mirage City, and its rumors.

Hmm, maybe “Mirage City” isn’t the best name. How about “City of Mist”?

Though we might not need such a name once it is fully established as a city... Maybe I’ll get all the residents together again for an all-night brainstorming session. Yeah, OK.

Anyway, Tsige is becoming more aware of this city’s existence.

Some say they thought they’d been dreaming. Others say they’d thought they were lost. And some even say they’d thought they were dead.

All the stories spoke of a phantom city one could sometimes wander into by chance.

In this city, monsters spoke the common language and were friendly to visitors. Guests were treated well and arrived home safely, bringing with them rare resources, materials, and equipment—rewards far beyond what any normal request or mission could provide.

To adventurers, it was like hitting the jackpot at a gambling den. Slowly but surely, these materials were making their way to Tsige, and requests related to them were starting to appear.

Bit by bit, the groundwork for Young Master to start trading the Demiplane’s goods through the Rembrandt Company was being laid.

At the base in Zetsuya, after the people there had heard our story, an unfortunate accident led to its collapse.

Following that, Young Master had been on high alert, rushing straight to Tsige with minimal rest. I’d been off on combat training, so progress on that front had stalled.

Sadly, I’d only leveled up twenty times. That’s a nightmare I’d rather forget.

I’d managed to follow orders—better late than never, I guess. Ever since the Rembrandt Company got involved, everything in Young Master’s life had become quite hectic.

I’m not one to sit back and let things pass me by.

I’ve got to be ready to leave Tsige at any time.

I need to take this seriously and enjoy myself as welllll.

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After being dismissed by the forest ogre elders, I was given a rather comfortable guest room. They'd told me to rest there until the banquet that night. It seemed like we were off to a good start in building a positive relationship.

I had to shorten my introduction quite a bit and had mixed in a few white lies, which left me feeling a bit guilty. But I couldn't exactly tell them that I had punched Shin or destroyed Shin's previous home. So, it was what it was.

After our meeting with the elders, Aqua and Eris escorted me to my room, but for some reason, they didn't leave. Introductions were over, and there was really no reason for them to stick around. Frankly, I wanted them to go.

Because dealing with these two felt exhausting.

They hadn't listened much during the battle earlier. Couldn't they at least hear me out now?

Aqua, with her bow and arrows, was undeniably beautiful but seemed rough and short-tempered. Eris, with her short staff, had a cute look but an eccentric personality.

My search for a more mature, maid-like older-sister type was turning out to be a complete failure. They had an exotic appeal, sure, but...

Unfortunately, I had a strong feeling these two would drain my mental energy dry. I'd prefer to keep my interactions with them limited to this village. I already had enough troublemakers in my life.

On top of that, my burgeoning magical power made finding more Contract partners a significant challenge. Given how formidable my first two partners were, it seemed unlikely I'd find a casual partner anytime soon.

Even though I was open to Contracting someone to test Tomoe's theory, it seemed that having too much magical power meant I had to be more selective.

The saying “more is better” didn’t apply here. While moving someone to the Demiplane didn’t necessarily require a Contract, these two...

As forest managers, they were essentially part of a forestry clan, which made them valuable as a species, but... it was a bit of a dilemma.

“Aqua, Eris. Thanks for guiding us. You can leave now,” Mio said, unintentionally scaring them.

“How about you accompany us to discuss your future plans?” Aqua responded.

“You’re asking us to come with you?” I asked, annoyed.

How frustrating. I’ve been feeling more irritable lately.

“Unfortunately, both Young Master and I are tired. We’d appreciate it if you could leave,” Mio added. *Nice one, Mio.*

“We just want to introduce you to our master,” Aqua insisted.

“Or maybe you could come along to make up for breaking our weapons?” Eris added.

Their master, huh... No, I definitely don’t want to meet them. If they’re anything like these two, my stomach won’t hold out. An aggressive, unpredictable character who doesn’t listen to anyone... sounds as bad as Mio before our Contract.

“I’m sorry, but that fight earlier really wore me out,” I told them. “I’d like to rest until the banquet. I mean, that’s why the elders lent us this room.”

The elders had indeed given us the room as an apology for Aqua and Eris’s rather rude behavior and so we could rest until the banquet. Having them hang around here was unbearable.

Did they have something they wanted to ask before the banquet?

“Tired? You? Don’t make me laugh,” Aqua scoffed.

“The fight was a piece of cake for you,” Eris chimed in.

Yep, these two were really tough to deal with. I had no desire to interact with them any longer.

“Excuse me.”

A calm but resonant voice interrupted from behind the forest ogres standing at the room’s entrance. I looked over to see a young man with unnaturally pale skin. Though he had the same physical traits as the other villagers, his skin tone set him apart, unsettling me. Maybe he was using some kind of magick?

“And you are?” I asked the man as he stepped forward between Aqua and Eris. They silently moved aside, indicating he held a higher status, though their demeanor suggested more hostility than respect.

“My apologies for the intrusion. I am Adonou, a relative of one of the elders... more precisely, I’m his son,” he said.

“Thank you for the introduction,” I said. “I’m Raidou, a novice merchant who recently established the Kuzunoha Company. This is my companion, Mio. It’s an honor to have a relative of an elder visit us personally. I deal in medicine and carry nutritional elixirs that are quite effective for fatigue.”

I decided to maintain my merchant persona. Considering the uncertainty of his intentions, it seemed wiser to present myself as a merchant who just happened to visit the village, rather than the master of the Demiplane.

“Ah, a merchant, I see. I’ve heard about your company from my father. He mentioned your skills, so I initially assumed you were an adventurer. Haha,” Adonou said.

“I’m also affiliated with the Adventurer’s Guild, but that’s mostly for appearances,” I replied.

“In this area, there isn’t a Merchant Guild except at the base. You must have come from Tsige?”

He eyed me, seemingly appraising my worth. *What’s this guy’s deal?*

“Yes, that’s right. I’m from Tsige,” I answered, still unsure of his intentions. His false smile and the rough aura around him were irritating.

I glanced at Mio. She seemed annoyed by the constant stream of forest ogres intruding on our space.

Damn, even when Mio is just silently brooding, it adds to the tension in the room.

“I see, I see. It appears my worries were unfounded. Pardon me, the preparations for the evening banquet will be complete by sunset. Please enjoy yourselves,” Adonou said, bowing slightly before turning on his heel and walking away down the hall without a sound.

He’s someone to keep an eye on. But if we don’t see him at the banquet, he isn’t an immediate threat. If he tries anything, I’ll just have to deal with it.

“Adonou wasn’t always this creepy,” Aqua commented.

“Adonou has changed,” Eris added.

“Um, do you think you two could leave now? We have some things to discuss,” Mio said, her voice bristling with irritation as she addressed Aqua and Eris. I shared her sentiment.

I needed some time alone.

“Why so hostile? We just want you to meet our master,” Aqua insisted.

“It only hurts the first time,” Eris chimed in.

Do these two understand human emotions at all? Enough is—

Suddenly, a loud crack echoed through the room.

“Ugh!”

With Mio still on guard against Aqua and Eris, I turned my attention to the origin of the noise behind me.

It was the sound of destruction.

The wooden wall of the room had been smashed in. It was the windowless side, so the airflow was quite... No, that wasn’t the point.

“Hey! Are you the guests?!”

An aggressive, unpredictable character had appeared.

I could tell instantly: this must be the master Aqua and Eris had mentioned.

So, the master is just as troublesome as the disciples...

“Hey, I heard you treated Aqua and Eris like kids? Not bad at all! Come on, let’s shake hands!” he said.

“Master!” Aqua and Eris exclaimed in unison. It was an apt reaction. But when he mentioned shaking hands, their expressions tightened slightly with surprise and tension. Could he have super strength? Was this going to be an “ow ow ow” situation?

A handshake... I guess I can endure that.

Now that I’ve met him, I have to deal with this eccentric person quickly to get him to leave. Let’s get the handshake over with and send him on his way.

Breaking into the guest room by destroying the wall and saying, “Hey” was too much. Mio was starting to look dead-eyed again.

Well, talking is pointless, so I’ll just silently stick out my right hand. The master grinned and grabbed my hand.

He squeezed.

Huh, it’s not an “ow ow ow” situation.

He continued gripping my hand.

Excuse me, this is creepy, old man.

A stern-looking man with slicked-back hair and a tough face was holding my hand.

Wait a minute! Could he be... into that?! This requires an immediate escape! This is beyond intellectual curiosity!

“Hmm...”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Could you let go, please?” I asked.

My hand had already gone limp, drained of strength by the sheer terror.

“This is quite... something...”

Shivers ran down my spine.

I glanced at Mio and the others, silently pleading for help.

Aqua and Eris were watching the strange scene with bated breath. Mio was looking down, creating an incredibly awkward atmosphere between us.

“For the first time in a while... this is good.”

My shivers intensified!

I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to firmly reject this.

Snap!!!

“Let go! Wait, what was that snapping sound?”

“Divine retribution!!!”

As I reached my limit and yanked my hand from the master's grip, I heard a sound like a blood vessel popping. Suddenly, a fierce wind kicked up, and the master vanished from in front of me.

Huh?

To my left, Mio was trembling with excitement, her shoulders rising and falling.

Ah, she was the one who had shouted “divine retribution.” She was holding a fan in one hand.

Oh! She must have smacked that pervert with it! And since I can't see him, he must have been blown out through the hole in the wall he created.

I wondered if he was still alive. Probably. Guys like him didn't go down easily.

“Master!!!” Aqua and Eris cried in unison. They slipped past me, their voices harmonizing, as they chased after their master through the hole in the wall.

“Wah—” Mio began.

“Wah?”

“I've never had the chance to be that close to Young Master for that long! That insolent brute! Thirty-two whole seconds with Young Master!”

Scary!

You're terrifying too!

A buff, suspicious guy and a yandere with a voracious appetite.

What a brutal choice. If this were an eroge, I'd confidently avoid it, even if the game was a big hit.

For now, I didn't want to think about anything.

I decided to just quietly sleep until the banquet. It was probably the only way I'd be able to recover my sanity. I wasn't sure I'd sleep soundly, but I'd try my best.

???

I had discovered a most perplexing existence. It seemed they were suspicious of me, and I wasn't mistaken. I had been among this rare species for a while, but I had never encountered beings like them before. The masked boy and the woman in black... Neither of them were mere humans. *Could they be the ones I've been seeking?*

I doubted it, but if they were, my obligations to others would end. My true goal would take priority.

During our last encounter, I sensed a discomfort that suggested my usual power might not work on them. I might need to abandon my vessel and confront them in my true form. As for communication, it was unnecessary. I was never in a true partnership with that woman; if anything, I was just using her. Any interference from her would be unwelcome.

Regardless, I've developed an interest in these two. I must have them as my experimental subjects.

I already understood the capabilities of the forest ogres and had no further use for them. They held no value. Finally, after so long, I might have found a clue to the being I sought. After the banquet, I would act. The masked boy and the woman in black... How unfortunate for them to have crossed paths with me.

Mio

I had planned to enjoy a quiet moment in the forest with Young Master, but we were interrupted by humans and these forest ogres. It was infuriating. Although it was a blessing to taste Young Master's blood—a dream come true—too many things were ruining my mood!

The village elders who rudely stared at me and Young Master finally finished their tedious questioning (which Young Master mostly handled). I thought we could rest in the room they provided, but then two worthless guides started prattling about their master and the places they wanted to show us. Their names were confusing and annoying. It was all so disruptive.

A pale weakling with a faint presence crept up and dropped into the conversation. And then! Even the useless guides' master appeared!

Even I have only ever touched Young Master for thirty-one seconds at most! Ah, that time, I gently wrapped my hands around his wrist... feeling the warmth of his pulse... I was so happy...

But!!! This man had the audacity to shamelessly hold Young Master's hand without letting go!!! I held back as long as I could. I remembered well Young Master telling me to avoid violence. But he couldn't expect me to restrain myself forever.

If it's within thirty seconds, I can forgive it with a half-killing later. If it's thirty-one seconds, I can forgive it with a near-death experience. Thirty-two seconds, though? Die. There's no way I can tolerate that. Naturally. It's an absolute truth. Thirty-two seconds deserves a swift death.

My body moved reflexively, probably faster than I allowed myself. Young Master scolded me, saying, "You didn't think about what would have happened if I had kept holding his hand, did you?" Oh, the way he said "you"...

I'd meant to kill the pervert, but being reminded of Young Master's presence made me misjudge my strength, and I'd failed. Still, it brightened my mood a bit.

"Mio, I'm counting on you," he said afterward. Young Master entrusted me with a task to investigate something. I'd deal with that man later. Young Master and I had finally been alone and all the pests were gone, so I couldn't help but feel disappointed being asked to leave him but the task asked of me was

appealing. I slipped into the shadows and began investigating the small village. Sneaking around and gathering information without being noticed was fun.

In Young Master's memories, there were scenes where people used strange devices to dodge red beams while infiltrating places! I always wanted to try that. Someday, I'd love to go on a quest for the world's treasures with Young Master... *Oh, but right now, I'm on a mission for him.*

He truly understands me well. If I could be a bit selfish, I wish he'd notice my other "desires" a bit more. But that can wait.

Lately, Young Master seemed to be in a hurry about something. When he called for me in only situations like this, it made me feel a bit... sad.

Sad? Why? I should be happy to be "used" by Young Master in any situation. Yes, I existed for him. I wanted to serve him, fulfill any of his desires. So, why did I feel sad?

If you're going to hire a town prostitute, I wish you'd just call for me instead. You have Tomoe and me by your side, yet you're still buying a human woman. Does that mean you think we're less than them? I hate it. Absolutely hate it.

Ever since I took this human form, I'd had a lot more to think about. I'm sure I'd understand these feelings once I studied them enough. *Focus, focus. Time to refocus and find my target.*

—There.

It was easy for me. Finding one of the four who came to the room earlier. The pervert who lasted all of thirty-two seconds. *Seeing him again, I still want to kill him... but I have to restrain myself.*

Young Master noticed something strange about him, but he didn't seem aware of what had happened when he shook his hand. He probably sensed it but dismissed it because it seemed so insignificant. The pervert had left with his two weak disciples, dismissed them, and had been left alone.

Hm? His presence has completely changed... Oh, I see. He's possessed by something. That explains the crude, unpleasant aura. And he doesn't even know it. How pathetic.

A dense earth magick power surrounded him. The smell of it from my hiding spot made my mouth water.

I hadn't tasted anything like that since I'd started following Young Master, but my body remembered the taste from when I'd been a spider.

Yes... That must be delicious. Too bad I can't eat it. It's probably undead. I can't devour it without Young Master's permission. Even a drop of his blood is sweeter than all that pervert's power combined. Not even close. And I don't want to get scolded.

Since the undead part is just a guess, I'll stick to reporting that he's possessed by something.

Tomoe said not to mix speculation with reports. Only give my opinion when Young Master asked for it. All right, enough about the pervert. One more to go. Let's move on to the pale forest ogre.

From darkness to darkness. Whether it's day or night, there's always darkness in hyuman villages and towns, and I can hide in the smallest shadow. No one notices my movements. Young Master might think forest ogres could be stealthy and highly capable in combat, but that's far from the truth. I could devour all of them without a sound, without ever revealing myself. Young Master is too kind; he must be trying to see the good in them. They're all weaker than the pervert, just low-level adventurer-grade pests...

"What... is..."

Oh.

Seems I was right to take precautions against those who may use detection spells. The invisible black threads I'd spread throughout the village picked up something. With this, I could detect and evade their sensing techniques beforehand. It sounded like a conversation. *Could it be Telepathy? An unexpected find. I didn't think it could be used this way. Let's hear what they're saying!*

Th-This is eavesdropping! Ah, my first time eavesdropping. How exciting.

"... sir, half of the elders are inclined to cooperate with the demons. The weakening of the ancient barrier seems to have gone well for us."

“The dragon’s barrier, if I recall?”

“That’s what we’ve been told. We’re not sure of its exact nature, but it was definitely beyond anything we could replicate.”

“I’m intrigued, but the barrier can wait. So, the village’s existence is at risk of being exposed, and our antagonistic relationship with the humans may become public?”

A man and a woman. It seemed the man was reporting to the woman. *This magick... The man must be the pale forest ogre. I don’t recognize the woman. At least, she’s not anyone I know.*

“In two months—no, one month—the forest ogres will pledge their cooperation to the Demon King. I’ll lead them myself.”

“Adonou, how reliable. I have high expectations.”

“The ideology of the demons you shared with me... It’s the only way to save all demi-humans and humble the arrogant humans. To rally under that banner is my greatest honor!”

“The strength of the forest ogres is highly valued by His Majesty. Naturally, as a demon general, I value it too. Your task is nearly complete, but the final steps are the most critical. If you get careless and neglect the groundwork, everything will be for naught.”

“Leave it to me.”

“I look forward to the day you guide me to the capital. Farewell for now.”

“Yes, please excuse me.”

The Demon King and a demon general. So, they’re demons. I thought the humans and demons were at war... They’re planning to recruit the forest ogres into the demon army. That means the pale one is connected to the demons. Is the other person speaking part of the demon leadership? I’m not sure how high-ranking a demon general is, so I’ll just report them as someone in contact with the demons. I need to tell Young Master this. Let’s head back. I don’t want to keep him waiting.

I'd gathered quite a lot from both targets. Not bad for my first infiltration and eavesdropping mission, if I do say so myself!

"Mio, you were quick."

Before I could reveal myself upon returning, Young Master turned to face me. He was wary of the forest ogres eavesdropping and spoke to me through Telepathy. I replied in kind.

To me, Young Master was different. Maybe it was because of our master-servant relationship, but that didn't matter.

"I investigated the two," I said.

"Can you report right away?"

"The pervert seems to be possessed by something. I sensed earth magick, so it might be an earth-type magical beast or monster."

"Possessed... Like a ghost, you mean? What about Adonou?" he asked.

"That forest ogre was in contact with the demons. It seems they want the forest ogres to cooperate with them."

"Demons... So, they've extended their reach to the Wasteland, and now to the Forest Ogre Village..."

Young Master seemed deep in thought. I briefly wondered if I should mention the undead. But he didn't ask, so I didn't want to overstep. Besides, no matter what schemes were in play, Young Master could solve everything with a wave of his hand. None of these people could threaten him—not that weakling, not Aqua, not Eris, not the pervert, not the pale one. No one in this village posed a threat to Young Master. Once they saw even a fraction of his power, any foolish hostility would dissipate like mist.

"Thank you, Mio. I'm sorry, but could you pretend to be sick and skip the banquet? I need you to go to the Demiplane and bring Tomoe here."

"I don't mind, but couldn't you just call Tomoe through Telepathy?" I asked.

"Actually, I've sent the three adventurers who barged into the forest into the Demiplane. Tomoe's handling them, but I need her here. I was hoping you could cover for her for a bit. I'll open the gate to the Demiplane right now."

“Got it. I’ll go right away.”

Leaving Young Master alone posed no danger. With that assurance, I accepted his request. It was a bit disappointing to switch places with Tomoe, but once I got back, I would be able to enjoy that scene again. Dealing with mere human adventurers shouldn’t take much effort. I left an illusion of myself on the bed in case anyone looked into the room, then returned to the Demiplane.

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The banquet hosted by the forest ogres was a lively affair, filled with beautiful dances under the soft glow of magical lights.

That is, until Aqua and Eris’s master suddenly collapsed, his body emitting black smoke. From that smoke emerged a skeletal figure resembling a grim reaper—minus the scythe.

Panic spread through the crowd, and the figure made its way toward Adonou. As it closed in, Adonou began to wither, while the skeletal figure grew more imposing. I was the only one who now stood in its way, the forest ogres behind me watching with fear.

“Seriously? Just when I thought the curse was over, now we’ve got an undead to deal with. Just for reference, is he still alive?” I asked, glancing at the person who had collapsed in front of me.

“Do not compare me to lesser undead like ghouls,” the skeleton replied. “This one merely had his life force drained to facilitate my manifestation, leaving him unable to move.”

“Got it,” I said, noting the skeleton’s eagerness to explain. *“Manifestation, huh? He seemed quite proud of that.”*

Simply from skeleton’s appearance, it was obvious my opponent wasn’t some low-level undead. The undead’s skeletal frame was draped in a luxurious black robe with gold accents, skull glowing with a sinister red-black light. The skeleton wielded an ornate staff embedded with gemstones. A lich, most likely—a being whose power could vary greatly depending on its origin. If this lich were the remnant of a powerful mage, it’d be exceedingly strong. Such beings often

chose to become undead to preserve their identity and knowledge, fearing dissolution through death.

The man at the lich's feet seemed to be alive—Aqua and Eris's master. He lay there, coughing up blood with a pained expression, looking shrivelled and drained. I looked to the other downed figure behind the lich. With my gaze, I silently asked the same question about him being alive.

"Does he look alive to you?" The lich's response, posed as a question, was clearly an answer.

"Why did you kill this one?" I asked.

"He was a nuisance, involved in some shady dealings with an annoying woman. He became an obstacle, so I eliminated him," the lich answered.

"So, this was internal conflict?" I guessed.

"No. I have no allies."

So, just a relationship of mutual interest, nothing more. I could see what kind of person he was.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You. And the girl who was with you, though she's not here now."

"So, I'm the target... I don't recall doing anything to earn a grudge."

