

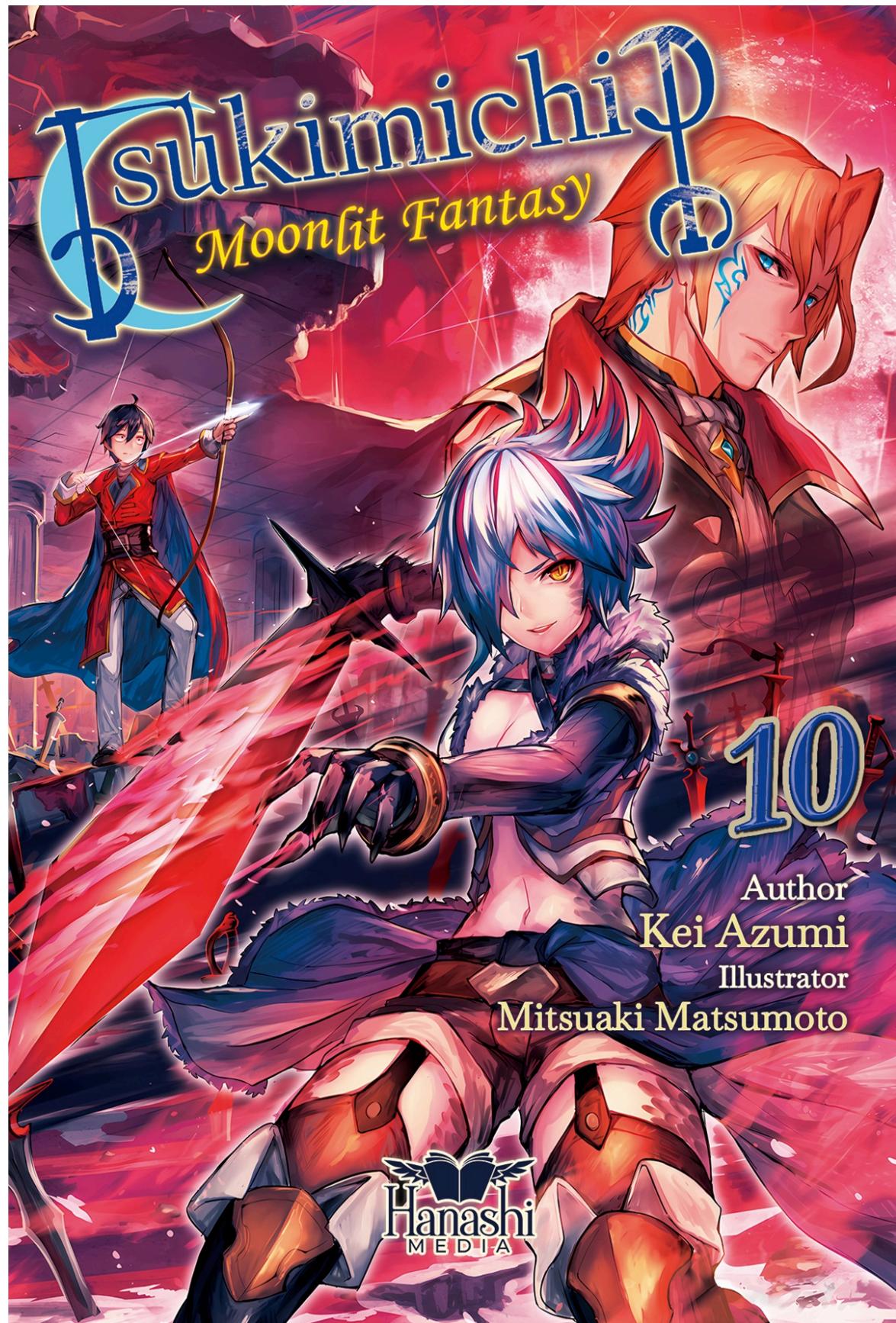
# Tsukimichi

*Moonlit Fantasy*

10

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TSUKI GA MICHIBIKU ISEKAI DOCHU Vol. 10

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Illustration: Mitsuaki Matsumoto

Original Book Design: ansyyqdesign

Originally published in Japan in 2016 by AlphaPolis Co.,  
Ltd., Tokyo

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

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

ISBN: 978-1-961788-35-0





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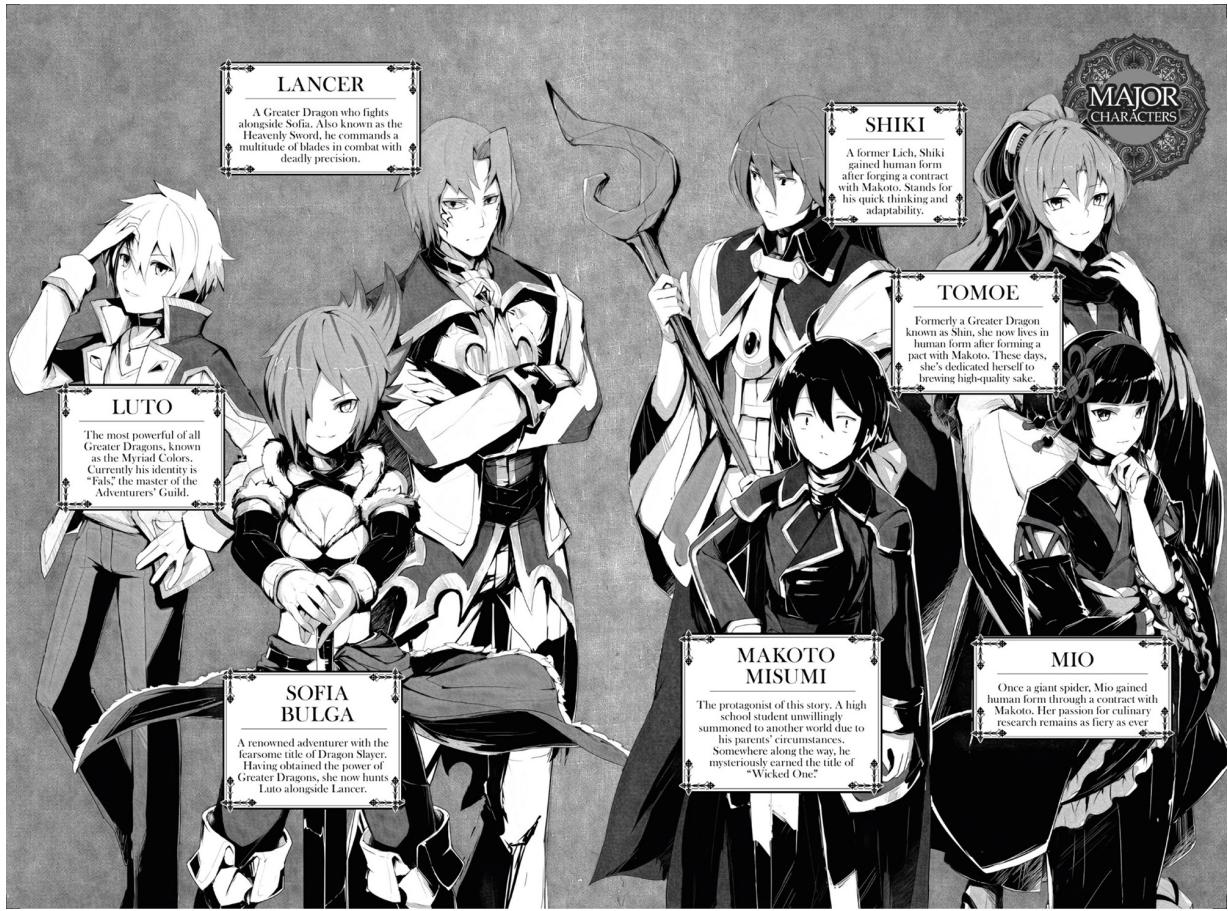
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Side Story: Survival of the Fittest







# Tsukimichi

## Prologue

**A**t the center of a vast chamber stood a lavish canopy bed, its ornate posts draped in silk like banners in a royal tent. The hour was late, and silence had settled over the room like a heavy curtain.

That silence was shattered in an instant.

A sudden wild flurry of thuds and a high-pitched, manic laugh burst through the stillness like a storm tearing through glass.

“H-Hehehehe... Incredible! Unbelievable!!! So this is what otherworlders are like! This is what it means to be *human*! No wonder I can’t get enough of them. They do the unthinkable without a hint of hesitation, and it’s glorious!”

The one cackling with childlike glee, kicking his legs and rolling from side to side on the bed like a boy who’d just discovered a chest of treasure, was none other than the master of the Adventurers’ Guild, Fals, better known as Luto.

Anyone familiar with Luto's usual demeanor—calm, composed, with a perennially gentle and emotionless smile—would be struck speechless if they saw him now.

This was one of his private bedrooms.

Tucked deep within the inner sanctum of the guild, sealed off by his command from all foot traffic, the room was entirely soundproof. No echo of his undignified antics would ever escape these walls.

In front of Luto, a translucent rectangle of light hovered.

Nothing tangible, just an image, a moving projection, alive with motion. And it was this image that had him so enraptured.

“Technically speaking, Makoto-kun isn’t even human, he’s a *hyuman*, right? But still... when one of them lives in the original world long enough, will they always end up like this?! Ahh, I have to know! I need to test it! Can I bear his child? Can I contain that potential within me?!”

Inside the floating screen, the footage jumped and jolted with jarring intensity. It was a dizzying mess of motion, the kind of camera work that would give even a seasoned scout a headache. The image blurred, whirled, and lurched without rhythm—utterly unwatchable by any normal standard.

One thing was clearly visible on the screen: at the very center, an orange, *hyumanoid* *something* was always in view.

After watching for a few seconds, Luto could tell this was the perspective of someone moving at incredible speed, their gaze locked on that glowing figure as they ran. He watched the frenetic display intently, his eyes dancing with excitement as he tracked every twitch and turn.

If he was really understanding what he was seeing, then his kinetic vision bordered on the divine.

“Sofia the Dragon Slayer... Huh.” His tone sounded amused. “I thought she was just another pointless irregular, but she’s done rather well for herself. If she manages to survive this, I suppose I could reward her with a very short audience. After all, it’s thanks to her that I’m witnessing Makoto-kun’s power with my own eyes.”

Of course, he was only saying this for his own amusement; he knew there was no chance of such a meeting actually happening.

The setting depicted on the screen was Ur, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Limia.

It bore no resemblance to the grand, radiant city known across the world. Its majestic skyline had been reduced to ruin, as if a god of destruction had swept through in a single breath.

Ur had fallen.

“The capital’s finished,” Luto muttered with an airy shrug. “Still, thanks to the Goddess sticking her nose in, the Hero got to keep his life, and one of the Demon Generals is already off the board. With so much power colliding at once, I’ve got no idea what Tomoe and Mio are up to anymore, but that’s fine. As long as I get to see Makoto-kun and Shiki in action, I’m satisfied.”

His voice rose, gleeful.

“That opening—that ridiculous armor stunt was comedic gold! Perfectly timed laughs, followed by a rampage, and then the real show began: *the unleashing of his true power!* I thought I would be getting bored by now, but I’m enjoying you more and more every day. Tell me—*how?* What kind of thinking, what kind of *path* leads a person to power like that?”

Luto’s gaze narrowed, fixated on the figure cloaked in that surreal orange glow: Makoto Misumi. The hyumanoid form wasn’t flesh or machine. It was pure magic.

More precisely, it was a dense mass of mana made visible—weaponized. But it was more than just raw energy. This was mana given form, a structure that allowed it to physically interact with the world.

A technique that the rest of the world had long since forgotten.

Neither the hyumans nor the demons had found it viable, and generations ago, the research had been discarded, labeled inefficient and a dead end. And yet, here it was, brought to life before Luto's eyes.

The moment Makoto revealed that ability, all emotion had vanished from Luto's face. He'd stared, wide-eyed, devouring every detail as if committing it to memory.

Then, suddenly, he'd stripped off his bathrobe and leaped into bed, launching into a naked frenzy of laughter and shouts.

“One of alchemy’s deepest secrets—the creation of the Philosopher’s Stone. If it’s pure, without any contamination, then it’s nothing less than a true *Elixir of Completion*.”

The words rose unbidden in Luto’s mind, a forgotten quote coming finally to the surface.

The Philosopher’s Stone: a substance born of the most advanced theories and techniques in alchemy, requiring mastery far beyond what even the most experienced alchemists could claim. A product of ultimate refinement, a catalyst of immense and limitless potential. If one could create a perfect version of it.

Not that Luto had ever heard of a hyuman achieving that feat. Not once.

“For alchemists, reaching the Philosopher’s Stone is the supreme ideal,” he murmured to himself, as if recalling a fond memory. “Eventually, not just alchemists but all

kinds of researchers were referring to their life's ultimate goal as their 'Philosopher's Stone.' But... you know."

His lips curled into a small smile, the hint of a chuckle tugging at his breath.

*Makoto's* materialization of mana, an act that veered violently off the traditional paths of alchemy, had achieved something astonishing. It was absurd, crude even by scholarly standards, and yet its results were undeniable. Somewhere in the recesses of Luto's mind, that reckless feat clicked into place with the old alchemical term.

Once, he remembered, Makoto came to him, brow furrowed with the earnest frustration of a diligent student, asking how he might increase the amount of mana he could wield at once. Makoto didn't simply want to possess a vast well of power, he wanted to unleash it, fully, without bottlenecks.

It was a problem familiar to any mage. It didn't matter how much power you had if you couldn't release it effectively.

Naturally, Luto had offered him a few techniques. A little favor, provided out of an affection he hadn't yet put a name to.

The sad truth was that Makoto simply didn't have the aptitude.

Even if he devoted himself to the harshest, most optimized regimen Luto had shown him, he'd only ever manage a fraction of what a well-suited hyuman could achieve. Luto had told him as much, gently but honestly. This wasn't something one could master in a single month of summer training. It was a lifelong endeavor, and the gains would be incremental at best.

Even knowing that, Makoto had chosen to train. During the academy's summer break, he'd vanished somewhere,

isolated himself, and pushed forward with single-minded determination.

No, the effort hadn't been futile.

Even if the results took their time in coming, the very act of devoting oneself to growth had its own worth. *He's refining himself*, Luto had thought at the time, and he hadn't tried to dissuade him. Self-discipline and focus, especially in someone like Makoto, were admirable qualities.

Even so...

Makoto's original goal had been straightforward, at least on paper: increasing the visible amount of mana he could channel into a spell at once.

What he actually achieved...

"It's absurd," Luto muttered, his voice a mix of awe and disbelief. "To externalize mana, manifest it physically, and then hold it in place, ready to deploy as needed? That orange figure he's cloaked in... it's pure mana, held just on the edge of spell activation, sustained in a near-critical state. True, that's the moment when mana has its strongest potential for physical interaction, but it's so inefficient that it's usually dismissed outright. Even I'd be lucky to maintain it for ten minutes."

What Makoto had done was, by any standard, an astoundingly inefficient solution. And yet it worked.

How much mana did one have to possess to even *conceive* of something like that?

Luto revised his internal estimate of Makoto's magical reserves. No longer just "unusually high." No, they were effectively limitless.

Not actually infinite, of course—everything had a breaking point. But the kind of boundless pool that defied conventional measurement. Any attempt at numerical

analysis would lead to an endless string of zeroes until the mathematician collapsed from exhaustion.

Sure, Luto himself could theoretically construct a smaller version of that kind of mana shell—an imitation—in controlled conditions. But to do it in combat, and in such overwhelming quantity, like Makoto was doing against Sofia?

Unthinkable.

It would be far easier, and far smarter, to just flatten the entire battlefield in one go, leaving a crater behind and calling it a day. The sheer effort needed to sustain that kind of magic in such a focused form was monumental.

This was a power only Makoto could wield. An ability only he could have imagined.

“Near-critical mana, capable of mutating freely. Externalized into a tangible form and deployed for both offense and defense at will. It’s like... It’s like someone aiming to create a common-grade Philosopher’s Stone accidentally leaped straight past perfection and stumbled into pure Chaos.” Luto laughed softly, shaking his head. “It’s so unbelievably foolish. And so unbelievably brilliant. A true feat of genius.”

Suddenly, the screen went black.

Just for a moment, Luto had looked away, and in that instant, Sofia had fallen.

Of course. This was *her* point of view. The chaotic footage, the shakiness, the strange angles, it had all come from a device relaying her visual feed. *Must have been something worn on her face*, Luto thought, *like a miniature head-mounted camera*.

So naturally, when her vision went dark, so did the screen.

*She’d never suspect that the Dragon of Myriad Colors she’d spent so long chasing was actually using her as a*

*glorified camera drone.* The irony would've been hilarious, if it weren't so damn tragic.

Luto didn't know exactly what had happened to knock her out. But from his expression, he wasn't particularly bothered. Truthfully, he'd never expected her to put up much of a fight in the first place.

From the very moment Makoto activated that terrifying ability, Luto had known: Sofia, for all the power she'd gained from bonding with a handful of Greater Dragons, was no match for him. Not even close.

And yet, watching her fall, he felt no triumph, only a quiet, pitiful kind of sympathy.

If only she'd known her place. If only she hadn't plotted schemes with that fool Lancer, also known as Mitsurugi. If only she hadn't tried to hunt Greater Dragons, pretending she was something more than a lucky adventurer. If only she hadn't dared to challenge him, Luto, even for a moment.

If she'd just lived out her life as an ordinary adventurer, under Luto's unspoken protection, she could have prospered and even thrived. With the strength she'd borrowed, she might have died a respected name, a success story in the eyes of the world.

Now? All of that was meaningless.

"A mana-born equivalent of *Materia Prima*, the First Substance," Luto mused, savoring the idea like a fine wine. "If that ability of his still has no name, maybe I'll offer the term to him myself."

He smiled thinly. "He probably doesn't even know what it means. The theory of creation through magic; he set it aside, abandoned the logic, and ran from the principle itself. And now... Now he's reached the threshold of that very power by force of will alone."

*Without understanding a single law. Without walking any known path. And yet, here he is.*

“Makoto-kun,” Luto whispered, voice low, reverent, and trembling. “You are *everything* I ever wanted in a hyuman. The literal embodiment of the being I once imagined, the dream I’ve longed for, that I swore I would someday create. And yet, here you are. Already real. Already perfect. Right in front of me.”

A shudder coursed through his body, coming from deep within.

“My core is burning,” he murmured. “It aches... It melts... I think I’m going mad.”

He offered the chaotic name—a title befitting entropy itself—to Makoto’s power. Not aloud, not yet. But in his heart, he had already enshrined it.

No one would hear its meaning, not tonight. Only the feverish heat of his words clung to the walls, saturating the air of the sealed chamber like incense in a temple of madness.

The screen flickered again, returning now to an aerial view.

Through the sky streaked dozens of crimson lights, all converging on the glowing hyumanoid form Makoto wore like armor. The attacks came from far-off positions, yet their trajectories were inhumanly precise.

Each arc curved like artillery fire, warping midair, its path corrected in real time to strike the same point again and again with pinpoint accuracy.

It was a technique born of supreme control, focus, and talent. Beautifully executed, but none of that mattered.

Luto’s wonder-glazed eyes saw only him. Only Makoto, standing encased in living magic, burning like a second sun in a dead city.

Before he realized it, Luto's form had shifted—graceful, delicate, trembling. The figure in the bed now wore the shape of a woman, shuddering with desire.

Even the ongoing crisis, with the mutated monstrosities that had appeared in his own seat of power, Rotsgard, seemed forgotten.

That night, Luto did not sleep.

# Tsukimichi 1

## Chapter 1

“Tch. So much for dragons. It wasn’t even that big a deal. The ladies from Kuzunoha have way more presence than that thing.”

The fires were finally dying down across the capital of Limia.

As one of the hyuman adventurers muttered this observation, he glared up at the massive silhouette looming in the distance. His voice was hoarse and bitter, but he remained on his feet, if only just. Blood stained his armor, one arm hung limp at his side, and his knees trembled from exhaustion. Anyone could see it; his bravado was down for the count. A mask of false courage slipping off a battered face.

Though smoke still wafted in thick plumes from scattered neighborhoods in the royal city, the sounds of battle had ceased. The fighting between the hyumans and the demons was over.

This was partly due to the retreat order issued by the Demon General, Rona, but the real cause was the sheer devastation wrought by the rain of light-blades that had

just torn through the battlefield. The sky itself had opened, and annihilation had poured down like divine judgment.

*I agree,* came a silent thought.

A short distance from the adventurer, standing atop a pile of broken tiles and shattered stone, was another figure —this one cloaked in dignity and stillness. He nodded faintly, acknowledging the man's bitter words. But unlike the adventurer, there was no hint of false bravado in his tone. He meant it.

A long, dark robe clung to his lean form. It was elegant yet simple, subtle yet refined, with faint threads of gold running through the matte black fabric. From a distance, the cloaked figure might be mistaken for a sage or mage. Up close, however, there was no denying it: his body was no longer that of a man.

The hood had slipped back, revealing a face stripped of flesh—a bare skull, smooth and white as porcelain. Two crimson lights floated in his empty eye sockets, glowing faintly like distant stars through a fog of death.

This was Shiki, Makoto's contracted companion, once a lich, now reborn in human form through their pact. But here, in the midst of war, he had shed that disguise. To avoid revealing his identity to the "heroes" of this world, he had taken up an old persona, Larva, a name once deeply feared, now cloaked in mystery.

He had followed Hibiki Otonashi—the Hero of Limia—on her charge from the castle into the city below, a desperate attempt to halt the demons' rampage. And it was he who had withstood the onslaught of swords that fell like divine wrath from the heavens.

Just then, a massive shadow descended before them. Its presence was so heavy it seemed to press down on the very air.

“Well. That saves me the trouble,” Shiki muttered, glancing sideways at the state of the so-called heroes.

The adventurer who’d spat curses earlier was barely conscious, his limbs trembling with fatigue. Belda, the knight, was no better, leaning on his sword like a crutch just to stay upright. Behind Hibiki, who stood alert and braced for the unknown, the shrine maiden Chiya of Lorel was desperately channeling healing magic, her hands trembling with strain.

There was one more—the person who had Shiki’s attention.

A mage named Woody lay crumpled on the ground. Whether he’d failed to shield himself in time or had simply been struck by stray magic, a gaping wound marred his abdomen, blood seeping through torn robes.

Shiki’s eyes narrowed.

Earlier, he had quietly considered a last-resort contingency: if Hibiki lost control, perhaps crippling a few of her companions would halt her momentum. Now, that plan was moot. They were already incapacitated, distracted by wounds and recovery.

It really did save him the trouble.

After a final glance at the heroes’ pitiful state, Shiki turned his eyes back to the towering figure that had landed before them, and this time, his gaze locked on with sharp precision.

There was no mistaking his focus now. The shadow eclipsed even the tallest watchtower. It was a dragon, a silver-white dragon, standing on two legs like a man.

Its scales had shifted into something unnatural—armored and structured, almost mechanical. In some places, the plates curled into jagged blades; in others, they curved smoothly like circular shields. It wasn’t simply *armored*, it was *weaponized*.

An aberration among dragons.

It looked down on Shiki with eyes that gleamed not with animal instinct, but with cold, intelligent intent.

“A lich, is it?” the dragon said, its voice deep and unhurried. “You don’t seem to be aligned with the demons. Fine, I’ll overlook your presence. Leave.”

Its first words were directed straight at Shiki. But the skeletal mage didn’t flinch. His reply came in a calm murmur.

“Greater Dragon Lancer, the Heavenly Sword, I didn’t think we’d meet face to face.”

Shiki spoke the dragon’s name not with reverence or fear, but with simple recognition. The former lich remained unshaken, even in the presence of one of the highest-ranking dragons in existence. In fact, he seemed almost pleased by Lancer’s words. A faint glimmer of amusement, or perhaps anticipation, stirred beneath the expressionless mask he wore.

Even as the anguished cries of the heroes, who called desperately for the court mage Woody, echoed behind him, Shiki showed no response. He had eyes only for the dragon.

Without a word, he raised his weapon, an unadorned black staff that could easily be mistaken for a simple rod. Its tip pointed calmly at the enormous draconic frame.

“That stance... What do you intend to do with it?” Lancer’s voice rumbled low, cautious.

“My name is Larva. Servant of the Wicked One.” Shiki’s tone was flat, but each word landed with deliberate weight. “That should be enough to tell you my intent.”

“A servant of the Wicked One?” Lancer growled, hatred twisting his voice. “So that bastard *did* bring soldiers.”

A wave of power radiated outward.

Lancer’s aura surged like a shockwave—pressure thick as steel, snarling and primal. Even without initiating

combat, a Greater Dragon's mere awareness of battle released the force of a subspecies' roar.

Shiki stood firm.

He wasn't restrained, wasn't buckling. The undead mage remained exactly where he was, holding his black staff aloft with the same serene expression.

"Well then," he said coolly, "that simplifies things. Shall we begin?"

There, in a ruined capital shrouded in drifting mist—fog thick enough to obscure a grown man's lower half—a battle began that by all rights *shouldn't* have been possible.

A battle between a lich, just another high-ranking undead, and a Greater Dragon, one of the world's apex lifeforms. A confrontation born of impossibility.



"You truly are the Wicked One's servant," Lancer remarked. "But you hardly seem like a servant. You don't even seem like a lich. You're more like one of those hyumans wearing a mask of undeath."

The two combatants stood amidst crumbled stone and scattered flames, both untouched, unscathed.

Their skirmish had been brief; each one testing the other, exchanging blows more to measure than to maim. Neither had gone all out. Not yet.

A dark chuckle escaped Lancer's throat. "Hahahaha...

"But what a shame," he continued. "You showed up too late. No matter how well you fight now, I am no longer just

a Greater Dragon. That time has passed. To think the Wicked One has a servant capable of matching a Greater Dragon... it only confirms what I feared. He's dangerous."

The glint in Lancer's eyes sharpened, and his voice cut clean through the haze of the battlefield.

"Larva, was it? Playtime's over."

"I need to regroup with Sofia. No, I'm done waiting. I want to kill the Wicked One myself with my own two hands. He owes me a debt, after all. Even if it was only for a moment, he took my legs from me."

He spoke casually, but the edge beneath the words was honed like a sword.

Shiki stayed silent, watching as Lancer's body began to transform. The towering form of the Greater Dragon shrank, sinew and scale folding inward, until he stood not as a beast but as a man. And not the childlike form he'd used in the imperial capital—this one was different.

Now, in front of Shiki stood a young man, perhaps in his early twenties—lean, sharp-featured, bearing an eerily calm beauty. Glowing patterns like tattoos traced faint lines across his pale skin, pulsing with gentle luminescence. The shifting light danced over him, cloaking him in a dreamlike aura that teetered between divine and monstrous.

"You want to kill him?" Shiki asked quietly. "Funny, that's *my* line, Lancer."

"Tch. Still running that mouth, are..."

Lancer's insult was cut short by a sudden, blinding flash, a dozen swords of light flaring into existence and surrounding Shiki like a noose. The next instant, they lunged at him in perfect synchrony.

Shiki didn't waste a second.

He unleashed a barrage of defensive spells, shattering several blades before they could strike and carving a narrow path through the deadly ring. But even he couldn't

completely escape the resulting blast; the impact hurled him through the air like a dried leaf caught in a gale.

He flipped midair, twisting deftly, and landed beside the heroes.

“Larva-dono!” Hibiki shouted, eyes burning with urgency. “Dispel this fog! If you do that, we can fight too! We can help you bring that dragon down!”

Shiki turned toward her, lips curling into something between pity and amusement.

“Heh... Hibiki, Hero of Limia. You really don’t get what’s going on, do you? I’m not struggling.”

“You can’t be serious.” Her voice was sharp, incredulous. “You didn’t even dodge that last attack. You’re pushing your luck, pretending you’ve got this under control.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Though none of Lancer’s strikes had landed squarely, Shiki had weathered countless close calls. His robes were torn, scorched, and shredded in places, barely hanging onto his frame. His movements remained composed, but the signs of strain were clear.

Lancer, meanwhile, stood untouched.

Now in his condensed hyuman form, his presence felt even more overwhelming. The strength of a full-grown dragon, distilled and packed into a body that radiated controlled violence. He stood tall, calm, unshaken. There was no denying it—by all appearances, Larva was on the back foot.

Oddly, he spoke with unshaken certainty, not even glancing back at Hibiki. “My master has given permission.” Larva’s voice was low. “Lancer’s composure won’t last much longer.”

“My master? You mean the white one?” Hibiki’s voice trembled with urgency. “Larva-dono, let me be honest with

you. That dragon—the one who's slaughtered so many and turned this capital into a ruin—let us fight alongside you. Let's *end* him, together."

"No," Shiki said with a quick shake of his head. "That's not possible. From here on out, I won't have the luxury of worrying about you people. Even maintaining the barrier that protects the ground you're standing on will soon be beyond me."

"What?!" Hibiki's voice cracked, and behind her, Chiya let out a strangled cry.

"If you drop this now, Woody won't make it! He'll die!"

The shrine maiden's voice quivered with raw desperation. Her healing spell was only just keeping him alive; the protective mist shielding the group was all that stood between life and death.

Shiki didn't even flinch.

"There's no need for concern, shrine maiden of Lorel," he said softly. "This mist will soon disperse. But more than that, I have something to offer you."

"Something to offer?" Hibiki narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

She couldn't read his face—after all, he was a skull, a glowing mask of bone. Not once during the conversation had he even looked at them. The crimson lights floating in his eye sockets remained locked on Lancer, as if the rest of them barely registered.

Given how thoroughly he'd rejected her plea for an alliance, how could she trust anything he said now?

Still, something in his tone made her hesitate.

"Yes," he confirmed. "If all of you stay where you are and just focus on defense, I'll save your comrade. After the battle is over, I'll see to his wounds. Of course, that offer depends on whether your shrine maiden continues her healing spell until then."

“What?!” Chiya gasped. “*You’ll* save him? You... an undead... You would save someone who’s *alive*?!”

It was common knowledge—an absolute truth—that the undead were incapable of casting healing magic. And even among the rare high-ranked undead who could, there was a more fundamental truth:

The undead *hated* the living.

They envied the warmth they’d lost. They resented the light they could no longer bask in. Their very nature twisted that envy into hatred, their existence a mockery of life. To imagine such a being, especially a lich, *choosing* to preserve a living soul? It was impossible.

That was why everyone stood in stunned silence, why every pair of eyes was filled with shock. Because by every logical measure, Larva’s offer made no sense.

“... You really believe,” Hibiki finally said, voice low and tense, “that you can save Woody in his current condition?”

Though suspicion lingered in her eyes, Hibiki’s voice betrayed a spark of hope. A part of her *wanted* to believe.

“Of course I can save him,” Shiki confirmed nonchalantly. “A fist-sized hole in a hyuman’s gut? That’s nothing. Easy.”

His tone was devoid of ego or sympathy.

“Understand this: the line between life and death, the criteria we use to judge what can be healed—those differ vastly between you and me. Don’t lump your standards in with mine. It’s insulting.”

Then, still looking at Lancer, he added, “So? I made this offer, and even walked all the way over to your side for it. What’s your answer?”

“I’ll trust you,” Hibiki declared.

“Hibiki!” Belda’s voice cut in, sharp and disapproving.

Her decision had come too quickly—handing over a comrade’s life to an undead who hadn’t once shown a shred

of kindness? It sounded insane.

Before Belda could protest further, the injured adventurer who had been watching quietly stepped forward. His voice was calm and level.

“No, she made the right call,” the man said, glancing toward the robed lich. “That dragon’s no normal beast. But neither is the one fighting him. Anyone who can stand toe-to-toe with that and not get crushed is someone who means what they say. And this Larva, he’s got the same air about him as a certain group I know. The kind who only ever say what they’re going to do, and *always* do it.”

“Still...”

“Larva-dono,” Hibiki said firmly, cutting Belda off. “You *will* keep your promise.”

“Negotiation complete,” Shiki responded.

“*Mist Shrine, Nifheim*—deactivated.” There was a small flash of light, and the ring on one of Shiki’s fingers vanished. “Now then, protect yourselves. Let’s see if you can manage *that* much on your own.”

The thick mist surrounding them was beginning to disperse, unraveling into wisps and fading into the air.

The veil had fallen.

“Persistent little vermin,” Lancer growled. “Very well. Let the Hero die with them. I shall erase you all with my true blade.”

He raised his hand, and ten swords of light—suspended high in the air, razor-sharp edges gleaming—turned as one. However, each one then launched outward in a seemingly random direction.

“They’re not aimed at me,” Shiki murmured. “So, he’s ready to show his true strength.”

His voice hardened as he called out to the Hero’s party.

“Hibiki! All of you! Protect yourselves with everything you have. If you want to live, do *not* let your guard down.”

A heartbeat later, screams rang out from every direction.

“...?!”

“What is that?!”

“What the hell’s going on?!”

Cries of confusion erupted from Hibiki and her comrades as the air pulsed with a new, crushing energy.

Then came Lancer’s laughter, low, cruel, and utterly confident.

“Hahaha... If you must curse someone, curse the fools who dared to stand before me. They should have died when they had the chance, crushed by my forged swords. But no... They survived. Barely. And now, they face the price of that pathetic endurance.”

All ten of Lancer’s blades began to rise again, swirling back into the air like summoned spirits. But they were no longer the radiant swords of light from before.

No, these were *real* swords.

Each one was distinct, forged in different shapes and colors—crimson, black, silver, white—embellished with ornate craftsmanship and murderous intent. They shimmered with substance, not magic. They carried a heavy presence, each one steeped in killing history.

“*Blade-Dragon* Lancer,” Shiki murmured. “A dragon of swords. A dragon of men. A hybrid who walks with two souls in one body. So that’s what you are.”

Shiki didn’t seem impressed by this realization; his tone was analytical.

“So Luto was right. A dragon who wears the form of a man and gains even more strength by doing so. Fitting, I suppose.”

Lancer froze.

“Luto? You *know* that name?”

The fury in his voice was immediate and visceral. That unexpected name struck far too close to something buried.

Shiki ignored this outburst, continuing in the same calm, almost conversational tone.

“Surrounded by famous blades, revered as the Heavenly Sword... But those swords aren’t symbols of reverence, are they? They’re trophies. Remnants. Each one is all that’s left of someone who challenged you. From the way they pulse... I’d wager some still carry the lingering will of their original wielders.”

“You know too much. I can’t let you live.” Lancer’s voice was colder now, stripped of theatrics.

“I see,” Shiki answered, stepping forward rather than back. “You collect the strong, those who draw your eye, and add them to your arsenal. And you’ve stationed yourself near hyuman territory to make the hunt easier, double the efficiency, right?”

“*Enough, Larva!!!*” Lancer roared. “You’ll be the next in my collection, along with the Hero and her pawns!”

With that, the ten swords launched forward simultaneously, slicing through the air with lethal precision. But Shiki didn’t retreat; he advanced.

“I who wear the resentment of the fallen—*Gros Shear*. Silver veil that turns aside all arrows—*Malgiri*.”

As he chanted, his body surged forward with surprising speed for a lich. A ripple of force erupted from beneath his feet, and a haze of red and black energy cloaked his frame. Ethereal sigils shimmered across the surface of the aura, moving, writhing, and alive.

Shiki wasn’t defending; he was charging straight into the assault.

Of the ten swords, seven had targeted Shiki. Each one now hurtled toward him, guided by Lancer’s will, their

edges thirsting for flesh or bone. And still, Shiki ignored them all. His gaze was locked on Lancer.





Without so much as a flinch, he leveled his staff at the dragon, a wordless declaration of war.

“You dare!”

Lancer’s snarl tore through the air.

Just as five of the enchanted blades were about to pierce Shiki, a ripple, like a distortion in the fabric of space, flared to life around him. With a sound like snapping bones, the swords’ straight trajectories warped violently mid-flight, and they plunged harmlessly into the ground.

The last two, however, struck the red-black aura clinging to Shiki’s body. The moment they touched it, their gleaming surfaces began to rot. Within seconds, they had crumbled into rusted fragments, decaying midair before falling lifelessly to the earth with dull metallic thuds.

Then, behind Shiki came a brilliant flash of light. Both he and Lancer turned their heads slightly as the shockwave reached them.

Three swords, no doubt the ones fired toward Hibiki’s group, had detonated.

Shiki gave a quiet breath. Not relief, not pride, but satisfaction.

“Truly, I’m lucky,” he murmured to himself. “I didn’t believe things could fall into place this perfectly, but here they are, Blade-Dragon Lancer and Sofia the Dragon Slayer. Both who dared to harm *that one*. Now, I can kill you freely, without worrying about Tomoe-dono or Mio-dono objecting.”

His lips curled in a small smile.

“Yes... Quite fortunate.”

“You would kill me?!” Lancer roared. “You survived one of my true swords and suddenly think you’ve become my *equal*?!”

The staff Shiki had pointed was more than a gesture—it was the opening blow of his challenge. But he now lowered

it briefly, eyes half lidded, as if musing to himself.

"I've done my research," he said softly. "With Lutodono's assistance, I've come to know you well, Lancer. And now..."

"You do serve Luto! Then the Wicked One also..."

Lancer's eyes widened. The connections were forming. Shiki was the thread connecting two of the beings he could not ignore—Luto and Raidou.

A deep growl rumbled from his chest, the space around him vibrating with killing intent. And yet, Shiki remained composed, unmoved by the swelling battle lust.

"I believe the greatest weapon a person can wield is intelligence," he offered coolly. "I may be nothing more than a former man, but even so, I *will* prove the truth of that belief. By slaying a dragon slayer."

Lancer bared his teeth. "This is a battlefield. The finest of the demon army lie fallen here. Tsige's adventurers too. The ground is thick with death and talent. So many strong souls to forge into my power!"

He swept an arm to the side, gathering his energy.

"I'll crush that smug confidence of yours in a heartbeat!"

Before he could move, Shiki's voice rose—firm, cold, and final.

*"The sixth—befitting of me."*

*"...!"*

*"Cast off the sheath. Become the blade. Come, Ascalon."*

As he spoke, he shifted his grip on the staff, hands sliding into position as though hefting a great sword.

The plain black staff in Shiki's hands shimmered, bathed in a light not unlike the blood-red glow of a lunar eclipse, and transformed.

What emerged was a massive sword, a *claymore*.

Not a modest one either, it was oversized, broad, and brutal, more akin to a slab of honed darkness than a knight's weapon.

"You... You're a *sorcerer*," Lancer growled, narrowing his eyes.

"Indeed," Shiki answered, calm and composed. "That's correct. I am a sorcerer. This sword is called Ascalon, named after a certain dragon slayer's blade. A gesture of hope, I suppose. The hope that one day, I might hunt down something like *you*."

He chuckled faintly, as if amused by his own sentiment.

"But don't mistake it for a holy relic. This isn't some gleaming blade of legend. It's steeped in poison and curses. A blade reeking of hatred and ruin. It holds no sanctity—only *rot*."

Lancer's expression twisted. "Indeed. There's not a glimmer of noble light in that sword. It radiates nothing but malice. Tch. A cursed weapon, born of foul sorcery."

"That's exactly as it should be. After all, I'm the one wielding it. What use have I for a 'noble' sword? It would never suit me."

He tilted the blade downward at an angle, letting the tip kiss the earth. Gripping it with both skeletal hands, he held it steady.

Had he been a warrior by trade, this would be a textbook ready stance for a rising, diagonal gyaku-gesa slash; an upward reverse draw meant to bisect the enemy from hip to shoulder.

Lancer sneered. "That sword isn't meant for a sorcerer. You chose poorly."

*"Sixth-Tier—Frey, Release. Sword Emperor Possession—Sword Spiritum."*

The moment the words left his mouth, a crackling force surged around him, ethereal red arcs of energy lashed

through the air like spirits breaking free.

“You insist on this farce? A sorcerer challenging me with a blade?! You insult me!”

Radiating pure rage, Lancer shot backward in an instant—his draconic instincts kicking in as he sought to widen the gap. His hands flared with power, conjuring new swords at random and launching them through the battlefield with abandon. The blades struck down scattered warriors and corpses alike, absorbing lingering souls, consuming remnants of strength, and forging them into new, physical weapons.

Still, Shiki didn’t flinch.

“You think to match Ascalon and Frey with a handful of blades forged from discarded lives?” he asked, stepping forward into the storm. “Ridiculous. You should be ashamed to speak of them in the same breath.”

More power erupted from his body.

His night-red aura swelled, pulsing violently, arcs of force now reaching the tip of the massive Ascalon itself. The blade shimmered with hunger.

And then—he moved! A blur. A streak of dark flame.

For a moment, Shiki no longer resembled a mage at all. He cut through the battlefield like a born warrior—closing the distance in a single breath, each strike of his skeletal feet shaking the ground with terrifying force.

He understood the blade’s range perfectly. There was no hesitation, no misstep. With fluid precision, he brought the weapon upward, not chanting, not casting, but striking; the great, cursed sword arcing straight for Lancer’s neck.

Several of Lancer’s spectral swords flared back into existence, intercepting the incoming blade like automatic defenses. But against Ascalon’s edge, they shattered one by one—useless, brittle glass before divine steel.

“Ghh!!!”

Lancer barely managed a reflexive retreat, instinct driving him back into the shadows. It wasn't strategy but survival.

The grunt that tore from his lips wasn't just from frustration at his own sluggish response.

Blood was trailing from his right hand.

"You're one of the ones who sliced off my master's fingers, weren't you?" Shiki's voice was low. "So? Hurts, doesn't it?"

Only then did Lancer notice that his right hand was missing three fingers.

"You bastard! I'll never forgive you!" he snarled, his elegant features contorting into a mask of rage.

Shiki let out a dry chuckle. "We've been talking past each other this whole time, but at least now we understand each other."

He raised Ascalon high and brought it down in a swift, lethal arc.

The instant it connected, a blinding light erupted.

"Well now, that's a different kind of sword," Shiki noted. "Ah. I see. One of your little trophies, is it? A first-rate blade too. Something forged from the spirits of heroes long past. A proper Heroic Spirit Blade, huh?"

"It's more than that!" Lancer countered.

He opened his mouth wide, and in the space of a heartbeat, red light gathered like a coiled snake. Then, in a violent burst, he released it point-blank at Shiki.

The blast bore an uncanny resemblance to the technique Sofia had used time and again against Makoto—an attack meant to reduce everything to ash.

"Ngh?!"

But the gasp of shock didn't come from Shiki.

It came from Lancer.

“What’s the matter?” Shiki asked calmly, standing unharmed behind a shimmer of translucent energy. “I’m a sorcerer, you know. It’s only natural I’d be able to put up a quick barrier.”

The crimson flash that should have incinerated him had been pushed aside by the barrier, harmlessly dissipating into the sky.

A warrior wielding a massive sword that no sorcerer should be able to lift. A barrier so deft and resilient it would shame seasoned spellcasters.

Lancer’s gaze flicked to his injured hand, where blue light was knitting the flesh back together, and yet, his composure was slipping fast.

He was losing his grip.

“Now then... Shall we continue?”

Shiki stepped forward, his assault intensifying. The red gleam in his hollow eyes blazed even brighter, a silent promise of devastation yet to come.

Overhead, midline, low sweep.

Shiki’s blade danced through all three with seamless precision, sometimes even delivering slashes that looked more like karate-style downward stumps than any traditional sword form. And all of it was executed with a weapon most couldn’t even lift properly, let alone wield like an extension of their own body. The weighty claymore was a blur in his hands, a relentless storm that left no room for a counterattack.

Beams of light shaped into swords, as well as solid, conjured weapons—every attempt to interfere was batted away like leaves in a flood—shattered, scattered, and crushed before they ever reached him.

Around Lancer, the summoned elite swords moved in desperation, forming a frantic perimeter to intercept the onslaught and shield their master from ruin.

*“Brilliance that Pierces is the Flame of Vitality—  
Stiaselot.”*

From the void at Shiki's back, a darkness blacker than night itself slithered forward, coiling around Lancer's form.

“You're casting spells in the middle of this blade exchange?” Lancer's voice faltered.

To an observer, the change might've seemed small. Barely a hitch in his motion. But for those in the fight, the difference was lethal.

*“Let the Blade Return Unto Its Wielder—Rot Counter.”*

Another incantation, uttered without hesitation.

This time, he didn't even bother to deflect the sword aimed at him. He let it come.

It tore through the shimmering aura surrounding his body, but before it could bite into his flesh, a shrill *crack* rang out.

The blade shattered, as if it had been turned against its own wielder.

“You... You destroyed a Heroic Sword?!” Lancer's voice trembled, caught between panic and disbelief.

“How many of them will break before you fall, I wonder?” Shiki murmured. He was exhilarated, but not reckless. Every movement he made was precise, measured, surgical.

To Lancer, the figure before him no longer seemed entirely human. Sword raised, hollow eyes glowing, Shiki moved with a discordance that defied natural law.

It wasn't just his demeanor. It wasn't just the balance between poised calm and rising thrill; it was the impossible multitasking between sword and spell, both at once.

Even from a distance, the lone spectators—the Hero's party—could see the truth with painful clarity.

Shiki wasn't just holding his own against Lancer, a creature who belonged to the ranks of the Greater

Dragons; he was overwhelming him.

Inside the protective barrier, the party could do little but watch. The battle was so fierce, so brilliantly orchestrated, it was hard not to become entranced by it. It was the kind of spectacle that pulled your breath from your chest before you even realized.

Chiya, who had her hands full maintaining the barrier while healing Woody, could hardly spare a thought for anything else. And by comparison, what Shiki was doing—layering spells mid-combat while unleashing high-speed swordplay—was beyond comprehension.

As if his body and mind were acting separately. As if he were possessed by something that had long since crossed the threshold of humanity.

The dragon standing at the apex of this world was faltering. And all the others could do was bear witness to his fall.

# Tsukimichi Chapter 2

**T***ch.*

Shiki clicked his tongue.

On his list of worst possible outcomes, this one ranked near the top.

He had expected that Lancer might whip up imitation versions of his prized collection on the fly. Given the way the presence of death affected Lancer's power, Shiki had even accounted for the possibility that these replicas might temporarily enhance it in unpredictable ways.

He definitely hadn't expected them to be this strong.

Lancer alone had already far exceeded Shiki's original estimations. And now this—an escalating assault backed by blades forged with unexpectedly high-grade force.

The cause wasn't hard to guess.

The capital was crawling with elites: the demon army led by the giant warlord Io, and seasoned adventurers from Tsige who had come to aid Hibiki, the Hero.

It was no surprise that some of their weapons had been co-opted. The summoned swords didn't just attack blindly; they struck with relentless purpose, as if each blade had a

will of its own, and its only desire was to see Shiki defeated.

He couldn't tell who had contributed which weapon, nor did he care. But among them were swords born from the legends of ancient heroes, blades strong enough to rival Lancer's core collection. And they were *hurting* him.

To an outsider's eyes, the battle looked to be going entirely in Shiki's favor.

Even Lancer himself had begun to panic. His usual calm demeanor was gone, replaced with disbelief and growing desperation.

Just as Shiki had planned, but the truth was something else entirely.

He wasn't dancing through this fight with casual dominance. Every movement, every spell, every clash of blades was performed with absolute focus and zero restraint. There was no room for hesitation. He was burning through his options with reckless abandon. If it looked effortless, it was only because he'd forced it to be.

*Even so... I'll kill him without letting him smell the scent of struggle, Shiki promised himself. This one—I cannot allow myself to look pathetic in front of him. Not after declaring myself a retainer of Young Master.*

Lancer had grown terrifyingly powerful. In terms of raw strength, Shiki might have been losing. Not only did Lancer now spew condensed fire with lethal precision, but he could neutralize Shiki's darkness-based spells by layering similarly aligned energies over them. Even the toxic effects Shiki infused into Ascalon—venoms meant to corrode, paralyze, and rot—were being countered, purified mid-clash before they could take hold.

To put it bluntly: if they'd met like this with no foreknowledge or preparation, Shiki would've been utterly outmatched.

He could trade blows momentarily, maybe even keep up for a while, but his chance of winning outright? Slim to none.

The only reason he was still in control was because he'd gone all in.

A reckless barrage fueled not by advantage, but by desperation.

Shiki wasn't simply fighting; he was shredding Lancer's tactics with premeditated counters. Every spell, every movement had been calculated in advance to neutralize Lancer's strengths. And even when things slipped just past his reach, when the boosted enemy drove him to the brink, Shiki never let even a flicker of panic show.

When Lancer unleashed an absurdly powerful breath attack point-blank, one strong enough to flip the battlefield on its head, Shiki coolly deflected it without so much as a raised eyebrow.

Even threats he hadn't anticipated were met with instant, surgical responses.

Attacks meant to buy time and reset the rhythm of the fight were ignored outright. He refused to let Lancer catch his breath.

This was how Shiki was managing to overwhelm an opponent so far above him.

It was a feat impossible for someone unaccustomed to fighting those stronger than themselves, but Shiki had made a habit of doing precisely that.

Makoto had once said it plainly: "*Shiki is stronger than Lancer.*"

If Lancer were still the same high-tier dragon he'd been when he fought Makoto—perhaps a little stronger now, but fundamentally unchanged—then yes, Makoto would have been right.

Against an opponent of similar strength, Shiki's strategic mindset, combined with the adaptive power of his ring's multi-mode combat skills, would have given him a clear edge.

But this guy, this Lancer... He was something else entirely.

He had absorbed the strength of other dragons, perhaps even rivaling Sofia in that regard. And that changed everything.

Now, Makoto's assessment of Shiki's strength only rang true because of Shiki's sheer brilliance in adapting mid-battle.

Even so, unless he ended this fight soon, before something truly unexpected happened, before the dreaded unforeseen finally arrived, Shiki's chances of victory would all but vanish.

Fortunately, Ascalon's poison was beginning to show its effect.

Bit by bit, it was eating into Lancer's body.

His natural healing and resistance no longer seemed enough. The balance had tipped.

Already, part of Lancer's right hand had succumbed to petrification. Serpentine lines of crimson and black marred his skin, the poison creeping like rot beneath the bark of a dying tree.

Shiki was cornering him. Slowly, relentlessly.

*Don't notice. Just die like this...*

That Lancer still hadn't caught on to the hidden element—the piece of the puzzle that could unravel everything—was pure luck, and Shiki knew it.

"You're not even the Wicked One himself!" Lancer yelled with a mix of fury and desperation. "Just his damn servant!"

His summoned blades swirled in every direction; some swinging with brutal strength, others launching forward like javelins, turning the battlefield into a deadly storm.

He fought like a monster. No question there.

Controlling that many weapons simultaneously, attacking from all angles. It was the kind of ability only something *inhuman* could manage.

Shiki's blade met Lancer's.

His spell clashed against Lancer's incantation.

Steel and sorcery collided, exploding in sparks and thunder, and in both, Shiki held the slightest advantage.

So it was Lancer who bled. Lancer who broke. Lancer, who staggered beneath the weight of each exchange.

Every time their swords rang out, it was Lancer whose grip faltered first. And its conclusion was drawing near.

"Graaahhh!!!"

"Guh—ghhh!"

Ascalon's silver arc cut through the air in a savage horizontal sweep—connecting with Lancer's leg. The blade bit cleanly through the flesh mid-leap, severing it in one brutal motion. And Lancer crashed to the ground with a roar, legless from the knee down.

*Now. This is it.*

Shiki braced to end it in one clean strike, but then a voice, urgent and full of desperation, rang out from behind him.

He froze mid-lunge.

*Did Lancer's sword hit someone?*

A pit opened up in his gut.

*Was my worst guess right after all?*

Shiki turned his head slowly, dread crawling up his spine. But what he saw drew a quiet breath of relief from his lips.

"No, it seems luck's still on my side."

It had been a gamble. A two-in-five chance, by his count. If Lancer had figured it out—if he’d noticed that thing—Shiki’s entire plan would’ve collapsed right then and there.

But he hadn’t, and Shiki had won the bet.

Across the battlefield, an adventurer from Tsige had collapsed, arm outstretched, lips moving as if to convey some final message.

His words never reached Shiki—he was too far away.

Perhaps he’d known Tomoe or Mio. It didn’t matter now.

He and Shiki had never met before today.

The man’s body had been skewered by one of Lancer’s radiant blades.

Behind him, the shrine maiden from Lorel staggered—someone had shoved her aside just in time, but her protective barrier was shattered in the process.

*He shielded her, Shiki realized. Adventurer—whatever you are—thank you. If that girl, or even worse, the Hero, had become part of Lancer’s arsenal... I’d have lost everything.*

All this time, Shiki had been carefully bluffing; pretending that the new barrier Chiya had cast was merely a continuation of his old one—a subtle sleight of hand.

In truth, he no longer had the focus or spare strength to uphold such a powerful defensive field while dueling Lancer head-on. So he’d faked it. Let his opponent believe the barrier hadn’t changed.

It was a desperate ploy, and it had barely worked.

Chiya’s newly drawn barrier wasn’t strong enough to withstand a direct assault. If Lancer had figured it out—if he had turned his full firepower toward it—he would have shattered it in minutes.

*Or less, Shiki thought grimly.*

A single solid strike from one of Lancer's materialized swords could have ripped it apart like paper. And with it, Hibiki's party would've been annihilated.

Shiki had batted away three such swords using his own barrier, only to dispel the barrier immediately afterward and seamlessly switch it with Chiya's.

That subtle swap had allowed him to ease his magical burden without tipping his hand. By unveiling fresh strategies in rapid succession, he kept Lancer's focus locked squarely on himself, rather than on the one thing that absolutely could not be discovered.

Just as he hoped, the majority of Lancer's real-blade attacks continued to target only Shiki. The worst-case scenario, Hibiki and the others being absorbed into Lancer's power, never came to pass.

It helped, too, that someone in Hibiki's party must have caught on. Yet no one said a word. That silent cooperation had been critical to the plan's success.

More importantly, if Hibiki had fallen, Shiki would have failed to carry out Makoto's command. That alone was unacceptable.

He had gambled that Hibiki wouldn't go down so easily, but even so, hearing her scream earlier had made his heart lurch.

Still, the moment had come.

*This is the turning point*, he realized.

The moment that would decide everything.

"Tch... Missed again! You wretched little lich—so damned cunning!" Lancer spat the words like venom.

But his sneer quickly faltered into a grimace. He now fully understood what Shiki had feared all along. And yet, judging from his expression, he had not a hint of remorse, even after aiming his blades at a child.

Mitsurugi's leg was still missing. He couldn't regenerate it, at least, not fast enough. Instead, he leaned heavily on one of his swords, using it like a cane.

Behind him, the fallen adventurer's body dissolved into light. Within seconds, the light was coalescing, solidifying into a new weapon—another blade for Lancer's arsenal.

As soon as it had taken shape, the sword lunged for Shiki. At the same time, Lancer howled, and the battlefield ignited with steel.

Dozens, no, hundreds of swords surged into view, both real and spectral, light and steel, all pointing at their single target.

Shiki knew that this was it.

Lancer had cast everything into one final, all-consuming assault.

"Hmph. So you do understand," Shiki said. "You know this is the end."

"This is the first time I've been driven this far since Sofia," Lancer replied. "I wonder—how fine a blade you'll become, once I've added you to my collection!"

"Like hell I would serve you! I've already found the one I follow!"

Shiki dropped into a half stance, bracing Ascalon in both hands, its tip aimed forward like a lance. Then he charged.

A whirlwind of spells bloomed around him—barriers, distortions, threads of annihilation, and curses intertwined. Everything was aimed at Lancer.

Lancer roared and raised his swords to meet him, channeling the last of his might into each swing. Around them, a cyclone of blades converged, turning the battlefield into a cage of steel and light.

Shiki, Lancer, and a thousand swords, all collapsed into one singular, coalesced shadow.

Then...

*Impact.*

A thunderclap of power. Shockwaves exploded outward from the point of contact, shattering stone, flattening trees, ripping earth from earth. Sword pressure collided with magical force, and the very air split and howled with destruction.

Inside the barrier, those who had survived braced themselves against the blast. Belda was the first to speak, his voice unsteady.

“Did they kill each other?”

Hibiki’s healing had slowed—she’d spent too much magic shielding the others from the wave of devastation, but she managed to add her own thoughts, even as her hands trembled.

“No, no, that can’t be. That’s not... Larva-dono lost? Eh?”

And then silence.

Their eyes scanned the settling dust, the chaos parting to reveal the final tableau. One man stood.

Lancer: one-legged, panting, bloodied, but upright. Before him, Larva stood still as death, his body pierced from every angle by an army of swords. A grotesque statue of agony; his arms hung limp, his skull-like face void of light.

*He’s been defeated, Hibiki realized. Just like I said, it’s over...*

Ascalon had not impaled Lancer. No wound struck through his heart. His injuries seemed unchanged from before the final charge. It didn’t make sense. Not until Hibiki noticed what wasn’t there.

Larva was no longer holding his sword.

Ascalon had vanished.

Oblivious to this, Lancer threw back his head and howled in triumphant laughter. “Ha... Hahahaha! Do you see this, servant of the Wicked One?! This is the power worthy of ruling over dragons—no, the very laws of the world themse...”

He never finished.

That pride-soaked boast was the last thing he ever said. Whether he ever paused to wonder, as Hibiki had, where Ascalon had gone... No one would ever know.

“....!!!”

Hibiki saw a great sword.

It was Ascalon.

The blade made a clean, merciless arc as it fell from sky to earth. Wreathed in venomous red and cursed black, the great sword cleaved through Mitsurugi’s body vertically, carving him in two.

The halves slid apart with grim finality, collapsing to the ground in steaming, twitching slabs of flesh—one last grotesque offering to the battlefield.

From Hibiki’s vantage, the sword had come from behind Lancer. Only when the blade-dragon’s body crumpled did the wielder finally step into view.