"You ask a lot of questions, boy. Even facing my miasma, you don't flinch. Intriguing."

Miasma. So that's what this is. It was definitely not something you'd want to breathe in for long—sour, nauseating, and heavy with magick.

"If trouble comes my way, I can handle it," I replied.

Honestly, this might be the easiest opponent I've faced yet.

In truth, I had an incredible resistance to magick. I'd once worried about status-affecting spells, so I'd asked a group of knowledgeable people—Tomoe, Mio, and the orcs, as well as arachs. They'd all looked puzzled, wondering why I had been so concerned about that kind of magick.

Tomoe, Mio, and the others had bombarded me with every spell they could think of—illusion, soul drain, paralysis, and deadly poison. But nothing had happened; I'd remained unaffected.

When I'd asked Tomoe why'd they tried such dangerous spells on me without any hesitation, she'd replied that they knew they wouldn't have worked, so they'd given it their all.

"If you pour water or add salt to the ocean, it won't change anything," Tomoe had said. With an immense amount of magical power, one is practically immune to such spells. Changing the taste of water in a cup is easy, but the ocean? Not so much.

"I have some questions for you, so I won't kill you," I told the lich.

The skeleton likely had some lethal techniques up its sleeve. Unfortunately for the lich, I also had questions. This undead seemed like a rare character with specialized knowledge in magick and had mentioned something about a woman.

Actually, if I used the Sealing Magick Realm, which shut down all magick, the lich would be stuck. Even Tomoe and Mio couldn't use magick under its affects. If I sealed the lich's magick, it'd probably perish instantly. But that felt like overkill. Besides, I wasn't in the mood to end things so quickly.

Surprisingly, I found myself wanting to enjoy this a little. This was the first time I'd felt a high from combat.

"A skeleton in a robe, asking me questions, huh? Gives me the chills," I remarked.

"Oh? You understand what I am?" the lich asked.

"I get that you abandoned your humanity through magick to pursue knowledge and sorcery, right?"

"Close enough. I am a lich," it said, and its laugh sounded like bones grinding together. "You know me, so I should get to know you. Will you answer my questions?"

"Me? I'm just a human."

Strictly speaking, that might not be entirely true. But I was born and raised in that world. I'm not about to abandon the term "human."

The lich's arrogance seemed to waver. The light flickering in its eye sockets gleamed with something—a mix of madness and curiosity. Even though its eyes were just glowing points, its intent was clear.

"Human... The name of the ancient race that is the ancestor of the current humans."

"So I've heard."

"You are not a Grant, I see. But humans remain beyond my understanding. If humans are beings that surpass Grants, then it seems I aspire to become one of you."

"Grant"? What's that? I've never heard that term. Does he aim to become human if it surpasses something called a Grant?

"I am eager to study your body and mind," it continued.

"Wait, hang on. Are Grants a higher species than humans? Do you want to evolve or reincarnate into a superior being, since you've already forsaken your humanity?" I asked.

"Is that strange?"

"I'd think it unnecessary, considering your current form probably gives you eternal life. Isn't that what you need to pursue knowledge and sorcery?" I countered.

"You are wise. And dangerous. It's a shame; had I met you when I was alive, I would have liked to converse more," the lich said.

"I've experienced a lot," I replied.

In games, light novels, and manga, that is.

The lich hadn't answered my question directly. Was it planning to end this now? The lich raised its staff and began chanting in a magical language I'd never heard before.

Behind me, the forest ogres were vulnerable, weakened by the miasma.

“If you dodge, they will not survive. You, on the other hand, your consciousness and physical freedom will merely be restricted,” it said. Its chanting was short and efficient—definitely the work of a specialist!

Thanks to Tomoe and Mio, maybe my sense of fear had been dulled. Or perhaps it was because this was a contest in magick, an area I excelled in. I felt strangely calm.

“Farewell, human. Become nourishment for my knowledge,” the lich declared.

“Unfortunately, I can’t,” I replied.

Soul-like entities began to gather around the lich, merging at the tip of its staff. They looked like clumps of mochi, and for a moment, I found myself craving some. Judging by the lich’s chant, it was channelling the grudges of the souls swirling around. When fully formed, these humanlike spirits sped toward me as one, with malevolent expressions on their faces.

Since this village was in the forest of the Wasteland there were certainly plenty of human grudges here.

The combined large soul, now accelerating, charged at me—only to be stopped by my outstretched hand. I wasn’t sure if the lich could see this, its silhouette obscured by the spell, but it might find it suspicious that I hadn’t been thrown to the ground, having been hit head-on by the attack.

The soul halted in front of me, causing no harm.

Well then, time for Mr. Lich to feel some pain. It seems knowledgeable and might be useful, so let’s make the most of it.

“#\$/%&...” I chanted.

Darkness, devour until I command otherwise.

A very short, concise chant.

“Guh! What language is this?” the lich asked, squirming in discomfort.

Several black toothlike shapes swarmed over the soul I had caught with my hand. Their numbers multiplied rapidly, consuming the pale, glowing mass.

“What... What is this?” the lich muttered, astonished.

It was a form of magical erosion using dark magick. Not the kind of trick Mio used, but an inefficient method—interfering with an opponent’s completed magick.

It was a technique often dismissed as pointless by those who overthought things.

They don’t understand—I have an abundance of magical power! Inefficiency is my strength!

You didn’t think it would be over this easily, did you, Mr. Lich?

Come on, try and defend yourself...

“Guh!!!”

The lich’s head jerked sideways, as if struck by an invisible force. Where its head had been, a black bite mark now remained, hovering in the air.

“U-Uwoooooaaaahhh?!”

Realizing the black teeth that devoured the soul earlier were now attacking the lich, it quickly cast a defensive spell, forming a barrier. Despite its loud outcry, it seemed surprisingly calm, which I’d initially mistook for panic.

The dark teeth swarmed over the barrier, gnawing voraciously at it.

“What is this spell?” the lich cried. “I’ve never seen anything like it! How is it so easily breaking through my barrier?! What kind of advanced language is this...?”

“It’s like buying a penny for a hundred dollars,” I told it. “The old me would never have done something like this.”

“My spell deployment can’t keep up! Don’t swarm! Stay away!”

What an unsightly way for a spell to manifest. Devouring everything with dark teeth seems more like something he would use. I’d like to believe that’s just the nature of the spell, not influenced by my personality. Of course, I have no intention of verifying this later. This is just how the spell works.



“My magick is being devoured?! Impossible!” the lich exclaimed in disbelief as the dark teeth engulfed it, completely obscuring its figure.

“This can’t be happening! This absurd spell cannot exist!” Its voice echoed in desperation.

“Stop! Don’t consume me! I am to become a Grant—”

No matter how much it struggled, it couldn’t halt the relentless assault of the dark teeth. Even I couldn’t stop the spell I had initiated.

“G-Grant...” Its voice faded, signaling that the end was imminent.

“I’m disappearing. No, I don’t want...!”

In no time, all the lich’s magical power was devoured, and its malevolent aura dissipated. Its luxurious robe, once imbued with magick, was now reduced to tattered fabric clinging to its skeletal frame. It fell to its knees, unable to move, as the teeth continued to gnaw at it. The miasma it had been emitting vanished.

“My precision strike is perfect, honed through countless battles. I won’t kill you,” I announced.

Typically, losing all magical power would cause one to faint, but for a lich, it was akin to annihilation. Its ability to move had been solely dependent on his magical energy. Its presence now was significantly diminished.

The skeleton, once a formidable lich, was now convulsing, having lost its power source. *Did I go a bit overboard? Even to me that felt out of character.*

Looking down at this trembling, powerless creature, I couldn’t help but feel a slight sense of satisfaction, even though unleashing my frustrations in such a way wasn’t my usual style.

Tomoe

As I arrived to retrieve Young Master, an unusual silence permeated the air.

Did Young Master do something flashy again? I had been looking forward to enjoying a simple meal of rice and miso soup, with a sword crafted by our

skilled artisans in the Demiplane as a side dish. Once this wish was fulfilled, I planned to ensure Young Master started his days with rice breakfasts, even if he said he was fine with bread.

Oddly, he had summoned me urgently, leaving me no choice but to comply. I had delegated the care of the humans we brought along to the orcs, freeing myself for other duties.

“I was planning to have the forest ogres reside in the Demiplane anyway, so this timing works well,” I muttered to myself.

Following the gaze of those around me, I noticed Young Master and a near-dead (which, yes, I get the irony of) undead. Between them lay a forest ogre, with another corpse beyond the undead. Behind Young Master, a group of forest ogres stood frozen, their eyes locked on his actions, a palpable tension in the air.

It appeared Young Master had handled this undead in a remarkably striking manner, shocking the forest ogres. This was unexpected but not entirely surprising. After things settled, I knew a discussion with Young Master was necessary, especially about the brothel incident he might not be aware of.

I recognized a familiar face among the forest ogres—the same young man I had seen when I’d first created a barrier for their village, now aged significantly.

“You there, you must be Nilgistori. Good to see you’re still well,” I called out to him.

“Indeed, I am Nilgistori,” he said, fixing me with a puzzled gaze. “But who are you? I don’t recall meeting you.”

How rude. Just because I look different, he doesn’t recognize me? Ungrateful wretch.

“You cried tears of blood and begged me for the Mirage Barrier. Do you wish to die?” I retorted, irritation flashing in my eyes. Despite my full transformation into human form, my draconic traits surfaced when my emotions flared.

Recognizing the change in my eyes, the old man finally realized who I was and stiffened. “Sh-Shin-sama!” he exclaimed.

His recognition stirred the other forest ogres into action as if snapping them from a spell. They stared at me with a mix of fear and awe.

“It is Shin-sama, the Greater Dragon! Kneel, everyone! Bow your heads!” Nilgistori commanded, his voice carrying authority.

Obediently, they prostrated themselves before me, a gesture I found quite pleasing.

I wished this reverence was directed at Young Master however, while I merely observed by his side.

Clearing my throat, I began, “I’ve come to reapply the barrier—”

“Ooooooooooh!!!” they gasped in unison.

“—just kidding. I came because I was called by him,” I clarified, gesturing toward Young Master. The forest ogres seemed puzzled by my statement.

Idiots! Why on earth would I go out of my way to tend to your village’s barrier without being asked?

The forest ogres began to express their fears in a flurry of voices, breaking the silence.

“Shin-sama, we’re afraid for our lives! Earlier, a strange black smoke emanated from one of our comrades, transforming into a lich that turned on us with ferocity!”

“Liches are known for their profound magical prowess and mastery of necromancy! They’re a formidable threat!”

“But that person overcame it with an even more terrifying and bizarre spell!”

“Please, protect us!”

The elders, or those appearing to be in authority, relayed the situation one by one. Such troublesome individuals—they should have designated a single spokesperson.

Their fear suggested they believed Young Master might target them next, likely due to the unexpectedly strong spell he had employed.

“What were you planning to do to him?” I probed.

“Huh?”

“Given how scared you are, you must have harbored some ill will or hostility toward him, right?”

Indeed, they must have had something to hide, which likely led them to fear Young Master turning against them once he’d dealt with the lich.

“He trespassed into our forest without permission and discovered rare plants. According to our laws, that’s a crime punishable by death. After our people were defeated in combat, we invited him to our village so we could discreetly execute him during the feast,” one elder confessed.

Execution was once the most severe punishment among the forest ogres.

“You have lost quite a bit of your vigilance, Nilgistori,” I noted.

“Wh-What do you mean?” Nilgistori stammered.

“I’ve been referring to ‘him’ from the start. Would you dare raise your blades against someone associated with me?” I challenged.

The collective gasp from the forest ogres confirmed their shock.

“I came here to fetch him. To fetch Young Master,” I clarified.

“Wha-What did you say?!” Nilgistori’s voice faltered, his earlier confidence shaken. He should have recognized what my human form meant by now.

“Ah, Tomoe. Perfect timing,” Young Master interjected, acknowledging my presence. It seemed I had missed the optimal moment for my entrance while I was engaging with the forest ogres.

“To be precise, ‘association’ isn’t quite the right word. Actually, I’m his—” I bowed to Young Master before turning back to address the astonished forest ogres.

“I’m Mako— Raidou-sama’s follower.”

And with that revelation, Nilgistori fainted.

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I'd been slated for a forest ogre punishment known as "Tree Execution." The forest ogres, now profusely apologizing, had revealed their plans to execute me that night. They'd intended to incapacitate their target with enchanting dances and songs—admittedly captivating—before carrying out the sentence. The persistence of their intent to execute me, even after their initial defeat, was alarming.

I hadn't realized the gravity of my situation.

"Oh! To revive such a punishment, you guys are quite exceptional," Tomoe remarked, aware of this so-called Tree Execution. Her tone suggested it was a relic of ancient practices.

Thinking about it, I felt ashamed. I had rashly assumed that any adventurer who discovered the existence of the forest ogres had been dealt with. I knew of the stories of those who wandered into the village, yet I didn't bother to investigate properly.

Near the plaza where the feast was held, there was a small hut used as a prison, housing several humans.

The next morning, I was led to the execution ground and confronted with the harsh reality of Tree Execution. And they had dared to call my dark magick, which devoured the mana I employed, "repulsive."

The name "forest ogre" now seemed eerily apt.

Before this visit, I had thought of them as forest guardians, like elves living in harmony with nature. The village had appeared as an idyllic setting, devoid of any hints of their past transgressions against the spirits and plants.

I'd been mistaken.

The term "forestry" aptly described their view of the forest as a resource to be managed, not revered or loved. Engaging with the voices of the forest—communicating or even listening—was seen as counterproductive to their duties. Much like how conversing with livestock or vegetables grown on a farm would be seen as a hindrance rather than a benefit.

Then there was the Tree Execution. It was hard to see them as guardians or elves now.

Before me was a vast, orderly forest, not naturally grown but meticulously planted—a plantation. Every tree was robust, none frail or damaged.

Beneath the trees, the soil was odd, resembling the barren Wasteland I had traversed at the Edge of the World. Under normal circumstances, this environment couldn't possibly support tree growth.

"This is Tree Execution?" I inquired, surprised at the politeness of my own tone.

One elder nodded silently in confirmation.

"All of these..." The shock was palpable, but Tomoe and Mio seemed less affected—Tomoe was likely already familiar with it, while Mio's reaction suggested her sensibilities differed from mine as a foreigner to this world.

Tree Execution was a harrowing punishment using a unique status effect skill to transform the target into a tree. Victims would gradually lose their consciousness and memories over time. However, for years, they would retain their senses, meaning any damage to their tree forms caused excruciating pain—a true nightmare.

The transformation was nearly instantaneous, converting the victim into a tree within seconds. Who had these trees been?

"They are those who violated forest laws or were unauthorized intruders," one elder explained nonchalantly.

"Tree Execution was considered a lost art; after all, everyone who practiced it had died out. But this generation revived it," another elder said. He pointed to the master, who was staggering forward, supported by Aqua and Eris. "Whether through strong bloodlines or exceptional talent, it's remarkable anyone could reach this level on their own."

Tomoe nodded several times in understanding.

"As the barrier weakened, other races began encroaching not just on the areas of the forest that we managed but this village too. We entrusted him with military command," the elder continued, his gaze resting on the master, "and we executed those we couldn't repel."

It was clear Aqua and Eris's master held significant military authority within the forest ogre community.

From the elder's gaze, it was evident that entrusting him alone as a guard was considered sufficient—an intense, perhaps overly intuitive individual. People like him often turned out to be strategic masterminds; the kind who could outmaneuver others with sheer tactical brilliance. They made formidable allies. I hoped he wasn't the kind to misuse his intellect.

Aqua and Eris, visibly anxious as they supported him, must have held him in high regard.

"I have plans for the barrier. Rest assured," Tomoe said.

"Thank you, Shin-sama. With this, we can live peacefully again, free from external threats," another elder responded.

I no longer wished to linger in this place. We had accomplished nearly all that was required in their village.

I signaled Tomoe, and she understood my intent to leave, my mood growing increasingly somber.

"Shall we depart? And, forest ogres, remember—I am now Tomoe. Don't make me repeat myself," she stated, a hint of irritation in her voice.

"Yes, Tomoe-sama," one of the forest ogres replied.

I tried to shake off the chill running down my spine. This was the first time I'd ever been to an execution ground, and it made me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

One last look. I glanced at each tree, not knowing what they had originally been—hyuman or non-hyuman. Even when I'd used my power, the trees hadn't reverted to their original forms. Once the transformation had been triggered, even I couldn't do anything about it. I etched this fact into my mind. This world held some terrible things.

These individuals had faced this fate for their crimes, and while such power might be justified when used appropriately, its potential misuse in battle posed uncontrollable risks.

We couldn't just leave it like this.

I resolved to find a way to reverse this. Fortunately, I had the help of an excellent former spider and her kin, skilled in potion-making, to assist me.

Master

I had no idea that a creepy lich had been nesting inside me. I hadn't noticed anything unusual. The fatigue and the growing strength I'd been experiencing weren't side effects of awakening the power of Tree Execution after all. Maybe the creature was there even before that. Now, who can say for sure?

It turned out Shin, the dragon who'd placed the barrier around our village, had taken care of the lich. A thick mist had surrounded the lich, erasing it completely. Such high-level magick that left no trace of miasma... It had showed me just how powerful Greater Dragons really are.

Though my body was still sluggish, I managed to join the others at the execution grounds the next day. It was embarrassing to rely on Aqua and Eris for support, but with my life force so drained, I couldn't complain. Just being alive was enough.

As I tried to keep things light with jokes, my attention stayed on two people... the masked man and the dragon woman. She'd been the one who had supposedly defeated the lich with some unknown technique. I'd heard countless stories about Greater Dragons like her since childhood.

But this guy, this hyuman—how does he command such a monstrous creature? Why does she follow him? I couldn't wrap my head around it.

Since returning to the village, I'd been keeping an eye on the elder's son, Adonou. He'd been acting suspiciously. Lately, I'd been staying in the village, leaving the management and guard duties to others. Adonou's sneaky behavior, snooping around the village, confirmed that my suspicions weren't just in my head. He seemed to be in contact with someone, but I hadn't been able figure out whom.

Then came that day.

Aqua and Eris had come back unharmed, along with the intruders—the masked man and the black-haired woman. Despite not holding back, my mentees had been defeated. Lately, there had been cases of humans beating our warriors and being invited to the village. It had been the first loss for Aqua and Eris, but now we'd all need mandatory super-intensive training.

As usual, I'd expected to crush the intruders at the feast and toss them in the dungeon, but Adonou had made a move. Were these the people he'd been in contact with? I thought so, but it turned out they weren't. He just asked a few questions and then left. False alarm.

In the room were Aqua, Eris, and the intruders. My disciples seemed intent on bringing them to me. *The fact that they can't even sense my presence when I'm right by the wall... They'll definitely hear about that later.*

Wait. I see now. These people must be really dangerous if my followers want to bring them straight to me and skip the whole feast ordeal. In that case, I'll take care of them first. The result will be the same anyway.

"Hey! You the guests?!" I burst through the wall to make a dramatic entrance. The black-haired woman was immediately on guard, watching both my disciples and me. *She's strong. I can feel it.* The masked man was ready the moment he heard the crash.

Hmm... But it won't matter. Not against me.

Seems like they've been giving my disciples a tough time, so I'll wrap this up quickly. "Hey, I heard you treated Aqua and Eris like kids? Not bad! Let's shake on it!"

I grinned and extended my hand to the masked man. My disciples picked up on my intent, and I could sense their tension. Then I gripped his hand tightly.

It's over.

Tree Execution, activate. He'll turn into a tree any second now—

But he didn't.

I squeezed harder. I could feel his fear, but nothing happened.

“Could you let go?” he asked.

I felt his grip weakening. Just a little more... But nothing. This was a first. *What’s going on? This is getting interesting. So, there are cases like this, huh?*

Then, suddenly—a powerful blow struck my face. Before I realized I was in pain, I was already airborne. As I tumbled through the air, tears filling my eyes, I clutched my nose. The black-haired woman had swung her fan. I’d gotten hit! I didn’t even see it coming! I felt more blows on my back as I rolled, finally landing flat on the ground.

Amazing. That woman is amazing! Who is she, being able to strike so fast despite her appearance?

As I listened to my followers’ distant voices, I pulled out a Smoke Branch, using it like a cigar.

That was the last thing I remembered from yesterday. When I’d awoken, Aqua and Eris were beside me, waiting outside the mansion where Raidou and the elder were talking. Apparently, I had done a lot after that, but I couldn’t remember. The lich must have been controlling my body. My consciousness had only returned this morning. My body felt incredibly heavy and sluggish.

Apparently, the lich had come out of my mouth like black smoke. The masked man had defeated it. I don’t know the details, but it seems the final blow was dealt by the blue-haired woman, Shin.

Raidou. A new merchant in Tsige, huh? Yeah, right.

The discussions between our group and the intruders continued after returning from the execution grounds. But only the elder and those other guys were in the meeting. We could only hear the results. For now, I’d keep the fact that I’d tried to use Tree Execution on Raidou to myself. No need to complicate things.

But why didn’t it work? It’s never failed before...

“Master, can I ask you something?” Aqua interrupted the tense silence as we waited for the meeting to end.

“Hmm?”

“It’s about that guy, Raidou...”

“Ah... sorry. We’ll talk later,” I said.