A tall figure. Slender. Long crimson hair trailing behind like a war banner. And in his hand: the black, wicked blade that had once belonged to Larva.

“Wh... Who?” Hibiki’s voice trembled, half a whisper—a question meant for no one but herself.

“Pathetic,” the man muttered. “But this was the best I could manage. Disengage: Sword Emperor Possession.

Even his own voice was faint. A worn-out whisper meant only for his own ears.

The man looked down at the dissolving corpse of Lancer, his expression twisted into a bitter, self-mocking smirk.

Ascalon shimmered in his hand, then vanished. In its place remained only a simple, unadorned black staff.

Shiki, his true form now exposed, began walking toward the others.

The skeletal visage of Larva, the lich, had been discarded—a puppet, both disguise and decoy.

He had saved his trump card for the very end.

In the split-second before the final clash, Shiki had sacrificed his outer shell, activated a short-range teleport he had never once revealed to Lancer, and struck from a blind angle with a perfect finishing blow. That one final deception, unseen until the instant it landed, had decided everything.

*Had I been even a moment slower, a fraction weaker, this would've gone the other way.*

Because he understood that so well, Shiki couldn't help but curse his own lack of strength as he made his way toward Hibiki and the others.

"So it *was* you, Larva-dono?" Hibiki asked hesitantly, following a gut instinct that defied logic.

"What?!"

"No way!"

It wasn't Shiki who answered first. Belda and Chiya both cried out in shock before he could open his mouth.

That the mysterious figure and the monstrous lich from earlier could be the same person was, by this world's standards, utterly unthinkable.

The boundary between the living and the undead was immutable. Final.

Even if the two had wielded the same weapon, the logical assumption would have been that the lich had been under someone else's control, a puppet summoned and commanded by another.

Hibiki wasn't from this world.

Unconstrained by the natural laws of this realm, she still carried the logic of Earth, and it was precisely that unorthodox perspective that let her connect the dots so quickly.

*An otherworlder, huh... Shiki sighed in exasperation. Heroes are even more troublesome than I thought.*

He hadn't even had time to recover before his identity had been deduced with laughable ease.

Even his master had once asked him, quite seriously, whether he could "change back" to his original appearance. That had left Shiki equally dumbfounded. It seemed people from other worlds were blessed (or cursed) with endlessly unpredictable imaginations.

In this case, the transformation had been primarily for the sake of disguise. So, strictly speaking, Shiki hadn't returned to being a lich. But it wasn't as simple as just donning a costume either.

It was difficult to explain in plain terms—there were layers of magic, spirit manipulation, and form-shifting involved that didn't fit into any single category.

*Is my master going to want a detailed explanation of all this?* Shiki wondered briefly.

But the theories and formulas that had begun bubbling up in his mind were cast aside the next instant as he focused on the party before him.

"Normally," he said, his voice hoarse, "no one would ever catch on so easily. Honestly, considering all the blunders that led to this point... I have a headache just thinking about it."

His tone carried the weight of someone who hadn't wanted to show his hand, and now regretted doing so.

"So you were actually hyuman?" Hibiki asked cautiously.

Shiki offered only the faintest smile. "That was a very long time ago." Then he turned, brushing past Hibiki as he approached Chiya.

"Step aside, shrine maiden. I intend to keep my promise."

"Eh? Ah..."

Hibiki moved instinctively as Shiki raised one hand, fingers glowing faintly.

"Fifth-Tier: Khet, unlocked," he murmured. "Hmm... Not as severe as I feared. I'd prepared for the worst—soul displacement, full body reconstruction—so this is almost disappointing."

He extended his hand over the fallen adventurer, his tone clinical yet oddly respectful.

"If your soul had still been lingering nearby, I had contingencies. But it seems that won't be necessary."

On his finger, a new ring shimmered into view.

*"Silver Arm, Ágátrám. Begin restoration."*

A warm, green light rose up from the ground, wrapping around Woody's body like a soft, living blanket.

Hibiki, Belda, and Chiya stood by, collectively holding their breath.

Even after Chiya's desperate healing, the gaping hole in Woody's abdomen had only barely closed. His complexion remained ghostly pale, his breathing shallow and fragile.

Now, before their eyes, color began to return to his skin. First faint, then fuller, richer. His lips pinked, his cheeks warmed. Soon, his chest began to rise and fall with a gentle, rhythmic breath, steady and peaceful.

"That should suffice," Shiki murmured. "From here on out, all he needs is rest. No need for long-winded explanations. Just take good care of him."

Chiya nodded deeply, her relief plain.

Even Belda—who until now had kept his distance, wary and mistrusting—bowed his head with sincerity and said, “You saved him. Truly, thank you, Larva-dono. I swear by my name, I will repay this debt.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Shiki said curtly, already turning away.

Hibiki stopped him with a probing glance.

“Servant of the Wicked One,” she echoed. “Was that just Lancer’s assumption, or should we be taking that title literally?”

Shiki didn’t miss a beat. “You heard Lancer’s ravings?” he asked. “Then forget them. In fact, erase them from your mind.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Look,” he prompted, gesturing outward.

Beyond the ruined courtyard, the royal capital lay in tatters. Buildings shattered, streets torn open like broken ribs, fires still smoldering in scattered pockets of destruction.

“There are so many survivors out there. Crying out for help. Afraid. Displaced. The ones who evacuated are no doubt just as shaken, waiting to hear that the chaos has ended. Don’t waste your time on me. You three have more meaningful things to do.”

His cold, dismissive expression never changed. But in reality, he could barely contain his frustration.

*Damn it. That fifth-tier Khet spell drained too much. Overused the rings. That bastard Lancer really made me bleed for this one. If I go to Young Master in this state, I'll be dead weight. First, I need to recover...*

“And this time,” Hibiki asked pointedly, “you’re not going to stop us from offering aid?”

“I won’t help either,” he replied flatly.

He meant it.

At this point, the only real threat to Hibiki’s group was Sofia, and Shiki was confident that Makoto was handling that.

With the rain of swords having devastated both forces alike, large-scale combat was no longer feasible for either side. And, as if to seal the deal, Lancer had been defeated by none other than Shiki himself.

Whether the goal was to rescue survivors or to escape the ruins of the capital, nothing in the royal city could stop Hibiki now.

“Belda already said this, but... we’ll repay you. One day, I promise,” Hibiki said.

“Hmph. Very well. I’ll remember that.” Shiki’s reply was nonchalant, as ever.

Belda, now carrying the stabilized Woody over her shoulder, turned toward Hibiki as they finished getting ready to move.

“Hibiki, let’s head for somewhere Woody can rest. I heard from one of the scouts. They barely managed to get a signal through, but they said camps are forming outside the city walls. That’ll be our best bet.”

Hibiki nodded quietly. She cast one final glance at Shiki, then turned away and ran without a word.

Her thoughts did not stay quiet.

*The dying words of that adventurer, the one who got turned into a sword...*

*He said I reminded him of certain people. Was he talking about the ones from Tsige?*

*And Larva, when he fought as the Wicked One’s servant, his sword style... It wasn’t with a katana, but the movements... The form was so similar to my teacher’s. There’s absolutely no way that was just a coincidence.*

*Then the Wicked One’s white armor; it looked exactly like a tokusatsu hero’s suit. Designed with purpose and styled for Earth’s eyes.*

*Larva and him, whoever he is; there’s a strong chance they’re connected to otherworlders. Maybe even from Earth.*

*Tsige, otherworlders, impossible powers... Could this all tie back to the Kuzunoha Company?*

*Could the Wicked One be Raidou? But, I haven’t sensed Mio-san. Or the dwarf artisan.*

*And apparently, the name “Kuzunoha” only exists in the Lorel region of this world.*

*There’s got to be something to this. But there are still many missing pieces.*

*One thing’s certain; none of them are just coincidental strangers. Not a chance.*



“Ahahaha!!”

Sofia’s laughter burst through the near-ruins of the audience chamber, high and sharp, echoing off the shattered stone like a knife drawn across glass.

“Did you finally lose it?” I asked.

“Hardly,” she replied, flashing a toothy grin. “I’m perfectly sane. Just... two things struck me as really funny.”

“What?”

The word slipped out before I could stop it, half exasperation, half genuine concern.

I’d already dispelled the charm that was twisting her mind, so at least she wasn’t fixated on the Empire’s Hero anymore. But personality-wise? There wasn’t much change at all.

She was still brimming with killing intent, still locked onto me like a predator. Then, out of nowhere, she started laughing like she was on the edge of madness.

*Seriously... Is she broken or what?*

The moment her laughter cut off, I felt it—her aura shifted. Darkened. Swelled.

No, it evolved.

Power surged around her like a tidal wave just beginning to crest.

*So that’s it. She wasn’t losing it; she was buying time.*

Not all of the energy she was drawing in had arrived yet. She needed more time, and that laugh was a distraction.

*Crafty. And just my luck to be stuck with someone like her.*

“One,” Sofia began, her voice trembling with restrained mirth, “is that no matter how long you’ve fought beside someone, no matter how much history you’ve got, they can still die absurdly easily.”

“Lancer’s dead, huh?”

I hadn’t extended my perception far enough to see Shiki’s battlefield. Not directly. But still...

*Yeah. No way Shiki lost.*

And if he’d managed to *finish* Lancer, then...

*He’s gotten way stronger than I thought.*

Sofia exhaled, her smile turning thin and sharp. “And the second thing? That would be my ridiculous luck. I made a bet, and wouldn’t you know it? I won.”

“A bet with Lancer?”

*What the hell would she wager in a situation like this?*

She hadn’t made any deals with *me*, so it had to be between her and Lancer. But even in this state, she didn’t feel reckless, just more dangerous. If she had another trick, I’d watch. If not, it might be time to end this.

“I told him that if I died first, I’d become part of his little collection.”

Her eyes glinted, just for a second.

“But if he died first, then his remaining life and power would be mine.”

*“Remaining life,” huh? Lancer had more than one life?*

“So what?” I asked quietly. “You won your bet and absorbed however much life or power Lancer possessed, and then what? What exactly do you think that gets you?”

I tilted my head slightly, just enough to make my disinterest obvious.

“You already know it doesn’t matter. No matter how many swords you summon, no matter how much dragon

power you cram into yourself, you can't pose a threat to me. Not even close."

Getting a boost from Lancer at this point was like trying to patch a sinking ship with bandages. Even if it made her light swords a little stronger, it wasn't going to change anything.

"There *was* one more thing I realized," she replied, her voice quiet now.

The twisted smile faded from her face. That eerie, delighted laughter vanished like a forgotten dream.

*No more stalling? Good. I was going to wait either way.*

"Haaah..." I couldn't help letting out a sigh.

"Looking down on someone in a fight really does make you feel sick," Sofia continued. "And I've done a lot of that lately. So, I guess I'm trying to reflect."

"Oh yeah?" I questioned flatly.

*Right. Now you want to play the noble warrior routine? Spare me.*

If it was meant as provocation, it wasn't going to land. Not anymore.

I had a decent grip on the reins of my own mind and even the ending of this looming fight. I could accept it calmly, whatever it turned out to be. There was a certain detachment, almost clinical, in the way I was thinking now.

*I'm not cold. I'm just... in the zone. It's not like I'm some soulless killer.*

*Not even someone who's slaughtered thousands in war spends their days off thinking about bloodshed while cracking jokes over dinner with friends. That kind of dissonance doesn't work.*

*More likely, they compartmentalize.*

*You flip a switch. You become the soldier. You move like one. Think like one. Kill like one.*

What I had inside me right now wasn't something special. It was just my version of that switch.

*It's not another person in my head, it's just me.*

*Me, but setting my emotions aside for a while, just long enough to survive the fight. Because this... This is the combat mindset that best fits me.*

*I've been confronting myself ever since I was still in Japan, that's why I'm fine now.*

*Just like how these magic-formed bodies can't touch me anymore, no matter what my "enemies" say, I won't be swayed. I won't let them rattle me.*

As that thought settled quietly in my chest, Sofia's voice cut through.

"And those who look down on others—they let their guard down. That's why I got here when I did. I'll show you my trump card. The one that crushed not one, but two Greater Dragons."

"Y'know..." I interjected calmly. "Strong people running wild on the battlefield, doing whatever they want with their strength, isn't that kind of the definition of the logic of war? Sounds less like carelessness and more like inevitability."

"You're not even trying to stop me now. If that's not arrogance, if that's not complacency, then what do you call it?"

"Poise, maybe? Hmm..."

No reply came.

Meanwhile, the floor beneath Sofia's feet began to ripple—an oily sheen of violently clashing colors, a nauseating kaleidoscope that bled outward across the stone.

The wave spread slowly and uneasily, and then it reached me.

*The hell is this?*

The warped colors crawled over the floor, up the walls, into the ceiling, until everything, everywhere, was consumed. Sky, stone, space itself, a sickening prism of distortion swallowed all of it.

I waited, watching carefully. The spread stopped just short of overtaking the entire throne room.

Still, what was overtaken had become a wholly alien world. A visual assault. A place the eye actively wanted to reject.

*What an awful space. It hurts to even look at it.*

The moment that completely unfiltered thought floated through my head...

It began.

A shrill, earsplitting screech, like a dozen fingernails raking across glass all at once, shattered the air. It rose and rose in volume until it was impossibly loud. Then, without warning, the rainbow-hued world shattered like brittle crystal.

Gone.

And just like that, we were back in the familiar silence of the audience chamber.

Except... not.

No, I'd suspected that wouldn't be the end of it, and I was right. Seconds later, swords began to emerge—from beneath Sofia's feet, from the walls, from the air itself.

And not just one or two. They kept coming. Dozens. Hundreds.

Each with a unique design, a different aura. The space around us looked like the throne room again, but it wasn't. This was something else.

*She pulled me into a different dimension entirely.*

*What an over-the-top, extravagant setup.*

They were all swords, sure, but the energy I was feeling from them? That was no ordinary craftsmanship.

Dozens of them gave off a presence that rivaled the elite weapons forged by the elder dwarves.

*Incredible.*

“Welcome,” Sofia said with a smirk, “to the *Prison of Blades*. This is a special space, linked directly to the vault where Lancer stored his collection. And also, an execution chamber.”

*Of course it is.*

Her smile was confident, theatrical, and precisely what you’d expect from someone who thought the trap was already sprung.

“You’re not wrong,” I admitted. “The swords are impressive. But what’s even more impressive is that you managed to drag me into a separate space in the first place.”

“That part was a shortcut. I just nudged the layers a bit —low effort, really. But the hospitality? That, I’ve put thought into. I guarantee you won’t be bored.”

“Yeah, well, this is a first for me. Well... almost. Aside from a few exceptions.”

I was giving her genuine praise. But instead of basking in it, Sofia closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her expression carrying a stillness that hinted at coming violence.

*Wow. Ignored. How rare. Even Tomoe has never completely tuned me out like this.*

*Must’ve been when that godawful screech rang out, that’s when the shift happened. Damn. I might actually be impressed by her for the first time.*

Sofia had said it was a shortcut, but if she really had this level of spatial manipulation hidden under the hood...

*Yeah, no doubt about it. She’s seriously talented in spatial or dimensional magic. It could be one of her original aptitudes.*

She still wasn't attacking, which meant I had time.

*All right then. Let's activate the Realm and analyze this place.*

"Hmm... So it boosts the power of whoever deployed it. That's pretty standard for bounded spaces, but wait, that's not all."

My eyes flicked through the data flooding in, and one particular trait caught my attention.

"Whoa... That's the nasty one—shared life with the swords?"

The moment I said it, Sofia's brow twitched ever so slightly.

*Got her.*

"That's not just intuition," she muttered. "You're beyond hyuman. At least in every way except your looks."

"Guilty," I said, deadpan. "So, every single one of these swords is your life now, huh?"

I turned slowly, taking in the profusion of blades planted in the ground and floating in the air.

*Swords. Swords. Swords as far as the eye can see.*

"Limitless extra lives, courtesy of a literal sea of weapons. Now that's a filthy trick if I've ever seen one."

I could feel it, the pulse of life, radiating from the swords stuck in the ground and floating in the air.

They weren't just weapons. They were alive.

Every single one of them was linked to Sofia, like arteries to a heart. Life flowed between them, shared and distributed.

Judging by her expression, my guess was dead on.

In this space, Sofia wouldn't die unless I destroyed every last one of these blades. Or maybe I'd have to kill her as many times as there were swords.

As long as we remained inside this warped pocket dimension, she would continue to benefit from an absurd

power multiplier. This automatic enhancement spell pushed her strength past normal limits. On top of that, she could temporarily wield skills and magic she wouldn't usually possess, depending on which weapon she picked up.

Those weapons? They still carried the power of multiple high-ranking dragons she'd already consumed.

*Okay, yeah, that's just broken.*

"One thousand and eighty," Sofia said with quiet pride. "It's not infinite."

"Actually, it's a bit less now," I replied. "Lancer already spent a few against Shiki. Some of them didn't make it out."

Still, it was a spectacular sight and, frankly, an incredible ability.

If I were a Greater Dragon, I wouldn't want to fight something like this either, not when her base combat power alone was already terrifying. And she'd already absorbed Bakufu—the healing-type dragon—by the time we first fought.

*Yomatoi and Akari... I really do feel sorry for them.*

Not to mention, many of the blades here weren't just steel. They were heroes. Lancer's chosen. His prized collection.

"This is the final dance of blades," Sofia said. "And it won't end until you're the one who dies."

She drew one sword, then another—now dual-wielding with practiced ease. Her eyes gleamed with confidence as she faced me.

But...

"Too bad," I said quietly. "You picked the worst possible ability for the final act, Sofia."

She stopped, her breath catching in her throat—not out of fear, but from the subtle change she'd noticed. The way I was looking at her now, I wondered if she could see the pity

in my eyes. But she offered no response. Instead, she stared at my left hand. Because the moment I said “too bad,” it had flared with light. Just faintly. But she’d noticed. And more than that... she’d heard it.

So had I.

A split-second after that light flashed, several piercing, echoing cries tore through the air—agonized wails like the dying screams of ancient heroes being undone.

Her gaze sharpened.

“Raidou. That’s...”

“Warrior. Mage. Doesn’t matter,” I said, stepping forward. “Because I’m neither of those things, Sofia.”

I raised my left hand toward her, weapon in hand, the same one I’d pulled from a separate space just moments ago. Even within Sofia’s dominion, a space entirely under her control, I could do this effortlessly.

*Yeah... It’s a trick built on subdimensional layering, sure, but even so, I almost feel bad.*

As a greeting, or, more like, a demonstration, I let the attack speak for itself. The moment it was unleashed, it confirmed what I already knew. The sword I’d targeted shattered.

*Just as I thought, she doesn’t stand even the faintest chance anymore.*

“Ah... Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

Sofia’s scream split the air, her eyes blown wide with the kind of fear that borders on clarity. Whether it was intuition or a sudden flood of signs within herself, she had reached the same conclusion I had.

She came at me like a bullet. No style. No build-up. Just pure, primal speed.

The blade she swung had enough power to rock the air. Enough force that, even against my mana body, it landed harder than any of her previous strikes.

*This isn't just her base strength,* I realized.

The space itself was backing her. And the blade she wielded had its own power. It all stacked—enhancement on top of enhancement.

*Fine. Then I'll stack something too.*

I shifted the *Realm*, tuning it for defensive reinforcement. The next time Sofia's blade met my mana body, it barely left a mark.

*Perfect.*

Next, I reached into the Demiplane and withdrew another piece of my armory—a white arrow, its shaft almost glowing with purity. Just like the bow I already held in my left hand. I notched the arrow and took aim.





Sofia darted from ground to sky, blades flashing with each step, but no matter how fiercely she attacked, her gaze never left my left hand.

"This bow is *Azusa*," I said calmly. "It's mine. The craftsman who made it insisted I name it—wouldn't take no for an answer. So I picked an old name. An ancient bow from back home, *Azusa-yumi*."

As I poured mana into the arrow in my right hand, it began to change color, from stark white to pale pink, then bright red, until at last it glowed a deep, angry crimson.

The shaft was made of the same material as *Draupnir*, the rings I always wore. Dense, mana-conductive, forged to contain power I couldn't safely hold within myself.

When I first got the mana body, I realized something: if I couldn't build a spell by burning mana all at once, then I just needed to store the energy somewhere else, like in a weapon.

Sure, there were limits. But this crimson arrow carried far more force than any spell I could shape directly.

"Stop!!!" Sofia screamed.

At her command, the other swords scattered across the air and ground turned as one and surged toward me, not just the two blades in her hands, but all of them.

Slashing, thrusting, raining down like an execution; there wasn't a shred of hesitation or mercy.

Amidst that storm of violence, Sofia twisted through the air, constantly shifting her position. She ducked, rolled, leaped, and sometimes vanished in mid-motion, reappearing in flashes of light across the battlefield. She was doing everything she could to break my aim. And as she moved, she cycled through blades, each one bringing with it new skills, new spells.

*How many heroes' powers has she absorbed? I couldn't even guess. But it doesn't matter.*

*Azusa* wasn't a modern weapon. It was a relic of a simpler time, its shape more like a traditional Japanese *yumi* than the kind of bows used in this world. To me, it felt like home.

I pulled the string tight, then released.

The red arrow flew forward, but for the briefest instant, it hovered. Suspended in the air like time itself had stuttered.

Only the bowstring snapped back.

The arrow split.

Two fragments, then four, then eight, branching again and again like lightning across the sky. A blood-red glow trailed behind, jagged and alive.

The arrows tore through Sofia's domain.

They didn't just pierce the swords—they shredded them.

More than a hundred blades—each one housing a fragment of Sofia's life—were obliterated in a flash. The arrow-light carved through her fabricated dimension like a god's judgment, unraveling it at the seams.

All of it...

*In the time it would take to blink.*

"Ghh—!!! Th-This... This can't be happening!" Sofia's scream was raw with shock as she beheld the crumbling remains of her arsenal.

I closed my eyes and went momentarily still.

Then I just kept going. Calmly, quietly, and with no stopping.

*It's too late to panic now, Sofia.*

*Even if you fight harder, scream louder, claw your way through the ruin of this space, it won't change a thing.*

Still, I'll give her this: she never flinched. Never cowered. She stood her ground and pressed forward with everything she had.

*For that alone, you were a first-rate warrior.*

“Since I’ve got some... fairly dangerous *kabura* arrows with me,” I muttered, reaching for another glowing shaft. “I might as well begin the Rite of the Roaring String, the bow that tames monsters and spirits alike.”

“You... *monster!!!* What *are* you?!” Sofia’s voice cracked in rage. “What the hell are you??!!”

Two hundred.

Three hundred.

The repetition continued.

*Arrow. Draw. Fire. Shatter. Repeat.*

I would finish what I started. I would return these fallen heroes to the earth first, then bury her. To crush every ounce of her borrowed strength was the least I could do. And there was one more thing.

*I’ll give her my name.*

My true name. The name of the man she tried to kill without ever really knowing.

“I’m a *kyūdōka*,” I said, voice steady. “Name’s Makoto Misumi. Seems cruel to let you die with nothing but a fake name etched in your mind, doesn’t it, Sofia?”

“I still haven’t *met* him!” she shrieked. “I haven’t even faced Luto, that bastard who plays at being the Greater Dragon of Harmony! I can’t die yet!!!”

*Well...*

*I tried.*

She ignored my name entirely.

*Oh well. I said it. That’s what matters.*

“Luto, huh?” I chuckled. “And harmony, really? He always struck me as more of a *chaos* guy. But hey, here’s the funny part, he turned *you* into a camera and you didn’t even notice.”

“Wha...?!”

Even mid-battle, that made her freeze.

*Sofia, you never realized. You weren't just ignored. You were used, watched, and played like a pawn. In the end, you'll die without ever having been the player.*

*Trying to play the game of schemes with Luto was a mistake from the start.*

Sofia had gambled, and now, she stood on the edge of a miserable defeat.

*So much for Dragon Slayer.*

“Goodbye, Sofia Bulga.”

I looked around. There were no swords left, not a single one. No lingering presence of power, no hidden edge waiting to strike.

Just her.

Even the sword that I'd taken to be a keepsake from Lancer had vanished. She stood alone, unarmed.

Or so I thought.

“No!!! There *is* one! There's still one left!” Sofia's scream cracked through the stillness like breaking glass. “Lancer! So you hid one from even me, right until the end! Damn you! This isn't over! *It can't be over!!!*”

Then, she turned away from me, away from the center of the battlefield, away from everything, and launched herself toward an empty-looking spot in the air.

*What?!*

The sheer absurdity of it threw off my focus for a heartbeat. I hesitated. My arrow loosed half a second late. The space ahead of her rippled like water struck by an unseen force. A crawling, formless unease slipped over me, a shiver of wrongness I couldn't describe. Still, the arrow flew, straight and true, toward her unguarded back.

And then she turned, sword in hand.

*Wait. That's...*

“A katana? A Japanese sword?!”

With effortless grace, Sofia drew the blade from its sheath mid-spin and cut. The arrow shattered—no, split. Even the backlash of its magical charge was cleaved in half and dispersed like mist.

My attack didn't touch her.

Even without perfect focus, that shot should've held devastating force, but she severed it as if batting away a twig.

"Sometimes I like a one-in-a-million bet!" she shouted triumphantly.

That sword—was that what Lancer had hidden? Was that truly the final blade? More pressing still: a *katana*? What kind of hero had been turned into that?

*No... No, wait.*

*Could it be?*

That sword—its shape, its energy—it wasn't just familiar. It resonated.

It had to be.

*Don't tell me its origins are...*

"A sage turned a Japanese person into a sword?"

*If that's true, then Lancer really went above and beyond.* I immediately reached out with my senses, trying to grasp the sword's nature.

Nothing...

Like all the weapons in Lancer's collection, the only things I could feel were its *properties as a sword*. But even that was limited. Incomplete.

*I can't even get a full read on its abilities.*

What I did learn was enough to be troubling. As a weapon, it stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the finest works of the elder dwarves, maybe even surpassed them.

From what I could grasp of its function, it was terrifying in its simplicity: so long as it remained drawn, its

wielder's power would continue to rise. Constantly. Limitlessly.

*That's obscene.*

One of my students specialized in stacking enhancements like a madwoman, but compared to this blade, her skill felt almost adorable.

*No idea about the drawbacks. No indication of a cap.*

I didn't know enough about Lancer to guess why the sword hadn't been sealed in some even more secluded, hidden layer of the space that housed his collection.

Its origin? Its nature? Whether it really came from a Japanese person?

*Not a clue.*

*Tch... What a pain.*

As if sensing my unease, Sofia tossed the scabbard aside without a word. A statement, clear as day: she wasn't going to sheathe that blade again. Not until one of us fell.

I had to give it to her, when pushed to the brink, her instincts still found the one narrow path that could potentially lead to victory.

*Maybe that's what creates miracles: the clarity to choose the impossible and believe in it.*

Honestly, if I hadn't used Azusa...

If I hadn't gained my mana form...

This could've gone very differently.

*Uff.*

*Japanese people, katanas, none of that matters right now.*

Whatever that katana was, if I let my curiosity take over, or if I tried to wrest it away from Sofia and drag it back with me, I'd be the one getting cut and inviting disaster. That'd be the worst of all strategies.

*Right. End this, all of it.*

I forced myself to focus.

*Get it together. This isn't over yet.*

Sofia gave a smile that sent chills crawling across the skin, one born not of confidence, but something far more disturbing.

"So your expression finally changes, Raidou—no, Makoto, was it? This sword... It's incredible, you know? Even in its incomplete state, with its name missing, the power keeps pouring in. When I consumed dragons, I stopped being hyuman. But this? This feels different. I haven't lost myself, I've stepped beyond."

I didn't answer, but my mind was spinning.

*Beyond hyuman, huh. Superhyuman, maybe?*

I remembered Shiki telling me something similar once, back when he was still a lich, how he'd pursued transcending hyumanity like it was a dream worth bleeding for. Now here was Sofia, thinking she'd reached it with a single sword.

*Seriously? A shortcut to transcendence?*

Even if it worked, even if she had touched something real, power like that—rushed, raw, and stolen—was bound to collapse. She was walking a path she didn't even begin to understand.

*I've already picked a fight with a god, you know. You think I'm going to flinch just because your sword sparkles?*

If that katana were her final trick, then maybe this time... she'd stay dead. I didn't plan on taking back my goodbye.

With a blur of motion, Sofia lunged and slashed. Her sword ripped through the mana-formed arm I'd extended to block.

"Your precious armor, hah. All that work, and now it shreds like paper."

The limb evaporated, scattered like steam.

*That's one hell of an edge.*

*Japanese steel, of course. And fast, faster than before.*

With these buffs, she went beyond dangerous, into lethal territory. That sword didn't just cut better; it amplified her reflexes, her precision, her everything.

*OK, let's gauge the risk here. If her speed only triples from here, I can still track her. And with my coat shifted to red—speed priority—I'll have a clear edge in linear acceleration.*

Sofia twisted, blade low and trailing like a comet, and looked over her shoulder with that same mocking smirk.