I wanted to answer her, but it seemed the meeting had ended. The elders were coming out of the hall. Our future would be decided soon. At worst, we might end up as slaves; at best, their vassals. The black-haired woman and the dragon woman had rejoined us for a discussion with the merchant. Who knew what kind of demands they would make?

If it comes to that, I’ll step in. Even if Tree Execution doesn’t work, it doesn’t mean I can’t fight. If I can get a one-on-one duel with Raidou, I’ll have a fair chance. Especially if it’s a fistfight. All mages are the same—get close and it’s over. Convincing him to a duel might be tricky, but I’ll figure it out. No doubt, I’m the strongest among the forest ogres.

Raidou and his group... Don’t think we’ll just submit to your threats.

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During the meeting with the forest ogre elders, as I expected, Tomoe proposed inviting their tribe to live in the Demiplane.

Honestly, I can’t agree with that idea.

Right now, only the master of their tribe could use the Tree Execution, but just like the orcs and lizardfolks had grown under Tomoe’s influence in the Demiplane, I had a feeling that if we brought the forest ogres in, one by one, they’d start awakening that same ability while interacting with Tomoe and her clone. And if someone called me a coward for thinking that, well, they’d be absolutely right. There was no other reason for it.

Just like everyone else we’ve brought into the Demiplane, the forest ogres didn’t seem to have any objections to joining our realm (or what they understand as Tomoe’s divine realm). It was almost settled. And why wouldn’t it be? There’s nothing standing between us. As for me, despite being called a master or a king, I’m really just a figurehead who doesn’t actually do much of anything.

Everyone in the Demiplane treats me like a king, so now I have a lot of decisions to make. But there's no way I'm fit to be a king in the first place.

To the forest ogres, even though I was just some shady masked guy, Tomoe was a Greater Dragon who had earned their trust long ago. If she told them to come, they'd follow her without question.

But there was no way.

I'm terrified of that Tree Execution. To be honest, it scares me.

I'd been afraid of the Cursed Disease I'd seen at the Rembrandt household, but my anger and all the other emotions I had been feeling back then had dulled that fear. It hadn't hit me as hard.

This time, the Tree Execution had left me with nothing but pure terror. Maybe it was because I couldn't heal it, or because I didn't know the victims personally. Either way, I hadn't been overwhelmed by my emotions, so I'd ended up focusing more on the ability itself.

It's not that I found it unforgivable. It's just that I was left with this cold, creeping sensation, like icy water soaking into my back. A chill ran through me, a discomfort I couldn't shake, something I can't even put into words.

It had snapped me out of the lighthearted mood I'd been in lately.

There's no way I could just accept the entire forest ogre tribe into the Demiplane and say, "Go ahead."

That's why I used the fact that Tomoe had put a barrier around their village as a reason to steer the conversation away from a full-scale relocation. There was no need for fancy persuasion; we had the upper hand in the discussion.

Tomoe valued the forest ogres for their agility, combat skills, and their humanoid appearance, and she really wanted to add them to the residents of the Demiplane. She tried her best to convince me, and it seemed like she was surprised by my opposition.

Mio, on the other hand, even though she wasn't personally fond of some of the forest ogres, objectively appreciated their vast knowledge of plants and was

also in favor of them moving to the Demiplane. In the end, she said she didn't mind leaving the decision entirely up to me.

Of course, it's not like I wanted to completely reject the forest ogres. I knew full well that my opposition to their relocation came from my own fear, so I wanted to find some middle ground where I could accept them.

First, I'll have Tomoe reinforce the barrier around their village. That was a given. I didn't want to leave them exposed to danger.

Next, we'll seal off the area where the Ambrosia flowers naturally grew. No matter what happened from here on out, if we kept that place properly protected, we could prevent future conflicts.

The forest ogres suggested that we not cut ties completely, but my issue was with Tree Execution—it was an ancestral ability, something the forest ogres took pride in. It was anything but a simple problem to solve.

Tomoe argued that the forest ogres' formidable combat skills and human-like appearance would be invaluable assets to the company. Mio agreed, pointing out that relocating them to the Demiplane would be highly beneficial. We didn't have any forest experts there yet.

Considering the advantages, rejecting them wasn't really an option. So I...

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Tomoe and Mio were with me in my room in the mansion in the Demiplane. The other person present was still asleep.

I had just finished explaining my stance during the meeting.

"I see, so that's how it was," Tomoe said, nodding thoughtfully.

In the end, we'd decided to limit the forest ogres to trading with the Demiplane and working for our company instead of relocating the entire village. With the new barrier, their village would be safer, and they'd have more job opportunities. They could work as shopkeepers for the Kuzunoha Company, get involved in business negotiations after some training, and even gather intelligence.

During the meeting, I hadn't been as composed as I should have been, and I'd tried to keep my distance from them. That's why Tomoe's persistence had gotten on my nerves.

Surprisingly, Tomoe saw the forest ogres as similar to ninjas from Iga or Koga, which was her main reason for wanting them in the Demiplane. She'd talked about the benefits to the company and the stability it would bring to their lives, which had only made me feel more pressured to find a middle ground.

Even though we could have communicated telepathically during the meeting, I hadn't done it.

I'm pretty disappointed in my lack of composure.

The discussion had ended on a positive note. Afterward, we'd moved to the Demiplane and arranged a tour and orientation for the forest ogres, recruiting those interested in relocating for work. We'd set a limit on the number of people and conducted interviews. I'd managed to avoid a situation where my decision not to relocate the entire village would be undermined by everyone wanting to move.

Tomoe seemed to have aimed for that outcome, but as long as I understood her intentions, it was fine.

"Tomoe, in the past, generals kept the best ninjas and warriors close to them," I'd said.

This one line had gotten her excited. She'd gotten all fired up about carefully selecting recruits.

Right now, they were touring the Demiplane, getting familiar with the area and meeting other residents. Tomoe's mini-clones were doing a great job, and Ema was providing excellent assistance. Since some of the forest ogres had already learned the common language, the language barrier shouldn't be a significant issue.

Well, if that's the case, the common language might become the main language in the Demiplane too. I really need to find a way to handle this. Is there no way to negotiate with the Goddess to receive a blessing that lets me speak it?

If I have to keep relying on written communication at the Academy City we're heading to, I'll always need one of my followers with me, which is exhausting.

"But, Young Master, the Tree Execution shouldn't be an issue for you. I don't understand why it scares you so much," Tomoe said.

"I don't understand it either," I told her. *"But when I found out that the forest of planted trees was actually made up of humans and non-humans..."* I felt an involuntary shudder at the memory.

"Hmm..." Tomoe mused.

"I'm sorry I didn't notice..." Mio apologized.

I really didn't understand it myself. Maybe there was something about it that triggered an instinctive aversion. Tomoe nodded, lost in thought, while Mio apologized for not sensing my discomfort. I felt bad; after all, it wasn't her fault.

"Sorry," I said.

"There's no need to apologize, Young Master," Mio reassured.

"Exactly!" Tomoe chimed in.

Clearing her throat, Tomoe continued, "Let's put the enhancement of the forest ogres' abilities on hold and tell that man who can use Tree Execution to refrain from using it unless it's absolutely necessary. It's a rare ability, so I was eager to train others to learn it, but we should respect your feelings, Young Master."

I wasn't sure if "that man" could be restrained by such an order, but Tomoe seemed confident in her plan. I decided to leave it in her hands. I felt much better now, whether because the issue was resolved or because I'd finally talked it through. Next... we should head back to Tsige.

Hmm, I had a nagging feeling I was forgetting something. What was it?

We'd been ambushed by Aqua and Eris in the forest of Ambrosia, had fought them off, had gone to the village, and had met that creepy master. Then, after the feast, a lich had come out of his mouth... one of the forest ogres had died...

No, that's not it! The lich! That's right, the lich! No, wait, that's not it either. It wasn't a different matter, but that's not what's bothering me now.

Was it before that?

I thought back to what happened while we'd been escaping after being ambushed by the forest ogres, calming Mio down as we fled.

I had completely forgotten!!! I'd let three humans into the Demiplane. I couldn't afford to be careless. Ever since leaving Tsige, how many mistakes had I made? When the adventurers had arrived at the Forest Ogre Village, when I'd shook hands with the creepy master, and when it came to the lich—I'd only felt uneasy and didn't confirm anything properly, leading to this mess. Couldn't I have saved that forest ogre, Adonou?

Whenever I'd let my guard down, my thoughts seemed clouded, making me uneasy. That was why things turned out this way. I'd never felt like this in the Wasteland. And just because a beautiful woman approached me, I'd ended up acting so pathetically. I was only moving forward now because of my overwhelming power, but I couldn't keep doing this forever.

Remember how I felt when I touched the trees formed from Tree Execution, like I'd been doused with cold water. Anyway, I need to focus on what's in front of me right now! I'm in a world where anything can happen. I can't forget that.

"I wonder, what happened to those three humans?" I asked.

"Oh, you're not starting with this one?" Tomoe indicated the lich, who had been resting. Covering its bones, the skeleton was now dressed in a dark intricately embroidered robe that looked almost sinister, that had been regenerated by magick. The red light in its eye sockets indicated it had regained consciousness.

After arranging for Tomoe to handle the lich, I'd sent it to my room in the Demiplane ahead of us, limiting its movements to just within the room. It had woken up at some point but remained quietly listening to our conversation without participating. Despite being a bit unsettling, its nature meant it wasn't an immediate threat to me. For now, it seemed fine to leave it be.

"Well, I realized I never heard what happened to them," I said.

"Of course, they're touring the Mirage City. At first, they were confused, but this morning they quietly accepted the food offered to them. By now, they

should be with the orcs and elder dwarves,” Tomoe replied.

“What?”

“Is there something wrong?” Tomoe asked.

“They’re on a tour now?” I said, concerned.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Isn’t that bad? They were isolated while fighting Aqua and Eris...

“What if they bump into the forest ogres?” I asked, alarmed.

“Don’t worry. I’ve separated the areas,” Tomoe replied. “The humans are staying near the dwarves’ workshop, and they’ll be sent back tomorrow. Perhaps we should abandon them at the entrance to the path to Tsige in the Wasteland.”

Tomoe continued, “They are adventurers, so if we give them some decent weapons, they should be satisfied.”

The dwarves’ workshop was indeed isolated. In that case, there wouldn’t be an unexpected encounter with the forest ogres.

Those idiots had caused me a lot of trouble this time. The woman in the trio looked a lot like the woman at the brothel who’d caused trouble with Tomoe and Mio... but her hairstyle was different, so maybe she was someone else.

If they had decent weapons, as Tomoe suggested, they should be strong enough to handle themselves near the entrance to the Wasteland. I hoped they would take the right path from here. If not, they would likely die the next time they tried something reckless. The narrow path leading back to Tsige was a difficult and dangerous route. It was a constant uphill climb with monsters ready to attack. If they couldn’t make it back, it would prove their lack of ability.

The dwarves’ weapons were excellent. As a parting gift, they were more than enough. I wanted to check the progress on my own equipment, so I’d visit the dwarves soon. I felt a bit relieved, but I realized there was still much to do.

“I’ll leave the human trio to you, Tomoe. I can’t face them myself,” I said.

“OK,” Tomoe replied.

“You two can go now. I just need to talk to Mr. Lich for a bit,” I said.

“That sounds interesting, and I have something I want to try, so I’ll stay,” Tomoe insisted.

“That pervert’s a concern too. You can’t be alone with it!” Mio added.

Was there really a need for them to stay? I wished they would just get back to their tasks in the Demiplane. *Mio, there’s probably no danger of this skeleton violating my chastity.*

“All right, do what you want,” I said, resigned. “Let’s start the interrogation.”

Certain Adventurers

Meanwhile...

“This place is even more outrageous than the rumors.”

“Yeah.”

“Absolutely.”

The three adventurers who’d been brought to the Demiplane by Makoto and Tomoe were huddled together. They’d been welcomed by monsters and demi-humans and given rooms far better than anything they’d experienced in Tsige. By all rights, they should have been killed by the forest ogres, but somehow, through sheer luck, they ended up in the fabled Mirage City. As adventurers, they’d always relied on a bit of luck, but their expressions were grim—after all, they were hyumans.

“To be welcomed by those creatures... What an insult,” one spat.

“Demi-humans serving us? Give me a break,” another grumbled.

“We hyumans are the supreme race. Being served is one thing, but their familiarity is offensive,” the third sneered.

They were being treated with hospitality in a city they had stumbled upon—a gesture that should have been appreciated. But it wasn’t uncommon for hyuman adventurers, or hyumans in general, to think this way. Even these

three, who had sought out the Mirage City knowing it was inhabited by peaceful monsters and demi-humans, couldn't shake their ingrained superiority.

What these adventurers truly wanted wasn't to make friends or bring back souvenirs to Tsige, as the rumors suggested. They intended to loot—no, to “collect taxes.” Their goal was to take as many weapons and supplies as they could carry and leave. If anyone stood in their way, they wouldn't hesitate to eliminate any non-humans.

This mindset wasn't rare among humans. The sole Goddess of this world had placed humans at the top, with demi-humans as their servants, so this was seen as the natural order. All monsters were pests, and at best, demi-humans were livestock. Some demi-humans, like elves and dwarves, were considered tools—tools to be used skillfully, sometimes humored, but always controlled.

Makoto hadn't yet encountered this harsh reality, but it was the common sentiment. Few adventurers partnered with demi-humans, as it was seen as a loss of pride and often condemned.

“For now, let's find a way back to the forest. Tailing Raidou led to some surprises, but now that we know Ambrosia grows there, this is our chance,” said the woman who had suggested following Makoto into the Wasteland.

The other two recognized that their current situation was thanks to her foresight. Both the cautious man and the woman who had aimed for Mirage City nodded in agreement. The weapons and materials from Mirage City and the rare Ambrosia plant they'd discovered in the forest during the fight with the forest ogres could drastically change their futures. This was a perfect opportunity to gain both wealth and fame.

“We can't take our time. We'll grab what we can and get out. The longer we wait, the more likely others will show up,” the woman said, her focus sharp on the reward they sought.

Her companions nodded in agreement.

“That gullible pig who's taking care of us—we'll get all the information we need out of him...” the cautious man suggested.

“Yeah, that pig... He even invited us to dinner,” the woman sneered.

One of the highland orcs, a resident of the Demiplane, had been assigned to look after them. Despite his ability to speak the common language fluently, they still referred to him as a pig. Even though all three of them together wouldn't stand a chance against him unless they caught him by surprise, they didn't realize this. Highland orcs were formidable opponents, and with the strength they'd gained in the Demiplane, they were clearly superior. But the adventurers didn't see the orc as a threat, thinking he was just another inferior monster they could easily handle.

They were too naive to consider the possibility of failure. But their arrogant malice was something Makoto and Tomoe hadn't fully accounted for. They saw these three adventurers as weaker than the forest ogres, weaker than anyone in the Demiplane.

Little did Makoto know that these adventurers were the worst kind.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 4

“First, why don’t you stand up? You’ve recovered somewhat, haven’t you?” I asked.

Magick usually recovered with rest. All I did was feed the lich’s magick to the darkness, so I hadn’t hindered said undead’s recovery. Only the lich knew how much had returned, but at least standing and talking should be possible. I could sense its power returning, even if it wasn’t as much as when we fought.

“Hmph. What will happen to me?” The skeleton stood up obediently but didn’t summon a staff, probably because its magick hadn’t fully recovered yet.

“There are a few things I want to ask you. That’s all.”

“And then you’ll dispose of me?” the lich asked.

“Huh? No way. We’re not going to do what you’re thinking. We’ll just let you go,” I replied.

The lich looked surprised... I think. The expression was hard to read since its face was just a skull, but I could tell by the light in the lich’s eyes and the movement of its jaw.

“You’re going to release me after bringing me to your base and revealing your secrets?!”

“Yeah. Now that you know you’ll be safe, let’s start the conversation,” I said, gesturing for the skeleton to take a seat at the table.

After I sat down, the lich followed suit. Tomoe and Mio stood on either side of me.

“Let’s start with introductions. I’m Makoto Misumi, but you can call me Makoto if you’d rather. The blue-haired one is Tomoe, and the black-haired one is Mio. They’re my companions,” I explained with a wry smile.

“What do you mean by ‘if you’d rather’?” the lich asked.

“I’ll explain that later. Your turn.”

“As you can see, I am a lich.”

Yep, knew that.

“No, I want to know your name,” I said.

“I have no name. I am a lich, that is all. I no longer remember my human life, and even if I did, that name is no longer mine to use,” the skeleton replied.

Oh, so is that what becoming a lich entails? I can’t tell if it remembered but didn’t want to say or if it truly forgot.

“I see. Then Mr. Lich it is. Sorry, but are you male or female? It’s hard to tell from bones alone.”

“No need for ‘mister.’ You’re the victor, so there’s no need for formalities. I am male, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I was curious. Got it. So, Lich, let’s get started.”

“Makoto-dono, was it? I probably don’t have the right to ask, but may I pose a question?”

“Go ahead.”

If he knows he’s a prisoner, what does he want to ask?

“If it’s within your power to answer, would you allow me one question for every answer I give?”

Well, since he’d put it that way, I saw no reason to refuse.

“Sure.”

“Thank you.”

“First question: why were you in the forest ogres’ village?”

“For my research. I’d discovered the potential for hyumans to transform into Grants. I hid within one of the forest ogres to study their lost abilities,” he explained.

The forest ogres’ abilities connected with the potential of transforming hyumans... That’s got to be about Tree Execution. Did he awaken that perverted master’s power?

Tomoe narrowed her eyes and let out a soft “oh,” clearly intrigued.

“What are Grants?” I asked.

“It’s my turn, but I’ll answer that,” the lich said. “Grants are an advanced race of hyumans. They surpass hyumans in every way. I seek the path to becoming a Grant.”

I see... Or at least I was starting to get the outlines of it. Apparently, there was a race similar to hyumans called Grants in this world. A relationship like that could lead to serious conflict unless there was total domination.

I’d heard about hyumans fighting against demons, but I hadn’t heard about conflicts between hyumans and Grants.

“I’m curious why you would want to become a Grant, but go ahead with your question first.” I hadn’t expected such a polite conversation, but I guess his demeanor was rubbing off on me.

“Then I will ask two questions. Is your name not Raidou? And you claim to be a human, but humans are considered an ancient race of hyumans. How can you say that you are one?”

Ah, the term “human” was a bit of a misnomer. Strictly speaking, I felt more like a hyuman. However, the Goddess had called me a human, which suggested I had the physical strength to match. *Wait a minute, the Goddess knew my parents were hyumans, so why did She call me human...*

Noticing the lich was still waiting for an answer, I pulled myself back to reality.

“Raidou is my registered name with the Adventurer’s Guild and the Merchant Guild... It’s a sort of alias. Or you could call it a pseudonym. My real name is

Makoto Misumi, like I said before. As for being called a human, the Goddess told me that. I don't know much about my details either."

"The *Goddess* told you?! Is that even possible?"

"As far as I know, that's what happened. I don't know if it proves anything, but I can't speak the common language. Apparently, it's because I haven't been blessed. Instead, the Goddess gave me the ability to understand non-human languages. That's why I can speak with you, in the undead languages, without any issues."

"Now that you mention it, I didn't realize how naturally we were speaking... Regardless of proof, I have my answer. Please, go ahead with your questions," he said.

So far, he seemed willing to answer in good faith. Maybe he still had questions of his own.

Should I ask about his wish to become a Grant?

No, there's something else.

"Before our battle, you killed one of the forest ogres. I heard he was the son of one of the elders. You mentioned something about an 'annoying woman.' Could you explain that?"

The only casualty in the fight with the lich was the pale-looking forest ogre who came to see me and Mio. The Aqua and Eris duo also seemed concerned about him. His name was Adonou.

The lich had killed him first. Maybe it was to gain strength from the nearest source, but since he said something to him just before, there must have been another reason.

"Ah, him? I did not expect you to remember every word spoken in that situation. It seems I underestimated you, Makoto-dono. Not that I'm frustrated about being outmatched so easily... He was a dog."

"A dog?" I asked. He probably meant a spy.

Who would place a spy in the forest ogres' village, and for what purpose?

“Yes, a dog—well, perhaps a better term would be operative. He was involved in diplomacy, dealing with other races on behalf of the forest ogres. But at some point, he sympathized with a certain faction and was bought off, trying to steer the forest ogres in the direction that party desired.”

Being in a position to negotiate with outsiders would give plenty of opportunities to interact with other races. So, there were people who noticed the forest ogres’ existence and their combat capabilities.

“That woman you mentioned belongs to this ‘faction,’ right?” I asked.

“Correct. That explanation was part of my previous answer. The woman is a general of the demon race, and the faction, of course, is the Demon King’s army.”

Wow. The demon race, based in the northern continent, extending their reach all the way to the Edge of the World... That was alarming. Although the demons had even appeared at the gates of Mirage City, perhaps those weren’t just random soldiers training but actual members of the Demon King’s army.

“A troublesome woman, indeed. It seems that five operatives sent deep into the Wasteland have lost contact. She must be desperate to secure more forces, which is why she approached the forest ogres. A large-scale war seems to be brewing. I was asked to cooperate with the Demon King’s army, but I refused. I have no interest in such matters.”

Five operatives? Could it be... When I accidentally set off the Bridt explosion at Tomoe’s residence in the mountains, the demon who survived medium-rare and the four who turned out well-done—could they have been those five operatives?

“Are you sure you should be telling me this much?” I asked.

“I do not belong to the demon race,” the lich replied. “I don’t mind. Consider it a small act of retaliation. Didn’t I say it before? I find that woman particularly disagreeable.”

“Thank you. Now, you said you had a question for me?”

“No, I have two questions I want to ask at the same time. Please go ahead with yours first.”

Wow, this guy is quite the formal type. Maybe he was some kind of scholar in life?

“Hmm, the only thing I want to ask you about is your reason for seeking to become a Grant. Other than that, I have a request.”

Would the lich answer this question? I had a feeling he wouldn't.

“I cannot answer that. I am sorry. What is your request?”

What did I tell you? Well, it was more of a personal curiosity anyway. But the thing was, he was in a situation where he could be killed at any moment, and he *still* refused to answer. Tomoe might have been calm, but Mio was occasionally letting out some killing intent.

“I can see you're well-versed in magick. I'm willing to pay, so if you have any magick books, could you sell me a few?” I asked.

That was it. I was starting to feel the limitations of studying from the chant list Ema had given me. I wanted to explore other knowledge if possible. The language the lich used for his magick was something I'd never heard before, and I was sure he had plenty of books. Even basic ones would be fine.

“Is this a joke?” he asked, his voice growing agitated.

“Huh?”

“Makoto-dono, you cast spells with an incredible level of efficiency... far beyond the incantations I wove. And now you want to learn my spells and knowledge?”

Whoa. He was definitely upset. His red eyes locked onto mine in an intense glare.

No, no, no, that wasn't my intention at all! I just wanted some new textbooks! Tomoe, unable to hold it in, burst out laughing. *Why is she laughing?!*

Mio's shoulders were shaking as well.

“No, I genuinely want to learn. My magick textbook is just a single piece of paper,” I explained.

“What?” the lich asked, clearly confused.

“Yeah, my magick textbook is just one piece of paper! I’m just looking for more books,” I repeated.

“Are you saying the incantation for the spell you cast at me was written on that paper? Are you carrying fragments of a forbidden tome?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just a note, something scribbled down quickly. If you’re interested, I can give you a copy. How about we trade it for some of your books?”

To me, it seemed like a fair deal, considering I could just ask Ema to write another one for me.

“If that’s acceptable to you, Makoto-dono, I’ll agree to those terms. Though it feels like I’m getting the better end of the deal,” the lich said, sounding a bit bewildered.

Great, we had an agreement.

“Then, my question for you. I know you partially answered this already, but I’d like to clarify. What exactly was the spell you used to defeat me? How did you consume my magick?”

Ah, the classic “I don’t get how you did it” question.

“That spell used the properties of darkness. I targeted your magick first and then you, as a lich,” I explained as plainly as I could.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” he said, still puzzled.

“You mentioned the properties of darkness earlier yourself,” I reminded him.

“Wait, back then, did I say ‘my magick is being devoured’?” He began muttering, trying to piece it together. “Is that property ‘absorption’?”

“Yes, that’s correct. That’s how it works,” I confirmed.

“But dissipating a spell with magick like that is incredibly inefficient. It’s far more effective to counter a spell with an equivalent one. And trying to drain a caster’s magick with darkness should be even less efficient.”

“That’s true.”

“The consumption would be at least ten to fifteen times higher. It seems like an enormous waste.”

“It was wasteful.”

“Are you an idiot?” he asked bluntly.

“Quite the sharp tongue you’ve got there. But you still lost, didn’t you?” I shot back.

“You used magick like it was nothing, trying to absorb not just my spell but even my magical essence.”

“Yes, exactly.”

A strange, heavy silence filled the room. This was the most bizarre atmosphere since our conversation started.

But I was telling the truth.

The lich suddenly burst into laughter. “Heh... Haha... HAHHAHAHA!” It was a broken, rattling sound, the kind of laugh that makes you uncomfortable. What was going on? Had his understanding of reality just collapsed? Then again, being a living skeleton already defied common sense.

Abruptly, the laughter stopped.

“Don’t mock me! Do you think you’re some kind of spirit incarnate?!” The lich suddenly stood up, shouting in anger. But in the blink of an eye, he froze. Tomoe had silently moved beside him, placing her sword’s blade against his neck—assuming that spot was even a vital point. Mio, equally swift, trailed her closed fan down his spine from his neck to his tailbone.

“Silence, skull. How dare you speak to Young Master in such a way,” Tomoe hissed, her voice icy.

“Comparing Young Master to a mere spirit... Shall we scatter your bones across the Wasteland?” Mio added, her tone dripping with menace.

Their speed and coordination were impressive. Had they been practicing this?

Both of them had terrifying looks in their eyes, but they hadn’t actually harmed him. They had stopped just short. Still, we couldn’t keep going like this.

I motioned for them to step back. “My companions were disrespectful. I apologize,” I said, trying to defuse the situation.

I was about to ask the lich to sit back down, but he had already slumped back into his chair. Or more like his legs gave out and the chair just happened to be there.

“This—!” Mio moved to act, clearly angered by his behavior, but I quickly stopped her. I appreciated her concern, but...

Mio, I wish you wouldn't react so violently to every perceived slight. Try assessing the situation more calmly!

“Young Master, may I speak?” Tomoe asked, her tone still cool.

“Tomoe, try to stay calm,” I urged her.

“It's not about him; it's about the magick books,” she said, her expression having rapidly shifted. She had looked genuinely furious just moments ago, but now she seemed almost casual. *Was that just an act?* Tomoe could be hard to read.

“What's the issue?” I asked, trying to keep her focused.

“Instead of just a few books, why not take all of it? Or better yet, why not take *him* along too?” Tomoe suggested, nodding toward the lich.

“What?!” I exclaimed. *Tomoe, don't say stuff that will only make our lives more complicated!* The lich looked startled as well.

“I'm sure he would be more than happy to offer it,” she added, as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

“Tomoe, please, stop...” I sighed, feeling a headache coming on.

“No, Young Master. I think I know what he really wants. If you grant me full authority, I'll ensure your wishes are fulfilled completely,” she insisted.

“Are you serious about this?” I asked, wary of her intentions. Tomoe had too many incidents in her past for me to fully trust her judgment here. Her earlier display of anger had reminded me of Mio. She had been cold during the forest ogres' situation as well. I couldn't always predict what would set her off. Even

when she'd drawn her sword earlier, she seemed less angry about his treatment of me and more about something else.

As a Greater Dragon, Tomoe had lived for an unimaginable amount of time. I couldn't fully grasp or control all her thoughts. But I did understand her interests quite well.

"Of course. I'm your servant. Like the loyal followers of Mito Komon, I will never betray you or cause you harm. I am here to serve," she said, bowing deeply.

If she's that determined...

I nodded, signaling my agreement and letting her take control of the situation. Maybe Tomoe knew something I didn't. I hoped she would reveal it soon.

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Now, how will Tomoe handle negotiations with the lich?

"Very well. I'll call you Lich instead of skull. You want to know about the Grants, right? That means you're aware of beings from other worlds, not created by the Goddess, isn't that correct?" Tomoe began, her tone sharp and probing.

What did she just say?!

The lich visibly recoiled at the mention of "other worlds." But, so did I.

"Hmm, I see. You're on the right track. You're not the first to talk about reaching the Grants. There are two types of beings who reach it. One type includes heroes who seek power, achieve great deeds, and are recognized by the Goddess, and high-ranking spirits, becoming the kin of deities and reincarnating as a Grant," Tomoe went on.

So those recognized by the Goddess or high-ranking spirits become Grants. But what does this have to do with other worlds?

Tomoe pressed on, clearly pleased with the lich's reaction.

“And the other type... This might align more with your idea of the Grants. Those who know this world isn’t the only one. Let’s call them Seekers. They discovered the existence of other worlds through small rifts or records left by visitors from other realms. Among them are those who actually managed to cross worlds.”

The lich’s eyes locked onto Tomoe, his gaze so intense it seemed it could kill.

“You must have thought that the Grants are superior beings who can cross between worlds at will,” Tomoe suggested.

“Yes! The Grants can cross worlds. They can move to whichever world they desire! Isn’t that true?!” The lich’s voice was desperate, as if clinging to hope.

Tomoe’s expression remained inscrutable. I wanted to intervene, but I couldn’t find the right moment. The lich’s words, though, contained something I couldn’t ignore.

Crossing worlds. Moving to the world you desire. Does that mean I could return to the world I left behind, where my family and friends are? Even though Tsukuyomi-sama said it was impossible?

“No,” Tomoe said firmly.

What do you know, Tomoe? I want to know too, just like he does.

“Wh-What?” the lich stammered.

“You must have spent years, and unimaginable effort, researching texts and traditions. You defined the Grants how you wanted to,” Tomoe continued, her voice almost sympathetic.

The lich seemed lost, struggling to process her words.

“Like I said earlier, the Grants refers to those who are reborn as kin of the Goddess or similar beings, and those who have crossed the gaps between worlds to live as new entities in other realms,” Tomoe explained.

“...?”

“Don’t you get it? The Grants aren’t a race, and being one doesn’t necessarily mean being able to travel between worlds. It’s a term for those who have become superior beings, that’s all.”

“A-Ah...!”

“There have been humans who found gaps in the world, researched on their own, and leaped into those voids. Some failed halfway, saw other worlds like fractured mirrors, and came back here. They left a few vague records but died before they could reveal much. They were never true Grants, but that’s what they called themselves in their writings. You’ve based your understanding of the Grants on these flawed sources.”

“What about those who didn’t come back?” the lich asked, his voice weak. He seemed unsure if he wanted to know the answer.

“If they successfully crossed into another world, they might live as Grants. If they died in the gaps between worlds, their human bodies would have likely disintegrated. No one but the gods know what happens to those who cross over. There are exceptions, but I doubt they concern you.” Tomoe spoke calmly, as if discussing the weather.

“That... can’t be...”

“People see what they want to see. Even if they piece together fragments of information to fit their desires, no one can blame them. Your interpretation of the Grants is—”

“The exceptions. Yes, what about the exceptions?! Under what circumstances would one be able to cross worlds?” the lich interrupted, desperation lacing his voice.

Tomoe didn’t even seem upset at being interrupted. Maybe she pitied the lich, seeing how her words had confirmed his worst fears.

“Please, I beg you... Tell me,” he pleaded, his voice trembling with desperation.

“That kind of exception, as far as I know, is only possible with the Goddess’s permission. If you can get the Goddess to open the gate, the chances of world transfer are much higher than becoming a Grant. However, even then, the success rate is less than 10 percent.”

Less than 10 percent, even with a higher success rate... That’s practically a death sentence. Is world transfer really that dangerous? As Tsukuyomi-sama

said, returning to my original world might be impossible after all.

Hearing all this, I began to understand that the lich hadn't sought to become a Grant out of a desire for power or immortality. He had some other purpose in mind—one tied to another world.

"Then... what am I supposed to do now?" The light in his eye sockets dimmed, and he seemed to lose some of his vitality.

"I don't know why you were aiming for another world, and I won't force you to tell me," Tomoe said softly.

The lich remained silent.

"But you're lucky, just like Mio over there."

Mio started, looking at Tomoe in confusion.

"Mio's just like you. Normally, she wouldn't have been saved. But now, who's standing in front of you?"

"Makoto-dono, right?" The lich's voice was barely audible.

"Indeed. This is my Young Master, Makoto-sama. So, what do you think I am? A hyuman?" Tomoe asked.

"Of course not. No hyuman could possess that kind of knowledge," the lich replied, his voice shaking.

"Then what do you think I am?"

"If I eliminate the impossible, then... a Goddess? A higher spirit? Or maybe... a Greater Dragon? But... no, that can't be. Why would any of those beings take on a hyuman form and come to a place like this?"

He's sharp. He carefully considered Tomoe's words and narrowed down his guesses to the right ones.

"Now, sense my magick power and analyze it, like you love to do," Tomoe instructed.

Tomoe's body radiated an aura similar to when she was in combat, pulsing with raw magick. The lich looked at her with a mixture of suspicion and

curiosity. Could it really be possible to identify a being's race through magick alone?

"A dragon. A powerful one, if I'm not mistaken."

"Correct. I am Shin, though I go by the name Tomoe these days."

"Sh-Shin? The mist dragon, the *Invincible* Shin?!"

So, he knew of Shin. Was the lich that well-versed in lore, or was Tomoe's reputation that significant? Given that Tomoe had lived in such isolation, I hadn't thought she was that well-known, especially to a former hyuman.

"It appears you've heard of me. Yes, I'm that Shin," she confirmed.

"Impossible," the lich marveled. "Why would a Greater Dragon be in a place like this?"

"I changed allegiances. I found someone more worthy of my service than the Goddess. Besides, where do you think you'd find the kind of information I just shared with you? That kind of knowledge isn't recorded anywhere—it would cause chaos if it were. Even the pieces you know are forbidden. Anyone who shared it would be swiftly eliminated."

"Then why tell me...?"

"Simple. Because I've taken an interest in you."

Taken an interest? Was she smitten with him? No, that couldn't be it. It had to be about his abilities, perhaps the way he awakened the forest ogre's power. She did seem impressed by that.

"Taken an interest?"

"Yes. Now, wretched lich who has forgotten his name," Tomoe said with a self-satisfied smirk, her voice slow and deliberate. "Become my Young Master's follower."

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A lich.

As an undead, it ranked quite high. However, its strength could vary quite a bit between individuals. Even the most powerful lich was no match for a Greater Dragon.

So, what did that mean for us?

If I were to form a Contract with him, it wouldn't be like the ones I had with Tomoe and Mio. Instead, it would result in the lowest form of Contract, a Sustenance Contract, with a ten-to-zero ratio. In other words, it means he'd be absorbed and cease to exist. While this wasn't what I wanted, it would still be pretty tragic for the lich.

Apparently, this was a Contract even lower than Subjugation. When I asked Tomoe about it, she brushed it off, saying, "I didn't think it was necessary to explain such a trivial Contract."

She probably didn't want any "impurities" mixed into me. But it was hard to imagine a creature's feelings, even an undead one's, reduced to nothing more than impurities.

Given that we couldn't even establish a relationship of Subjugation due to his lack of raw power, making him my follower seemed utterly impossible.

What exactly does Tomoe want to try?

After Tomoe convinced (brainwashed?) the lich, we'd been attempting to see if a Contract could be made. Although the lich himself was willing, the fundamental problem remained unresolved.

We were still in my room. Quite some time had passed since we'd first started, and it was now late at night. Everyone in the Demiplane must have been asleep already. From the perspective of someone from the modern world, it wasn't yet a time to feel sleepy, but in this world, especially among the inhabitants of the Wasteland, early to bed and early to rise was the norm.

"Hmm, it's still difficult as things stand..." Tomoe tilted her head, frowning.

"No matter how high-ranking it is, it's still undead. The fundamental magick that sustains its existence is quite limited," Mio remarked.

The lich sat with his shoulders slumped in embarrassment. He must have felt miserable, being treated like a common commodity despite his best efforts.

Inside the magick circle deployed for forming the Contract, it was just the lich and me.

At the start, the lich had been quite enthusiastic, but now he seemed frail and weak, as if a puff of air could blow him away. Tomoe and Mio's harsh words and actions seemed more like deliberate bullying to establish a clear hierarchy.

Outside the circle, Tomoe and Mio exchanged relentless and merciless comments about the situation.

"Young Master, can you weaken yourself with your power?" Tomoe suddenly suggested.

"Hmm? By using the Realm, you mean?" I replied.

Applying a weakening effect... I bet it's possible. The attributes of the space created by the Realm affect me as well. What's more, I can only deploy the Realm centered on myself. While I can consciously shape it into a sphere, it defaults to a dome shape if I don't focus on it. The difference is between 180 degrees and 360 degrees. If I concentrate, I can limit it to just my body.

"Yeah, I think I can do it," I told her. "I've never tried it before because it kind of seemed pointless."

"Then, go ahead and try," Tomoe instructed. "I'll get ready for the Contract again."

I deployed the Realm, focusing on keeping its range limited to my body, and added the weakening effect. After confirming the Realm was ready, Tomoe, with assistance from Mio, once again poured power into the magick circle.

A pillar of light rose between the lich and me, gradually changing color. The colored light re-dyed the white light emitted by the circle. Brown. A color I hadn't seen before. Both Tomoe and Mio's lights were red. Red signified a Domination relationship, according to Tomoe, it was the barely acceptable line.

So, is brown unacceptable?

“Earth color, huh? It’s risen to the level of Subjugation. But we don’t need a puppet,” Tomoe remarked.

Subjugation. If I recall correctly, it’s a state where the will is lost, turning the person into a mere... well, a puppet.

Indeed, this was not what we needed.

“Tomoe, isn’t this pointless? If you really want to make it a follower, wouldn’t it be faster to take a gamble and train it?” Mio suggested bluntly.

Take a gamble...? What kind of training is she talking about? Also, stop calling Lich “it.”

“Mio, don’t be so dismissive. I have an idea,” Tomoe responded, her tone calm.

Tomoe pulled something out of her pocket...

“Aren’t those Young Master’s rings?!” Mio exclaimed, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Indeed! And they’re fully charged. Mio, listen carefully...” Tomoe whispered something into Mio’s ear.

Mio’s expression shifted as she absorbed Tomoe’s words, her surprise giving way to a solemn nod. The brown light settled, and the magick circle stopped emitting light. Tomoe stepped into the circle.

Without hesitation, she handed the rings to the lich. He looked down at them, then back at Tomoe, as if wanting to say something.

“Save your questions for later,” Tomoe commanded, not meeting the lich’s gaze. “All right, put on all thirteen of them.”

Thirteen—well, that’s an ominous number if I’ve ever heard one.

“Put them all? But I only have ten fingers,” the lich pointed out.

“You can wear two or three on one finger. Hurry up. This is easier than diving into the rift between worlds, isn’t it?” Tomoe retorted.

“Yes,” the lich muttered, slipping the rings onto his bony fingers as instructed. With each ring he put on, there was no visible change or sign of distress. These

rings had already absorbed all of my mana that they could store. I'd been told not to use them anymore because they were dangerous. What would happen if they exceeded their limit?

Once the lich had the rings on, Tomoe stepped outside the magick circle again. As before, she and Mio began chanting together to resume the Contract. However, something felt different this time. Tomoe was handling the Contract ritual alone, while Mio seemed to be doing something else to the lich.

A pillar of light appeared once more. This time, however, it was red—the same color as the Domination Contract with Tomoe and Mio. No way!

"It's a success! It's red!" Tomoe exclaimed, her voice filled with triumph.

"Tomoe? Creating false mana is tricky, so please wait until it's over before celebrating," Mio chided.

How can she manage something so complex on the fly?! I could never do that!

"I understand. Young Master, we'll begin the Contract now. Lich, are you ready?" Tomoe asked, her tone now more serious.

False mana? Does that mean they faked it? I have no idea how you can falsify a Contract, but that's not something you do casually! Tomoe and Mio's abilities are terrifying. When they work together, do they activate some sort of mad scientist mode?

It looks like they managed to pull off a pretty extreme form of doping!

"Are you sure it's all right to make someone like me your follower, Makoto-dono?" the lich asked uncertainly.

Despite the circumstances, he did seem willing to become my follower. Maybe it was because Tomoe had thoroughly crushed his hopes and then lifted them just a bit. Between the story about the Grants and the Contract, it was clear they had no intention of letting him escape.

"Just when I was thinking we needed some testosterone around here," I commented to the lich. "Those are some very healthy bones you've got there. I'm expecting great things from you. Ahahaha!"

The red light filled the entire magick circle. After our brief exchange, the lich and I waited silently. Eventually, I felt a clear connection between us. The Contract was complete. Since this was my third time, I had become somewhat accustomed to it and could remain calm. The light gradually faded away.

Standing before me was the lich—or should I say, the man. Just like with Tomoe and Mio, the person before me had transformed. He now had black eyes like mine and long, deep-red hair that reached his back. He appeared to be a young man in his twenties, indistinguishable from a hyuman. He had flesh! *And you two over there!*

“Ohh. I was curious to see what form he would take, and this is it!” Tomoe exclaimed, her tone filled with genuine interest.

“Hmm, since he was originally a hyuman, is this maybe what he looked like when he was alive?” Mio speculated, her eyes narrowing as she examined him.

OK, I get your curiosity, but could you stop staring so hard at him? He’s barely wearing any clothes! Just the robe, with his chest fully exposed. At least he’s covered below the waist.

You two are women! And you look like women of appropriate age!

The lich—no, the man—lifted his arms to examine his new body, his eyes going wide in surprise. He touched his cheeks with both hands, embraced his shoulders, and seemed to confirm his own body by hugging himself. *Is this some kind of aesthetic beauty or a scene from a shojo manga?*

“It’s warm. I can feel the pulse of life!” He seemed genuinely moved, overwhelmed by having a physical body again.

“Hey, what happened to the rings?” I asked suddenly.

“Hmm, come to think of it, I’m not wearing them. Did I absorb them during the reconstruction of my body?” the former lich wondered.

“Originally, the rings were masses of Young Master’s mana,” Tomoe told him. “As long as they’re under his control, there should be no negative effects.”

Um... are you two really OK with that?