“Looks like the tide’s turned.”

*Yeah, no.*

*Maybe for a kyūdōka. But this isn’t kyūdō anymore.*

So I changed tactics.

*Forget form. Forget honor. Just hit her. Break her.*

This was no longer about hitting the center.

This was war.

I channeled will into the coat, its hue darkening into the same vivid crimson as the arrow. Every thread flared with acceleration enchantments, tuned and sharpened.

*Tch?!*

*Never thought I’d be using this on Sofia instead of the Goddess.*

Just for a second, I locked my eyes on the blade in her hands and loosed an arrow from above. It was a direct hit, but of course, one shot wasn’t enough.

*Figures.*

I kicked off the ground with everything I had, shooting skyward. Up there, I condensed invisible mana into a foothold and landed on it. No hesitation. I nocked another arrow, channeled magic into the shaft until it shifted from white to red, and then beyond, blazing with critical energy. Then I fired, aiming directly at that cursed sword.

The arrow struck and detonated with a brilliant flash, but Sofia and the katana were still intact.

*Seriously? Still standing after that?*

Even from this altitude, where she looked no bigger than a speck, the sword gave off a presence I couldn't ignore. It felt real, like the arrow had struck something worth the effort. I got so caught up in the sensation that I lingered too long.

And just like that, Sofia was on me.

She'd closed the distance between us in an instant.

Of course, she had wings. *The sky isn't safe*, I reminded myself.

I dispelled the foothold and, at the same time, detonated part of my mana body right next to her. The blast threw off her momentum, and her diagonal slash cut nothing but empty air.

I let myself fall, then reformed another foothold and launched myself sideways in a quick burst of speed. This time, the space between us widened again. Not ground-to-air, but air-to-air, and roughly the same range as before.

In other words: shooting distance.

I locked onto her blade again, funneled raw magic into the next arrow until it burned with critical force, and fired.

*It doesn't even feel like shooting anymore. It's like blasting a target apart with a railgun.*

Sofia grunted as the arrow landed.

*Got her.*

The impact reverberated through the sky between us. Not enough to destroy the katana, but the reaction was there. If I landed ten, maybe a dozen shots, I could probably break that sword. And I wasn't planning to let her get close again.

I'd learned my lesson. This wasn't like running a business. Combat didn't require negotiation; it was simpler than that.

By the time she traced the trajectory and locked onto my location, I was already on the move, repositioning to my next perch.

Sometimes I let her notice on purpose. Sometimes I aimed for Sofia herself, just to make her block with that sword. But I never gave her a moment to breathe.

She had wings now. She should've been able to dominate the sky, but I pinned her there, nailed her in place with relentless pressure. I wasn't going to let her *move* the way she wanted. Not even once.

It probably lasted no more than a few dozen seconds. But for her, it must have felt like an eternity.

Even with that blade, even with the power surging through her with every passing moment, she never even got close to touching my shadow.

I narrowed my eyes and glanced upward.

Solid earth beneath my feet. That mattered.

*Let's finish this from the ground that feels like the right way.*

Just like before, I drew, aimed, pulled, and released.

“There you are!”

She saw me, and our eyes locked.

*So long, Sofia.*

“Luto, I’m calling in this favor,” I muttered as I gazed into her eyes, and beyond. Toward the voyeuristic freak who was probably watching all this unfold live from Rotsgard.

A single white streak tore through Sofia, driving straight through the sword she raised to block.

And then... silence.

Whether it was the force of my arrow or simply the final gasp of the dying realm around us, I couldn’t say, but her pocket dimension surrendered to a rush of brilliant white. Everything faded. Her voiceless scream vanished along with her shadow, swallowed whole by the light.

A sound like shattering glass—like the moment this place was born—echoed one final time through the void.

The royal castle of Limia.

The audience chamber stood still and silent, and I was the only one left, bow in hand. No trace was left of our battle.

The lifeless atmosphere that had lingered moments ago had been replaced by something different, something with texture. A living breeze drifted in from outside, carrying scents from the wounded city beyond.

Not exactly pleasant, considering the place had just been under siege.

Limia was in for a rough road ahead, no doubt about that.

*But this country has Senpai.*

With her here, they’d probably manage. She was superhuman, after all.

*As for me... I'd rather put Rotsgard's reconstruction first. It's closer, and I've got more reason to care.*

*The people here survived this disaster with their lives intact. That's more than enough. So good luck to the rest of you Limia folks, I'm leaving the clean-up to the king and Senpai.*

A brief moment passed before my mind drifted back to the battle.

I'd realized partway through that Luto had been watching me. Around the time Sofia started flying around with her flaming wings, actually.

*Peeping bastard.*

I'd been a little startled at first. A bit creeped out, even. But then again, it was Luto. At this point, nothing about him surprised me.

Whatever history those two had, Sofia and Luto, and whatever twisted reason she'd latched onto him like that, I honestly didn't care. But... since it might piss Luto off, maybe I'd have him explain later. *Consider it payback for all the weird crap he's said to me over time.*

*Oh, right. Almost forgot, I still have one more thing to do.*

*“Guess that leaves Stella Fortress.”*

Getting close was going to be a pain. And if I tried to snipe it from here, I'd probably wreck half the countryside with the blast radius.

*I mean, I already created a damn lake by accident, maybe I should stop reshaping the continent like it's a sandbox game.*

*If anyone's between me and the target, they'll die for nothing. Best to just take out the fortress itself.*

I glanced back up at the sky; it wasn't even dawn yet.

I kicked off the ground, my body cloaked in magical armor. When the momentum dropped, I formed a platform

beneath my feet, then leapt again, and again, and again, gaining height with each jump.

*This should be good enough.*

Finally, I stood atop a platform of condensed mana, facing in the general direction of Stella Fortress. The darkness of night blanketed everything; the fortress itself was still invisible.

*Guess I'll try that trick, then.*

Expanding my *Realm*, I focused my senses to get a feel for the terrain. I already knew the fortress's approximate location, so I zeroed in on that first. Once I'd found it, I aligned myself and the target like two points on a string—just like I used to when lining up difficult shots back in Japan.

Not expanding awareness to everything, but instead, drawing a line between me and the mark.

The fortress stood still.

*Kinda reminds me of Tsige.*

There were no lights. It looked like Rona had done her job evacuating the personnel.

*All right, let's get this over with.*

I reached into empty air and drew the last arrow I'd need tonight. The method Tomoe had taught me really was coming in handy. It felt just as quick and efficient as opening a Demiplane gate.

This time, there was no need to wait for the arrow to turn crimson; I simply nocked it.

“One more shot to wrap things up.”

I didn't know the exact distance. Dozens of kilometers, maybe more. But weirdly, I didn't feel like I'd miss.

Maybe it was the lingering rhythm from my fight with Sofia, my senses still on edge, finely honed.

I let the arrow fly.

A faint red glow streaked across the sky. A few seconds later, it struck the target with perfect precision. A narrow pillar of light bloomed from the impact.

There was no need to fire again.

The fortress crumbled. The shot had completely shattered it, along with a good chunk of the surrounding earth, leaving a vast crater.

*That's a wrap on the Goddess's little request, I thought with grim satisfaction.*

I dispelled the mana platform beneath my feet and let gravity take over, then adjusted my descent as I plummeted toward the ground, angling my body toward where Shiki was. *I've really gotten used to falling, haven't I?*

A few moments later, I crashed onto the ground somewhere in the capital. But that was fine. As long as I stayed wrapped in my mana body, this kind of impact didn't even register.

*At this point, I wouldn't even mind if the Goddess decided to drop me from orbit again. I'd probably bounce.*

When I'd checked Shiki's location through telepathy earlier, he'd sounded a little hesitant, like there was something he didn't want to talk about. But judging by what I saw now, he was in one piece.

Or he had been... until I took a good look.

“Why, do you look like that?”

Instead of his usual lich form, Shiki stood before me in a hyuman body.

“My apologies. I ended up revealing myself. Lancer was... more troublesome than expected,” he explained, bowing deeply.

“You look worn out. Let's head back.”

“Are you certain we can leave the capital as it is? The hero... she didn't seem to be a stranger to you.”

*Right, I did call her “Senpai” out loud.*

No wonder he remembered. If Shiki and Tomoe had really seen my memories, it would make sense that they knew about her. Still, now that I thought about it, neither of them had ever shown much interest in my classmates or friends before.

*Why is that, anyway?*

“I’m sure the people of Limia will handle things around here,” I said. “Looks like the king’s already rushing over. If we’re going to help, it can wait until later. Wouldn’t want to jump into things and make them worse just because we don’t know the whole story.”

I gave Shiki a tired shrug, brushing off some dust from my sleeve.

“As for the hero... yeah. She’s someone I knew. We can talk about that once we’re back. I mean, I just got caught in my sentai cosplay and had to see *her* in some hyper-sexy fantasy armor. Honestly, I have *no idea* what I’m even supposed to say at this point.”

*Every time the Goddess gets involved, things spiral out of control—every damn time.*

“Would ‘long time no see’ be inappropriate?” Shiki asked.

I stared at him blankly for a beat.

“Absolutely.”

“But the girl, Hibiki, was it? Didn’t seem all that embarrassed by her outfit. She carried herself quite confidently, even when I directed my gaze at her. Barely reacted at all.”

“That’s probably because you were still in your lich form.”

“I saw her with this appearance as well. There was no particular reaction then either.”

“Huh, maybe she’s just into that kind of thing? Never heard anything like that before, though.”

*Wait, what the hell am I even considering? No, stop that. Don't go down that road.*

Even if she did have some eccentric taste, it wasn't like that sort of thing would be public knowledge. I mean, I only ever saw her in casual clothes once, and that was by pure chance. We never really talked much. I didn't know her, not really.

*This is stupid. I should head back already.*

Knowing my luck, if I lingered too long out there, I would end up running into her. Even if there were no sign of life in the area for the moment, I wouldn't put it past the universe to pull that on me.

"There's also that adventurer from Tsige who was accompanying Hibiki... I'm afraid I wasn't able to save him," Shiki added.

"You don't need to blame yourself for that, Shiki," I reassured him, "That's just how it is. Being an adventurer means accepting that bad things can happen suddenly. He chose this path. He came to Limia to fight a war. I'm sure he was ready for the risks."

"I hope so."

"If Senpai's safe, that's enough for now, don't overthink it. Let's head back and try to get a bit of sleep while we still can."

"Young Master... Speaking of which, we've yet to hear from Tomoe and the others who were attacking Kaleneon. Should we be concerned?"

"Nah, they're probably already back in the Demiplane. Tomoe sent a telepathic message earlier; she said they're all fine and that things went well, too. She couldn't hide that smug little chuckle of hers."

"As composed as ever, those two..." Shiki's eyes glazed over for a second, as if recalling some distant trauma.

He looked like he was spiraling a little, so I figured a few words of encouragement wouldn't hurt. "There weren't any dragon slayers or heroes on *that* battlefield. Probably went smoothly for them. Tonight's MVP is without a doubt the guy who took down Lancer—you. Seriously, you've done more than enough. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"Young Master, it seems you handled Sofia with ease as well. And you appear to be completely uninjured."

Oof. Shiki was really on the negative side today. I guess struggling that much against Lancer must've hit him hard.

*If I try the usual "That's not true" comfort line, he might spiral for hours. Best not to.*

"Well, she was a decent opponent, for gauging my current limits, I guess," I finally said.

"I still have a long way to go; I must become stronger."

"Yeah. If there's anything I can do to help, I'll be there."

"Most appreciated! That reminds me, Young Master. After I'd rescued one of the heroes' companions, they offered a gesture of thanks. What should I ask for?"

*Ah, there it is. Back in full-on Rotsgard mode already.*

Shiki's ability to bounce back instead of brooding forever was one of his hidden strengths. Sure, it had been pounded into him (quite literally) by Tomoe and Mio, but still. A strength's a strength.

*I could learn a thing or two from that resilience, honestly.*

"A token of gratitude, huh. How about we ask them to forget they ever saw you in your real form?" I asked with a smile.

If not, there's no way I could safely let Shiki anywhere near Rotsgard or any place packed with people. And if that meant I had to start taking the lead in more business

meetings again, I would be the one cracking under pressure.

*Yeah, no. Definitely not happening. My error rate would spike instantly. I'd probably end up bedridden from the stress.*

I could manage a register or customer service with a Japanese-grade zero-yen smile on the rare good day, but not consistently.

"I already tried that suggestion, but well, we'll see," Shiki replied.

"I see. In that case... Oh, right. Isn't there a shrine maiden from Lorel in Senpai's party?"

"Yes. I believe her name was Chiya. Remarkably high mana capacity for a hyuman. She may well become one of the most gifted shrine maidens in recent history."

"Then maybe we could ask for something like this..." and I leaned in and whispered the idea into Shiki's ear.

"That's quite a clever plan," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Very well. I'll handle it."

"Thanks. All right, let's head home. Back to the Demiplane."

No way there'd be a party waiting for us at this hour, but if they'd had a clean win over there too, maybe we could celebrate tomorrow.

With Shiki still looking a little unsteady on his feet—probably from magical overexertion—I kept close, ready to catch him if needed. Quietly, without a word to the rest of the city, we left the ruined capital behind.

# Tsukimichi 3

## Chapter 3

I was exhausted.

The face staring back at me in the mirror had half-lidded eyes, and the dark circles under them were painfully obvious. Everything about me screamed fatigue.

*Well, yeah, I'm really freaking tired.*

Just a few hours ago, I'd been in the middle of a full-blown war in the capital of Limia. Of course, that would take some time to recover from.

We'd left before dawn, but somehow the sun had already climbed high into the sky.

*Once things settle down, I'm taking a whole day off. I don't care what anyone says.*

As I splashed cold water on my face, a thought slipped out of my mouth.

“Everyone in the Demiplane really is strong.”

When Shiki and I arrived back here, we were welcomed by Tomoe, Mio, the orcs, and the dwarves. Their side of the operation had gone incredibly well. They'd not only gotten back earlier than us but also achieved near-zero losses. Zero dead and two injured.

*Seriously? Those are real battlefield numbers?*

I almost wanted to question it. It sounded more like a practice drill than actual combat.

Apparently, it was true. They'd successfully secured almost the entire territory of what used to be the nation of Kaleneon. It might've been small, sure, but still.

I'd thought the countries of this world had larger armies or more dangerous military forces. After all, I came from a world that idolized special forces.

Green Berets. Spetsnaz. SAS. CIA. KGB. FBI...

*Wait. I think I'm veering off the "military" part now.*

The point is, watching movies and shows that highlighted these ridiculously elite units made you think, *Wow, armies are terrifying.*

So, I'd assumed the same about armies in this world. *That's not really my fault, is it?*

*Right. We'll go with that.*

Low casualties were a good thing anyway, so I'd let myself enjoy the relief, my assumptions had been off. That was all.

As for the two injuries, one of them turned out to be a misty lizardfolk who got its tail stepped on by a fully armored highland orc. An accident so wholesome it was almost cute.

Mio, meanwhile, was practically glowing with health. She showed me a tiny, hand-sized dragon, like it was a souvenir, and told me it had been their enemy commander.

I didn't really get the explanation, to be honest.

Then Tomoe casually added, "There was no one left for me to fight after someone else took the only worthwhile opponent, so I drew a giant cliff along the border as a temporary national boundary."

*That's... not a jab. That's a full-on haymaker.*

We were in the middle of trading reports when everything suddenly ground to a halt.

It happened the moment I mentioned—smiling like an idiot, mind you—that I’d taken down Sofia, and Shiki had handled Lancer.

Both Tomoe and Mio froze. Their expressions didn’t change, not a twitch. But their presence? Yeah, it shifted hard.

If I had to describe it in simple terms, it was the kind of smile beautiful women give you when you realize you’ve walked straight into a minefield.

Shiki had started giving a detailed report about our contact with the demons and the nature of the Goddess’s power, but he never got the chance to finish. Tomoe grabbed him by the shoulder, and Mio took his hand. The two of them dragged him off for a “private debriefing” in another room.

*Wait, are they jealous? Over Lancer?*

I hadn’t seen him since the battle.

In the end, Ema took over the rest of the report. We agreed to keep things brief for now and dismissed everyone to get some rest. She’d also proposed a victory celebration, which we decided to postpone until the following evening—tonight.

Ema had gone out with the army last night too, so she was probably asleep by now. But I figured someone else had taken charge of preparing for the party in her place.

As for me? Yeah, no such luck.

Last night’s battle had been a last-minute disruption. The real schedule was today.

Today was the main event.

I was supposed to handle the mutant issue in Rotsgard, and that hadn’t changed just because I fought Sofia and Io the night before.

"To be honest, calling these things 'mutants' after fighting those two feels kinda silly."

Even so, I'd only managed to grab an hour or two of sleep before dragging myself back out of bed.

Exhausted or not, I still had to head for the academy first thing in the morning.

The mutants were gathering in one of the upper-class residential wards in Rotsgard. That couldn't be a coincidence. There had to be some deeper strategy behind it, something orchestrated by the demons.

The Demon General Rona had dropped a few ominous hints during our last conversation. Something about certain demi-humans in Rotsgard taking the demons' side.

*Hyuman or demon, huh...*

*But really, who says demi-humans would side with hyumans in the first place?*

Looking back, it was a bit naïve to assume they would. The only demi-humans that hyumans really valued were the ones with valuable skills, and even then, they were more like tools than allies. Hyumans rarely saw demi-humans as people.

So fair enough if some chose the demons instead. The demon world might be harsh, but it was built on merit, not prejudice. If you were strong, you were respected. And if the demons offered actual rights?

Of course, some demi-humans would find that appealing.

Even if they'd stayed with the hyumans before, that was probably just out of necessity. The demon territories had been frozen wastelands until recently. The choice might not have been about loyalty; it might've just been about survival.

*Honestly...*

*If I had to judge them by what I've seen—the way they run mixed-race armies and judge by strength, not race—it's hard not to think the Demon King's impressive.*

*Knock knock.*

The sound of someone rapping gently on my door echoed through the room. Was someone here to wake me up?

“Yes, come in!” I called.

“Good morning, boss. You’re already awake, I see.” A tall young man stepped in, impeccably dressed and fully geared up, flashing me a cheerful smile.

“Lime. Morning.”

“Sorry for the early visit. The academy sent me to fetch you. Guess going in early to check on things came back to bite me.”

Right, Lime had been planning to meet up with Mondo, the dwarf, and the forest ogre at the academy.

“So, everyone’s already there?” I asked.

“Yep. The headmaster’s itching to get this mess sorted,” he replied. “Oh, and it’s a little late to be playing dumb, but turns out the cleanup efforts you and I were involved in—officially, those were at the headmaster’s direct request. That’s what they want the story to be, anyway.”

*Wow.*

*A bit late in the game for negotiations, though.*

“And, uh... I got similar requests from a few of the senior full-time instructors too. They’re asking that your involvement be seen as acting on their behalf, for the sake of the city’s residents, of course.”

*Unbelievable.*

Did they really think they could slap on a coat of whitewash now?

Still, I had to admit, I wasn't exactly innocent in all this either.

"Let me guess, you told me all that exactly how they asked you to?"

"More or less. As close as I could manage," Lime said with a nod. *Reading between the lines like a pro.*

"In that case, I'd say the headmaster's at least more tolerable than the rest. I'll talk it over with Shiki later. Either way, I want it clear that the Kuzunoha Company stepped in on our own initiative, for the sake of the city. That's the version I'd like people to believe."

"Of course, boss. Makes perfect sense. Ah..." Lime's tone grew more hesitant, like he was trying to find the right words. "One other thing"

"What's that?"

"A woman is waiting outside. Just one. This is a shelter, so I didn't know if maybe you'd taken someone in?"

*A woman? Here?*

I didn't have any women tucked away here (or anywhere else, for that matter).

When I asked for details, Lime told me it was that older-sisterly woman who'd been checking in on me ever since I helped her at the brothel.

*Estelle, yeah, I think that was her name.*

"Oh, right. I brought her here to the shelter. Of all the hyumans around, she's probably the one I've talked to the most. Wonder what she wants this time."

"She bolted the moment I glared at her, so I doubt it's anything serious. Thought for a second maybe you were, uh... *entertaining* first thing in the morning or something—heh." Lime scratched his head, clearly embarrassed.

"Don't start. Don't use your *raging libido with gorgons* as a baseline for everyone else."

“All things in moderation, as they say. Still, boss, I do think it’s about time you learned how to have a little fun.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, let’s head to the academy.”

“Are you sure? I don’t see Shiki anywhere.”

“I’ve been trying to talk to him telepathically, but he hasn’t responded. He looked pretty worn out last night, so I figured today I’d have you come with me instead.”

“My pleasure. I heard you all wrapped up some massive incident over there, one that made our little crisis here look like a stubbed toe. Bit late, but... Welcome back, boss. I’m glad you made it through safely.”

“That was Tomoe, wasn’t it?” I sighed. “She already told you?”

Lime chuckled. “Wouldn’t have said anything if it wasn’t okay with her.”

*So even he’s heard about it, huh.*

I wondered how fast the gossip could spread. Lime didn’t even come by the Demiplane all that often.

*Tomoe must’ve gone bragging again.*

Then again, it could’ve been Mio. Both of them were practically glowing when I last saw them.

“Lizardfolk and arachs all over the merchant guild and coliseum were squirming with envy. They thought they’d drawn the short straw for missing out on the action.”

“There weren’t any straws to begin with...” I sighed as I moved toward the exit of the shelter. “Anyway, we’re having a victory party tonight. You should enjoy it, Lime. You’re lucky, you don’t have to worry about hangovers.”

It was time to finish things at the academy.

And maybe, just maybe, I’d get to throw a few choice words at Luto while I was at it.



In short, there weren't any demon collaborators like Rona had hinted at. What we did find, however, was something even more annoying: three massive mutants squatting in the middle of one of Rotsgard's districts, flailing around and destroying everything in their path.

Each one stood over four meters tall, but that's where the similarities ended. One was slimy and shapeless, another looked vaguely beastlike with four legs, and the last stood upright with a hyumanoid shape.

When we arrived, we weren't assigned to the main assault force, just stationed on the perimeter to prevent them from escaping. That gave us plenty of time to observe them. The academy's units, which were now finally capable of fighting mutants, were deployed as the front-line extermination team.

They started strong, but that didn't last.

Cornered, the mutants played their trump card: they fused, not in some sleek, anime-style robot fusion. No, this was a grotesque mess; wet and sludgy, with an audible *gloop* as they merged into something worse.

The resulting giant wasn't just physically tougher; it also gained resistance to every element.

It took only a few minutes for the academy's team to descend into full-blown panic. When the retreat order was finally given, they scattered like startled spiders.

What they left behind was us.

So yeah, we got "promoted" to the extermination team after all.

*Sigh. When they first told us to "hold the perimeter," I honestly thought we were getting the easy job.*

Now? Now I was running on zero sleep, and Shiki had looked even worse since we met up at the academy. I'd told him not to push himself and that he didn't need to come along. But of course, he wouldn't hear it. "I can't just stand by while Young Master does all the work," he'd replied firmly.

*He definitely didn't sleep at all. I wish he would take it easy for once.*

"Well, not like I'm planning to fight either," I'd said with a shrug. "We've got enough manpower that we won't even need to step in."

After all, it wasn't just Lime here; we had Mondo and a few elder dwarves, too.

"Don't worry, you can leave it to us!" Lime and Mondo said confidently as they stepped forward.

"We'd each like one of them for ourselves, if you don't mind. We brought our finest weapons along, after all," the dwarf craftsman chimed in with a grin, hoisting a massive great axe that was taller than him.

That axe looked just like the one I saw during the summer presentation. I remembered hearing that the dwarves had been testing it. The handle alone was ridiculously long; from a distance, it rose so high above the dwarves carrying it that it looked as though the axe was walking on its own. Unless it were held upright, it would knock into walls and lamp posts, making it impossible to carry around town.

Right now? In a place like this? No one was going to complain.

"All right then. Lime and Mondo, you take two of them. Eldwars, the last one's yours. I'm counting on you!" I shouted.

“Then... strike first, strike hard! One blow, one kill! Let’s go!!”

The axe—or rather, the three-man team of elder dwarves—charged toward the tallest, most hyumanoid mutant. Their enthusiasm was through the roof.

They hadn’t been part of last night’s deployment, which might explain it.

*Actually, maybe that’s precisely why they’re so fired up. Looks like the whole damn story’s already spread across the Demiplane. Great.*

“Huh? Lime, you two aren’t going in yet?” I asked.

“Boss. Is *Tree Execution* allowed for this one?” he replied.

“Oh... That’s what you’re thinking. Yeah, sure. We’re here anyway. Maybe we can turn it into a symbol of reconstruction. Two giant sacred trees standing tall, that’d make a cool landmark.”

A familiar image came to mind, those divine trees outside Shinto shrines back in Japan.

Lime nodded. “Understood.”

“Go wild. And Lime, given its size, you know what to do, right?”

“Of course. We’ll be done in less than three minutes. You ready, Mondo? Wait, where did he...?!”

Lime turned only to find that Mondo had already taken off, charging straight for the nearest mutant.

“Keep up, Lime!” Mondo roared. “No matter how dumb or clumsy they are, there’s just something invigorating about facing a huge opponent!”

*This group’s full of energy too, huh...*

Usually, one of these oversized mutants would’ve been impossible for Mondo to bind with *Tree Execution*. They were just too big, and highly resistant to magic. But with Lime there? No problem.

Sure enough, one of the massive monsters was already engulfed in a brilliant glow.

After all, Lime excelled at drawing out the best in others.

In sports like doubles tennis, there are always those players who shine brightest when partnered up. Lime had acquired the skill-based equivalent of that.

I'd never seen another like it, so maybe it was unique to him. It made me think of standing between two mirrors: the way his ability amplified his partner's strengths, like an infinite feedback loop, pushing each beyond their normal limits.

When teamed with Mondo, for example, he could trigger *Tree Execution* across every enemy in a designated area. Even opponents who would usually resist it could be caught and bound. He also worked exceptionally well with Aqua and Eris—the forest ogre duo.

A skill like that, one that always lived up to its potential no matter the setting, was rare. Combined with Lime's naturally supportive, dependable personality, it was a perfect match.

*Oh, the second tree's done.*

While I'd been lost in thought, two massive trees had taken root in the middle of Rotsgard's streets. Taller than the mutants they came from, and far more majestic. No doubt they were going to become the city's next landmark.

"Down the middle with a bamboo split!!!" The dwarves' shout cut through the air like a thunderclap.

I must have missed the exact moment it happened, but one of them was now airborne, swinging an even larger version of that oversized axe with earth-shattering force. It came crashing down on the vaguely hyuman-looking mutant, splitting it clean in two.

A perfect overhead slash, straight through the skull, bamboo-style.

That axe was designed to be bigger, heavier, and stronger. *Go big or go home, right? But at this point, the pool of people who can wield it is shrinking...*

Still, wasn't there a problem with just... splitting a mutant in two?

I kept watching, uneasy. The severed halves of the creature began to swell from the inside, frothing up like a shaken bottle under pressure.

*Wait, did they actually kill it?*

Relief washed over me when the swelling reached a critical mass and, *boom*, it popped.

*Thank god it didn't split into two more.*

Wait. Hold on.

“Hey. You've gotta be kidding me.”

Given the sheer size of it, its exploded remains were now raining down across a vast stretch of the city.

*God, that stinks.*

I wrinkled my nose as the noxious stench surrounded me—a cloying, chemical reek like rotting meat stewed in magical residue.

“Good grief,” I muttered. “The whole city's gonna reek if we leave it like this.”

“Far from ideal,” Shiki agreed, his voice still weary from the day's exertion.

Standing atop a building just tall enough to oversee the area, he unfurled a massive magic circle into the air. The falling fragments of the exploded mutant burned away in a curtain of flame before they could hit the streets.

“Whoa. That’s spectacular.”

“It was originally a crop-burning spell,” he explained with a tired shrug. “The visual impact is greater than the actual function. It only weakly incinerates anything it touches. I cast several to make it look more dramatic.”

“Well, thanks to you, we won’t be scraping mutant bits off the rooftops. Or breathing them in.”

Shiki narrowed his eyes toward the distance, where a few dwarves still lingered around their handiwork. “Honestly... who swings an axe like that without thinking?” He gave a dry sigh, rolling his shoulders. “We may need to teach those eldwars a lesson later too.”

“*Too*, huh?” I arched an eyebrow at him. “Did you say, ‘Teach them a lesson too?’”

He blinked, but said nothing.

“You did. You definitely did. *Who else*, Shiki?”

“Please, Young Master...” he murmured, eyes darting to the side, “don’t make me say it twice.”

His voice was so soft it practically trembled.

I gave him a look but decided not to dig any deeper.

*Yeah, probably best not to bring up last night’s events right now.*

Either way, the battle, if you could call it that, was over.

The academy would handle the cleanup, declare the emergency resolved, and Rotsgard could finally shift its focus to recovery, reconstruction, and moving forward.

*Still, that didn’t feel like a real fight.*

I tilted my head back, squinting into the sky. One of the newly grown trees swayed gently in the wind, lush green leaves rustling with serene indifference to the chaos below.

*Are those evergreen?* I wondered absently.

And just like that, I let my thoughts drift—detached, unanchored.



Dragoons, lauded as the pride of the Lorel Federation, stood at the pinnacle of its military might. And yet, for all their glory, they were cloaked in secrecy, never seen outside Lorel's borders.

They were a cavalry of dragons—living weapons of awe-inspiring power. The core requirement of becoming a Dragoon wasn't strength or skill, but a soul connection, a profound resonance with their dragon partner.

The unit that had delivered supplies to Rotsgard rode Lesser Dragons, a specialized airborne division. Others operated atop mighty earth dragons, forming a terrestrial corps. These were the two forces officially acknowledged. But rumors whispered of a third, a maritime division, which might or might not exist.

In both offense and defense, the ability to dominate the skies granted an undeniable strategic advantage. Unsurprisingly, this made Lesser Dragon-mounted dragoons especially celebrated within the Federation.

They were Lorel's most treasured force, and they knew it.

Or at least, they *had* known it.

Now, in stark contrast to their usual composure, the Dragoons and their partners stood frozen on the field. Lesser Dragons that would usually stalk the skies with unshakable pride had gone stiff, as if turned to stone—literally. The riders, visibly rattled, were whispering, their eyes flicking anxiously between their motionless mounts.

So much for the pride of the Federation.

“Haaah... So, *these* are the vaunted Dragoons,” Tomoe remarked with an exaggerated sigh. She acted like she was addressing no one in particular, but I understood loud and clear that the jab was meant for me. “I was hoping for something more impressive. These dragons and riders both seem dreadfully... second-rate.”

“That coming from someone who got sulky the moment the sun came up?” I shot back, exasperated. “Fine, I’ll ignore the irrational mood swings for now. But can you *please* try not to antagonize the elite soldiers of a major world power?”

Tomoe puffed her cheeks out in a mock pout and turned to me with theatrical innocence.

“Now, now. Young Master and Shiki are remarkable. *I* merely split the earth beneath me, nothing more. The Dragon Slayer, the Heavenly Sword brat, and even the demon generals—all claimed by others. I think I’m entitled to *some* bitterness, don’t you?”

“There you go again with the impossible demands.”

*Yeah, that explains it.*

If I had to bet, I’d say the Lesser Dragons’ panic traced back to *her*. When Shiki and I returned to the academy to report the mutant incident, Tomoe had stayed behind in Rotsgard. While we were away, she’d apparently had a conversation with several high-ranking officials. Clerics from the temple, Sairitsu from the Federation, and other political heavyweights. Whatever she’d said or done there, it had been tense. Even then, she carried the same eerie aura she radiated now.

As soon as we arrived back at the academy, Shiki paused like he’d picked up on something, his expression and voice restrained.

“I’ll go dispel the student barriers.”

Without waiting for a reply, he vanished into the crowd alone. Looking back on it, I wondered if that wasn't his sixth sense kicking in again.

Tomoe, on the other hand, blamed her sour mood on damage to her side-blade, apparently a result of too many reckless long-distance transfers. But honestly, it felt more like displaced frustration. Frustration aimed squarely at Shiki, who'd managed to snag a top-tier prize in the form of Mitsurugi.

Which meant, alongside our report to the headmaster, I'd found myself saddled with a secondary mission: mollifying a grumpy samurai.

When the conversation with Sairitsu drifted toward the topic of Dragoons, I saw my chance. Tomoe had shown a flicker of curiosity, so I half-coaxed, half-dragged her along for a change of pace. This mess was the result.

Even now, she stood beside me, sighing and muttering, "Even Mio managed to pick off a demon general..."

"You brought the four seasons into the Demiplane. That was your goal from the beginning, remember?" I replied, trying to inject some perspective.

*Well, technically, she's about to complete it, but close enough.*

"Hmph. And yet, I seem to be the only one who came out of this empty-handed. No reward, no prize."

"Why not celebrate tonight? Drink to your heart's content, wash it all away. Then tomorrow, enjoy the seasons you worked so hard to create. That Japanese sake you've been waiting for finally got the green light, didn't it? I've been looking forward to it myself."

Not that I had much experience with sake. I couldn't tell a junmai from a ginjo if my life depended on it. Still, if it was made in the Demiplane and people said it was good, then to me, that counted as real Japanese sake.

“We’ll see how much I enjoy it with *Shiki* still around.”

“You mean you’ll see how much you enjoy it with the *seasons*,” I corrected flatly.

“...”

That one hit the wall; she brushed past it without so much as a twitch.

*All right, I’m done poking that hornet’s nest. You win this round, Tomoe. Shiki. Rest in peace.*

Tomoe tilted her head, suddenly cheerful again. “Oh, that’s right. What shall we name the sake? Naturally, I leave the honor of naming it to you, Young Master.”

“Why don’t you name it? You’re the one who took the project the most seriously.”

“Oh no, this is a matter of prestige. It must come from you.”

“Fine, I’ll think of something before tonight.”

If all it took to lift Tomoe’s mood was naming a bottle of sake, that was a price I was more than happy to pay.

“I look forward to it,” she replied, her tone regaining a trace of mischief. “Hmm, I suppose it’s a bit cruel to keep taking things out on *Shiki*. Let’s say I’ve achieved my goal with the seasons and leave it at that. Besides, having Young Master play mediator, well, perhaps I’ve let the joke go on long enough.”

With a long, deliberate exhale, Tomoe seemed to blow away the last remnants of her irritation. Her expression smoothed out, clean and composed.

Unfortunately, I knew that face.

Growing up with sisters had taught me a thing or two. That wasn’t *closure*, that was a *pause*. She’d just filed it away in a box marked *To Be Dealt with Later*.

*Well, that’s fine. Some things need time.*

“I appreciate it,” I told her, then let my gaze drift across the small landing field. “Even though there’s only

about twenty here, dragons have a presence that's hard to ignore. They brought in a sizable load of supplies too. I imagine the townsfolk were impressed."

Clearly, I wasn't the only one who thought dragon-riding looked cool. A number of spectators had gathered at the edge of the plaza, curious eyes tracking every movement. Some had probably come just to gawk. Others, having already checked on their loved ones, were drawn here by sheer wonder.

Maybe the town's recovery would start as soon as tomorrow, or even later today.

Tomoe crossed her arms, unimpressed.

"Young Master, I stand by my earlier assessment. A few among them may be worth noting, but most? Middling, at best."

"Well, you're a Greater Dragon. If we're using *your* standard, I can't argue."

"Indeed! Why, before you got here, I'd already warned representatives from every major nation to mind how they treat our trade company going forward. I daresay I've been far more useful than that flapping flock of second-raters!"

I blinked. *Wait, what did she say to them during that heavy mood back at the summit?*

This was Tomoe we were talking about. She wouldn't do anything reckless, probably.

But more pressing than her diplomacy...

"I see. That explains a lot," I said slowly. "But for the record, Tomoe, I'm not comparing you to them."

Her brow furrowed slightly. "Hmm?"

Did she think I was measuring her against the Dragoons' Lesser Dragons? Comparing her to someone else's partner?

Today's Tomoe was more emotionally volatile than usual.

“Even if there were hundreds or thousands of them, I’d still choose you, Tomoe. So don’t sulk too much, okay?”

I didn’t usually say things like this, but we were in the middle of a busy, noisy plaza. No one was paying attention. If there was ever a safe moment to speak plainly, this was it.

“You have a real way with words sometimes, Young Master,” Tomoe murmured.

“I mean it,” I said, meeting her eyes. “You’ve always been looking out for me. I really do appreciate that.”

Gratitude, genuine, heartfelt gratitude, was always a little embarrassing to voice aloud. But if not now, when?

“L-Luto said something kind of like that,” she replied, flustered. “That ‘a man can change in three days’ or something. Maybe this is what he meant!”

Whether it was a deflection or not, she suddenly burst into hearty laughter, her cheeks blazing red.

“I’m counting on you, Tomoe. We’ve still got plenty of trouble ahead, I’m sure.”

“Don’t worry, I’m here for you.”

There. That settled that.

Still... Luto? He was quite the character himself. But I’d done him a significant favor with that whole Sofia incident, so I figured I could cash that in soon.

Specifically, I had a plan: *“Kaleneon Never Actually Fell —What a Shocking Twist!”* And I fully intended to drag him into it.

It would be a long while before we could establish stable ties between nations, but when that day came, I hoped the Aensland sisters would be ready—true representatives of their homeland, prepared to stand with pride.

Currently, though, Kaleneon was marooned in isolation. If anything, we’d be the ones offering support. Given its

geography and population, the only path forward would be one of equal coexistence between hyumans and demi-humans. No exceptions.

Which was why I had high hopes. I really believed Kaleneon could become something special.

We'd need to think carefully about what kind of aid the Kuzunoha Company could provide. But that was a discussion for another day. For now, I was just glad Tomoe was back to her usual self. She was even humming.

If I wasn't mistaken, she was humming the opening theme of that vigilante-action show she liked, the one with the moral that life has its ups and downs, and you have to roll with them.

That left only one thing on the agenda: tonight's victory party.

*Here's hoping I get to relax a little too.*



"And so, starting tomorrow or the day after, the cycle of seasons will finally start in the Demiplane. If any problems crop up, we'll handle them the way we always have: together. That's all for now."

Night had fallen, and I stood before the assembled crowd, offering a clumsy but heartfelt toast to kick off the celebration.

The speech had covered a lot; acknowledging those who'd fought in the previous night's battle, thanking everyone for their efforts in Rotsgard's recovery and the

early steps toward Kaleneon's revival, and, of course, warning of the coming seasonal shifts.

“Cheers!”

Raising the cup in my right hand, I felt a hundred eyes on me as I made the final call.

“Cheeeeers!!!” the crowd echoed, then the sound of clinking cups and eager gulps filled the air.

The tables, lined with platters stacked high with food, quickly became gathering points. Though it was a buffet-style feast and people were free to eat while I spoke, the crowd had waited patiently. Primarily thanks to Tomoe.

Apparently, she'd recalled the tradition of *kagami-biraki* —the ceremonial breaking of a sake barrel—somewhere in her vast stores of memory. She'd insisted on opening the celebration with that act, turning it into the official unveiling of our newly brewed sake. That also meant no one could touch the food until the lid was cracked and the sake shared around.

This was the Demiplane. It wasn't like we had formal rules for events like this. There was no longstanding culture or rigid etiquette to follow. But somehow, it still felt right to do things properly, or at least as close as we could manage.

Now, the atmosphere had relaxed into a warm, lively buzz. Laughter echoed beneath the stars as people carried their drinks, some in glasses, others in wooden mugs, and gathered around the food.

As I watched them, I sipped my own drink and took in the aroma drifting up from the cup. The scent reminded me of something from long ago. Back when I'd lived in Japan, I wasn't old enough to drink, so I couldn't say how close this was to the real thing, but it smelled right. The atmosphere felt right too.

This sake would likely change over time, shaped by the preferences of the Demiplane's people—sweeter, drier, richer, or sharper. Whatever they came to love most.

*Maybe in ten or twenty years. I hope it becomes something they treasure.*

*Still, drinking nihonshu from a Western-style glass really makes it feel more like sake, huh? Heh.*

I drifted over to Tomoe, who was cradling a small *choko* cup with deep reverence, sipping her drink like she was communing with the spirit of rice itself. Offering her a quiet toast in honor of the sake's successful debut, I raised my glass again and clinked it against hers.

Then I took another sip from my own heavy mug.

Something felt off. Not the taste, it went down smooth enough, but this definitely wasn't the right way to drink it. I was used to the idea of small sips from dainty cups, not knocking it back from a beer stein.

Could I really finish all this?

I glanced into the mug. The level hadn't gone down much. A small bead of worry trickled down my spine. But no, this was the unveiling. I had to drink at least one full cup. It wasn't overly strong, and it was smooth. I could probably handle it.

*Probably.*

Here and there, I could already spot a few of the tougher Demiplane warriors slamming their mugs down with a satisfied "Ahhh!" and heading back for refills. *Monsters.*

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice from beside me. "An excellent celebration, Young Master."

*Ah, here we go.*

Kakun, the chief of the Winged Folk, stood by my side, smiling with formal poise. The flood of greetings from each tribe's representative had begun. And judging from the

look in his eye, this was the kind of thing I couldn't politely escape from.

*The things I go through... Who'd have thought I'd feel like a salaryman in another world?*

"I know a lot of you were heavily involved in field operations lately," I told Kakun. "This feast is the least I could do to thank you all."

"We Winged Folk were also granted a role in supporting Kaleneon going forward," Kakun said, bowing with practiced grace. "We are truly grateful."

"Up until now, I've mostly judged everything based on our training matches. But from here on, I'm planning to incorporate inter-species mock battles and to hear reports from other groups. I want a fairer, broader perspective. I realize I've been too narrow-minded in how I assessed your people before. I'm sorry for that."

"There is no need to apologize, Young Master. One day, we'll demonstrate our full strength in a direct match with you, and I'm confident you'll come to acknowledge it then. Still, I must ask one thing—please, speak to me as you would with Ema-sama. Casually. Honestly."

"Ahaha... It's still hard for me to relax around people who look older," I admitted with an awkward smile. "But I'll try. Anyway, aside from the sake Tomoe worked so hard to create, Mio's been testing out some new dishes tonight too. I hope you'll enjoy whatever suits your tastes."

"I certainly will. Judging by the crowd, the response has been very positive. And the sake—it's excellent. I've taken quite a liking to it."

Kakun gave a graceful nod and smile, then stepped aside. "But I've monopolized your time long enough. I mustn't hold up the others waiting behind me. Please excuse me."

“I’ll be staying in the Demiplane for a while,” I told him, “so even if you don’t have anything urgent, feel free to stop by any time.”

Still smiling, Kakun gave another polite bow and began to weave his way back into the crowd, exchanging nods with other representatives along the way. He’d kept that friendly, easy demeanor from start to finish.

Then came the wave.

Highland orcs, misty lizardfolk, arach, gorgons, they all came to greet me in turn. Their words were casual, but appreciative. Some commented on the sake. Others just wanted to chat.

I could only imagine that a good portion of their praise was polite flattery, but overall, the feedback seemed genuinely positive.

*Good. That’s one less thing to worry about.*

The orcs and lizardfolk, still running on the adrenaline of the previous night’s battle, were already asking about setting training schedules for tomorrow. I gently waved them off, reminding them that tonight was for celebration, and we’d talk logistics another time.

*Still, I realized, sake’s got a pretty high alcohol content.* Yet everyone was knocking it back like it was water. Literally, some people were standing there sipping it nonstop.

Of course, a few had already turned bright red and were swaying with satisfaction, but the party spirit remained high. Mio’s experimental dishes probably played a role; most of them were perfect sake accompaniments, which only encouraged everyone to keep drinking.

As for the hyuman perspective, I’d only heard from Lime so far, and one opinion wasn’t enough to judge by. Still, if the demi-humans were enjoying it this much, maybe

there was potential in distributing it to their communities first. It could be worth pursuing.

“Young Master! Young Master! Try these next! Oh, and these too!”

I turned around to see Mio standing beside me, arms full of plates.

Of course, she could’ve just had someone else serve them. But knowing her, she wanted to do it herself.

She only brought small portions at a time, so each individual dish wasn’t overwhelming. But the sheer number of them was staggering, and the moment one plate emptied, she replaced it with another at near-supersonic speed.

Apparently, Mio had designed her prototype dishes around traditional Japanese cuisine, with a touch of Chinese influence mixed in, and she hadn’t ignored this world’s native flavors either. The result was a stunningly diverse lineup of food.

At this rate, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she started dabbling in the French cuisine I’d once tried (and utterly failed) to introduce. A wave of unpredictable fusion dishes might be just around the corner.

“Mio, don’t just serve all day. Sit down and eat something yourself,” I said, patting the seat beside me. “Come on, relax.”

“Ah—okay!” she answered, a bit startled but clearly pleased.

“Thanks for your hard work last night. I heard you fought the commander of Kaleneon. I’m glad you’re okay. That tiny dragon—is that the one?”

“It is. I’ve let it roam in the garden for now. Surprisingly agile for its size. Quite clever too.”

“So, what *is* that little dragon?”

“I believe it called itself... Left? One of the demon generals, or something like that. Tomoe-san told me to stop eating it halfway through, so I did. It’s been well-behaved ever since.”

*Wait. One of the demon generals?!*

*That puts it on par with Io and Rona, doesn’t it?!*

“It... It was in Kaleneon?”

“Yes, although it said that was just a coincidence,” Mio replied nonchalantly. “I tried to mimic some of the tricky deflection techniques it used, but...” She frowned, just a little, visibly frustrated. “I couldn’t quite pull it off. Pity.”

*That’s not the issue here!* I wanted to shout.

“The—the real question is: why is it so quiet now?” I asked, leaning forward. “If it’s really one of *them*, it shouldn’t be sitting quietly in someone’s flowerbed!”

Any one of the demon generals could wreak havoc just by existing. And yet, Left or whatever it was called was currently chasing butterflies in my garden like an overgrown toddler.

“It started mumbling to itself partway through the fight,” Mio explained, smiling as if she were recounting a funny dream. “Ever since then, it’s just been following insects around. Seems harmless to me.”

*That is absolutely not reassuring.*

“I... I see.”

*So that’s how it went.*

In the end, Left probably got toyed with, thoroughly broken, and then discarded—Mio-style. Poor thing. Still alive, at least. And technically still a demon general, judging by what little presence it still had. Maybe once we got around to visiting demon territory, I could quietly drop Left off there.

“By the way, Young Master,” Mio said suddenly. “More importantly, do you recall our promise?”

She dismissed the whole demon general situation as “*a mere trifle*” and straightened up in a rare display of formality. Her eyes fixed intently on mine, searching.

“A promise?”

I sifted through my memories.

*Ah—that. Probably from the time we had that race to take down the mutant with Shiki.*

“Oh, the whole ‘I’ll grant you a wish’ thing?”

“Yes! That’s the one!” she exclaimed, leaning in.

I really did want to hear her request, but not now. The tribal elders were still within earshot, casually chatting nearby.

“I remember. But let’s wait till things quiet down a bit. I’ll hear it then, okay?”

“Y-yes! Then I shall make sure the food is being distributed properly. I’ll be right back!”

“Thanks, Mio.”

As she whirled away with newfound energy, I couldn’t help wondering, *What is she going to ask for?*

I'd thanked Tomoe properly earlier. But Mio had been just as invaluable. Whatever it was she wanted, if it were within my power, I'd gladly do it for her.

"What the hell are Eris and Aqua doing?"

A sudden burst of commotion yanked my gaze toward a now very active section of the celebration. There they were, everyone's favorite forest ogre duo, belting out a lively song while performing a wildly energetic dance.

I blinked. Once. Twice.

*Nope. Still happening. Not a hallucination.*

*When the hell did you two become idol performers?*

They weren't half bad either, kind of impressive, actually. Had they been practicing behind the scenes this whole time?

In any event, the crowd was loving it; the mood had reached a new high.

I turned to Shiki, who'd been quietly drinking beside me for a while now, hoping to share the moment. "They're really getting into it," I murmured with a chuckle. "They're good."

"You've had quite a bit to drink, haven't you, Young Master?" he said with a knowing smile.

"Hey, Shiki, just so you know, I had a word with Tomoe and Mio earlier. Both seemed to be in good spirits. I think we're in the clear for now... probably."

That last part came out less confidently than I'd intended, but still, this wasn't just the alcohol talking. I did mean it.

"Thank you. That's reassuring to hear."

"Oh, right, no hotpot from you tonight, huh?" I asked, glancing around.

"Everyone, especially Ema and Mio-dono, appeared quite enthusiastic in their preparations from early this

morning," Shiki replied. "I decided not to intrude on their efforts."

"Good call. Sometimes, knowing when not to step in is the wisest choice."

"That said, Mio-dono and I were discussing taking a short trip to the coastal towns to look for ingredients. I may ask you to taste-test a new creation or two sometime soon."

"Looking forward to it."

*A port town, huh? If I recall, north of Tsige, there's a place called Koran. The Demiplane doesn't have its own sea, not yet, anyway.*

"I was hoping to speak with you about upcoming lectures for the academy students," Shiki added, "but perhaps tonight isn't the time."

*Do I really look that far gone?* I didn't feel drunk. Not yet, anyway.

"No, that's fine. The town's recovery takes priority for now, so there's no rush. More importantly, here, have some sake. Try it."

When I handed him a glass, Shiki let out a soft chuckle, but there was hesitation in his eyes.

*Ah, maybe he's not a fan?*

"I've already sampled it, but I must say, it's quite potent. I believe the way Tomoe-dono enjoys it, with small cups and slow sips, is far more suitable for me."

He cast a glance across the way, where a group of orc warriors were guzzling sake straight from overflowing mugs like it was cold beer, and cringed.

*Okay, fair. I wasn't asking you to do that.*

"All right, all right. How about this?" I said, filling his mug to about seventy percent. "It's a milder one and goes down easy."

Shiki accepted it with a resigned smile, clinking it gently against mine.

“Cheers!”

“Itadakimasu.”

And so, the night carried on. Laughter and music rose into the sky as the celebration stretched toward dawn, long after the stars began to fade.

The party had long passed its peak. The all-night revelers still lingered in the plaza, while the more responsible back-to-work-tomorrow group had already filtered out.

Eventually, we followed suit and went back to the mansion.

I could've pushed through an all-nighter and still functioned the next day—probably. But Shiki had gently insisted that, as an instructor, I should at least look presentable in the morning. So we'd left a little early.

Now, it was just the four of us in the room: Tomoe, Mio, Shiki, and me.

The atmosphere was mellow, steeped in the warm afterglow of celebration. Everyone had settled into their favorite corners, sipping the last of their drinks or just relaxing in silence.

“That sake really turned out well,” Tomoe said with a grin. “But I know I can make it even better. Something for you to look forward to, Young Master.”

“I am. Great job. It's going to get colder soon, so maybe try making a version for hot sake next?”

“Hot sake... I completely forgot about that!”

We spent a while like this, chatting amicably about the food, the sake, and the night as a whole. Then I turned toward Mio, who was sitting beside Shiki and... grinning a little too much.

“Oh, right. Mio, about that wish you mentioned earlier. Have you decided yet?”

I'd promised her I'd grant her request, and I meant it.

“Y-Yes. I have,” Mio replied.

“Let’s hear it then. What is it you want me to do?”

As soon as I asked, her expression shifted, her casual smile giving way to a startling seriousness that made me blink in surprise.

“I’ll say it now,” she said.

“Okay.”

“I’d like you to... allow me to spend the night with you.”

“Spend the night?”

*Not councilman, that’s for sure. Ah—that kind of “spend the night.”<sup>1</sup> As in... the forty-eight positions<sup>2</sup> kind.*

*Huh.*

*Didn’t see that one coming.*

I’d been bracing myself for something like “make me your official chef” or “take me on a culinary tour of the continent.”

This... This was something else entirely.

“Yes!” she confirmed, cheeks flushed. “Tonight... with me...” Her voice grew soft as she trailed off.

“Oh...” Tomoe murmured, unsurprised.

“As expected...” added Shiki.

“Is... Is that not acceptable?” Mio asked, her wide eyes searching mine with quiet intensity.

There was something disarmingly sincere in the way she looked at me, almost childlike in its vulnerability.

Cute, even.

“So, you mean, *spend the night*, huh...” I echoed, mostly to confirm it to myself.

I’d always thought, *If it’s going to happen, I want it to be with someone I really care about.*

I didn’t know if I loved Mio in the romantic sense, not yet, but I knew I didn’t *dislike* her. If it came down to it, if it was a binary choice between like and dislike, then yes, I liked her.

She'd stood by me so many times. Helped me, supported me, without asking anything in return. Always patient, always loyal.

And now, she was asking for something that, to her, meant everything.

Could I really say no?

Would I want to?

"Young Master?" she whispered.

I was silent.

All three of them were watching me now, a quiet tension settling over the room. No more words were spoken, but their eyes spoke volumes.

They were waiting.

Waiting for my answer.

Mio had always given me everything.

If this was what she wanted and would make her happy in return, then maybe I could finally give something back.

For some reason, Mio suddenly sucked in a sharp breath.

And I thought, *Yeah, okay. If it's within my power, I want to grant her wish.*

"All right, I..."

"I-I was wrong!!! I was mistaken!!!" she blurted out, cutting me off with a shout loud enough to shake the walls.

"Eh?"

The noise she made, and the panic on her face—was so unexpected that an idiotic little squeak slipped out of me in response.

"I didn't mean *that* kind of *togi*!" she cried.

"Huh?"

"I meant the *other* kind of *togi*<sup>3</sup>! I wanted you to teach me how to properly *wash rice*!"

"Wait, but... You said tonight..."

“I meant for tomorrow’s breakfast! I want to test the taste after it’s been properly prepared!!!”

*Mio?!*

*No, but—hold on. I definitely heard her say “spend the night” earlier. I wasn’t imagining that.*

Was I?

*Am I drunk? Is that what this is?*

“Pffft!”

“Kh...”

Tomoe and Shiki had been trying valiantly to hold it in, but they finally lost the battle and burst into stifled laughter.

*What?*

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. I didn’t think I’d drunk that much, but maybe... just maybe... I’d misunderstood?

“Tomoe-san! Shiki! Would you please be *quiet* for a moment?!” Mio snapped, her cheeks flushed deep red in rare, flustered embarrassment.

She glared daggers at the two.





“S-Sorry. Pfft—hah—ahahaha!”

“I—I apologize... hehehe...”

Tomoe and Shiki were doing their best to contain their laughter, but failing miserably. Their shoulders were shaking, their faces turned away in a weak attempt to maintain composure.

*What's so funny, seriously?*

“You two... I *will* remember this,” Mio growled, her voice cold and ominous. Then she turned back to me, her expression softening into something modest and a little sheepish. “Young Master, may I still ask for that lesson?”

“Ah, yeah. Of course. But I think I might be a little tipsy right now... Would tomorrow be okay?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I already showed you the basics last time, so you might honestly be better than me by now. We’ll probably end up washing rice side by side, not anything exciting.”

“Oh! Young Master,” Tomoe suddenly chimed in. “In that case, might I take this opportunity to ask for a demonstration as well? Say, on how to *sharpen*<sup>4</sup> a sword?”

She said it with a perfectly straight face.

*She's not even trying to be subtle.*

“Didn’t I already show you how to do that ages ago?”

“Did you? Oh my, perhaps my memory has dulled with age. My apologies, my apologies,” she said, scratching her head—not that she fooled anyone.

“Tomoe, you absolute menace!” Mio snapped, visibly trembling with restrained fury, almost lunging toward her.

“Oh dear, was that inappropriate? A slip of the mind, I assure you. Honest mistake.”

Tomoe’s sheepish tone was about as convincing as a fox apologizing to a henhouse.

“I *said* I’d deal with you two later, but I take it back. Outside! Now!”

A sharp *crackle* of killing intent leaked from Mio's aura.  
*Whoa—Mio, calm down! Shiki didn't even do anything! He just laughed!*

I threw out the most diplomatic suggestion I could muster. "Uhh, maybe we should all just call it a night? We've got things to do tomorrow, after all."

"Yes! You're absolutely right!" Mio turned to me with a dazzling, almost unsettlingly radiant smile. "Young Master, I hope you have a good night's sleep."

*Wait... Just me?*

"Actually, everyone should get some rest."

"Oh, no need to worry," she cut in sweetly. "We can go several days without sleep. We'll be wide awake. And we'll make *sure* you're up bright and early."

The words were gentle, but the implication...

*Was that an order to go to bed?*

*Well, tomorrow is another day in the Academy City, no doubt about that. And yeah, I should probably get some sleep soon.*

*Before I do, there's something I have to say.*

This wasn't some drunken impulse. It wasn't something I thought of on the spot. But it wasn't about duty or obligation, gratitude spoken out of formality.

It was something personal. Something that, to me, felt like a way of drawing a line, of putting my feelings into words the only way I knew how.

"So yeah, I'll go to bed," I said quietly. "But before I do, can I say something to the three of you?"

I paused while Shiki, Mio, and Tomoe nodded and glanced at me, expectant. "Thank you. All three of you, for fighting, for working so hard in the Demiplane, for managing the shop... for everything. If I'd been alone through all of this, I think I would've made a mess of

everything. Half-baked plans, unfinished tasks, nothing would've taken shape."

The room was utterly still and silent.

"Because I met Tomoe, I came to know the Demiplane at all. I could offer people a home because of that. Thanks to Mio, I remembered what cooking means; she made it easier to deal with adventurers too. And with Shiki... Well, even with all my naïve ideas, I've been able to keep the company running."

I looked at each of them, one by one.

"It's because of you three that I can still be *me* in this world. That I haven't lost myself."

Still, no reply.