Once the lich finished marveling at his new body, he quickly retrieved the robe he had dropped during his dramatic pose and hurriedly put it on. Then, with a grand, almost theatrical gesture, he knelt before me, the atmosphere suddenly shifting to one of solemnity.

“Master Makoto, I am deeply grateful for the honor of joining your ranks. I was so overwhelmed by the power I now feel in this body that I delayed my greetings. Please forgive the delay, and allow me to prove my worth through my future efforts. I look forward to serving you,” he declared.

“Ah, yeah. There’s no need to be so formal. I’m looking forward to working with you too,” I replied.

“Yes, sir!” he responded, bowing his head deeply. I couldn’t help but wonder—does the Contract actually change personalities? No, it shouldn’t, right?

“How do you feel, Lich? No regrets, right?” Tomoe asked him. “This is just the beginning. You have yet to learn where you are and who Young Master truly is. Your joy has only just begun, isn’t that right, Mio?” Her voice was filled with excitement for our new follower’s arrival.

Tomoe’s passion for research and experimentation was evident—she and the lich might actually get along quite well.

“Yes, there’s a lot to teach him. Especially about Young Master and the rules and regulations here,” Mio added.

It seems Mio doesn’t mind having a male follower. She’s likely to drill anyone on the rules, regardless of gender, and probably add in a few unnecessary details for good measure.

So, my third follower was a lich. With the thirteen rings imbued with my mana that he absorbed during the Contract, he could potentially use them as a formidable combat strength. Plus, with his vast knowledge of magick, he should be quite capable in battle.

I thought I might take him with us when we visit the Academy City, concealing his identity as a lich. Or perhaps he would stay in the Demiplane permanently. There was no issue at the moment, but if adventurers happened to stumble in,

it could lead to trouble. Having someone who could handle such situations would be reassuring.

“Young Master! Can I share what I know with this former skeleton and the slow-witted Mio?” Tomoe asked, her eyes gleaming.

She means about my background. That’s right, they’re my followers and family under my control. It should be me who tells them.

“No, I’ll explain everything myself. Let’s head to the archive.”

Oh, right. I need to think of a name for the lich. I’ll settle on one as soon as possible. I’ve got a few ideas in mind, and we can decide during his welcome party.

“Young Master!”

“Yeah, Tomoe?”

“Something troublesome...! Damn it!” Tomoe’s expression suddenly shifted, her face etched with concern as she tried to explain what was happening.

A blinding light suddenly poured into the room through the window, cutting her off midsentence.

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A faint trace of magical power washed over us, carried by a sudden gust of wind. *What in the world—?!*

This is...

“It’s my magick?”

No, that can’t be right. But what I felt against my skin was my own magick power, no doubt about it.

“I... apologize, Young Master. I’ve made a grave mistake.” Tomoe’s regretful voice reached me as I stood by the window, my attention still drawn to the light outside.

When I turned around, I saw Tomoe kneeling, blood streaming down her forehead, with Mio and Lich standing nearby, both looking tense. An attack?

But why was only Tomoe hurt? Besides us, the only unknowns in the Demiplane were the Three Idiots and the forest ogres. There's no way they could harm Tomoe.

"Tomoe! What happened?!" I demanded, panic rising in my chest.

"Guh... Those three..." Tomoe muttered weakly before collapsing face-first onto the floor, blood still flowing. This was the first time I had ever seen Tomoe injured. In fact, aside from Mio and me, there shouldn't have been anyone in this Demiplane capable of harming her.

Damn it, what's going on here?!

I expanded a Search Realm. I couldn't cover the entire city, but I spread it as wide as possible—and what I found shocked me. The entire area was saturated with traces of my own magical power, making it impossible to discern exactly what was happening. I abandoned the magical detection and redeployed the Realm for a physical search, focusing solely on mapping out the terrain and identifying people.

There was... something near the gate I'd connected when returning from Tsige's back alley. The terrain in that area, a bit away from the mansion, had been drastically altered, forming a massive crater. *Did something explode there... Could that be what caused that light I saw before?!*

"Mio! Take care of Tomoe. Lich, come with me!" I shouted, not waiting for a response as I dashed out of the room. The close-range weapons I had requested from the dwarves weren't ready yet. All I had was the ceremonial short sword the orcs had given me, which I grabbed with one hand as I ran.

Those three... Tomoe mentioned them. Could it really be the Idiot Trio? But their abilities should be limited... How could they have caused this much damage?

"Makoto-sama."

It was Lich's voice, via Telepathy. I glanced to my side, but he wasn't there. I was rushing down the stairs, heading for the front door, and replied without slowing down.

"What is it?"

“My apologies. I’m not accustomed to this body and cannot run properly.”

What? Sounds like something an old man would... Oh, right. He was just bones a moment ago. Why didn’t he think of floating instead of trying to run?

“Can’t you move faster by floating?”

“You are correct. However, if you would permit it, I could use my magick to fly ahead and start healing the injured.”

“Healing magick?! Lich, you can use healing magick?! Seriously? Since when can the undead use healing magick?!”

I expect no less of the Goddess, I thought, sighing in exasperation. She imposes absurd rules on this world. Undead are supposed to be creatures that have died once. Healing magick should harm them, like in games. Am I the one who’s out of touch here?

Still reeling from Lich’s revelation, I finally reached the first floor after descending the long staircase, and I caught sight of the entrance hall. I would need to ask Lich later about what it meant to be undead. For now, I could tolerate healing magick in his human form, but doing it in his skeletal form? Absolutely not.

“Can I use it? Of course. In fact, I excel at it.”

He excels at it...? My understanding of the undead was being completely shattered. He’d said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“If you can do it from where you are, start healing from there.”

“Yes. I will deploy the spell over the area with the injured.”

Honestly, I couldn’t fully wrap my head around it, but that wasn’t the priority right now. What mattered was that he could help without having to follow me.

I rushed out of the mansion, running straight toward my destination. I cut off the Telepathy with Lich after entrusting the healing to him. *Damn it, if only I could fly! Why can’t I use wind magick at all? If I could, I’d be able to move so much faster and easier.*

These thoughts raced through my mind as I pushed myself to run faster, focusing solely on reaching the scene as quickly as possible.

When I finally arrived, the sounds around me began to filter through—moans of pain, sobbing, crying. The injured bodies lying on the ground were orcs and dwarves. The ground bore the scars of destruction—stones gouged out and scattered, earth exposed in patches where the cobblestones had been torn apart. The entire area reeked of violence.

What in the hell happened here?

Something had exploded. That much was clear. It might have been an exaggeration to call it a crater, but the brutal force that had ravaged the cobblestones and felled trees reminded me of a weapon of mass destruction. But more than that, what concerned me most was... my own magick power.

This spot had the highest concentration of magick. From here, my magick had spread out over a wide area, even reaching as far as the mansion. Aside from that, the only other presence I could sense was... Lich's magick.

Lich's healing light enveloped the injured in a warm yellow glow. I extended my own healing Realm as far as I could; it covered the area where the wounded lay motionless, unable to stand or help one another. We needed someone to be healthy enough to explain what had happened, or we wouldn't get anywhere.

As I scanned the area, trying to grasp the situation, something unusual caught my eye. Near the center of the explosion, something resembling a cocoon stood out.

No way!

I sprinted over. That wasn't a cocoon!

"No... This can't be real."

The figure before me had its upper body burned, its right arm severed at the shoulder, and its left arm missing from the elbow down. Its body was riddled with cracks, with most of its limbs barely hanging on by threads of skin. It looked more like a broken, twisted shell than a person.

"It's an arach."

How could someone as powerful as an arach end up like this? Was he still breathing?

I knelt beside him, closely inspecting his mouth and chest for any sign of life. I touched his body—it was cold, devoid of warmth, stiff like the lifeless stray cat I'd once found as a child.

No, he can't be...

My mind went blank. I had never reacted to the deaths of insignificant humans, nor to the deaths of lizardfolk, demons, or Wasteland beasts. But this... I didn't know what to do. My body began to tremble uncontrollably.

Just before my mind went completely numb, Lich's voice snapped me back to reality. *"Makoto-sama! The one beside you is the most severely injured! The others have stabilized, so I will focus my magick on him. Please, Makoto-sama, help me!"*

He's not dead?! This arach can still be saved?!

What can I do to help? The Realm—it's all I have. But will it be enough? If only I could use healing magick! Why can't I use it, even though I understand the chants and formations perfectly? It's absurd that the very attributes I need most right now—wind and healing—are beyond my reach!

Damn it! Will the Realm alone be enough? Whether it is or not, I have to try.

I poured all my focus into healing. My Realm, combined with Lich's intense light, enveloped the arach's broken body, but there was no immediate response. Was it still not enough?

"Lich! Can't you increase the effect? He's not getting better!"

"I'm giving it everything I've got!!! I'm casting the spell while moving toward you, but even if I examine him directly, I'm not sure I will be able to produce visible results... unless I abandon the others I'm still treating..."

"No, keep treating the others. Once you're done, focus all your attention on the arach."

"I'm hurrying over, but please keep healing, Makoto-sama."

Healing, huh? My Realm isn't magick. I can't use recovery spells like you can, Lich. I don't know how much less effective my Realm is compared to actual magick, but maybe if I combine it with Lich's power, it might work better.

Combine them?

Yeah. The Realm. It can hold two properties—enhancement and healing, enhancement and search. It's worth a shot.

I concentrated on the Realm enveloping both the arach and me.

Please, let this work...

I layered healing upon healing. If this could somehow double the effect...

I visualized everything around us being revitalized, layering healing upon healing.

"The cracks are closing!"

The effect was amplifying! The countless cracks that had marred the arach's tough skin were shrinking, becoming fine lines... and then they vanished. Yes! Yes!!!

His lower limbs, which had been on the verge of detachment, were forcefully reattaching to his torso. His right arm, severed at the base, and his left arm, which had been missing from the elbow down, was regenerating. Now, if only his consciousness returned, he would be safe.

The arach's normally earth-colored lifeless skin began to regain warmth. His newly regenerated arm twitched, as if convulsing.

"Are you OK?! Can you hear me?!" His eyelids twitched and then slowly opened. His consciousness had returned! Everything was happening so smoothly...

"Ugh..."

"You don't need to talk! Just nod or shake your head!"

After a brief pause, he nodded weakly. The arach had understood my words. Relief washed over me, and I felt the tension drain from my body. Thank goodness. Truly.

I took a moment to survey the area. My lingering magick was still making it difficult for me to fully grasp the situation, but using my eyes instead of relying

on the Realm, I could see that the chaos was beginning to subside. People were getting up and checking on each other's safety.

Now, if I could talk to those who had regained consciousness, I might learn what really happened.

The Gate of Mist—could it be connected to the entrance I had created when returning here? It doesn't seem like a coincidence...

Feeling uneasy, I turned my attention to the area where I had created the gate, though its exact location was obscured by the destruction. Nothing in particular stood out.

Still, being close to what seemed to be the epicenter of the explosion, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off... Was I overthinking this?

Wait, what's that on the ground?

Judging the arach to be stable for now, I approached the object and picked it up. *A fragment of an accessory?*

It looks like part of a chain... Could this be from a Draupnir?!

Should I deploy the Search Realm? But my own magick is getting in the way... Wait, maybe I can set the conditions for dual searches, just like I did with the healing. My magick's just getting in the way of trying to figure out what happened here. If I use a second Search Realm to filter out my magick, like peeling away a layer, it might work. It's risky and untested, but...

It was working. As I watched excitedly, the smog-like haze began to clear.

So, who was here... The arach, the orcs, and the lizardfolk... I think I'm detecting traces of orc magick near the arach. But neither Tomoe's mini-clone nor the orcs are in sight. Where did they go?

Now that I think about it, Tomoe was injured in a way I'd never seen before. Could it be that if her clone suffered fatal injuries, Tomoe herself took the damage? If that was the case, something must have happened here that harmed Tomoe's clone... And the orc's magick I sensed... The worst-case scenario flashed through my mind.

I pushed aside that nightmare and focused on the task at hand. Three. There were indeed three distinct, unusual magick signatures that didn't belong to the inhabitants of the Demiplane. Could these be the three people Tomoe mentioned? Judging by the strength of their magick, they seem to be humans. *But if they're the ones who caused all this chaos, how did they manage it? They're just ordinary folks, slightly above average for Tsige.*

I traced the three magick signatures. Two of them faded away, while the third left a lingering trail, as if it had moved elsewhere. The way the two signatures faded was similar to the magick of Tomoe's mini-clone. The one with the strange trailing signature ended at the spot where I had created the Gate of Mist.

This is strange. No one but Tomoe and I should be able to open a gate on their own... The magick lingering here, the chain fragment from Draupnir, the human magick that disappeared into the Gate of Mist... Could the explosion have accidentally opened a gate?

"Makoto-sama, I'm sorry for the delay. It seems we've managed to save the injured."

"Lich, I'll leave this to you."

"What, Makoto-sama?"

Leaving those words with Lich, who had rushed to my side, I forced open the distorted Gate of Mist and stepped inside... a heavy sense of foreboding settling in my chest.

Tsukimichi

Chapter 5

“Is this Tsige? Am I back?”

A woman’s voice echoed through the narrow, deserted alley.

“Aha! I made it! This air, this smell, there’s no mistake! It’s Tsige!”

I had found her.

After passing through the Gate of Mist and following her trail, I’d located her in this deserted alley. She had just woken up. Despite her severe injuries, she was alive. If this had been the Wasteland, she wouldn’t have made it. But here in Tsige, all she’d have to do was call out for help on the street, and someone would have saved her. Even at midnight, Tsige’s bustling streets were full of people, some of whom were out visiting brothels. There was a chance she might’ve encountered someone with bad intentions, but I had a feeling she would’ve found a kind soul willing to help. All she’d had to do was step out and call for help... She would have been saved.

If only I hadn’t learned about those things...

I hadn’t understood what was happening to me. As I had approached her, trying to figure out how to start a conversation, my mind had kept drifting to thoughts of my magick—the cause of her injuries—and the devastation in the Demiplane. I’d needed to know more about all of it.

That’s when it had hit me—

“... Ambrosia... enemy demi-human... kill... purpose... hunt... misty city... Raidou... enemy’s city... danger... accomplice... suspicion... why those two...

escape... success... reward... Tsige... crush... kill... steal... take... right... fortune... trash... foolish demi-human... night... treasure trove...! To the valley... pursuer... best weapon... hidden move... defective ring... exploding light..."

A torrent of information had overwhelmed my mind, unraveling a web of conspiracy and hidden agendas.

It had felt like being forced to watch countless screens playing at full volume and speed while someone screamed disjointed commentary directly into my ear. The screens had flashed with meaningless subtitles, and patterns like colorful stains swirled amid the chaos.

I'd felt sick. My head had grown heavy, and dizziness had taken over.

What is this? Her memories?

The experience of having someone else's memories forcibly merged into my own had been horrifying. But it hadn't just been the intrusion of memories that had made me feel truly nauseous—it had been the thoughts and emotions intertwined with them. Although I hadn't retained everything, the final fragments of her memories and thoughts had remained vividly clear.

I'd originally approached her with the intention of offering healing.

I'm not sure how much time had passed—what felt like an eternity might have been mere moments. At this point, she still hadn't regained consciousness. But now, I had no intention of healing her.

I wanted to believe that not all humans shared her mindset. After all, these were her individual thoughts and experiences. But part of me feared that these might reflect a more common sentiment among humans. This possibility made me feel the world's intrinsic abnormality and distortion more acutely than ever, despite having previously encountered mostly kindhearted individuals.

Now, after seeing such an extreme example, I had a glimpse into how humans might perceive those unlike themselves.

In any case, this woman was beyond redemption.

Nausea, revulsion, and a burning anger welled up inside me—anger that edged dangerously close to hatred, a level of raw emotion I had never felt

before.

With this torrent of feelings swirling in my head, I felt an overwhelming urge to shout, scream, and vent my rage.

I stared blankly at the woman lying on the ground.

How much time had passed? Her body twitched slightly—it seemed she was awake.

I stepped back, blending into the shadows at a safe distance.

When she realized she was in Tsige and cried out in joy, I dragged her and her immediate surroundings into the mist. Now, she was completely separated from Tsige.

She must have thought the alley had suddenly been enveloped in a thick fog. She sat bolt upright, looking around in bewilderment.

It took a few seconds before she noticed my presence.

“Who’s there?!” she shouted, turning in my general direction. I didn’t respond, continuing to close the distance between us.

“Is that you, Raidou?!”

I kept quiet. There was no need for any further exchange between us.

“You followed me here... but it’s too late. We’re in Tsige. No one will take your side, especially since you’re working with demi-humans!”

“Working with... Ah, that’s what your memory tells you. Think what you like; I have no intention of explaining myself.”

Her memories had shown me her discussions with a priest from her party, where they speculated about my supposed alliance with demi-humans.

I spoke to her in Japanese, the language in which I could best express my emotions.

“What? What are you saying? Have you lost your mind?”

Of course, she had no idea what I was saying. Hearing me speak in an unfamiliar tongue must have unsettled her even more.

“I hate myself. I actually wish I’d killed you all in that forest. But I was too caught up in my own issues. And somewhere deep down, I was still judging humans by the standards of my old world.”

“I told you, I don’t know what you’re saying! Just use those bubbles like before!”

Her voice was edging toward hysteria, likely trying to mask the fear that was creeping in. Well, after narrowly escaping death, it was only natural for her to cling desperately to life.

“The fact that someone as beautiful as you would even bother talking to someone like me... it’s ridiculous. Just like a man who can’t get a date.”

“Raidou. Get rid of this mist and let me go. Do it now, and I’ll let you walk away.”

She stood up, using the wall for support, and brandished her weapon. She had seen my abilities firsthand when she was being chased by the forest ogre. Did she really believe she stood a chance against me now?

“Are you just putting on a brave front? Or are you serious? With you, there’s always something. You’re certainly much more impressive than someone like me. Blessed like the hero of a story.”

I genuinely meant that. It wasn’t just mockery; I could see how she’d fit into a fantasy story as the blessed protagonist.

“Even if I’m injured, I’m a Level 96 adventurer! I won’t lose to some *merchant!*”

There was real force behind her shouting, but her words had lost all significance to me.

“By sheer coincidence, you happened to be in the Demiplane at the same time as the forest ogre, which made me drop my guard,” I told her. “By pure chance, you stayed near the dwarves’ waste disposal site, and their negligence allowed you to steal some equipment, even if it was all of pretty poor quality. Coincidentally, you stumbled upon a damaged Draupnir and fled to the Gate of Mist that was connected to Tsige. The ring you threw just happened to explode, which pushed back your pursuers. Using the Clay Aegis you had as a last resort,

you—the weakest of the three—managed to survive. And finally, my overflowing magick power from the Draupnir just happened to force open the Gate of Mist, which allowed you to slip back into the city...”

What kind of joke is this? How many miracles needed to happen simultaneously for this nonsense? Luck? This goes far beyond luck.

The memories I saw from this woman... they might be flawed, and her wishes might be mixed in. But for now, I had to believe in that nightmare-like scene.

She was just way too lucky. No, considering that the two who escaped with her were already dead and she was now facing me, perhaps she was unlucky.

“This is your last chance. I know this random mist is your doing. Dispel it.”

I placed my right hand on the hilt of my dagger and drew it. The small gasp that escaped her lips told me she understood my response.

In her memories, I’d learned of a death that haunted me.

A highland orc, who had been tracking these three scumbags along with Tomoe’s clone and the arach, had gotten the closest to them. Despite being warned by Tomoe’s clone and the arach to fall back as soon as he sensed trouble, he still pursued them. The Draupnir thrown at him narrowly missed its mark, striking the ground and exploding. Tomoe’s clone had jumped out to try and mitigate the blast’s impact but was obliterated along with the barrier it had erected. Even the arach, who was farther away, was left critically injured and teetering on the brink of death. There was no way a mere highland orc, caught at ground zero, could have survived.

He might have been saved if he had retreated and not been driven by responsibility.

I couldn’t blame him for how he had acted. He had been trying desperately to rectify the mistake of letting adventurers escape from the Demiplane. He had been brave.

I would tell Ema and the other highland orcs that I avenged him with the dagger they gave me. At least it would bring them some measure of solace.

I’m glad I brought this dagger. There’s no better weapon to end her.

“This is a dagger passed on to me by the orcs, one of whom died due to your futile resistance.”

I took a step forward, closing the distance between us.

Silently, I drew nearer to the woman.

She shouted curses at me—nasty things, the kind that would have broken my spirit under normal circumstances—all while pointing her longsword at me. The closer I got, the louder her insults became. Maybe she hoped someone would hear her cries. Given her luck, if this were truly Tsige, she might have succeeded. But here, halfway between Tsige and the Demiplane, her shouts reached no one but me.

Despite what she said, she was in absolutely no condition to fight. She couldn't even turn her back and run. As an adventurer, she surely understood the folly of turning her back on an opponent in this situation.

The gap between us closed step by step. My dagger would reach her in just a few more.

There was a difference in effective range between a longsword and a dagger. She held the advantage in distance, and her eyes told me she was waiting for the right moment to strike.

The tip of her longsword wavered slightly. She was aiming for my throat—a thrust.

Her desperate attack was deflected right in front of my face with a high-pitched clang. The barrier of the Realm. It sounded like swords clashing. The force of the deflection caused her arms to fly up.