*If I'd been alone from the start...*

I probably would've gotten used to flipping that combat switch on and never turning it off. I'd have looked at everything with cynical eyes and lived a joyless, indifferent life in a world that didn't care.

"So, this might not mean much, but I want to give you something in return."

I took a breath, the words coming clearly now.

"I want to give you the same surname as mine—*Misumi*. If you're okay with it, I'd be honored if you accepted it."

The moment I finished, silence fell again, even deeper than before.

Just a single breath of stillness.

"With pleasure," Tomoe said at last. "As I said earlier today, Young Master, you really are dangerously good at winning people over."

She let out a soft chuckle before her lips curled into a broad, radiant smile.

"I would be honored, Young Master," Mio chimed in with a bow, her voice bright and reverent. "I may be

inexperienced and clumsy, but I will bear that name with pride.”

She still looked like she might’ve misunderstood something, but at least all traces of her earlier menace had vanished. She was beaming.

“There could be no greater honor,” Shiki said, voice quiet but certain. “I swear, from this day forward, I’ll serve that name with all my strength, and never bring shame upon it.”

His gaze didn’t waver. His words felt like an oath.

*Good. That’s good.*

*Maybe now, I should start using the name more openly —Raidou Misumi. Especially since, sooner or later, I’ll have to face Hibiki-senpai, the Kingdom of Limia’s hero.*

When that day comes, it might help to have a name that carries weight.

“I’m glad none of you said no,” I muttered. “Well then, goodnight.”

Suddenly embarrassed to be meeting all their eyes, I turned and slipped out of the room like a man on the run.



On the outskirts of the Demiplane, the plains bore clear scars of a fierce battle: splintered earth, burned-out grass, the telltale craters of heavy magical impact. In the center of the wreckage, Shiki lay sprawled on his back, eyes rolled back to white, utterly defeated.

Next to him lay the shattered trunk of a once-mighty tree, now split clean in two. Tomoe and Mio sat upon it, calm and composed, as if the devastation around them had nothing to do with them at all.

A blanket had been mercifully draped over Shiki's twitching body, which spasmed faintly now and then, but neither woman paid him any real attention.

"Say, Mio," Tomoe began casually. "Why go to such tortured lengths with that excuse? That was the saddest little save I've ever seen. You can't seriously expect us *not* to laugh. The way Young Master was leaning in, he clearly would've accepted."

"Hmph... Are you still not satisfied?" Mio shot back with narrowed eyes. "You're one to talk, after that cruel little stunt. Don't pretend it was just harmless teasing."

"I merely wish to understand. Why would you throw away a golden chance to finally share a bed with the man you adore? Even with a little drink in him, Young Master was perfectly coherent."

They sat shoulder to shoulder, gazes locked on the place where the starlit sky met the distant land. The air still carried the chill of night.

Silence settled over them, but only for a moment.

"From what I've seen," Tomoe continued, voice softer now, "Young Master's grown quite a bit over these past few days. The old him would've stayed in Limia's capital to help rebuild just because someone asked him to. There's no way we'd have ended up launching a strike on Kaleneon."

Mio stayed quiet.

"He even stood firm before a Dragon Slayer. He carried himself with true resolve. At this point, I think knowing the touch of a woman wouldn't be the worst thing for him. And while I'd like it to be me first, I'd still cheer for you."

At last, Mio broke the silence, her voice quiet but firm. "It's not about the order," she said. "I just don't want to be with him out of obligation. Or because he's grateful. Or because he feels like he owes me something."

"I realized something. It's not enough that I want him. That I feel that way isn't the point. I want him to want me, to choose to be with me of his own will. I want to be with him because he desires me, not out of duty, or praise, or gratitude."

Tomoe tilted her head slightly. "Oh?"

Mio's gaze didn't waver. She understood Makoto well, too well. If she'd pressed on in that moment, he would have agreed. Not because he wanted to, but because he thought he should.

And so she'd stopped herself and chosen to step away, before a shared night became nothing more than a misunderstood favor.

"You want him to say it," Tomoe said, still staring into the stars. "You want to hear him say he wants you."

Mio paused, then nodded; a slow, almost vulnerable motion.

"You've gotten picky, haven't you?" Tomoe asked. "But it won't be easy. Young Master, he's begun to see us as family. And that kind of closeness can sometimes be further from desire than anything else. A love that isn't romantic. A warmth that doesn't lead to passion."

"I know," Mio replied softly.

"Even so? You'd still stay by his side, even if he never returns your feelings?"

"I would. I want to serve him. I want to give everything I have to him, not because it's expected, but because it's what I choose. That's the truth I want to live by."

"I see. Well, I suppose he can go a bit longer without knowing a woman's touch. He's not surrounded by

temptresses these days. As for me, the chance that he'll ask for my body is probably even lower than yours. So there's not much point in hoping."

She gave a crooked grin.

"But at least I can cheer you on."

"There's no one else he loves," Mio said. "No one waiting in the wings. I'm in no rush. I'll take my time, patiently and slowly."

Whether she meant to win his heart with devotion or with more direct tactics, she didn't say.

Tomoe let out a low chuckle.

"But you know, humans don't live forever. A few years from now, he may fall in love. Find someone he wants to spend his life with and propose. One woman, maybe two."

"That's fine. So long as I approve of them. Of course, I'll expect to be loved just as many times as they are. And anyone who marries him should be able to handle all the household chores to perfection, and cook at least as well as I do. That's the bare minimum."

"You're worse than a mother-in-law. Honestly. At this rate, it'll be a long time before we see Young Master's child."

The two veteran followers sat on the broken tree, voices mingling with the hush of the night as they continued talking long into the hours before dawn.

# Tsukimichi 4

## Chapter

**T**he mutants left deep scars on Rotsgard.

Many lives were lost, and the city was ravaged—entire districts lay in ruins. As much as they yearned to go back to their everyday lives overnight, most of the residents now lived in temporary housing, working day by day to rebuild what they'd lost.

Eva and Luria Aensland were declared dead in the aftermath and quietly relocated to Kaleneon. I've been sending people to help with the recovery effort over there, so I've been hearing a lot about their efforts. The population there is still small, but the sisters seem to be holding up well—no complaints, no hesitation. Just quiet determination every single day.

There was no end to what needed doing.

Compared to Kaleneon, maybe the Academy City got off lighter. But still, the damage is significant.

From our perspective, the mutants were practically a joke. But for the people of this city, it was a once-in-a-generation catastrophe. Rumors started spreading; claims of a demonic conspiracy behind the attack. And with them

came a sharp nosedive in public sentiment toward demons in general. Among the hyumans, suspicion turned quickly into hate.

And then, just like that, a whole year passed. By all accounts, Rotsgard had made a magnificent recovery.

If only that were the end of it.

No, I wasn't just a bystander in this city.

I attended merchant guild meetings, what few of them still had members left, and got roped into opening a temporary storefront. I declined the offer to become a full-time instructor, and every single day since has been filled with work far above my pay grade.

It used to be that even if I counted the day's responsibilities on my fingers, I'd still need both hands. These days, I'd need extra fingers.

"Do I really need to be meeting all these foreign dignitaries right now?" I muttered under my breath.

Every night, another meeting. Another demand for supplies. More requests. More logistics. Which all meant more work for me.

The academy, of course, was eager to resume classes as soon as possible. Apparently, they wanted to present the image of "business as usual" to the rest of the continent.

*Ridiculous.*

*Classes? While the city's still crawling out of the rubble? Who's the idiot who thought that was a good idea?*

As if all this weren't enough, the prince of Limia was still hanging around, along with high-ranking officials from Lorel and even senior clergy from the temple. Each of them, on rotation, had decided it was perfectly acceptable to summon me like I was some political errand boy.

*I've lost count of how many times I've wanted to tell them all to shut up and sit down, preferably at the same time.*

Today, we finally got started restoring the main road.

It had been about a week since the attack, and the most visible areas of the city were beginning to look like their old selves again.

Our own shop, though... It still had no clear timetable for reconstruction.

Not that we were in any rush. The temporary storefront we'd set up near the shelter zone was doing fine. Trying to rush the rebuild could even confuse our customers at this point, so I'd made the call to hold off. It wasn't worth the trouble.

“Sensei, how is this a lecture?!”

“This really doesn't feel like class work.”

As Jin and Izumo voiced their heartfelt despair at full volume, Abelia chimed in with a pout.

“Shifu and Yunno get to work in the merchant guild, where it's nice and cozy, and we're out here in this?! This is total discrimination!”

To be fair, it was a little windy today. The chill wasn't nothing. But clearly, none of them were pleased with what I'd labeled as a lecture.

All the students from my class, except for the Rembrandt sisters, were here. This crew of eager fools had ambushed me the moment I showed my face at the academy, demanding to know when lectures would resume.

I'd told them, of course, that the academy's reopening would be postponed until the city was stabilized. Maybe indefinitely. That should've been the end of it. But no, the only answer they would accept was “right now.” Even if the

academy was half destroyed, they wanted class. They were motivated.

So here we were. And since they were so desperate to learn...

I had them spend the day tearing down partially collapsed buildings and doing basic earthworks. Under the noble banner of “reinforcing foundational skill sets.”

Participation was “strongly encouraged,” meaning more or less mandatory.

There’d already been discussions between the academy and the local guilds about providing labor for the city’s reconstruction. In reality, mages—especially those capable of precision work—could drastically accelerate the city’s recovery timeline. So getting these students involved was only logical.

Somehow, though, Rembrandt had gotten wind of this in advance and managed to reroute Shifu and Yuno into some “special assignment” under his wing. It was an impeccable move, clean, fast, and totally legal. I couldn’t even be mad.

Plus, I figured the girls could use the opportunity. Shadowing their father and learning real merchant work? Valuable experience. So I didn’t go dragging them into this mess.

“The fact that you’re whining this much just proves why you panicked during the mutant attack,” I said flatly. “Your weapons should be ashamed of you.”

“Sensei...” Jin muttered, pausing his shovel work and eyeing me.

“What is it, Jin?”

“I just realized something. Ever since you started speaking more directly to us, you’re, like, the same age as us, aren’t you? Maybe even younger?”

“Are you saying talking to you ruined the illusion?” I asked, deadpan.

“No, no! Well, kinda?” He scratched his cheek, flinching a little. “I just meant that your written messages had more... I dunno, authority. But seriously, Sensei, if you joined the effort, things would wrap up faster. You’re young, right?”

“If I weren’t stuck being the on-site supervisor handling all this paperwork and logistics, I might consider it,” I replied. “But let’s be honest, if you guys fall behind schedule, I’m the one who has to pick up the slack anyway.”

“Wait, so you’re saying that this task has no actual quota?” Abelia suddenly cut in, her eyes sharp and suspicious.

She had an extremely intimidating glare for a student. Even at eye level, being stared down by her tended to make you instinctively step back.

“Of course there’s a quota,” I said flatly. “If you all underperform and I have to make up for it, it’ll be collective punishment. Everyone shares the penalty.”

“Pe... Penalty?” they echoed, visibly paling.

“Well, we could do another mock battle. Perhaps against Yusuri from the misty lizardfolk. Actually, let’s throw in Zwei and the Blue Lizard as a combo too.”

“Nope! Nope!! Nope!!!” they all shouted in perfect sync.

*Flawless harmony. Truly impressive.*

Yusuri was the third member of the misty lizardfolk.

Unfortunately for him, and fortunately for everyone else, he hadn’t gotten much spotlight during the mutant incident. But when Jin and the others started throwing around demands for more “lectures” without reading the room, I’d decided the task would need some stakes behind

it. So I'd called in Yusuri and asked him to be ready for a mock battle.

Jin and his team used the weapons I'd given them. Yusuri entered the ring unarmed, wearing only minimal protective gear: elbow guards, shoulder pads, nothing that restricted his movement.

That's because Yusuri was a rarity in this world: a hand-to-hand fighter, a full-on martial artist.

He'd always preferred fighting bare-handed, but after I introduced him to some combat techniques from my world, he became obsessed. Obsessed enough to do nothing but train, day in and day out.

His short sword, once reluctantly carried, was now little more than decorative flair on his belt. These days, Yusuri stood at the forefront of the Demiplane's budding martial arts scene as a pioneer.

If the Blue Lizard was "technique," and Zwei was "power," then Yusuri was both, strength and skill rolled into one.

*In other words, he does not mess around.*

The level of brutality Yusuri brought to a fight depended on how seriously he took it, and this time I'd asked explicitly for minimal restraint. So from my students' perspective, Yusuri probably felt like a damn grim reaper wrapped in muscle and precision.

It was like watching bowling pins get obliterated by a perfect strike. Jin and his team got flattened.

Every weapon I gave them? Broken. Each student? Punched, kicked, thrown, submitted, the whole martial arts experience. I made sure the eldwars repaired the weapons afterward, of course, but judging by the haunted looks in their eyes, the mental scars would be deep and long-lasting.

I'll admit, even I was a little surprised when Yusuri launched something that looked like a ki blast.

Jin's group had probably hoped that if they could keep their distance, they'd have time to come up with a plan. That blast absolutely *obliterated* their hope.

Yusuri had once mentioned something about "feeling out energy naturally." Just casually. Like that was a normal thing.

*He's insane.*

"So get serious already," I said, tone sharp. "Honestly, if you'd just show the people here that you're willing to help restore the city, it'd be nothing but good for you. For the academy's image too."

Jin scowled. "Most of the people here just leech off us students and try to profit," he muttered under his breath. "You're the weird one for actually caring, Raidou-sensei."

"I'll be blunt then," I replied coldly. "Right now, rebuilding this city matters more to me than giving lectures. If it comes to it, I *will* suspend my class. I'll cancel it outright and reopen enrollment later. Would you prefer that?"

That got his attention.

"Wait, wait, wait, that tone... Don't tell me that rumor was *true*! You really turned down a permanent teaching position?! One of those elite, stable-for-life jobs?!"

"Yeah. I rejected it on the spot. I never planned to make a living as an instructor anyway."

"On the spot?! You really are insane! That's next-level nonsense!" Jin grabbed his shovel with the desperate determination of a man who'd seen the abyss. "Okay, okay, I'll work! I'll work hard! Please don't reopen applications; we'd never make it in a second time! The competition would be brutal! Aaagh, I should've kept my mouth shut."

“You should’ve said that from the start,” I smirked. “At this rate, when new students arrive, they’ll leave you all in the dust.”

Strangely enough, from that point on, there were no more complaints, just a sudden surge of determination as they threw themselves into the work.

To be clear, I was bluffing about canceling and reopening the class. Mostly.

Once things settled down, I would probably have to open additional enrollment anyway. The admin staff at the academy have been watching me with that dead-eyed intensity that says, *“We’re watching you, workhorse.”* Honestly terrifying.

*Still, I do need to keep pushing Jin and the others forward in their studies. There’s just no avoiding it.*

Honestly, if my instincts from Limia were correct, then these students might have already been stronger than your average soldier or knight, by a lot.

That thought alone made me pause.

I’d been designing their training around the assumption that they were aiming to be elite specialists, using Tsige’s top-tier adventurers as the baseline. The idea was to let each of them hone their individual strengths on top of that.

Maybe I was off the mark. Maybe that goal was already behind them.

Creating students who could outperform royal knights? *That’s not even funny. It’s borderline irresponsible.*

*I may need to reevaluate my entire curriculum.* Maybe aiming for Wasteland-ready was setting the bar too low from the start.

*But all of that’s a problem for another day. For now, I’ve got my hands full just checking off today’s task list.*

Shiki was with Sairitsu in Lorel today. Mio was back in the Demiplane. Tomoe was out helping deliver supplies to the surrounding towns.

*Which means, of course, another late-night strategy meeting falls to me.*

*Sigh.*

That one banquet night already felt like a distant memory.



The morning shift had finally reached a lull.

Students and workers alike had scattered for their midday break, drifting off in every direction to take a breath and regroup.

As for me, I'd stepped away from the site for a while, and it was time to meet a few people. I'd already given instructions for the rest of the recovery effort, so I could afford to be absent for a few hours. *Probably.* Unless something went catastrophically wrong.

I passed by the ruins of the Kuzunoha Company store, a wreckage of splintered beams and shattered hopes slipped off the main road, heading toward my first appointment.

“Ahhh, sorry to make you come all this way, Raidou-sensei.”

The voice, warm and laced with a teasing lilt, belonged to Estelle, the sultry woman I'd met at the brothel not long ago. She guided me through the dim interior, still cluttered

with broken tables and shards of glass, and motioned toward a sofa tucked in the shadows.

“Please don’t call me *sensei*,” I said, smiling. “You’re older than me, and it’s not like I’m your teacher. Just call me Raidou.”

Estelle chuckled, placing a hand on her hip. “Hmph, bringing age into it? You really don’t mean anything by it, do you? That’s what makes you tricky. Still, calling my savior by name feels a little... rude, y’know? Anyway, our boss isn’t here yet, but you don’t mind waiting inside for a bit, do you?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“Still, you really caught me off guard, you know. One day it’s nothing but written text, and the next it’s all ‘Oh hey, I can talk now!’ Honestly, you sound younger than I expected.”

Her gaze lingered on me, full of fascination. I got it; until recently, we’d communicated entirely through writing since I couldn’t speak hyuman language at all. Jin had said the same thing, that I came off younger now. I still wasn’t sure whether that was a compliment.

*I was writing down what I wanted to say, yet it comes off so differently when spoken aloud.*

Estelle and I first met when I saved her from a mutant that had wandered into the local red-light district. It seemed like a one-off encounter, so when she said she’d introduce me to her boss, I assumed it was just flattery. I never expected her to follow through.

Still, if I was about to meet her boss, I needed to tread carefully. Someone like that was almost certainly tied to the underworld, and I couldn’t afford to get too close.

“By the way,” I asked, glancing around the still-intact walls and half-functional furnishings, “this area seems to

have come out of things relatively intact. When do you think you'll be able to open back up?"

The damage didn't look extensive enough to require demolition. With some repairs, the building could probably be put back in working order. Once the main street was cleared up, folks here might be able to return to their routines sooner than most.

Estelle gave a soft, wistful sigh. "This business lives and dies by the flow of people. Until the crowds come back and the city finds its rhythm again, we can't exactly throw open the doors. Even if the building and the girls are still standing."

"There must be plenty of demand with all the workers here for the rebuilding, right?"

"Oh, there's demand, sure," Estelle said with a knowing laugh. "But this business doesn't work that way. Just because people need it doesn't mean we can operate openly. We're in a delicate trade, you know, image matters as much as service. It's not just about supply and demand. It's about the mood, favoritism, popularity—all of it depends on how people feel."

*So that's how it is.*

It wasn't enough to offer what people wanted. In some cases, providing it could even backfire. I opened my mouth to suggest something, but stopped myself before I said anything stupid. I could only imagine the pitying smile I'd earn from Estelle if I came across as naïve.

She was already looking at me with the gentle gaze of an older sister watching over a kid who didn't quite get how the world worked; seeing that stung more than I expected.

"..."

As I tried to figure out how to respond, footsteps echoed from the entrance.

“Oh, sounds like the boss is here,” Estelle said brightly, already turning to go. “I’ll bring him right in. Don’t worry, today’s just a quick introduction and a thank-you. He may look scary, but he’s got a soft side. You’ll see. Just try not to flinch, okay?”

*May look scary? That doesn’t bode well.*

Maybe I could mentally prepare myself by imagining Io’s face. After all, no hyuman could look more intimidating than him, and he didn’t scare me—well, *not anymore*.

*Yeah. Just picture a towering, muscle-bound giant glaring down at me. Compared to that, this’ll be nothing.*

Still, if we were talking about scary hyumans, maybe I should be imagining Zara from the Merchant Guild instead.

Just the memory of him was enough to put most things into perspective.

A moment later, the front door swung open.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I hear Estelle and the girls owe you a great deal... Hmm? Raidou?!”

“Zara? Representative?”

The very face I’d imagined, complete with that bone-chilling glare, was now standing right in front of me.

*Wait—he’s the boss?!*

“Estelle, care to explain what’s going on here?”

Zara’s voice, usually composed and clipped, now carried a sharp edge of surprise as he turned to grill Estelle.

“Oh? You already knew?” Estelle blinked, a touch of mischief in her voice. “There’s really not much to explain. He’s the one who saved our lives; his name is Raidou. He’s a merchant, runs a small company.”

“You... You knew he was a merchant and still brought him to meet me?!” Zara barked, glaring.

“Well, of course,” Estelle replied nonchalantly. “He said he was just starting out, but he seemed promising. I

thought maybe you could keep an eye on him, as a favor.”

Her tone was casual, bordering on careless. I couldn’t tell if she was putting on an act or if that was just her natural air.

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Calm down, boss. I swear, I didn’t mean anything by it. You two already seem to know each other, though... Did I mess something up?”

“So, the one who saved all of you was Raidou.”

Zara let out a deep sigh, and I wished I could have done the same. *A little warning before you showed up would've been nice.*

After a heartbeat’s pause, Zara turned toward me and gave a deep bow. “Raidou, thank you. I truly appreciate it.”

“W-Wait, Representative, please! I—I didn’t do anything that deserves thanks like that!”

“No. You saved Estelle and the others. You saved lives. Of course, you deserve gratitude.”

*Ugh. Having someone I'm not comfortable with bow to me is seriously awkward.*

Desperate to change the subject, I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “T-To be honest, I didn’t know you were involved in, uh, this kind of business, Representative. That caught me off guard.”

“Yeah, I run the women and gambling in this city,” he said plainly. “Crushed everyone else who tried. It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this, but things happened.”

*So he's not just the head of the Merchant Guild, he runs the underground too.*

*And I thought I was having a busy day.*

The fact that he was overseeing all of this without planning it this way was even more impressive.

“I see. I just heard Estelle and the others scream and ran over. That’s all. I wasn’t trying to get anything out of it.

I didn't mean to make it a big deal."

I couldn't find the right words, but even if I fumbled the delivery, I wanted to make one thing clear: I hadn't helped them expecting anything in return.

"Good grief. You're still as much of a walking contradiction as ever," Zara muttered, exhaling through his nose in exasperation. "And yet, despite that, the name of the Kuzunoha Company is spreading like wildfire. I'm not saying I take Rembrandt's word as gospel, but he's right about one thing—you're no ordinary merchant."

His expression hardened for a brief moment, eyes narrowing in appraisal, before the irritation in his voice softened into something closer to resignation.

"A lot of the bastards who tried to set you up are dead now. On top of that, I've gotten what they're calling 'requests', more like thinly veiled commands, from both the second prince of Limia and the *chūgū* of Lorel to support you however possible. Even the temple sent word: 'Do not provoke him.' It's not even a joke anymore. The one who profited most from the mutant outbreak was *you*, Raidou."

"Uh, right."

*If by "profited" you mean being buried in new headaches, then yeah, sure. I'm thriving.*

For the record, the "*chūgū* of Lorel" referred to Sairitsu. At first, I'd thought *chūgū* was some imperial wife title, like an empress consort, but apparently, in that country, it referred to the head shrine maiden overseeing the shrine's inner court.

Sairitsu had said it wasn't a particularly well-known position, but if she held the highest religious title in one of the Four Great Nations, surely someone had heard of it.

*Well, not me, obviously.*

"As for the Merchant Guild, we still owe you for overextending your resources during the transfer of

emergency goods," Zara continued. "There were never many apothecaries in this city to begin with. That's why we've been quietly steering anyone trying to re-enter the trade toward other kinds of businesses."

"Wait, I—I didn't ask for any of that."

It sounded suspiciously like they were telling me, *Go ahead and monopolize the medicinal trade*. I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"Idiot. It's not just for *your* sake," Zara snapped. "The reality is, so long as you lot can maintain that quality and price, there's no other shop in the city that can compete with Kuzunoha in anything medicine-related. I was going to bring this up at tonight's meeting, but fine, here it is. I want you to start thinking seriously about expanding your supply. Even slowly is fine. Or hell, open a branch store."

"A branch?"

That'd stretch our staff very thin. Honestly, I wasn't sure we could manage it.

"I've also been talking with Shiki-san. If you're willing, we'd like you to continue acting as our intermediary with the academy. The reason the city's recovering so quickly is that we've been able to use magic so readily. And we'd like to keep that going until we've fully restored everything."

*Huh?*

*Why did he call Shiki "Shiki-san," but just Raidou for me? Does he think Shiki's my guardian or something?* To be honest, I couldn't entirely deny that.

"I'm definitely planning on continuing to work with the academy for now," I said, trying to shift back to the practical matters. "Through Tomoe, we're also continuing deliveries to the surrounding cities."

"Tomoe, she's the one who's got dragons eating out of her hand, right? Even more than a Dragoon would. I've got plenty of issues with how recklessly green you are, but with

the kind of cards you play, I can't help but tip my hat. Using Lorel's hidden treasure like a glorified carriage... We have no idea how deep your hand runs."

“It’s only possible thanks to the support of the Dragoons.”

“Support?” Zara scoffed, raising an eyebrow. “I went to see it for myself. That was no ‘support.’ Those knights were basically props. The Lesser Dragons moved like a trained army under her command. It was terrifying.”

“Ahaha...”

“At this rate, we might have Rotsgard looking like itself again in a month. As Guildmaster, and as someone who looks after the red-light district, I need to repeat myself: thank you, Raidou.”

Zara bowed deeply once more. Estelle followed suit without hesitation, lowering her head in sync with her boss.

*I’ll never get used to this... Being bowed to by the Guildmaster?*

“N-No, really, thank you. I still have a lot to learn, so I hope you’ll continue to guide me where I fall short, Representative Zara.”

“So long as you don’t make Rembrandt blow a fuse,” he muttered with a smirk. Then he seemed to remember something. “By the way, I’ve been thinking, when the brothels along this street reopen, I’m planning to give you free access as a show of thanks. What do you say, Raidou?”

When he lifted his head to meet my gaze, his smile changed in an instant, twisting into something *deeply unpleasant*.

“Uh... I don’t really, uh... partake in that sort of entertainment. I’m still not even a full-fledged merchant.”

Zara sighed again. “That kind of vague response? Another one of your more obvious flaws. Well, fine, I’ll take it positively. In that case, Kuzunoha gets full brothel access. Use it however you like. And I’ll make sure the girls here buy all their daily necessities from your shop. That’ll serve as both our thanks and hush money.”

He said it so smoothly that I almost missed the threat baked into the kindness.

“Anyway, sorry to keep you. We’re both busy, but make sure you attend tonight’s meeting. Don’t forget, Raidou.”

With that, he pivoted without waiting for a reply and strode right out of the shop.

*Yeah... He knew I wouldn’t say no.*

Not that I’d have any reason to blow the whistle anyway. What good would it do? I wasn’t planning to stir up anything.

Still, even without trying to be intimidating, that guy had a way of getting under my skin. I wasn’t sure why, but I just couldn’t relax around him.

*All right. Next up is the prince of Limia.*

We were supposed to meet in one of the academy’s conference rooms.



The prince of the Kingdom of Limia. Or rather, *princess*, technically speaking. If I remembered correctly, the name was Joshua.

Honestly, the first thing that came to mind when I received the summons was: *She’s still in Rotsgard?*

That about summed up my entire reaction. I’d assumed she’d left long ago.

Most likely, this was going to be about her *gender*.

Fortunately, I already knew what I had to do before anything else.

Apologize.

That was it. There was no simpler or safer move than that.

If the topic veered into discussions involving national affairs or merchant business, I could just hit them with a polite *"I'll need to get back to you on that."* Always works like a charm.

I was actively memorizing useful lines like that, phrases you could whip out in meetings when you needed to buy time or dodge commitment.

That's what was on my mind as I knocked gently on the conference room door.

"Come in," came the immediate reply.

Definitely Joshua's voice.

*Well, it's not like a prince, err princess, of a major nation would set a trap in a foreign facility like this, right?*

No point in being *too* paranoid.

I opened the door and stepped inside, offering what I hoped came off as a humble, commoner-style greeting—just to be safe.

"It's been a while, Joshua-sama. I'm honored to have been invited."

Joshua was dressed exactly the same as before, formal men's attire with a princely air. No surprise gowns or sudden femininity to throw me off balance.

So far, so good.

As planned, I would start with an apology. First and foremost, I needed to address the elephant in the room. Namely, the incident where I'd accidentally... *well*, made contact with her chest. That particular form of "diplomatic mishap" was going to haunt me for a while.

"I'm so sorry!"

...

*No, no, no.*

*What am I doing?! That's not the timing at all!*

I'd barely walked through the door! Now I just looked like some emotionally overwhelmed foreigner shouting apologies at royalty for no reason. *Great.* For all I knew, she probably thought I was still struggling to speak.

*Fantastic start. Truly elite-level diplomacy.*

"Huh? Oh... yes, I'd heard you could speak now, but I didn't expect you to be this fluent. That's quite the improvement. In any case, I'm the one who's grateful you answered my summons, Raidou-dono."

Princess Joshua spoke with the same calm, polite manner as I remembered. She hadn't changed at all. Graceful, refined, still composed even when some idiot came crashing into the room, blurting out apologies.

"Th-Thank you..."

I tried to recover, but I was already getting tired of this routine. *Every single person I meet comments on how well I can speak now. It's getting old. I get it—I couldn't talk before. Now I can. Move on, please.*

I had no clue how to properly greet royalty or exchange pleasantries anyway. So I decided to skip the niceties and get straight to the point, even if it was a bit rude.

Okay, I *might* have been in a bit of a rush to get this meeting over with.

"So, what can I do for you today?"

"Yes, I suppose we should get straight to the heart of the matter," she said softly. "Then, let's begin."

"Please."

Joshua hesitated for a moment, her composed expression cracking just enough to reveal the tension beneath.

"First, about what you learned the other day—my..."

Her voice trailed off, awkward and uncertain.

*Yep. That incident. Knew it.*

“You mean the fact that you’re a woman?” I asked.

“Yes. As you can see by how I’m dressed, I still present myself this way. But that truth is known only to a select few within the Kingdom of Limia. It has never been disclosed to any foreign nation.”

“I understand.”

*“Has never been disclosed.”*

*Is she worried the demons or the Empire might have caught wind of it?*

That’s the impression I was starting to get.

*Oh. Wait. Is this room even secure?*

That thought had only just occurred to me. But if Joshua was willing to drop revelations this heavy with such casual composure, she must have already taken precautions.

Besides, it wasn’t like she was discussing anything damaging to me, so I figured it wasn’t worth stressing over.

“I understand it was an accident, something that happened while you were trying to help me,” she said gently. “Still, regarding that incident. I must ask you not to speak of it to anyone else.”

*A request, huh?*

When Zara used that exact word earlier, it was heavy with sarcasm. But with someone of Joshua’s status, a request was just a polite way of giving an order.

At least, that’s how it felt to the person being asked.

Well, maybe it was official Limia policy, but from what I’d seen, she’d also gone out of her way to support Kuzunoha’s business. Given that, I could at least be trusted to make a call about what not to run my mouth about.

“I understand.”

“Excuse me?”

She heard me, of course she did, but for a second, she just stared, blinking like I’d said something impossible.

“Ah, um, I mean, I understand. I won’t tell anyone.”

“U-Um... You do realize that what I’ve shared is a royal secret?”

She trailed off, eyes narrowing just a little—not in suspicion, but in confusion. Her face clearly said, *That’s it? No demands? No questions?*

As the conversation moved on, the tension she’d been holding in began to melt away. Slowly, cautiously, her expression softened.

“I will not speak of it. I promise,” I repeated, clearly and without hesitation.

If anything, I wanted to ask her: *What exactly do you expect me to do now that I know your secret?*

*Blackmail?*

*Yeah, right. That would only invite disaster.*

*Get along with her? That’s what she wants?*

*How’s that supposed to work, when we’re not even close to being on equal footing?*

Our statuses were worlds apart. I was just a merchant. She was royalty.

On top of that, I knew one of her most sensitive secrets, completely one-sided.

*How am I supposed to build a friendship off that?*

*Besides... Limia is where Hibiki-senpai lives.*

The last thing I wanted was to stir up unnecessary conflict with its prince/princess.

Joshua spoke again. “I’m sorry, but... just hearing it from your lips isn’t enough. It doesn’t make me feel secure. In fact, it makes me uneasy.”

“I see.”

“Is there anything you *do* want? Something I can offer you? If it’s within my ability, I’ll do what I can.”

Ah, *there it is*. The Nothing’s More Expensive Than Free mindset. She couldn’t believe I’d leave a secret like

this hanging in the air without extracting some kind of payment.

“At the moment, no,” I said plainly. “If anything, I’d suggest you go back home as soon as possible. Focus your energy on its recovery, that seems far more urgent.”

“I have no rebuttal to that. You’re right, as that’s one of my duties.”

*Exactly.*

*The king’s already gone back, yet the prince stays in Rotsgard? That alone raises eyebrows.*

“In that case, please do.”

She had shown flashes of genuine worry about her homeland throughout the conversation; the kind of concern you can’t fake.

“But at the same time,” she added with a troubled smile, her eyebrows faintly furrowing, “investigating and negotiating with you... is also part of what I consider my duty.”

*So that’s why she said “First” earlier.*

She hadn’t just summoned me to apologize or to protect a secret. There was a second part coming: the negotiation.

Unfortunately for her, I wasn’t in any position to entertain diplomatic deals right now. Rotsgard was still in chaos, and things in the Demiplane were anything but stable.

“If it helps, you can report that there’s no current issue. I’m preoccupied with the rebuilding effort here, and as you may have gathered from your investigation, we don’t hold any ideology of favoring one particular nation.”

“So I’ve heard...” she replied, her tone cooling slightly. “It seems other nations have also attempted to win your favor. But with little success.”

“Indeed. And I’d suggest they not hold out hope for better results in the future.”

I doubted we’d ever work exclusively with any one nation.

In fact, I wasn’t even sure we’d stay allies with just the hyumans going forward.

Not that I’d say that out loud.

“So you want me to report exactly what you just said,” she murmured, more to herself than to me. “I see.”

“I’m not trying to force your hand,” I said calmly. “But if you were hoping I’d request something, then let me clarify, I’m not. From your position, I think your time is far better spent getting back to your country as soon as possible. That’s all I meant.”

*If I were the thing keeping her here, then she has no reason to stay now.*

“Then I’ll take it that way,” she said with a faint nod. “Still, it seems I’ve been warned off trying to negotiate anything further.”

“I apologize. It’s just that between the academy, the Merchant Guild, and lately Fals-dono from the Adventurers’ Guild, and even a delegation from the temple, I don’t have the capacity to take on any new commitments.”

“If it’s just the temple, I do hold a little sway there. I’ll ask them to pull back as much as I can.”

“That would be a huge help.”

*Seriously. If that’s her way of repaying me, I’ll take it gladly.*

You can only hold so many endless talks that lead nowhere before the stress starts to wear you down.

“I’ve already taken up enough of your time, Raidoudono. I have nothing further... except, perhaps—one last question.”

“Go ahead.”

“What do you think of me?”

*Oh boy. That's one hell of a vague question.*

What part of her was I supposed to comment on?

Her disguise as a man?

Her identity as a woman?

Her decision to remain here negotiating with me instead of returning home to her recovering country?

There were too many layers, and no way to know which one she was really asking about.

“What do I think of you?” I repeated, trying to buy a second or two. “I’m not sure this answers your question, but I think it must be hard.”

“Hard?”

“Yes. Dressing the way you do, carrying yourself as royalty, being stuck here dealing with someone like me—a strange, inexperienced outsider. All of it seems like a difficult position to be in.”

“Heh. Forgive me. That’s... not the kind of answer I expected,” she said, letting out a quiet, almost amused breath. “But I see. Your perspective on my situation is unusual.”

*Was that not what she was hoping to hear?*

I couldn’t tell, but, well, that was just how I felt. No pretense.

“Then, if you’ll excuse me, Prince Joshua.”

My deliberate use of the *prince*, not *princess*, was a subtle signal: *I’ll respect your choice. I won’t out you.*

I bowed, turned, and left the room, leaving Joshua behind with her unreadable smile.



"Well, well. If it isn't Raidou-dono, it's been a while since we've crossed paths like this, hasn't it?"

"Fals-dono, you seem to be keeping yourself quite busy."

Our exchange took place just after I'd wrapped up my conversation with Joshua and finished a brief meeting with a few of the academy's lecturers.

As I made my way down the hallway toward the exit, I bumped into Luto, Guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild.

Like he said, it was unusual to see him in the academy. We hadn't run into each other much lately anyway.

Come to think of it, he still owed me one.

I'd been planning to have him pay that debt back by formally recognizing Kaleneon as a legitimate entity under the Adventurers' Guild. That was still on the table.

"Could I trouble you for just a few minutes?" Luto asked, his voice as casual as always.

"A few minutes, I can spare."

"Excellent. Then let's head to the spire over there. There's a spot up top that should be empty at this hour."

"Sure."

I fell into step behind him, and we ascended to one of the upper rooms of the academy's pointed tower. Sure enough, it was quiet, totally deserted.

*Huh. Nice view.*

All of Rotsgard stretched out below us, still scarred from the recent devastation. Half the city was in ruins, but even in its broken state, it carried a kind of solemn beauty when seen from above.

"I owe you an apology for last time," Luto began, his tone sincere. "I never expected Adventurer Sofia to interfere the way she did. Nor did I anticipate the

Goddess's influence. I deeply regret what happened to you and your companions."

I shot him a flat look. "Oh? You spied on me through Sofia's eyes, and you think a 'my bad' cuts it?"

*The nerve of this guy.*

To be fair, I'd already picked up on the fact that Luto felt at least some level of guilt. That's probably why I didn't hesitate much when he invited me to a quiet, secluded place like this.

Not that I was letting my guard down.

If he happened to take the "*that was then, this is now*" approach and tried something, I was more than capable of picking him up and throwing him straight out the window.

*Chastity is important, after all.*

"A-Ahaha... Well, you see," he began with a weak laugh, "for high-level adventurers, I've built in a sort of safety valve mechanism. That's how I'm able to, uh, do things like that."

As usual, he was trying to deflect with that smooth, evasive style of his. But this time? His eyes were definitely darting all over the place, and I was definitely unimpressed.

"You're not lying very well today, Luto," I said. "Sofia wasn't pulling off that stunt because she was some high-tier adventurer. It was because she had some deeper connection to dragons, or more specifically... to *you*."

I had pieced that much together. And once I realized that, I became aware of his gaze, watching through her eyes.

It was a sloppy lie, especially for him.

"You're sharper than usual today, Makoto-kun. Did you uncover Sofia's secret?"

“I don’t know what her secret is. But I know enough. No ordinary hyuman suddenly mutates and absorbs draconic power like that. That’s not some rare evolution. It’s cheating.”

“I see...”

“And more than that, her obsession with you was *insane*. Sofia and Lancer both. That’s why I said you owe me. Do you even realize what Shiki went through? He barely made it through that fight.”

“That’s true,” Luto admitted with a pensive sigh. “Though really, the idea that a Greater Dragon, one who’s contracted with you, no less, would be taken down by a lich in a fancy cloak is absurd. I taught Shiki a lot, sure, but I still didn’t expect him to be able to defeat Lancer in that state.”

*Yeah, well, neither did he.*

Shiki himself said it was a hair’s breadth. He’d been dangerously close to his limit.

Not that I’d tell Luto that.

“I’ll be sure to pass that along to Shiki,” I said instead.

“Please do. In any case, thank you, truly, for taking care of both of them.”

*Oh, come on. Even now, he’s still trying to play dumb?*

“Taking care of them?” I narrowed my eyes. “You really think this is over?”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying that I did you a favor by leaving the cleanup to you.”

“...!”

Luto inhaled sharply.

The smile he’d worn so comfortably just moments before vanished in an instant, replaced by something much more serious. A grim tightness settled into his eyes, and even the air between us seemed to shift.

“You’re planning to move tonight, or tomorrow at the latest, right?” I continued, keeping my voice even. “Seriously, what’s gotten into you today? You’re making rookie mistakes. Sloppy lies. So easy to see through, even for someone like me.”

“Makoto-kun... You...”

“When it’s over, I’ll come ask for something in return. That’s the favor I’m calling in. So make sure you handle it properly, Guildmaster of the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“...”

Luto stared at me silently, all traces of his usual playful demeanor gone.

*Is this how little he thinks of me?*

The look on his face wasn’t just surprise; it was disbelief. He hadn’t expected me to figure out this much.

I had left it all to him: the resolution of Sofia, Lancer, and possibly the other Greater Dragons entangled in this mess, all of it.

That was the debt.

Tomoe had expressed some concern about it, but I had no intention of watching it unfold. I didn’t need to. All I planned to do was show up again tomorrow, or maybe the day after, to talk to him about Kaleneon.

That was enough.

“If you don’t see a man for three days, expect him to have grown,” Luto finally muttered with a dry chuckle. “You’ve certainly proven the saying true.”

“Glad to hear it. Anyway, I’ve got to get back to the site and check in with the office. Believe it or not, I’m very busy, way beyond my actual capacity.”

Leaving the dazed Luto behind in the high tower, I turned and descended the stairs in silence.



Heavy rain was falling.

It was night, several hours after the conversation between Raidou and Fals.

Deep within a forest so thick and wild that no traveler dared approach without purpose, a ragged figure sat motionless, save for the rise and fall of breath that was sharp, shallow, and desperate.

A lone hyuman woman.

The rain poured over her bare body like a cold shower, and with the moonlight smothered by a thick canopy overhead, the faint light radiating from her gave her away more than it protected her. Her breath came in ragged bursts.

“Haaah... Haaah...”

Sofia Bulga was sitting in a nameless forest, some distance from the capital of Limia, Ur.

Defeated, crushed by the Wicked One, Raidou, in the royal castle, and yet, she had survived.

“Raidou... That *thing*!”

Staggering to her feet with uncharacteristic frailty, Sofia leaned against a boulder taller than she was, one hand still gripping the shattered remains of her sword. Her clothes had long since been torn away in the battle; she hadn't had the means to change.

Rain beat mercilessly against her exposed skin as she muttered to herself.

“Mitsurugi's finally dead. His weapons were obliterated. He probably hasn't realized I used Yomatoi's

last resort to escape death. What is he? What *is* that monster?"

She growled Raidou's name like a curse, her voice raw with hatred and disbelief. But even as her venom poured out, her eyes closed and her breathing steadied. She focused inward, drawing upon her remaining mana to begin restoring herself.

This was where her experience as a seasoned adventurer showed.

The fight had gone too far; she had crossed a line she never intended to cross, all because Raidou had spoken his name.

Luto.

Her final goal.

The name alone had driven her to throw everything into that battle.

Afterward, her reason had returned.

"As humiliating as it is, I'll need to find a way to bypass him if I ever hope to face Luto. There's just no beating that monster directly. First, I need to take down the Invincible Dragon in the Wasteland. With what I've gained, it's not impossible."

She stared down at the blade in her hand.

Even broken, it seemed to carry some strange new weight, an implication that her battle with Raidou hadn't left her empty-handed.

"Unfortunately for you," came a genderless voice from the dark forest, "that won't be happening."

Sofia's eyes snapped wide.

That voice *should not* have existed here.

She was alone. No one had been following her. She'd made sure of that.

But there it was, piercing the rain-soaked silence.

"?!"

Her body was nowhere near ready to face a new threat, but Sofia forced herself into motion. She threw her back against the boulder, using it as cover from the direction the voice had come.

Her grip tightened around the broken blade in one hand, while her other summoned a translucent sword formed from light, an immaterial weapon born from Mitsurugi's former abilities.

"Hm. That was a decent move," the voice mused. "But compared to when you fought Makoto-kun, you're moving like a turtle."

"?! One of his allies? Where are you?!"

Her mind raced. She focused her senses, stretching her awareness into the forest's darkness. She'd already gauged a rough idea of the speaker's location, but that voice had known Raidou's real name.

She hadn't forgotten it. She couldn't forget it. That name belonged to the monster who had humiliated her in Limia's royal castle.

And anyone who knew that name?

Long-term combat was impossible in her current state, but she had enough energy for a sharp, decisive exchange. She began forming her strategy, mapping out her options in her head.

"Seems Lancer never taught you how to sense dragons properly," the voice continued, calm and amused. "Guess your relationship was never more than mutual convenience."

From the shadows stepped a young man with silver hair.

He wore a smirk, a little mocking, a little self-deprecating. His aura clashed violently with the dripping, broken silence of the forest around them. He did not belong here.

“You’re one of the Wicked One’s allies, aren’t you?” Sofia called out, still hidden behind the rock.

“One of his allies? Let’s say... a dragon who wants to be one, but keeps getting turned down.”

“A dragon?”

“A fool who turned his back on him long ago, only to end up owing him a debt because he couldn’t look away from something interesting,” the silver-haired man said with a crooked grin, his tone dipped in self-mockery.

“A debt... Wait. No. Don’t tell me...”

“Sharper than Makoto-kun, huh?” he said with a soft chuckle. “Allow me to reintroduce myself: Luto. The Greater Dragon of Harmony you’ve been searching for.”

“!!!”

Sofia’s eyes widened in shock. The breath caught in her throat.

Of all the possibilities, this was the last encounter she’d expected. And this was unimaginably bad timing.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you’re too embarrassed to come out just because you’re naked. I came for one last conversation.”

Luto’s voice was calm, almost playful, but the word “last” had already tipped Sofia off.

Slowly, she stepped out from behind the rock, unflinching despite the pouring rain and her lack of armor or clothing.

“Luto, is that truly you? The real one?”

“Think what you want. Would you prefer to be killed by an imposter or the real thing? I’ll leave that up to you.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than eight radiant swords of light appeared and lunged at him in unison. At the same time, a surge of crimson energy scorched the earth beneath his feet, attempting to melt through the ground and disorient him.

But Luto...

He closed his eyes with a tired sigh, and with a casual snap of his fingers, every blade, every flash of magic, dissipated like mist in sunlight.

“Was that proof enough for you?”

“...”

Sofia’s jaw clenched, and she could hear her teeth grinding in her mouth.

She knew now—with her eyes, her instincts, her entire body—that this was the real Luto. The one she’d been searching for. And she had just tried to strike him with everything she had left, only to be swatted away like a bothersome breeze.

That one effortless display made the gap between them impossible to ignore.

“A splinter of a dream I once had,” Luto murmured, his voice carrying an old weight. “That’s all you were. A forgotten fragment, stirring again after all these years. At first, I found it amusing.”

“...”

“But then things became strange. A regression more intense than I anticipated. A throwback with hyuman blood so potent it was almost like a direct child of mine. And then, to amuse myself, I fused two lives. A whim, really, but now, both of them have met, in the same era, and even teamed up. I have to admit, I didn’t see *that* coming.”

“You... You knew about me all along,” Sofia whispered.

“Of course I did. I’m the head of the Adventurers’ Guild. I’ve known about you since the day you registered. I know when you awakened to the instincts in your blood. When you first grew ambitious. When you became a woman. When you fell in love, and when you had your heart broken.”

“Tch. And you even knew I was looking for you.”

“Naturally. Though I never planned on meeting you.” Luto offered a thin, ironic smile. “You can thank Makoto-kun for that. He made this encounter possible. He’s the reason your little wish to meet me has been granted.”

*Of course, he didn’t add out loud, he’s also the reason everything else has fallen into chaos.*

“You...! You knew everything, every move I made, and still you left me and Mitsurugi alone?!” Sofia’s voice trembled, not with fear, but with seething rage.

She and Lancer had been after Luto’s life.

They had believed they were working from the shadows.

That if Luto had noticed anything, it couldn’t have been much, certainly not enough to warrant interference.

But now...

“I saw your goals. I saw how it would end. There was no need to get involved,” Luto explained, his tone maddeningly calm. “Frankly, I didn’t think you’d even get past Sazanami or Muteki.”

“Don’t you *dare* mock me! I had more than enough power to defeat them!”

“Power, sure. But power means nothing if they won’t face you seriously. Sazanami? Perhaps you had a shot. But Muteki? He lives so deep in the Wasteland, you’d need a war to drag him out. He was never going to play your game. And since your whole plan was based on faulty assumptions, why would I waste time stopping a doomed effort?”

“Faulty *assumptions?*” Sofia spat. “What the hell was wrong with my plan?!”

“Oh, let’s see, the part where you assumed that absorbing six Greater Dragons would let you surpass me?” Luto said, deadpan. “I could strip that power from you whenever I wanted. It’s not yours. Whatever Lancer told

you, the absorption ability you rely on is just a minor extension of my power. You may carry a thicker dose of my blood, but don't mistake that for control. You'll never wield it better than I do."

"..."

"So yes, I regret letting you run loose, just a little. You inconvenienced me briefly. But hey, you managed to make me feel regret. That alone is worthy of a toast in the afterlife." He smiled faintly. "Though Lancer won't be joining you. So you'll be drinking alone."

"It was all just whim for you. You left your bloodline among mortals on a whim. You created dragons from nothing, then on a whim declared them 'Greater Dragons'..." Sofia's voice cracked. The fury inside her had reached the breaking point. "Everything was just a damn game to you?! Don't—don't you dare mock me!!!"

Sofia's blade reformed in her hand, flickering with red light. She lunged with every ounce of strength her body could muster, channeling all of her wrath into one clean arc toward Luto's throat.

He stood there—calm, still, untouched.

Dressed simply in a pale shirt that somehow remained dry in the torrential rain, Luto looked more like a bystander than the godlike being Sofia was screaming at.

Sofia realized it too late.

Her crimson blade never reached him. A barrier of shimmering golden mana flared into existence, silent and absolute, absorbing the impact before it could even graze Luto.

"You see?" Luto said, exhaling as if the effort genuinely fatigued him. "This one's a copy. I'm imitating Makoto-kun. It's exhausting, honestly. I can only hold it for maybe ten minutes at best. And *he* maintains this constantly? How much mana does that guy have?"

“A... Ahhh...”

The sound barely escaped Sofia’s throat.

“All those Greater Dragons you planned to absorb,”

Luto continued softly, “that was my goal once upon a time. That foolish little fantasy? It started with me. Lancer must’ve heard me reminiscing about it when he was about your size. I never meant to pass it on, but he wasn’t like a typical Greater Dragon. He had desires. Ambitions. Traits unbecoming of our kind.”

Luto lowered his hand to about knee height, gesturing as if recalling a child’s stature.

Sofia could only stand there, silent.

And then he said the words:

“Tiamat Project.”

“...!”

The reaction was slight, barely a flicker in her breath, but it was enough.

Luto saw it. Felt it. “I thought so,” he murmured, eyes narrowing.

“Using my abilities as a base,” he added calmly, “the plan was to absorb every Greater Dragon. To control the earth, the skies, and the waters, on a scale even spirits couldn’t reach. To become something equal to the goddess and split this world in two. That was the Tiamat Project.”

He tilted his head, watching her face carefully.

“You probably don’t know, but Tiamat is the name of a fertility goddess. One who embodies both dragon and divine. The perfect fusion of two natures.”

“Fertility... goddess... There’s another god besides the Goddess?” Sofia asked, stunned.

“You’re not supposed to know that,” Luto said, tone suddenly dry. “And no. Not in this world.”

Sofia blinked, her expression blank, lost. “This... world?”

"It doesn't matter," Luto went on with a flick of his hand. "Back then, I realized I couldn't win against the Goddess. She'd already amassed too much of the hyumans' faith. The odds were stacked. Then I met someone. And that changed everything. I dropped it all."

A short breath.

"And yet, here we are. You, my defective one, teaming up with a dying dragon and a cursed weapon full of lingering hyuman hatred. Somehow, between you three, you managed to restart that moldy old plan of mine. How quaint. What a small, small world."

"Defective?!" Sofia's voice cracked with fury. "All because of this cursed power I never asked for. Do you even realize how much it's ruined my life?!"

Luto's answer came with chilling detachment. "It's an old saying, but still true: power itself is neither good nor evil. You twisted it. You warped it. You were the one who slaughtered hyumans, demons, and dragons alike, drunk on rage. That wasn't because of the power; it was because your heart was weak."

His voice was quiet, almost tired.

"And Lancer... He was no different. He reached a level where I wouldn't have minded calling him a Greater Dragon. That in itself was a miracle—an aberrant fusion. But even then, he wasn't satisfied. He let his hunger grow. Let it rule him."

For the first time, Luto's expression turned cold.

"In the end, both of you were just pathetic beasts who couldn't master your hearts or your desires. Losers. That's all. That's why I lost interest in you."

He raised his right hand high above his head, like a conductor signaling the final note of a symphony.

"I wasn't wrong. I was never wrong to hate you," Sofia roared. "Of all the creatures in this world, you are the only

one I'll never forgive!"

She sprang at him with everything she had left—muscles coiled, red light flaring, eyes wide with hate.

It lasted only an instant.

In the very next breath, her body collapsed like a marionette with its strings severed. She dropped to her knees, gasping, unable to understand what was happening.

"Wha..."

Hands planted against the soaked earth, she couldn't lift her head. Couldn't move.

From her body emerged four glowing spheres, each one rippling with distinct colors:

A deep crimson.

A cool blue.

A pitch black.

And a marbled sphere of red and white, swirling like blood and ash.

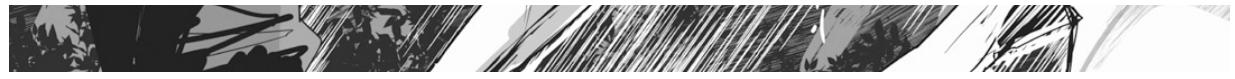
One after another, they floated into Luto's outstretched palm.

"You already lost the Goddess's blessing," he said, his tone now devoid of warmth. "Now that I've reclaimed the dragons' power... Well. You know what happens next, don't you?"

"Th-This can't be how it ends!"

The words rose from her failing lungs and out of her lips like a prayer lost to the wind.





"As far as adventurer deaths go, it's pretty ordinary, isn't it?" Luto murmured, kneeling to pick up the sword that had slipped from Sofia's limp hand. "A sudden, unexpected end. Happens all the time."

He turned the blade over in his hands, studying it with narrowed eyes. Then, as if some long-buried memory had just surfaced, he deftly dismantled the weapon, disengaging the hilt from the blade and inspecting the root of the tang.

"I see... So he became the sword itself. All this time, sealed inside that place," Luto muttered. His voice dropped until it was almost inaudible. "And that's why Lancer couldn't suppress his ambition. He thought he held limitless potential in his grasp."

A bitter, weary sigh.

"How foolish. How irredeemable."

His expression twisted in genuine remorse.

"Nagi-kun, I'm sorry. If I ever find the others, that'll be yet another thing I need to apologize for."

For a moment, Luto was no longer the all-powerful dragon or the head of the Adventurers' Guild. He was just a man drowning in reflection, haunted by mistakes long past.

Time, uncaring, marched on.

And then, finally, a small golden orb, no bigger than a marble, drifted from Sofia's body like a soul leaving its shell.

"Not... me!"

By some miracle of will, her right hand stirred. Weakly, it reached out for the sphere, trembling as it tried to reclaim what was no longer hers. But that was her last motion.

That faint cry and that dying gesture were the last echoes of Sofia Bulga.

Silence fell like a curtain.

Luto watched the orbs—red, blue, black, and now gold—each suspended in the air like glimmering remnants of a shattered legacy. He let out a long breath.

“Looks like we’re going to have a whole new generation of Greater Dragons,” he muttered. “Not that I have time to play parent. Guess I’ll dump the job on the local guardians.”

His lips curled with mischief.

“Actually, maybe I’ll ask Makoto-kun for a little favor. He’s always been a bit too... inward-facing, y’know? Might be good to give him a reason to look outward, see the world for what it really is.”

He lowered his hand, and the glowing orbs slowly shifted in form, transforming into softly pulsing dragon eggs, each one radiating the color of the power it once contained.

They floated gently in the air, weightless, cradled by magic.

“As for Lancer,” Luto mused, “I doubt Makoto-kun would be thrilled to take care of that one. Might be better to pawn him off on Aunt Sazanami, I guess. She does like hyumans; she even gave them her blessing. I don’t think she’ll mind rebirthing him.”

His gaze shifted to Sofia’s body, still lying motionless under the pouring rain. Her skin was pale, her hair clung to her face, and at the edge of one eye, a faint trail of moisture slid down her cheek.

Was it the rain?

Or the final tear of a broken soul?

It no longer mattered.

The rain washed away the difference within seconds.

She had no more answers to give. But Luto’s mind was elsewhere.

“Everything, just like Makoto-kun planned, huh?” he murmured. “Sofia, poor girl. She was just a pawn in the end, wasn’t she? Even if she was clumsy about it, she tried to reach something real.”

Then, his smile returned, not cold, but mischievous, the kind of grin he reserved only for Makoto.

“Still, letting him have his way entirely wouldn’t be any fun. I know what he’ll ask next. So, just once, I think I’ll beat him to the punch.”

Luto moved his left hand, fingers weaving through the air like a spellcaster drawing sigils. The moment he did, Sofia’s body gently rose off the ground, floating as if gravity no longer held her.

The playful light returned to Luto’s eyes.

This wasn’t the knowing stare of an all-powerful being, but the grin of a schemer with a plan, directed at Raidou, or rather, Makoto.

Then, without a sound, Luto vanished from the clearing, taking Sofia’s body with him, and the forest was empty.

# Tsukimichi Chapter 5

**A** loud knock at the door yanked me out of sleep.

Not exactly the gentlest of ways to wake up, especially not after the exhausting days I'd been having lately; my body felt heavy, but not in a bad way. In fact, it was oddly pleasant. *Maybe this kind of honest, sweaty, dusk-till-dawn work actually suits me. What a strange thought.*

The knocking didn't stop, even as I climbed out of bed and started changing out of my sleepwear.

"All right, all right, I'm up! What's going on? Come in already."