Not hesitating for a second, I took a quick step toward her. My dagger arced upward in a diagonal slash, glowing a deep blue, almost indigo, as it sliced through her longsword—severing both her hands.

There was no resistance at all. Just like when I'd cut through the limbs of the giant spider. A slight splash of blood landed on me.

Annoying.

She didn't even scream, but her face twisted in shock. I kicked her in the stomach, putting distance between us once more. She was flung back, dissolving into the mist. As she screamed in agony, her silhouette reappeared.

Why should I care?

Oh, this is seriously annoying.

You killed them too, didn't you? Driven by that distorted belief that humans are superior. To me, that orc was worth more than you. Even Tomoe's clone was worth more than you.

I walked unhurriedly toward her writhing silhouette, imagining the moment when I would end her life. I felt no remorse for killing someone who resembled me. Only anger and the urge to kill were left.

She noticed my approach and let out a fearful whimper from where she lay on the ground. There was no longer any will to fight in her eyes, just a desperate clinging to life.

How did I appear to her? Did she see me as a kind soul who might spare her if she begged for mercy?

"Help me! I'll do anything, anyth—"

There was no need to listen to her pathetic pleas.

"Goodbye."

As she raised her face to look at me, I drove the dagger into her neck, just as she had aimed for mine earlier. After a brief spasm, she went still. Blood flowed from her wrists, neck, and mouth.

In the end, I guess we never had a "conversation."

With everything over, I collapsed to my knees.

I cried, whether for the person I had killed or for the orc who had rushed to his death trying to stop these three.

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Certainly, what we had been doing was riddled with problems. Running a business in a fantasy world with the same carefree attitude as students setting up a café for a school festival was one of those problems. Unfortunately, I only realized the festival-like atmosphere we had been operating under now—when it was too late.

In front of me were Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki. Also present were the elder dwarf, Ema, the lizardfolk captain, and the arachs. Shiki, formerly Lich, was now a valuable member of our team. Not a ghoul, not a familiar—his name meant “knowledge.”

Two days had passed since that horrifying event. After killing that woman, I went back to the Demiplane, trying to appear calm. But inside, I was a wreck. I had cried more than I ever thought possible, and it had taken me some time before I’d been able to face anyone, not wanting them to see my swollen, tear-streaked face.

During the time it’d taken to gather everyone, I’d done a lot of thinking about the future of the Demiplane. I was determined to ensure that such a tragedy would never happen again. The woman I’d killed had vanished without a trace, disappearing from both Tsige and the Demiplane. Where she had gone from that corridor, I didn’t know, and frankly, I didn’t care.

We were gathered in a large room at my mansion, a space Ema had suggested could be used for meetings. Incidentally, the mansion was still only partially completed. I tried not to think too much about how enormous it would be once finished.

As I looked between the faces seated around the large table, I steeled my expression even more. I had informed them that I had something important to discuss, so they were already on edge. Seeing my serious demeanor, their expressions grew even more severe.

“During the incident a few days ago, we lost a highland orc and one of Tomoe’s clones.” A heavy silence followed my words.

“I already apologized at their soul departure ceremony and admitted that the primary cause was my mishandling of the situation with those three humans.” The soul departure ceremony was essentially a funeral.

The highland orc who perished had been caught at the center of the massive explosion, so there was no body to recover. However, I learned that when orc and lizardfolk warriors mourn their comrades, they light a fire and hold a feast to honor the dead. We conducted the ceremony based on that tradition.

I felt deeply responsible for the lives lost due to my mistake. I'd repeatedly bowed my head in apology to the departed's family and fellow orcs.

Tomoe, who had lost a clone and sustained injuries, wasn't pleased when I bowed to her in apology. While she'd accepted my gesture, she'd insisted it wasn't necessary for me to personally meet with the orc's family. In her view, as their leader, it wasn't my place to apologize for every death among my subjects. She believed they understood the risks and were prepared to die for me.

To me, however, this was about my own accountability. It was my oversight that led to his death. Moving forward, if my decisions led to casualties in battle, I wouldn't offer individual apologies. Instead, I would honor the fallen collectively with a soul departure ceremony.

This time, I'd apologized to the orcs to prevent myself from sinking into despair. I'd explained my reasoning to Tomoe, and she understood why this apology was necessary for me.

"... As far as our relationship with humans in this city, we've been far too naive. Some of them are skilled adventurers. We didn't see them as a threat and we failed to consider the need for caution. Going forward, we have to treat them as potential dangers and do everything we can to make sure nothing like this happens again."

I paused, scanning the room. Everyone nodded in agreement.

"First, let's talk about the highland orcs. Ema, I want to put strict regulations on where humans are allowed to go and what they're allowed to do. Specifically, we need to establish a designated area for them."

"A separate area? Of course, if that's your directive, Raidou-sama, but could you clarify what you mean?" Ema asked.

"Yeah, to put it simply, I want to build another wall within the existing town to create an isolated section. This section will function as a small town

specifically for adventurers.”

“A town inside a town?”

Exactly. It would serve as a controlled environment where humans could interact without causing problems. There would be no need for genuine cultural exchange; we’d only provide minimal goods—just enough to keep them connected to Tsige and our base. The occasional flow of goods from the Demiplane into the outside world would be sufficient.

“Precisely. And those who interact with the adventurers in this designated area should be highly skilled individuals, whether that’s you, the lizardfolk, or the dwarves. Tomoe will make sure the adventurers are guided to this area from the start, leading them to believe it’s the entirety of Mirage City. We can allocate some of the leveled but undeveloped areas for this purpose.”

Ema nodded in understanding. Assigning capable individuals to this task would prevent weaker or younger members from encountering adventurers. Treating it as a mission or job would ensure they remained professional and vigilant.

“So, this’ll keep the weak and young from interacting with adventurers, and we’ll require a high level of professionalism from the skilled individuals who take on this responsibility in rotation?” Ema clarified.

“That’s right. We have a lot of plans in progress, but I want this to be our top priority.”

“No problem. Do you have any specific area in mind?”

“No, you decide.”

Ema smiled with satisfaction. Despite the loss of a comrade, her support of me remained unwavering—and I was truly grateful for that. Since I didn’t have a complete understanding of how the town was expanding and being organized, entrusting this task to her was the best choice. After all, Tomoe couldn’t just snap her fingers and create a new clone.

“Next, the elder dwarves.”

“Yes.” Eld and Beren were present at the meeting, representing their clan.

“First, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

They both looked at me with serious expressions, fully aware of what was coming.

“Regarding the weapons that were meant to be discarded, and the rings... You’re top-tier craftsmen, and I know you understand how to handle these items properly. But there are other races here. Careless management without even a lock is unacceptable.”

“I’m very sorry,” Eld said. He bowed deeply, and Beren followed suit.

As master craftsmen, they fully understood the dangers of failed or discarded items. However, they also knew that without significant impact or deliberate manipulation, those items wouldn’t pose a threat. As a result, their handling had become somewhat lax. Discarded weapons and equipment had been left in an unlocked storage area used as a trash dump.

Their management seemed lax despite their knowledge of the risks because their people never handled such items carelessly. Even dwarf children knew the dangers. That familiarity had bred complacency in how they managed waste. In reality, these items should have been securely stored and carefully disposed of, just like their masterpieces.

The Draupnir that became a deadly weapon, after absorbing my magick to its limit, had been left in an unlocked storage area. This lapse in vigilance had contributed to its theft.

There was another reason for this situation: the Demiplane’s inhabitants still lived in segregated groups. Typically, no other races roamed freely in the dwarves’ workshop. The dwarves wouldn’t allow it.

Even though there were issues with how the Draupnir were managed, allowing adventurers to stay near the dwarves’ workshop had been a mistake. When Tomoe had reported this to me, I’d realized how crucial it was to address these potential dangers. It pained me to reprimand Eld and Beren, knowing the context.

They were still bowing. I sighed and continued, “Remember, to many adventurers, your weapons hold great value on their own. Stuff that’s been set

aside for disposal, you should throw away immediately. If you can't, build a secure storage facility and put it there. This needs to be done right away."

"Yes, of course," Eld responded with a nod.

"I also need you to collaborate with Ema to choose some dwarves who will interact with adventurers. Eld, you have a report about our weapons, right? We'll discuss it after this meeting. Beren, why don't you shortlist candidates for deployment to Tsige."

"We will," they both replied resolutely.

Their lax attitude was gone, and I felt assured they would manage things the right way from now on. Even weapons considered junk by the dwarves held significant value in Tsige. It was clear that we needed to be more careful in handling the distribution of dwarf-made weapons through the Kuzunoha Company. Assigning younger dwarves with less experience as part of their training might also be beneficial, with Beren potentially serving as the supervisor for those sent to Tsige.

"Next, the misty lizardfolk."

"Yes?" responded their representative, the lizardfolk captain. This person was both the highest authority among their warriors and the leader of their unit.

"I appreciate your hard work across all the different areas—pioneering, guarding, hunting, civil engineering, and construction," I said.

"You are too kind. Since you've given us ample time for thorough training, we're committed to supporting others all possible ways we can," he replied.

As part of their cultural practices, the lizardfolk engaged in rigorous unit-wide combat training. During these periods, they couldn't participate in other tasks, but their efforts in other areas more than compensated for it.

"I'm going to shift your role slightly."

"As you wish."

"From now on, your primary duties will involve hunting and training. We'll gradually reduce your involvement in pioneering work."

"..."

“In exchange, I’d like you to take on the responsibility of patrolling the town.”

“Patrolling?”

“Yes. It’s a task where you’ll follow designated routes around the town, responding to any irregularities. I’ll provide Tomoe with the specifics, and you can allocate personnel under her direction.”

“This town is rather large. Would it not be difficult for our people to handle alone?”

The lizardfolk’s formal and rather archaic speech, likely influenced by Tomoe, contrasted humorously with their reptilian faces.

“You’ll have the best access to Tomoe’s network. The orcs will also help out around town. They’ll help identify issues and form separate groups to address them. This patrol duty is a temporary measure to ensure the town’s safety, and I’ll make sure it doesn’t become a burden.”

“Understood. We will carry out the mission to the best of our capabilities.”

With Tomoe at the helm, this patrol system was likely to evolve into something akin to the fire-fighting and thief-catching units from the Edo period.

Given our current level of civilization in the Demiplane, this approach seemed most effective. *Modern policing methods, like stations and patrols, are based on similar principles—or so I believe. Trusting in the success of the Edo period, this method certainly feels more reliable than doing nothing at all.*

Finding enough people to fulfill all these tasks would still be a challenge, and it wouldn’t happen overnight. Inviting the forest ogres into the Demiplane right now was an option, but given my current feelings, I wasn’t certain we could establish a good relationship. Their sentiments toward me were still unclear as well.

Maybe we should just start recruiting intelligent races whenever we encounter them, I mused. However, introducing a race significantly inferior to the current residents might create issues related to disparity and hierarchy.

I should also go exploring in the uncharted Wastelands once in a while, although I’ve got to be careful, or I might accidentally create some kind of

demonic army.

After the lizardfolk captain bowed and agreed to the new role, I turned my attention to the arachs. “And finally, the arachs.”

“Young Master,” their representative spoke up. “First, I have to express our gratitude. We haven’t had the chance to properly thank you until now.”

Wow. She already speaks the language so fluently! But first, I want to apologize.

“Gratitude?”

“Yes, we’re grateful for you saving our kin. Without your healing, our situation would have been dire. We all thank you deeply.” The arach placed a hand on her chest and bowed, the other two following suit.

“No, the fact that he was injured in the first place was due to my mistake,” I told her. “It was only natural to help. I should be the one apologizing.”

“We’re grateful for your kindness. It reaffirms our dedication to serving you.”

Ah... It seems nothing I say will change their minds.

The one speaking was female—one of two among the four arachs in the Demiplane. With the other two being male (one of whom was injured), they made a balanced ratio.

“Well, I’m glad he’s all right. Now, I have a few tasks for the arachs. How many of you can transform into humanoid form?”

“All of us,” she replied.

Impressive. Talking to her feels like speaking with a high-performing, diligent class president.

“Ah, I see. That makes things easier. I want each of you to take turns staying in the designated area for interacting with humans. In humanoid form. Given there are only four of you and several other tasks to manage, it would be difficult to have more than one of you on this duty at a time.”

“One at a time, in humanoid form?” the arach clarified.

“Exactly. You’ll pose as a skilled adventurer staying in town.”

“Pretending to be a hyuman?”

“That’s it. Keep an eye out for suspicious behavior from the hyumans, and report anything concerning. I also want you to gather information, however useful you think it may be. With your abilities, you should be able to handle most situations. If anything comes up that’s too much for you, Mio or I will step in.”

“Understood. We’ll take turns staying in town.”

Good.

“One more thing. Before, everyone shared the responsibility for pioneering. But with more of you needed in town, that’s going to have to change. I want the three of you who aren’t stationed in town to focus on pioneering and investigation tasks. That’ll probably slow things down, but that’s fine. Coordinate with Mio and go forward cautiously.”

“Got it. We’ll manage it. Is it all right if we continue our combat training and magick research?”

“Of course. You can train and research as you see fit. If something needs to take priority, let me know, and you can postpone the pioneering and investigations.”

The three arachs looked pleased at my response.

Lately, they had been eager to learn and grow. It was encouraging to see their enthusiasm. I hoped Mio found something to spark her interest too... other than me.

“That’s all I have for now. Report any issues as they arise. Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, stay here. The rest of you are dismissed.”

The representatives from the other races left the room, leaving just my direct followers behind.

Whew. Talking so intensely has made my shoulders tense. I rolled my neck and shrugged to relieve some of the tightness.

“You handled that quite well, Young Master,” Tomoe said.

“Young Master, you did great,” Mio praised.

“I’m impressed with how you managed such a diverse group, Young Master,” Shiki added. He seemed particularly struck by my ability to communicate across the different races.

“Thanks,” I told them all. I needed to share some important decisions with these three. Even though I was exhausted from behaving out of character, all I could do was push forward.

“Tomoe, when I first came here, you were the first one I made a Contract with. We talked about how the Contract affected you, but we never really discussed how it affected me.”

“I believe I mentioned that it wouldn’t be a bad deal,” Tomoe replied, her tone ambiguous, as if unsure whether she was playing dumb or genuinely didn’t remember.

“All three of you lost your original forms and had your abilities enhanced by Contracting with me. So, what about me?” I asked.

Since arriving in this world, I’d formed Contracts with a dragon feared as a calamity, a black spider, and a lich—entities far beyond normal beings. Tsukuyomi-sama had assured me that my magical power surpassed even that of the heroes. This power must have played a role in forming these Contracts.

So far, I hadn’t noticed any adverse effects from these Contracts... except for one incident in the Demiplane between the Gate of Mist and Tsige. That overwhelming experience of someone else’s memories flooding into me was presumably Tomoe’s doing.

Seeing Tomoe waiting for my next words, I continued, “Two days ago, I saw someone else’s memories. Do you know anything about that?”

“You’re quite the sly one, Young Master,” Tomoe said. “You already know the answer... and yet you still ask.”

“I’m just making sure. The Contract of Domination seems to lead to dramatic changes and enhancements for the servants. But what does the master get for it? I think they get the characteristics of the servants. Isn’t that what it means?”

I couldn’t explain it perfectly, but if I could use Tomoe’s abilities, then it was likely I could also use Mio and Shiki’s powers. It seemed unlikely that a human

could wield such inhuman abilities without any consequences...

In other words, I was starting to wonder if I had become something other than human.

“Pfft.”

“What’s so funny, Tomoe?”

Becoming something other than human is no small matter, you know? It’s the most shocking revelation since I arrived in this world. The fact that you kept such an important detail from me—if this were serious, it could be considered a betrayal. If you were to say something like, “Is losing your humanity such a big deal?” I’d be genuinely stunned.

“I’m sorry. I thought you had overcome a major hurdle in the past two days, but it seems you were still caught up in your misunderstandings... It was just amusing. Sorry.”

“I willingly gave up my own humanity once, so I can’t fully grasp how important it is, but now I understand that being human is significant to you, Young Master,” Shiki said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

OK, so Tomoe and Shiki had opposite reactions to my words, while Mio... Mio just seemed a bit confused about the situation.

“The fact that you could use my ability, Young Master, well, that was a coincidence given the current circumstances. Normally, those kinds of abilities wouldn’t manifest until much later. It was probably caused by your overwhelming emotions and, uh, this is embarrassing to say, but the bond that formed between us,” Tomoe explained.

The bond?!

Whoa! Mio’s eyes just got dangerously intense. The sparkle in them is fading! This is a misunderstanding, I swear!

“An explanation! Tomoe, explain! Fast!” I shouted.

“Hm? Oh, my apologies. By ‘bond,’ I meant trust and emotional connection. Think of it as a testament to our loyalty and devotion. You can rest assured, there’s no infiltration of servant traits into the master. That would imply an

equal relationship. We're your servants, we're sworn to loyalty. You can use our powers however you want. However, these are inherently foreign abilities, and those take acclimation. Normally, the master gradually becomes aware of and able to use them. But there are exceptions, for example in this recent case..."

The abilities of my servants, huh? Indeed, I've never felt such powers emanating from within me. Even the other day, it wasn't like I sensed Tomoe's power; it was more like the ability simply manifested on its own.

"..."



Mio's attitude seemed to be subtly halting the progress of our discussion. I couldn't tell if she was truly listening or if she'd moved past jealousy to another emotion. Hopefully, it was the former.

"When the master seeks a solution to a crisis and has a solid bond of trust with a servant, the relevant abilities of that servant may come out in the master, sometimes in an uncontrolled way. Sometimes these abilities manifest as they are, and other times they adapt to the master. It looks like this time it was the former."

Though the experience had been intense, it hadn't drained my magick power. It was similar to using the Realm, except this time my magick was definitely involved.

"Trust causing an uncontrolled surge of power, huh?"

Does this mean I trust Tomoe more than the others? She was my first follower and Contract partner, so I suppose I do have a special trust in her. She seemed happy that I used her memory-viewing ability. Honestly, that was an extremely unsettling experience. If it could happen again...

When would I be able to control it consciously?

"Yes, trust! It's because of your trust, Young Master! You used my ability first, which solidifies my position as your primary follower!" Tomoe exclaimed, her face glowing with pride. Meanwhile, Mio...

"It was just a coincidence," Mio muttered.

"Hm? What was that, Mio? I didn't quite catch it," Tomoe responded, clearly trying to provoke her.

Tomoe, stop it!

"It was just a coincidence that the memory ability triggered! If Young Master were gravely injured, I'm sure my regeneration powers would have activated to save him! It was just random chance!!!" Mio shouted.

Don't imagine me gravely injured! The Realm's healing doesn't work on me! I'd die if I suffered such a big injury! Well, maybe if I could use Mio's

regeneration ability, I'd be OK. But if the ability optimizes and changes into something else...

That's a gamble I absolutely can't take. I'll make sure I get injured near someone who can heal me.

"Yeah, yeah, it was just a coincidence, like Mio said," I said.

The phrase "joyful to the point of bursting" perfectly described Tomoe's expression. As for Mio, her face was like a demon or a Hannya mask, simmering with frustration. She had been on the verge of slipping into her "dead inside" mode.

Ideally, Shiki would step in and calm them down, but that was unlikely. As the newcomer, he tended to defer to the other two, who often teased him. I hoped they hadn't been too hard on him.

"Fuh, fufufu. I wonder if words can reach someone like Tomoe-san, who swings around a sword she can't fully control while shouting about Edo and samurai," Mio taunted.

"Oh? Mio? Are you trying to pick a fight with the number one servant? I've already formed a bond with Young Master. Clearly, there's a difference in status here," Tomoe retorted, her voice dripping with mockery.

A bond, really... That's quite an exaggeration.

"I have a bond with Young Master, too, forged through our intense battles and shared blood!" Mio exclaimed.

Mio, that's not really a bond. And the blood was only taken from me, not shared.

"Hah, you weren't even in your right mind. If that's what you call an experience, then I've had it too. I was pierced so deep I was writhing around! Only Shiki's been thoroughly trampled on. Mio, you..."

Tomoe, all you did was attack with a Bridt, nothing more!

"We're not talking about temporary servants here. Throwing around words like *bond* and *connection* so casually... Besides, Tomoe, you—"

Temporary servants? That's a bit harsh. And it was your actions that led to this situation in the first place.

Sigh. Ever since we met, it always spirals into a spat about who's more important or who was here first. I have more pressing matters to discuss, but they're really getting heated...

Maybe I should check on Shiki first. He seems down from the stray comments during the argument. His expression says, "I'm worthless."

Personally, I think liches have a lot of potential.

For now...

I used my Realm to block out the noisy duo. Very convenient.

"Let's leave those two to cool off. Shiki, I've decided on our next destination," I said.

"You're sharing such an important decision with me first?" Shiki replied, his tone tinged with disbelief. *Such negativity...*

"Yes, to me, Tomoe, Mio, and you are all vital comrades and family."

Shiki's eyes widened as if my words were completely unexpected. Given our relationship was bound by a Domination Contract, I suppose it made sense. My words probably sounded strange in the context of traditional magical Contracts.

The way he looked at me with those insecure, puppy-dog eyes made quite a contrast with his tall, intellectual appearance.

"I'll be going back to Tsige and getting ready to head to the Academy City in a few days," I told him. "I'll explain more about the company later. Originally, I was planning to go to the Academy City anyway, but I've gotten interested in human education, and I want to get there as soon as possible. I'll need everyone to take care of things in Tsige while I'm gone."

"Are you planning to go alone, Young Master?" Shiki asked.

"No, you'll be coming with me, Shiki. Just the two of us, two guys on an adventure."

“Me? But shouldn’t Tomoe-dono or Mio-dono accompany you instead? Honestly, if it comes to this, I doubt I’ll make it back in one piece...”

How much have those two been intimidating you, Shiki? His panicked reaction was almost comical, but I wasn’t joking.

I’ll need to teach those two how to treat their juniors properly. Shiki’s already practically trembling after just two days.

“We’ll meet up in the Demiplane anyway. Moving separately works better for a few reasons. Right now, only Tomoe and I can create gates. Since you were a researcher, you’ll probably have a lot to teach me about preparation and strategy. Plus, with your background as a former hyuman, you might understand their common sense better than I do...” My voice faded as I finished. Even during our battle with Mio and the incident with the forest ogres, Shiki had shown real promise. Besides, I had already destroyed a base with Mio.

“You’ve had your share of challenges too, Young Master.”

“Yeah, and you should be ready for more in the future.”

“...”

“Eventually, I’d like you to be able to end their arguments with just one word.”

At this point, Mio and Tomoe’s exchange had escalated into such harsh insults that it barely resembled a conversation. At least they hadn’t come to blows yet. Maybe they had some unspoken rule against being the first to strike. I was just relieved their verbal sparring wasn’t causing any physical damage.

Shiki stared at me as if questioning my sanity. “Young Master, even the undead can die, you know?” he muttered.

“You have healing magick, so you should be fine,” I reassured him.

“All-out, relentless attacks... Healing won’t help. I’ll be obliterated,” Shiki protested, tears welling up in his eyes.

He was clearly still far from ready to handle those two.

“But... I’m planning to have you inform them about their separate missions,” I said.

“?!”

“I want the two of them to head north from Tsige, toward the sea. Tomoe will probably start going on about seafood soon. If she’s that obsessed with Japanese cuisine, we’ll need things like katsuobushi and kombu. Considering the kidnappings of adventurers in the Wasteland and our connections with the Rembrandt Company, it makes more sense for Tomoe to stay near Tsige.”

Tomoe was surprisingly skilled at negotiations.

“M-Mio-dono could accompany you, couldn’t she?” Shiki suggested.

“Mio, huh? Honestly, I’d like to take her with me too, but I don’t want Tomoe to shoulder too much. We can meet a few times a week, so it’ll be fine. Besides, Mio needs to become a bit less dependent on me.”

Shiki, why do you look like the world is ending? I don’t expect Mio to become as versatile as Tomoe, but I do want her to learn and grow.

“Young Master—”

“Oh, and when we go to the Academy City, drop the ‘Young Master.’ Just call me Raidou.”

“Are you sure you want me to be the one to tell them?”

“Absolutely. I need to head back to Tsige and properly thank Rembrandt-san for his hospitality before I leave on such a long trip. It’s only right.”

“My first task is this dangerous? I might end up back in the ground...”

I decided to ignore Shiki’s pessimistic muttering. Speaking of which, high-ranking undead like liches were often associated with strong earth attributes and elements of earth spirits. Many of them were dual-attribute, such as earth and darkness, or earth and fire.

Honestly, it’s hard to picture. The earth and spirit elements don’t really make sense to me. The only thing I know for certain is that they can be destroyed by draining their mana faster than they can replenish it.

“All right, I’m counting on you. I’m heading back to Tsige for now,” I said.

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And so, I decided to make my way to the Academy City—Rotsgard.

I wanted to officially launch my company's activities, but I also hoped that a place rich in knowledge might offer clues about my parents. The final nudge came from the memories of the woman I had killed.

I had always accepted that this world was strange, being governed by that Goddess. But that explanation no longer satisfied me. I needed to know more—about this world, the humans, faith in the Goddess's and Her influence, the non-humans, the demons, magick, the Grants, and other worlds.

So, even though I left both the Demiplane and Tsige in a somewhat unfinished state, I decided to move forward.

A chance encounter with an unfinished world map at Rembrandt-san's place also fueled my decision. The incomplete shape and its implications—it only added to the list of mysteries I wanted to unravel.

To my surprise, Rembrandt had been supportive of my decision. I had braced myself for a stern lecture, given his experience as a veteran merchant. Instead, he was astonished but encouraging. I had expected a scolding, believing it was a mistake to leave, but his lack of criticism left me feeling oddly deflated.

It felt like there had been a hidden catch, but I hadn't been able to coax it out of someone as seasoned as him or his butler. Using the Realm to explore or investigate wouldn't have uncovered their true intentions, making it a futile effort.

Bizarrely, Rembrandt had even prepared the necessary documents for Academy City, which made me suspect he had his own agenda. I had come to trust his family, likely because I'd seen his genuine concern for his loved ones when they were afflicted with the Cursed Disease. I believed they were different from the humans I had killed.

In any case, I'd accepted said documents along with a letter of recommendation from Rembrandt, bowing deeply in gratitude. The recommendation was unexpected. I had always considered him just a prominent merchant in the remote city of Tsige, but it seemed he was more influential than I had realized.

To express my appreciation for their overwhelming support, I'd decided to remove my mask in front of them. It was a step I had been avoiding but felt was necessary to address.

Their first glimpse of my face had, predictably, brought out pity. They had seemed to find it unsightly, but I could only laugh to myself. I couldn't have very well told them that they were the ones who were strange.

They'd assured me that I would get used to it eventually—a backhanded compliment if there ever was one. Despite this, Rembrandt had taken it in stride, likely due to his family's experience with transformations and changes.

Although I hadn't gotten to meet his wife or daughters, I'd been relieved to hear that their recovery had been progressing well. Feeling reassured, I'd left Rembrandt's estate with a sense of gratitude. I'd even considered prioritizing him for future shipments from the Demiplane.

Next, I had to face Tomoe and Mio. Apparently, they had been quite upset after hearing the news from Shiki (sorry, Shiki). When Shiki had reported back to me, he'd looked utterly exhausted, almost translucent, as if something vital was slipping out of his mouth.

Feeling bad for Shiki, I'd decided to explain things to Tomoe and Mio myself. They'd confronted me as expected, but after I'd carefully explained my plans and what I wanted to do, they had begrudgingly accepted. The occasional jealous glances at Shiki were something I'd have to tolerate.

Taking Shiki with me while leaving Tomoe and Mio behind felt a bit unfair, so I'd decided to give them hints related to questions they had asked me before. These hints were drawn from my memories—details they couldn't access on their own. They had asked before, but I hadn't had the time to sift through my memories for anything useful.

The hints might not lead directly to answers, but it was my way of showing that I valued their concerns.

For Tomoe, it was about swordsmanship, particularly with the katana. While I wasn't an expert—far from it—I had some basic knowledge. My experience with iaidō was minimal and clumsy, leaving me with cuts on my left hand more often than not. I had never even successfully cut through a practice target.

Fortunately, I had recalled one crucial aspect of swordsmanship from my past: grip strength. I'd suggested she focus on strengthening her grip, as it was essential for wielding a katana effectively. I'd also recommended practicing with a heavier training sword to build her strength and refine her technique.

I should take the opportunity to revisit my memories and review my training and my teachers' words. Of course, if I ignore the parts where they called me talentless, I wonder how useful those memories will actually be.

For Mio, it was about guns. She was fascinated by how they were depicted in the anime and tokusatsu shows freely accessible in my memories, and she wanted to try recreating them through magick.

She had already managed to form bullets out of magick, but she was struggling with achieving the desired penetration power. Like her, I'd thought that just sending the bullet at high speed would naturally give it the power to penetrate, so I'd been puzzled when she'd asked me for advice.

Even back home, I hadn't had that much experience with guns. Not even the well-researched manga I'd read were very helpful. However, when I'd dug through my memories, I'd realized that a piece of advice from my archery teacher might solve the problem. At least, it would be more useful to Tomoe than anything from my own experience.

The key was rotation. Guns imparted spin to the bullet as it traveled through the barrel, and that spin was what gave them accuracy and penetrating power. My teacher had explained why, but since I had been more interested in bows, I hadn't paid much attention. Thankfully, Japanese archery relied on the same principle, so I'd been able to give Mio something of an explanation of the importance of rotation.

Regardless of whether my hints were perfect, both Tomoe and Mio were happy with the advice, which was all that mattered. This was the least I could do since I couldn't take them with me.

As much as I criticized them, I genuinely thought of the three of them as family. I even considered having them take on the Misumi family name. At this point, they were just Tomoe, Mio, and Shiki.

Unfortunately, I didn't know how to bring it up, and the thought of it made me feel extremely embarrassed, so I didn't say anything this time... *I really am a coward.*

"Dad, Mom. I still don't know much about you, but I'll search for you at my own pace. That's OK, right?"

I spoke aloud to myself, standing on a hill in the Demiplane. Since I'd made the Contract with Shiki, new hills and mountains had formed. Fortunately, they were all far from the town. If they had been close, it could have been a disaster.

The hill I now stood on alone was bathed in the red hues of the evening Demiplane sky. The chill was growing stronger, and the ground was already cold beneath me.

In my left hand, I held portraits of my parents, each one about the size of a sheet of A5 paper. I had commissioned Rinon, the artist from the Adventurer's Guild, to draw them. There was no one in the Demiplane with an artistic touch, and although I found it odd that she was the best we had, I didn't want to ask a street artist to draw something so personal for me.

Then I remembered something else, or rather, I confronted it. With my right hand held up, something like a hologram floated above my palm. It was a photograph from my memory.

In the picture, everyone wore calm expressions. It was a place devoid of life-threatening dangers or the scent of peril. It was the group photo of my archery club.

I focused on two people in the middle of the upper row.

"I'm sorry I disappeared on you. I... I ended up killing someone. I cried, but I wasn't sad. It made me remember you both clearly."

My words drifted aimlessly.

I had thought of my family first, then archery, and then I had come here, deciding that everything else could be left behind. It only took a moment of reflection for me to realize how many lingering attachments I had to that world.

I couldn't just leave things as they were with these two.

“I know I’m the worst for remembering and forgetting things conveniently.”

If I could devote myself to something with all my heart, like I did with archery, facing reality with the same single-minded determination, things would be easier. But every time I tried to move forward, I was plagued by doubts. It made me feel like a pathetic, ordinary person.

“Hey, Azuma, Hasegawa. Even so, I’ve decided to give it my all. I don’t want to stay a loser who would disappoint you. So, if I ever manage to return...”

Even so, I’d killed someone. It was unrealistic to think I wouldn’t have to kill again in the future.

If only...

I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence. I no longer felt like the person in that photo.

The Goddess, humans, demons, non-humans—I needed to understand them all. That was my goal, at least for now.

After that? I wasn’t sure, but I could decide later. For now, the war between humans and demons was none of my concern.

Bowing my head, I solidified my resolve.

Rotsgard, the Academy City. According to the map I’d seen back in Tsige, it was located near the center of the continent—a massive city, as big as a small country. Southwest of Tsige, it was a city devoted to research and academics, yet close to the front lines of the war with the demons.

That would be my next destination.

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“Excuse me, Master. The Kuzunoha Company is in trouble.”

It all began with these words, which the butler Morris spoke as he entered the room.

Patrick Rembrandt, head of the Rembrandt Company, frowned as he heard them. He had been enjoying a peaceful evening with his recovering family after

a long day's work.

"Tell me, Morris."

The Kuzunoha Company had become a benefactor to Rembrandt. Specifically, its representative, a young man named Raidou, had saved his beloved wife and daughters from a dire situation, making him quite literally their savior.

Rembrandt, once a man who would stop at nothing to advance his business, now found himself deeply concerned about a newly established and relatively minor trading company. This was quite out of character.

"Here you are," Morris said, handing over a stack of documents.

Rembrandt's expression shifted to that of a shrewd merchant as he quickly scanned the papers. There were about ten pages, each outlining various issues that the newly formed Kuzunoha Company was already encountering.

Rembrandt's eyes moved swiftly as he absorbed the information. He finished reading quickly, his face reflecting serious concern mixed with surprise.

"Hmm. This is troubling, indeed. Quite the predicament, Morris."

"Yes, sir. What shall we do?"

"Of course, we'll help them. It's true that some challenges are best faced early on, but the sheer number of these issues is overwhelming. Besides, Raidou needs to focus on attending the academy. He seems to have already considered it, and it lines up with our plans. Helping him is the obvious choice."

"So, we'll address everything outlined in these documents?"

"Yes."

"Raidou-sama really is fortunate. He's drawn the concern of both Lady Rembrandt and the young mistresses, and now your support as well. With this backing, the Kuzunoha Company will no doubt thrive in Tsige, even if it had a scarecrow as its representative."

"I understand we're coddling them, Morris. But there's something about that young man... He's different. I can't fully articulate it yet, but there's something there."

“Hehe, understood, sir. We’ll leave it at that for now.”

“This isn’t just an excuse. One day I’ll explain it all to you, but for now, we need to tackle these issues one by one. Starting tomorrow, I’ll be putting all my energy into the Kusunoha Company for a while...”

There was a seriousness in Rembrandt’s voice that Morris didn’t often hear. And yet his eyes held a glimmer of amusement. Morris noticed this but simply nodded in agreement.

The room was filled with a peculiar atmosphere, a mix of urgency and unspoken excitement.

“So, has Raidou-dono made any moves to address these issues?” Rembrandt asked.

“No, sir. They seem to be venturing into the Wasteland quite often, probably for procurement, and I think they’re unaware of the contractual issues mentioned in the documents,” Morris replied.

“I see... Should we inform Raidou-dono?”

“Once everything is resolved, we can subtly hint at it. After all, we know very little about the inner workings of the Kusunoha Company or who holds which roles.”

“Indeed. Starting tomorrow, compile as much information as possible on the Kusunoha Company’s internal structure.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

“This is nothing compared to what we’ve handled in the past,” Morris remarked, his demeanor calm.

Rembrandt nodded, letting out a small laugh.

And so began the Rembrandt Company’s top-priority mission: assist the Kusunoha Company. This initiative would lay the foundation for the Kusunoha Company to become a unique and formidable presence in Tsige, though no one could foresee the full extent of its future impact.

Part 1: Land

The Kuzunoha Company had already started thinking about establishing its own store. They had requested assistance from the Merchant Guild in finding land and had managed to complete the purchase remarkably quickly, considering the significance of the transaction. Yes, the Kuzunoha Company already owned land.

“And they paid for it all upfront?” Rembrandt mused.

After hearing about the Kuzunoha Company’s difficulties from Morris, Rembrandt began his efforts early the next morning. To address the land issues, he visited the Merchant Guild.

Although Raidou (Makoto) wasn’t fully aware of it, the Rembrandt Company was essentially the most powerful trading firm in Tsige. Based on his limited knowledge and experience, Makoto perceived Rembrandt as just another influential merchant. However, the Rembrandt Company had a firm grip on several established enterprises in Tsige.

In other words, no merchant in the city wielded more influence than Rembrandt. Many of them could only source crucial raw materials through deals with him, and some of the top names in the guild found their weaknesses in his grasp. It was an unspoken truth among those in the know that the Rembrandt Company reigned supreme in Tsige.

Thus, Rembrandt’s early morning visit to the guild caused the expected degree of agitation. What’s more, the matter concerned a newly established trading company. Amid the confusion, the guild hastily sent out a representative to handle the situation and report on the Kuzunoha Company’s activities to Rembrandt.

In what seemed like a sacrificial move, the guild representative—who was well aware of this new company’s transactions—stood stiffly as he relayed the information to Rembrandt.

“Yes! We’ve confirmed full payment by a person named Tomoe from the Kuzunoha Company. The transaction was processed through the guild; we have

the records.”

“You’re right; it’s not a lease but a purchase. And the payment was made in full.” Rembrandt casually took the classified documents from the representative’s hand and began leafing through them while the man watched with a nervous smile.

There was no question who held more power here.

The staff member remained silent, sweating despite the cool of the room. Saying anything out of place could have dire consequences. He knew exactly the kind of man he was dealing with.

“Hmm, the seller was someone named Missel, correct?” Rembrandt inquired.

“Correct. Missel has a solid reputation, and we maintain a good relationship with him,” the guild representative replied.

“Hmph... This landlord is just a front. The Eleor Company sounds like the true party behind these land deals. And the Merchant Guild is probably in cahoots with Eleor... Maybe taking a little kickback here and there?”

“!!!”

“Now, let me ask you a question. Why don’t you answer with a simple yes or no. Is the guild ‘aware’ of what I just mentioned?” Rembrandt asked, his face adorned with a broad smile as he handed the documents back to the visibly shaken representative.

“No. The Merchant Guild recognizes the transaction as solely between Missel-sama and the Kuzunoha Company, as per the records. We have no knowledge of any involvement by the Eleor Company. And... and, sir, the guild would never take any kickbacks from—”

“I see, thank you,” Rembrandt interrupted. Turning on his heel, he swiftly made his way out of the room.

“Excuse me! Where are you going?” the guild representative finally mustered the courage to speak up.

“Your part in this is done. Thank you for your assistance.” Rembrandt didn’t even bother to answer the question.

Confusion clouded the representative's face as he watched the businessman leave. "What was that all about?" he muttered to himself. "And is the Eleor Company really going to be all right? The power difference between Eleor and Rembrandt is staggering. No matter how much they've paid us, there's no way we can keep covering for them."

After a moment, however, he began to relax. He was sure Rembrandt hadn't realized he was dealing with someone directly involved in the bribery. But his relief quickly turned to unease as he considered the possibility that Rembrandt had known all along and was just playing with him.

As a powerful and influential merchant, Rembrandt had the ability to instill fear and uncertainty with just his presence. Whether or not he knew the full extent of the situation, his actions planted seeds of doubt and paranoia in those who crossed him.

The representative picked up a sheet of paper from the counter and began jotting down notes, his hand trembling slightly.

The Merchant Guild maintained that it was unaware of anything beyond the official records of the transaction that had caught Rembrandt's attention. Additionally, the representative noted that the Kuzunoha Company, despite being founded by a newcomer, might be under Rembrandt's influence.

Meanwhile, Rembrandt arrived at his next destination: the Eleor Company. Naturally, he hadn't bothered to make an appointment. Although his visit was more of an informal meeting than a business call, it was still highly unusual. For most people, such a breach of protocol would be unacceptable, but Rembrandt was an exception. Refusing to see him could lead to serious consequences.

This approach worked precisely because Rembrandt, known for his meticulous manners, only resorted to such tactics in critical situations.

"It's quite a disturbance when someone shows up without an appointment and demands to wait indefinitely. The receptionist was nearly in tears," said the Eleor Company's representative, his voice laced with irritation as he addressed Rembrandt.

"This won't take long. I apologize for the unexpected visit," Rembrandt replied.

“And what exactly is your business here?” the Eleor representative asked, trying to maintain a calm demeanor in spite of his growing anxiety.

It was understandable. The Eleor Company, though a growing mid-tier firm dealing primarily in land and real estate, had nowhere near the scale or influence of the Rembrandt Company. There was no comparison between the two—they operated in completely different leagues.

From the perspective of the Rembrandt Company, most mid-tier trading companies weren’t much different from the Kuzunoha Company. So, when the head of such a powerful company suddenly showed up unannounced, loudly demanding a meeting, it was impossible for the representative of the Eleor Company to remain entirely calm.

Still, he was handling the situation with the professionalism expected of a seasoned merchant.

“A while back, you sold a piece of land to a new trading company called the Kuzunoha Company, correct?” Rembrandt began.

“No, we didn’t engage in any such transaction,” the representative replied immediately.

“I’m talking about the transaction recorded by the Merchant Guild, where Missel sold the land. Does that not ring a bell?” Rembrandt pressed.

“If that’s the case, then it must have been Missel-sama who transferred the land to the Kuzunoha Company.”

A brief silence followed, broken by a small sigh from Rembrandt.

When he spoke again, his gaze and his tone of voice had sharpened. “I’m well aware that Missel assists with your... clandestine dealings, and that you’re the one financing him.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Missel-sama is a landlord with extensive land holdings, so of course we work closely with him. But as for any clandestine operations or funding—”

The Eleor Company was still relatively new. Its representative had worked for other trading companies before founding Eleor with a group of trusted

colleagues. He was just about to turn thirty. Having come to Tsige from another city to seek business opportunities, he knew little of Patrick Rembrandt's past.

To him, Rembrandt was a powerful and formidable figure, widely respected in Tsige, but he couldn't begin to imagine that Rembrandt had once engaged in far darker and more ruthless business practices.

"I said this wouldn't take long," Rembrandt repeated, his voice now carrying a dangerous edge.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm not here to haggle or play games. If you don't want evidence of your misdeeds plastered all over Tsige by tomorrow, you'll cooperate and help me get this conversation back on track."

"..."

"I know about your three mistresses, your taste for demi-humans, and of course, your land-grabbing and fraudulent activities with Missel."

"What the—?!"

"And I have proof."

"!!!"

"You tampered with the land you sold to the Kuzunoha Company, didn't you? And the Contract too."

Everyone in the room could hear the Eleor representative gulp.

"How did you..."

Rembrandt sighed, a sound of not only resignation but also disbelief—how could he know about such a small, seemingly insignificant transaction with the Kuzunoha Company? And why would someone of Rembrandt's stature get involved?

"Raidou-dono, the representative of the Kuzunoha Company, is a friend of mine."

"A... friend?"

“Not just any friend—someone I’d risk my life to protect. Before long, everyone in town will know about our connection. He saved my family members’ lives.”

“The Cursed Disease... There were rumors about a new adventurer pulling off a major victory...”

“Indeed. Raidou-dono is both an adventurer and a merchant.”

“And you’re backing him...” the Eleor representative muttered, bitterness creeping into his voice.

He bit his lip, frustration evident. He was frustrated by his own ignorance and envious of Raidou, the young upstart who had waltzed into success without years of struggle and groundwork.

That envy had driven him to try and swindle the Kuzunoha Company, viewing Raidou as an easy mark. But now, he was staring down the harsh reality of his actions.

“That’s right. Starting today, you’ll undo everything you’ve done with the land and revise the contract to a standard purchase agreement. And make sure to redo the contract with Raidou-dono as soon as possible.”

“Does he know about this?” the Eleor representative asked.

“No. That’s why you need to come up with a plausible excuse to redo the contract. Do that, and I won’t have to take any further action.”

“So, I ended up crossing someone with an extraordinary protector,” he muttered.

“A protector, you say?” Rembrandt echoed, amused.

“Is that funny to you? It’s their own fault for not checking the fine print of the contract. In this world, it’s standard practice to scrutinize every detail before signing. They’re naive; they clearly don’t have any real business experience. Whatever they intend to sell, they’ll make mistakes sooner or later. Helping them like this is nothing short of coddling,” the man from Eleor retorted. He was letting his emotions get the better of him, but maybe he’d interpreted Rembrandt’s laughter as mockery.

“I’m sorry, it’s not funny. It’s just that my butler said something similar. He misunderstood when I told him it was just a gut feeling. But that’s beside the point. You may be right—I might be too lenient. But whether I’m being lenient toward them or toward you is another matter.”

“What do you mean?” the Eleor representative asked, confused.

“Did you know that the person who signed the contract with Missel was a woman?”

“Yes. She’s one of their members, correct?”

“She’s also an adventurer.”

“So, the Kuzunoha Company is a trading company run by former adventurers. That doesn’t bode well for their longevity.”

It was common knowledge that many adventurers struggled when transitioning to merchant work because the requisite skills were vastly different.

“That’s not the point right now. What I want to highlight is her level.”

“If she’s over two hundred after returning from the Wasteland, that would give her some credibility. But can you tell me her actual level?”

“She came back from the Wasteland with a level of fifteen hundred! The Adventurer’s Guild is keeping it under wraps, but word will get out soon.”

“Fifteen hundred...?” The representative almost fell off the sofa in shock. “I remember that an adventurer known as the Dragon Slayer was around 920.”

A four-digit level... That carried immense weight.

“Yes, fifteen hundred. This was the first time I’d seen it as well. With that much power, it’s baffling why she’s working as a member of a trading company.”

“However impressive her level might be, it’s a separate issue from business skill.”

“Of course. And as we see here, they made a grave mistake with this land contract. But... what if she discovers the tampering in the contract, gets

impatient, and decides to come here and cause trouble?”

“!!!”

“Scary, isn’t it? Terrifying. In a way, I might be helping you avoid such a fate.”

“Please... don’t joke about that kind of stuff. If something like that happened, the lord would intervene for sure.”

“He won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll make sure he doesn’t. The lord of this town won’t lift a finger until it’s too late, no matter what happens to you.”

“...”

The confidence in Rembrandt’s words was clear. The Eleor representative understood the gravity of the situation.

He had no other options left. It took him a moment to find his words. He was no stranger to defeat, but it didn’t make the situation taste any less bitter.

“Thank you for your warning,” he said after a moment of silence. “From now on, we’ll treat the Kuzunoha Company as good business partners and neighbors.”

“Excellent,” Rembrandt praised.

“...”

“Wise decision, Representative of the Eleor Company. Now, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes, there are still too many fools targeting the Kuzunoha Company.”

“Are you going to take care of all of them? Yourself?”

“Of course. This concerns a benefactor and a friend. Now, if you’ll excuse me. Ah, one more thing—I’ve known about your hobbies and shady activities for about two years now.”

“?!”

“Ha. Here’s a piece of advice, to say thank you for your wise decision: your second mistress seems to be plotting something against your wife. You might want to address that soon.” With a sly grin, Rembrandt left.

“Two years? We were even smaller back then... You’ve got to be kidding me.”

This conversation had done much to change the representative’s perception of Rembrandt—once the city’s reputed benefactor, now something far more sinister.

“If I had shown my fangs without knowing this... I would have been wiped out in an instant,” he said to himself as he stared at the ceiling. “I knew his outward appearance wasn’t everything... but there’s no doubt, his hands are as dirty as they come. Much dirtier than mine. That confidence... it comes from having experienced it ‘firsthand.’ Does he even have influence over the lord?”

Part 2: Shopping

Acting on information flagged by the Rembrandt Company’s network, Patrick Rembrandt’s butler, Morris, paid a visit to a certain shop. This shop wasn’t a retail store but a wholesaler—the Miliono Company. Morris waited patiently in the reception area while the store’s staff dealt with a small crowd of merchants.

“Thank you for waiting, Morris-sama. Please, follow me.”

“I’m sorry for visiting without any notice.”

“Not a problem, we’re happy to help you.”

Morris didn’t need to apologize, of course; he carried the considerable influence of the Rembrandt Company. The guide leading Morris through the store did so with an unwaveringly respectful smile.

“Welcome!” A man stood up from his chair, warmly greeting Morris as he entered the room.

“It’s been a while, Hau-sama,” Morris replied.

“Thank you for your assistance back then. I haven’t forgotten your kindness.”

“There’s no need to bow to me. Not when you’ve established such an indispensable store in Tsige.”

“Well, it’s your dependable support that’s made it possible, and I’m deeply grateful.”

“Your humility is the true key to your success. But I’ll be sure to tell my master.”

The two exchanged pleasantries across the table for a while, until a brief silence fell. When Morris finally broached the subject of his visit, the atmosphere in the room shifted suddenly.

“So, the Rembrandt Company is fully supporting the Kuzunoha Company?” Hau asked.

“Yes. My master has made a firm decision on this,” Morris replied.

“I see. It will be challenging, but we’ll do everything we can to help.”

“Thank you. Knowing my master’s tasks are proceeding smoothly is a relief.”

The tension in the air eased slightly, but Morris had yet to address his main concern. He bided his time, engaging in another few minutes of light conversation and waiting for the right moment.

“I was surprised to hear the name Kuzunoha Company from you,” Hau went on.

“Oh? And why’s that?”

Hau had no idea that Morris was slowly steering the conversation exactly where he wanted it.

“The representative of that company is someone we’ve been talking about. I mentioned earlier that helping him would be challenging, and this is why.”

“You may already know this if you’re familiar with him, but recently, a lot of materials and resources from the Wasteland have been flowing into Tsige.”

“So I’ve heard.”

As a company that dealt primarily with supplies from the Wasteland, Miliono had unique insights, but Morris was already well aware of this development.

“He’s the reason. It seems he’s accompanied by adventurers who are particularly skilled at navigating the Wasteland, and that’s led to a significant influx of materials into the city.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Of course it is. But...”

“But?”

“It’s all happening too suddenly. This is partly my intuition, but it doesn’t seem like a once-off occurrence. If it isn’t, the market—where the prices have stayed high due to demand far outstripping supply—might see a shift soon. In fact, we’re already seeing the initial impacts.” Hau sipped the tea brought by a servant, moistening his lips as he continued to explain the situation to Morris.

“The balance between supply and demand is always in flux. We and our business partners understand that, but when changes happen too quickly... Well, it can be problematic.”

“Indeed,” Morris agreed. “However, my master would likely say that predicting those kinds of shifts is a merchant’s pride and a skill to be honed.”

“You’re absolutely right. But Raidou’s entry into this market was like a natural disaster—sudden and unforeseen. It’s unfair to blame merchants who couldn’t anticipate it.”

Morris’s eyes sharpened, and the smile faded from his face. “Hau-sama, does that mean measures have been taken or are being considered?”

“They were being considered. As it stands, we were intending to withhold supplies from the Kuzunoha Company, refrain from cooperating in their distribution, and limit transactions to high-priced sales only.”

“So, this is the consensus among wholesalers and everyone who operates here... And for how long?”

“Well, it’s true that Raidou’s influx of materials has caused this situation, and perhaps if he’d considered market dynamics more carefully, things might have been different, he didn’t do it out of malice. And anyway, having more materials from the Wasteland in circulation is beneficial for everyone. So, once we’d sold

off most of our current stock, we'd planned to rebuild a good relationship with him."

Morris felt a sense of triumph. He had elicited the exact information he already knew. There were few aspects of Tsige's business landscape that the Rembrandt Company wasn't aware of. However, maintaining this knowledge without revealing the full extent of their insight was crucial, especially with entities like the Miliono Company, which operated primarily through their public face.

Therefore, it was always better to let the other party speak first.

"When you said 'were being considered,' could I take that to mean that these plans have already been abandoned?"

"You can. With the Rembrandt Company backing them, any such actions would be futile. Besides, if Rembrandt-sama trusts him, I would prefer to maintain a good relationship with him too."

Any attempts at interference by a coalition of wholesalers would become pointless once Rembrandt's support was made known. Hau understood this well, having personally benefited from Rembrandt's backing in the past.

Back then, Hau had faced harassment similar to what Raidou was now encountering, though in a different context. With the support of the Rembrandt Company, Hau had not only survived but thrived, eventually becoming one of Tsige's leading material traders.

"Raidou-dono saved my master's wife and daughters' lives, and he's gotten a level of support that I've never seen my master give anyone else. Your decision to cooperate will surely be well received," Morris said with a smile.

"If it pleases him, then I'll see it through. I'm truly glad we had this meeting today. We can still correct the issues we discussed earlier," Hau responded, returning the smile.

"About that..."

Morris smoothly interrupted, steering the conversation toward his true purpose.

“Yes?”

“Hau-sama, have you noticed any sort of... troubling atmosphere at the wholesaler meetings recently? A merchant of ours mentioned something concerning, and my master’s been worried about your situation.”

“Yes, in fact, there are a few factions forming among the wholesalers. They’re trying to monopolize the market, which is quite concerning. Unfortunately, we haven’t found a way to counter them yet, and time is slipping away. It seems your merchant has a sharp eye to have noticed this.”

“Yes. He’s someone I’ve mentored personally. Perhaps soon, you’ll have the chance to meet him.”

“I’d like that,” Hau said, genuinely intrigued.

“But I digress. My master suggests that Raidou-dono take action to disrupt the influence of those trying to form monopolies.”

“Specifically?” Hau’s interest piqued, and Morris, sensing the shift, pressed on.

“We’ll ask Raidou-dono to limit the flow of materials for a time. Since most of the wild materials entering Tsige come from adventurers aligned with the Kuzunoha Company, that’ll cause material prices to rise sharply.”

“I see.”

“Also, we’ll only tell you, Hau-sama, when this restriction is lifted. This way, you’ll be able to sell your stock at peak prices.”

“I”

“After that, the Rembrandt Company will purchase a portion of materials from adventurers via the Kuzunoha Company and supply them to the Miliono Company at below-market rates.”

“Are you serious?!” Hau’s eyes widened at the unbelievably generous terms. It was like money falling from the sky.

“Of course. With careful management of information flow and material pricing, this strategy could potentially take down the factions if executed correctly.”

“That’s more than enough.”

“Our plan might be a bit rough around the edges since we’re not specialists in wild materials. Feel free to adjust the details as needed. My master hopes that Tsige’s wholesaling business will revolve around the Miliono Company. That should lead to further growth for the city. I share that vision.”

“You’re too kind. The Miliono Company understands this is our pivotal moment.”

“Then I wish you the best of luck. I’ll take my leave.”

“Please give my regards to Rembrandt-sama. If you need anything, consider me at your service.”

“I certainly will.”

The Kuzunoha Company, driven by the influx of wild materials brought in by the Toa’s group of adventurers, had caught the attention of Tsige’s wholesalers. They were on the verge of uniting to take punitive action. However, thanks to the maneuvering of the Rembrandt Company, this plan was derailed.

As a result, several mid-tier wholesalers had collapsed, while the Miliono Company quickly rose to prominence. The fact that Miliono’s ascent was quietly aided by the Kuzunoha Company spread among a select group of insiders.

Rembrandt and Morris continued to address the many challenges facing the Kuzunoha Company. In the process, Rembrandt managed to dismantle eight companies, while ten others, recognizing his influence, quietly fell into line.

Most of the significant companies in Tsige had been subtly informed about the powerful entity backing the Kuzunoha Company, each through methods tailored to their specific circumstances. As a result, even before its official opening, the Kuzunoha Company was on its way to becoming an untouchable force in Tsige.

None of this had reached Raidou’s ears yet. He might never learn these facts if Rembrandt chose to keep silent; after all, the other companies, aware of the consequences, wouldn’t dare speak up. All they could do was acknowledge the overwhelming force backing Raidou and make way for the Kuzunoha Company.

One day, when most of the issues facing the young company had been resolved, Rembrandt and Morris found themselves sitting across from each other at a table, deeply concerned. It was clear that they'd been spending more time recently thinking about the future of the Kuzunoha Company than their own.

"I didn't realize they hadn't hired any more employees," Rembrandt muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"It looks like they haven't even posted job listings," Morris replied.

"Was Raidou-dono planning on just handling everything himself?"

"With just Tomoe-dono and Mio-dono, it would seem."

"Should we lend them a few of our best people?"

"We don't really have any personnel to spare right now. If the opening were a bit later, we could have more flexibility," Morris replied, regret in his tone.

"Just three people... It's a dangerously small number to run an entire store. What will they do if something unexpected happens?"

"The Kuzunoha Company has faced a lot of issues due to their own inexperience and lack of caution. They've also had their share of bad luck recently. It's hard to say they're in the clear."

"Exactly. What kind of fate is that boy living under? He's quite the peculiar character," Rembrandt mused, though his expression showed a certain enjoyment. It was the same look he'd had when Morris first informed him about the Kuzunoha Company's troubles.

"They've decided to become a general store, after all," Morris noted.

"Yes, just like us," Rembrandt confirmed.

"Why do I feel no sense of competition at all? Am I missing something here?"

"No, I feel the same way. I bet you Raidou-dono is creating a business unlike any we've seen before."

"Is that another one of your hunches?" Morris asked.

Rembrandt nodded. "Yes, a hunch from a lifetime in business."

Though Rembrandt now prioritized his family, he didn't believe his instincts as a merchant had dulled. He had merely refined the means he employed for their sake. His mind was still brimming with ideas, strategies, and solutions, as sharp as in his earlier years. Several businesses had recently caught glimpses of this side of Rembrandt.

After a brief pause, Morris asked, "May I inquire how you foresee the trajectory of the Kuzunoha Company after their opening?"

"Well... I suspect they'll soon realize they're understaffed and start hiring. They'll learn the challenges of managing employees. I imagine they'll run at a loss or break even for about half a year. But before their savings run dry, they'll get their business on track and then start turning a steady profit," Rembrandt replied.

"And why do you think that?"

"Because I can't sit idly by for more than half a year."

"Ha ha ha ha!!!"

"It's rare to see you laugh, Morris."

"I couldn't help it. Why did you predict half a year?"

"Considering the reward for the Ruby Eye, if they stay with their current debt-free approach, that's about how long they can last."

"Now that you mention it, the Kuzunoha Company hasn't taken out any loans. They're operating entirely on their own capital."

Typically, a merchant starting a store borrowed money from the guild or from a former employer. The initial goal was to repay that money and establish trust. The Kuzunoha Company was an anomaly in this regard. Its representative had no prior experience in a company, passed the merchant guild's test on the first try, and funded the store entirely by himself. To top it off, he was opening a store without knowing the basics of business.

"They're clean but that means they have no connections with anyone else. This could be a significant disadvantage for a merchant," Rembrandt observed.

"I can't see that in a favorable light, even if I try," Morris replied.

“Indeed.”

“Well, I’ll start compiling a list of people who would work well under Raidou-dono.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

When it came to employees, Rembrandt wanted to ensure that Raidou had reliable people by his side. The weaknesses Rembrandt had observed in Raidou could be serious drawbacks in business. Therefore, he intended to place competent and trustworthy individuals around Raidou, both to support him and as a means for him to learn. It was a rather lenient approach.

Parents often spoiled their youngest child, and to Rembrandt, Raidou was not just an ally; he almost felt like an unexpected new son.

After Morris left, Rembrandt stood and surveyed Tsige’s cityscape from the window.

“This city is unforgiving for someone starting their first business,” he mused. “A small stumble can be fatal. So, I’ll keep an eye on you for a while, Raidou-dono. May you stumble freely where there’s room to rise again. For example, in the Academy City you’re heading to...”

His eyes were gentle, filled with a sense of expectation.

Part 3: Grand Opening

Several months later, after overcoming numerous hurdles, the Kuzunoha Company finally launched its operations by renting space within the Rembrandt Company’s store. Rembrandt himself watched the bustling scene with a complicated expression.

“Hiring demi-humans, of all things... I sure didn’t see that coming.”

Behind the counter there was no sign of Raidou; instead, a striking black-haired woman and a stocky middle-aged man were attending to the customers. The line extended outside the store; a sight Rembrandt had never anticipated.

“What’s truly remarkable isn’t just that they’ve employed demi-humans; it’s that they’re selling so well despite that,” Morris remarked to Rembrandt.

“That’s right,” the butler agreed. “I never expected them to turn such a large profit right from the start.”

“It seems Raidou-dono has quite a bit of experience dealing with demi-humans... He certainly had an unexpected ace up his sleeve.”

“Yeah. Normally, hiring demi-humans would be seen as a liability. If livestock were manning the counter, customers wouldn’t come. But those are dwarves. I see, if they’re known for crafting excellent weapons, they become a top-tier selling point rather than a drawback.”

“Even so, while it’s understandable that adventurers might flock here because of the dwarf factor, why are even the general residents crowding in?”

“It’s the fruit,” Rembrandt concluded.



“Fruit?”

“Yeah, that’s the real trump card.”

“Something sweet to bring in the female customers...”

“Along with that, the store carries popular items from the Mirage City. Besides fruit, there are a lot of other goods.”

“The Mirage City... You mean that place you supposedly stumble into in the Wasteland?” Morris sounded skeptical. He had recently heard a lot about the Mirage City and had seen items allegedly brought back by those who claimed to have visited. However, the tale seemed too fantastical for him to fully believe.

“Apparently Raidou-dono knows a way to reach that city or has some means of contacting it. It’s impossible to sell those items consistently just by buying them from adventurers. Some of the goods the Miliono Company is selling at exorbitant prices as trial items are bound to get resold at a premium.”

“I’ll pass the information to Hau-sama later.”

“Please do.”

“Still... it’s been a while since I’ve seen your predictions so thoroughly off the mark, sir.”

“I’m beginning to think predicting anything about Raidou-dono is pointless. To think he’d already secured exclusive items for distribution...”

And... before long, the women that get drawn in by the fruit and rare goods will try the commonly available medicines. The adventurers drawn in by the weapons will also try the potions for healing wounds and curing poisons. I’ve tested those potions myself, and they’re on par with magical potions but much cheaper. Raidou-dono’s desire to mainly deal in medicines while calling his shop a general store has been fulfilled. The Kuzunoha Company’s reputation will be attracting people to Tsige soon. Whether or not this was all planned, it’s impressive. I’m really looking forward to seeing the Kuzunoha Company develop... and Tsige too.

“Sir?” Morris looked at his master, who had closed his eyes and fallen silent.

“No, I just see things getting busy. It appears the Kuzunoha Company is going to be a tremendous catalyst for Tsige. It’s my duty to ensure we cooperate with them to enrich the town. I’ll be relying on you heavily.”

“I’ll follow you anywhere. The idea of seeing that happen fills me with a certain vigor... It’s not unpleasant.”

“We can’t let Kuzunoha’s momentum slow down. I’ll do everything in my power to support them.”

“As you wish.”

Patrick Rembrandt thought about how the unforeseen impact of Raidou’s legacy, even as the man in question journeyed to the Academy City of Rotsgard, was set to transform Tsige. His intuition, more often than not, was quite accurate.

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: Mitsuaki Matsumoto This book is a revised and published version of the work originally posted on the website Shousetsuka ni Narou (<http://syosetu.com/>).

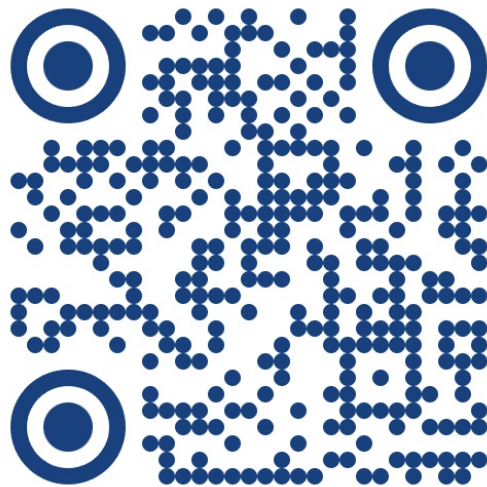
Thank you all

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