It was too early for this. *Seriously, who shows up pounding on doors like that first thing in the morning?*

This was my room in the Demiplane. Only recently have we introduced the concept of seasons here. That had come with no small amount of chaos, and things were just starting to settle down again.

The Demiplane's version of the four seasons worked a little... differently.

Sure, there were natural seasonal cycles, just like in the outside world. But in some areas, the seasons were

permanently fixed, a valley of eternal spring, a mountain range locked in perpetual winter... You get the picture. It wasn't the most elegant solution, but it was functional enough for the moment. We still had odd patches that defied classification, of course, but overall, things were manageable.

We'd been busy mapping out which crops thrived best in which zones, shifting farmlands accordingly, and more. With all that going on, we didn't really have the spare manpower to pull from the Demiplane for work in Academy City.

So when Tomoe burst into my room looking flustered, and Mio and Shiki followed right behind her, I knew something was up.

*Wait, what?*

To my consternation, the elders of several different races were filing into the room behind them.

*Thank goodness I changed clothes. At least I don't have bed hair or anything.*

With everyone gathered, there was evident tension in the air. But it wasn't panic so much as hesitation. Unease. Confusion.

Whatever had happened, it wasn't dangerous. Not immediately, anyway.

"All right," I said, glancing around at the crowd, "I can tell something's going on. But what's this 'intruder' you're talking about?"

Tomoe looked unusually hesitant.

"Well, 'intruder' might not be the right word. Perhaps, 'visitor' would be more accurate."

"... Visitor?"

*So someone's come to the Demiplane?*

That immediately set off alarm bells.

"Wait. Don't tell me a hyuman found out about the Demiplane? That'd be really bad!"

Tomoe shook her head. "No, not a hyuman."

That didn't make me feel much better.

"All right then, you've got them in custody, right? First things first, we need to figure out how they got here, what they want, and..."

"Young Master," Tomoe interrupted me softly. "We... haven't captured them."

"Huh?"

"The visitor is awake. It would be best if you spoke to them directly."

"Directly? But how..."

And then, before I could finish that sentence, it happened.

A deafening voice suddenly rang out inside my head.

*"Yo! Makoto Misumi! Mornin'!!!"*

"...?!"

I instinctively stiffened, my hand halfway to the door.

I didn't recognize the voice at all. It was brash and informal, but oddly commanding, not in a way that made me want to fight back, but rather in a way that made my posture straighten without thinking, like I was being addressed by someone important, even though their tone made them sound like a rowdy bar patron.

It felt like telepathy, like a mental transmission, but not quite. There was no sense of a magical connection. No feeling of a link, like when Tomoe or Shiki reached out mentally. It was more like the voice existed in my mind all on its own.

Still, after a brief moment of hesitation, I tried replying.

*"Good morning... I, uh... don't believe we've met before?"*

*"We haven't! Sorry for dropping in unannounced. My brother caused you some trouble, so I thought I'd swing by and offer my regards! I happened to be in the neighborhood, y'know? Heard you were still sleeping, so I just decided to wait around."*

*Brother?*

Who did I know with a brother who had caused me trouble?

*"I'm sorry, but may I ask for your name? Preferably, your full name?"*

*"Ehh, it's a mouthful. Let's go with the short version, call me Susanoo."*

*"Susanoo-san?"*

*"Yep, that's me."*

*Wait a second... Su-sa-no-o...?*

*Susanoo... Susanoo... Su-sa-no-o...*

*Wait.*

*You mean Susanoo-no-Mikoto?!*

*"The brother of the moon god Tsukuyomi? THE Susanoo-no-Mikoto?!"*

My brain froze. Then jump-started.

I was wide awake now, no trace of sleep left, and every neuron was firing.

That name wasn't just famous, it was legendary.

*He's a god.*

*A god of storms. Destruction. Chaos.*

Susanoo was a divine VIP whose bad mood could literally trigger natural disasters.

*And he was waiting for me to wake up?!*

*He waited?! For me?! The god of storms himself?!*

*"Oh. O-Oh, oh no. Oh nooo."*

I spun around, panic gripping my chest, and shouted at Tomoe before I could stop myself.

*"Tomoe! You should've woken me up right away!!!"*

She blinked, startled by my outburst. “I did suspect he was some tremendous being, but without a name, his presence seemed dubious. I hesitated.”

*Dubious or not, we’re talking about a divine being you do not leave waiting!*

My skin crawled. Was he offended? Was a wrath-of-the-heavens level storm about to tear through the Demiplane?!

*“Your brother asked you to check on me?” I asked tentatively. “And you’re just casually doing that now?”*

*“Yep. Just wanted to make sure you were holding up. Glad to hear your voice. Now then—we’re already inside this little world of yours. Mind if we come closer?”*

*“Of course not! You’re most welcome! Wait, is Tsukuyomi-sama with you?!”*

But then I paused.

*Wait, that can’t be right.*

*Tsukuyomi-sama should still be resting, recovering from the damage caused by intervening in this world. He wouldn’t be traveling anywhere just yet, would he?*

But Susanoo had said “we.”

*“Nah, big bro’s still healing back home. I just stopped by to talk to the goddess of this world for a bit. Dropping by here is just on my way out. Don’t worry, I’m not about to tell that idiot anything about this place. Quite the opposite, actually. I’ll help keep it hidden.”*

*“I... I see. Thank you very much. I’ll make arrangements to receive you immediately.”*

*He met with the Goddess.*

That explains something, actually.

Back when I was unceremoniously yanked into that divine domain, when the Goddess snatched me away, she was clearly flustered. Claimed she had a “visitor” arriving soon and needed me gone quickly.

So that visitor... was Susanoo?!

*No wonder she wanted me out of her hair! She had to entertain a god like him!*

*And now, he's on his way here?!*

*"Sorry to trouble you,"* came the god's booming voice again, *"but can you send someone to guide us? We're coming in on a rather large vehicle and need a wide, flat spot to land."*

*"I see. I'll arrange something right away. Where should we look for you?"*

*"Just look up. You'll see us."*

Just like that, the conversation with Susanoo was over.

My thoughts were still floating somewhere above me—fuzzy, stunned, like I hadn't quite caught up with the weight of what had just happened. But this wasn't the time to be spacing out.

I turned my head slightly to the right, casting a glance at my gathered companions. In hindsight, it was actually incredibly convenient that so many of them had assembled outside my room so early.

"Mio. Start cooking," I ordered. "Use every ingredient we've got, pull out all the stops. Priority is on Japanese dishes, but make anything you think tastes amazing. Call in everyone on kitchen rotation, I don't care who, get them moving, now."

"Y-Yes!!! Right away!" Mio replied.

"Ema, Shiki, prep for hospitality. As soon as I know whether they prefer to dine inside or out, I'll tell you. For now, gather people and supplies. Prioritize speed."

"Understood!" Ema nodded.

"As you will," Shiki accepted.

"Tomoe, you're with me. We're going to meet them in person. He said they'll need a wide, flat place to land—something even a huge beast could safely touch down on. Show me a plain that might work near here, the closest one

possible. The rest of you, split up. Help Mio if you know your way around a kitchen; otherwise, follow Shiki's instructions."

"A plain... Got it. I shall accompany you."

I broke into a sprint down the hallway, Tomoe close behind, shouting out instructions as I went.

*How the hell do you entertain a god?!*

I didn't know. I had no idea.

But I was going to try anyway.

Do everything I can. That's all I could do.

We burst outside.

My eyes turned skyward, half-wondering which sky I should be looking at, until I saw it.

There was no missing it.

Hanging impossibly high above the Demiplane, far larger than anything that should be able to fly at that altitude, was a dark silhouette. It was the size of a passenger jet, or of the mythical Roc, or even larger.

A bird.

A pitch-black bird, so massive it looked like a shadow carved into the sky.

"That's got to be it," I murmured, stunned. Then I glanced at Tomoe. "Think you can estimate a landing zone?"

"Yes... Still, that is *exceptionally* large." I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard that much admiration in Tomoe's voice. "On par with a dragon, no, perhaps even greater. There's one in the Demiplane that resembles it, but this one... This one surpasses it by far."

"It's a god's mount. Normal logic doesn't apply here," I replied, trying to sound steady. "For now, just put a marker down, some kind of signal, somewhere they'll be able to see it clearly from the sky. We need to show them where to land."

“A... god?”

“I’ll explain later. Please, hurry. And be sure we don’t offend them.”

“Of course. Still, that bird has three legs. And those talons, that beak—razor-sharp. If it goes wild, it would be... problematic, to say the least.”

“Yeah, but probably less dangerous than the ones riding it... Wait. Did you say three legs?”

*What?!*

Squinting up at the enormous black bird, yes, now that she’d mentioned it, I could barely make out the third leg trailing beneath it.

A giant black bird with three legs.

A crow.

No way could that be Yatagarasu, the mythic crow said to have descended from the heavens? The solar guide of emperors?

*The Yatagarasu?*

*Haha...*

They say those unworthy to behold it can be blinded. Thank every divine star above that I still had full use of my eyes.

I *had* heard somewhere that “yata” could be interpreted as “large,” but this... this was beyond ridiculous. This was aircraft-sized.

*There’s no way we can throw together a proper torii gate large enough for something like that to pass through, not on such short notice.*

“Young Master, the signal’s been received. They’re descending. Fast,” Tomoe informed me.

“Right. Let the others know not to look directly at it. Just in case. Let’s go, Tomoe.”

“As you command.”

*Susanoo.*

I never imagined I'd meet one of the Three Noble Children face-to-face.

I didn't know who else accompanied him, but he said he'd visited the Goddess. That meant he'd likely come from her domain.

Despite everything, despite the absurdity and the pressure, something deep inside told me this would be a good encounter for me.

Still...

Facing a god known for wrath and storms, a destroyer by nature...

I was more nervous than I'd been in a very, very long time.

My head was a mess, and my thoughts refused to settle.

*This is terrifying.*

Crows were already intimidating creatures with sharp beaks, keen eyes, and talons that looked like they could tear through steel. Now imagine one the size of a passenger plane. You'd think that would be the scariest part.

But no.

*The real threat isn't the bird.*

It was the three people, *deities, rather*, who descended from it.

To my left stood an elderly man with a warm, friendly smile and slightly dusky skin. He radiated a kind of approachable calm, like someone you could sit beside at a festival and talk to for hours. The pouch and small mallet hanging from his waist were curious, but unmistakably symbolic.

In the center, beaming with what looked like unfiltered joy, was a young man dressed in a heavily customized, pseudo-historical outfit that blended traditional Japanese

elements with artistic liberty. His expression was wide open, bright, and a little chaotic.

I didn't need to guess, this was Susanoo.

To his right, a woman. Likely a goddess. Probably the goddess accompanying Susanoo, but like the elderly man, I couldn't pin a name to her just by looking.

She wore a fitted business suit. Her hair was light brown, softly glowing where the sunlight caught it from behind, giving it a sun-kissed, almost golden tint.

*Gods don't dye their hair, right?*

So, natural? Somehow, that made it even more surreal.

Her eyes gleamed with a quiet, razor-sharp intelligence, and her presence screamed executive. If you told me she ran a multinational conglomerate and a divine realm on the side, I'd believe you.

I stepped forward and bowed, trying to keep my voice steady.

“It’s an honor to meet you. Susanoo-sama, and your esteemed companions. I’m Misumi Makoto.”

*Should I have said something like “Thank you for descending upon our world”?*

*No, that would’ve turned into a trainwreck real quick.*

*Better to keep it direct and respectful.*

I’d already instructed Tomoe to stay hidden unless I gave explicit permission. I trusted her not to go overboard, but these were gods. Gods from my world. Kin to Tsukuyomi-sama.

If they were here to see me, then I was the one who should face them personally.

Susanoo grinned and gave a casual nod. “Appreciate the welcome. Didn’t think the master of this world would come greet us himself.”

“N-No, it’s the least I could do! Tsukuyomi-sama has done so much for me... I couldn’t possibly consider this a bother!”

That was no lie. I owed Tsukuyomi more than I could ever repay.

It made perfect sense to give them a proper welcome—if anything, it felt like the absolute minimum I could do.

After all, if they were here, then maybe, maybe they knew more about Tsukuyomi-sama’s current condition. That possibility alone was enough to make me want to be as respectful and prepared as possible.

Only Susanoo’s name had been confirmed so far, but he was infamous for his temper and destructive power. It wouldn’t be wise to handle this meeting casually.

“Relax a little, would you? It’s not like you’ve done anything wrong,” Susanoo said with a chuckle, voice easy and unbothered. “And even if you had, we’re not here to

pass divine judgment or anything... Hm? Yeah, yeah, I know."

The woman standing to his right had nudged him gently with her elbow, clearly urging him to get on with the introductions.

"Like I said earlier, I'm Susanoo," he declared with a grin, tossing a thumb toward himself.

Then, the elderly man to his side stepped forward with a gentle smile.

"I go by Daikokuten. You might know me better from the Treasure Ship stories, one of the Seven Lucky Gods."

*Daikokuten?!*

*Wait, yeah, the bag and mallet, of course! That's why they looked so familiar!*

Still, wasn't there something more? A hidden connection or alternate identity that shocked me when I'd read about it once?

*Nope. Can't recall it now.*

His skin was slightly tanned, his earlobes smaller than the statues and illustrations I'd seen, but his overall aura was gentle and generous, just as I'd imagined for a god of prosperity.

The contrast between him and Susanoo was almost comically stark.

Finally, the woman with the bright brown hair and professional vibe spoke up, her voice calm and composed.

"I am Athena. In some places, I'm called Pallas Athena. A goddess of wisdom and war from Greece, far to the west of your homeland."

*Athena?!*

*What?*

*I mean, her hair color looks... well, pretty normal, honestly. That doesn't matter.*

What did matter was that nothing about her matched what I'd imagined a Greek goddess to look like.

Here she was, dressed like a high-powered corporate executive.

In fact, she'd probably look amazing in glasses.

And the juxtaposition between her and the other two couldn't be more striking.

I gave another polite bow and began leading them toward the main residence, silently noting that... yep, this day had somehow gotten even more absurd.

As we walked, the divine trio took in the sights of the Demiplane with visible curiosity, admiring the landscape and architecture.

They asked a lot of questions, some general, some more technical.

Between Tomoe and me, we answered what we could, but when it came to the true nature of the Demiplane, or its origin, we had to sidestep a bit.

All I could say was, "It seems to have come into being from the contract between myself and Tomoe, a dragon."

We soon reached our destination. Even with the Demiplane's entire staff mobilized, it wasn't realistic to organize a full banquet or feast right away. Though we'd taken our time walking and talking, by the time we arrived, the place was still buzzing with hurried preparations.

"I'm terribly sorry," I told my unexpected guests. "With your visit being so sudden, we weren't able to prepare a proper welcome. We're doing everything we can to get ready."

For now, I guided them to the largest room we usually used for meetings, about the only one spacious enough for guests like these.

"Told you, don't worry about it," Susanoo said reassuringly. "Still, I gotta say, you've built one hell of an

interesting town here."

"Indeed," Daikokuten chimed in with a grandfatherly nod. "And the fact that you're going to such lengths to prepare a feast for us, well, that's more than enough to make us happy."

"Truly," Athena added. "And your people work so diligently. It's refreshing to witness."

Hearing all three of them speak with such grace sent a wave of relief through me. They really weren't upset.

"Thank you. So, um... If I may ask, what brings you here today? If there's anything specific you'd like to do or need from us, we'll do our best to accommodate you."

We'd started off chatting casually, as if they'd just dropped by on a whim, but I didn't believe for a second that this visit was casual.

"Hmm? I told you already," Susanoo replied. "Tsukuyomi asked me to keep an eye on you. Said you were a curious one. That's the main reason."

"And if we must name anything else," Daikokuten continued, "perhaps just a few trifles, really."

"I came simply because I wanted to see this place with my own eyes," Athena said, smiling faintly. "The Demiplane is fascinating, limitlessly so. And now that I've seen it, I do think some things might be better kept from that child."

*Of course, what gods considered trifles can be cataclysmic for everyone else. Just look at what happened the last time she took a nap. Sure, it wasn't entirely her fault, but it was the final trigger.*

"If you'll be staying for a while, I'd be grateful to hear about those... trifles, in detail. Also, Athena-sama, if you'd like, I could personally give you a tour of the Demiplane," I offered.

"Yeah, and me and the old geezer here," Susanoo said, jerking his thumb at Daikokuten, "we brought you some

gifts. As for Athena, well, she's here to give that dumb girl a nice, sharp lecture. And maybe a collar too."

"A... A collar?"

The moment that word hit the air, Athena cast Susanoo a razor-sharp glare with her intelligent, ice-cold eyes.

I shivered.

"Uh... o-of course. Got it. I won't say another word."

Even he flinched. That alone told me just how terrifying she really was.

"Hehehehe. Ah, Makoto-dono," Athena remarked gently. "I'd love that tour you offered."

"Then why don't you let Tomoe be your guide? She's one of the people I trust most in this world. Tomoe, could you show Athena-sama around the Demiplane? She's a real goddess, not like *that one*, so make absolutely sure you treat her with the utmost respect."

"Y-Yes, I will," Tomoe responded, her usual composure giving way to a rare look of reverence. I could feel that my tension had transferred to her as well.

As she stepped forward to escort Athena out of the room, I watched their backs, and I quickly needed to warn Tomoe about something urgently. It should've happened sooner, but better late than never.

I chose telepathy; blurting it out loud would've been far too rude.

*"Also, Tomoe. That lady might have a bit of a competitive streak, so under no circumstances, and I mean none, challenge her to any sort of contest, all right?"*

*"U-Understood."*

*"She's revered as a war goddess. Try starting with misty lizardfolk territory, she'll likely find that region intriguing."*

*"As you command."*

*That's one crisis averted, probably.*

Now then, time to guide Susanoo and Daikokuten.

I waited until Athena and Tomoe were walking, then turned to face the two remaining gods. Their bright, broad smiles greeted me like the sun itself. It was a strange contrast: divine, intimidating beings who looked like they'd just arrived at a hot spring resort.

*A god of storms, a god of fortune, and a goddess of war.*

That trio made for a very strange combination. Especially Daikokuten.

*I mean, he's a god of fortune, right?*

More than that, he's not even strictly Shinto. He shows up in Buddhism, Shingon esotericism, and even in Hindu lore under a different name, a truly international deity.

One theory equates Daikokuten with Ōkuninushi-no-Mikoto, so there's no doubt he's an incredibly high-ranking god to begin with, but...

*Mahākāla...*

*Oh.*

*Oh no.*

*I remember now.*

*Daikokuten is Shiva!!!*

*The Hindu god of destruction!!!*

*We're talking top-tier, globally mythic, Could Probably Erase a Continent With a Breath If He Felt Like It levels of divine power. This isn't just folklore power creep; we're in Armageddon in a Bottle territory.*

My head slowly rotated, first from Susanoo, whom I'd been cautiously watching, toward Daikokuten. The motion was so stiff, I swear I heard creaking. And both of them were still smiling at me.

Friendly, cheerful smiles, as if they hadn't just cracked the sky open by existing.

"A-Are you... I mean, Daikokuten-sama, aren't you... Shiva-sama too?" I asked.

“Ohh, sometimes I’m called that, aye. Though for a Japanese person like you, Makoto-dono, I imagine the name Daikokuten is more familiar. I’m impressed you know the other one.”

“I-I’m honored!” I stammered, my voice cracking a little at the end.

I mean, let’s be real, plenty of Japanese people probably can’t list all seven of the Shichifukujin, but mention Shiva, and suddenly everyone’s nodding like *Oh yeah, the multi-armed guy with the third eye who does cosmic breakdancing.*

Probably because Fukurokuju and Jurōjin are the hard mode of that quiz.

“Still, Makoto, you’re sharper than I thought,” Susanoo cut in, leaning toward me with a wicked grin tugging at his lips.

“Eh?”

“That little mental note you sent about not challenging her to games? Gahahahaha!!”

*You’ve got to be kidding me. My telepathy was leaking?!*

*Which meant, Athena-sama heard it too?!*

“As for Athena-dono, she can be rather strict in her scoldings,” Daikokuten added gently, “but there’s no malice in her. She’ll forgive the misunderstanding, I’m sure.”

So, he’d heard it too.

*I’ve said something bad, haven’t I?*

“By the way,” Susanoo said, almost offhandedly, “reading a human’s heart is child’s play. Actually, it’s not even something we try to do; it just... happens. But relax, that comment about Athena didn’t reach her. Probably. You’re surprisingly good at hiding things like that. But me, my big brother, and this old man here? Yeah, no chance.

Once someone like us takes an interest, your thoughts are wide open."

I could feel the blood drain from my face.

So, it wasn't just telepathy. They could read minds effortlessly as soon as their attention locked on.

"It's not deliberate," Daikokuten added, "but when we turn our gaze to someone, thoughts just... surface. It's like breathing. That's why I worry for Fukurokuju and Jurōjin, they're rather forgettable, aren't they? Well, Makoto-dono, who knows? Maybe one day you'll find a method to shield even us from your heart. But not yet, I'm afraid."

*Wow.*

*So, this is what it's like to stand before divinity.*

*They found the Demiplane without trying.*

*They read minds without effort.*

*They see everything, because that's simply what gods do.*

"I'm really sorry for earlier," I said, bowing.

"Forget it," Susanoo waved it off. "More importantly, Makoto. You haven't nearly died recently, have you?"

The question hit like a slap.

"I... don't think so?"

*What's with the sudden interrogation?*

"Hmm. No weird migraines? Spontaneous nosebleeds you can't stop?"

"Actually... yeah."

When I accepted that cursed bug's power, I did feel like my brain was going to melt. Not quite death, maybe, but dangerously close.

*And now I've thought about it, so they definitely know.*

"I see... That must've been it." Susanoo leaned back, looking thoughtful. "I was planning to gift you a bit of power myself while I was here. But now I see someone has already dumped so much in you that you were practically a

corpse. No wonder I sensed something was off. Oji-san, can you tell what she did?"

"Hmph."

The old god turned his piercing gaze on me, eyes flickering with divine insight.

"That girl..." Daikokuten muttered under his breath, "How utterly foolish can she be? Honestly, we ought to strip her of her management privileges. Five worlds, was it? Six? And toss her straight into Brahma's domain. He may not be too active in the modern world, but when it comes to divine instruction, that old creator god is a merciless drill sergeant."

Daikokuten let out a heavy sigh, one carrying ages of exasperation. He was clearly fed up with her, the goddess responsible for the mess I was in.

*Honestly, thank goodness.*

*Even by divine standards, she's a disaster. I'm not imagining things.*

"So?" Susanoo asked. "What's the situation with Makoto?"

"He's hanging on by a thread," Daikokuten replied flatly. "Honestly, it's a miracle he's still alive. He's balanced at the edge like water clinging to the rim of a cup. And to think she calls herself a goddess of creation. That fool forced the *Pinnacle of Kotodama* onto a mere mortal."

"The Pinnacle of Kotodama?"

*Wait—could that be... the ability that lets me understand all languages in this world?*

*Sounds cool as hell, but also way too intense.*

*So, I really am just a regular guy, huh?*

*Well, from a god's perspective, even gifted probably looks like barely average.*

"To put it simply," Daikokuten continued, "it's one form of what you mortals call enlightenment. The power to

communicate with all things. A rare ability, granted to only a handful of truly exceptional beings throughout history.”

“But I only got the ability to talk to hyumans from the Goddess just recently. Before that, it was only other races, so...”

I trailed off as the truth dawned on me.

*Right.*

The first time, she gave me the ability to communicate with all non-humans.

Then, she added hyumans to the mix.

Put them together, and...

“Exactly.” Daikokuten nodded. “She’s clever in her underhanded ways. Technically, it’s not the complete Pinnacle if even a single aspect, like comprehension, is omitted. So she handed it to you in pieces. Cunning little workaround.”

“So what now?” Susanoo asked. “Is Makoto going to be okay?”

“You’d best give up the idea of adding your power to him,” Daikokuten warned, turning serious. “Makoto-dono is already filled to the brim with divine essence. He’s at capacity. However, didn’t you mention he has the ability to increase his mana reserves?”

“I do, yes,” I replied. “Apparently.”

“Then do that a few more times. I’ll help make some adjustments to your soul to better contain the existing powers. It’s not a guaranteed fix, but it’ll stabilize things.”

“Thank you so much. But increasing my mana also seems to cause the Demiplane to expand, so I’ve been avoiding it lately.”

“That much is of no concern,” Daikokuten assured me with a wave of his hand. “We’ll handle the technicalities. The Goddess won’t be able to find you, not while we’re

covering this realm. If your world grows, don't fret. If it ever becomes too much, I'll return to help."

That was unexpectedly comforting.

I hadn't really considered the Demiplane's growth as a risk of discovery, but if they can shield it...

"She's a pain, even when she's not around," Susanoo muttered, scowling. "Damn fool of a goddess."

*Couldn't have said it better myself.*

# Tsukimichi 6

## Chapter

**H**ahahaha! I see, I see! So, this is what became of that demon general, huh?"

Susanoo burst into boisterous laughter. Well, it looked like he was enjoying the banquet, at least.

Dangling helplessly from his massive hand was a tiny dragon, caught by the nape of its neck. The moment Susanoo's booming laugh shook the room, the little creature's eyes widened in panic, and it whipped its gaze upward.

Yes.

That adorable little dragon being swung around like a plush toy...

*That's all that remains of Demon General Left.*

His appearance, his mind, everything had regressed. He was practically a child now, if not worse. Cute, yes, but only on the outside. The real trouble lurked beneath that scaly exterior. And he was a serious headache every time I had to negotiate with the Demon King.

*What am I even supposed to do with him?*

Honestly, when I first found out who he was, my instincts screamed, *“Send him back immediately!”*

Thinking it through, letting him return in that state might create even more problems.

*Seriously, though, why was one of the Demon General’s Big Four all the way out in the middle of nowhere—some rural backwater like Kaleneon?!*

*Was my resolve to step onto the world stage really that disastrous?!*

*Is this what I get for being proactive?!*

“Stripped of all his power and reduced to this, he looks more like somebody’s overgrown pet,” Susanoo remarked.

“Come now, Susanoo-dono. This isn’t exactly a laughing matter for Makoto-dono,” Daikokuten chided gently, offering me a sympathetic glance.

He was kind. Reassuring, even. But still, something about him made my spine shiver. Maybe it was the casual way he’d mentioned crushing the sun earlier.

That was when I asked about the Yatagarasu, specifically whether it was true that the bird was some kind of avatar of the sun. I vaguely remembered stories back in Japan about it glowing with sunlight or being tied to solar myths. The whole “three-legged crow” thing also had solar associations, if I wasn’t mistaken.

How had Daikokuten responded?

“Carrying the sun on your back all the time? That’d be hot as hell, wouldn’t it? I might accidentally crush it out of reflex.”

*Excuse me, what?*

*Crush the sun?*

*That’s not even mythological exaggeration. That’s just straight-up terrifying.*

I must’ve been making a complicated face at the time, because he tried to *clarify* by saying:

"Like putting out a lit cigarette with your fingers, you know?"

I had *no idea* how to respond to that.

"Anyway," Athena said, swirling her cup with amused interest, "what do you plan to do about Left? You can't exactly keep him forever, can you?"

Her tone was playful, but her eyes were sharp.

Athena had revealed an unexpected side once the sake started flowing. Beneath her strict, dignified air was someone lively and warm. Turns out, all three of the visiting gods were fond of sake, especially the Japanese kind.

Luckily, our Demiplane-made sake suited their tastes perfectly.

Susanoo even complimented it, saying it was "*surprisingly good*." That praise had left Tomoe beaming in a way I hadn't seen in a long time.

"As for Left, I plan to treat him as best I can," I answered carefully. "Once he's stable, I'll try to send him back to demon territory."

"A bit of a long-term plan, isn't it?! Hey, Athena! You didn't bring a gift, so how about working a bit while you're here?"

Susanoo's sudden outburst had all the subtlety of a divine earthquake.

*What kind of demand is that?!*

Not that I expected anything from them in the first place. Just the fact that they were helping keep this place off that bug goddess's radar was more than enough for me.

*Wait...*

*Gifts?*

*What did he mean by "gifts"?*

*I don't recall receiving anything from either Susanoo or Daikokuten. Surely he wasn't talking about leaving that*

*Yatagarasu behind? There's no way. That thing's the size of a passenger jet. I wouldn't even know where to put it!*

"Me?" Athena tilted her head.

"Yeah! Just fix that guy up a bit, return his body to normal, and poof, wipe his memories for a month. All's well, right?"

*That's such an absurdly convenient idea.*

Even Shiki hadn't been able to handle Left's condition. I was ready for a months-long rehabilitation process. But could a god just do it like that?

"Oh, that'd be a breeze, even after a few drinks," Athena said casually. "Hmm. If I'm offering it as a gift, wouldn't it be better to grant him my divine blessing and bind him to absolute obedience under Makoto-kun? That might be more useful."

*Wait, what?! You can do that too?!*

"Do it, do it! Make it happen!" Susanoo cheered.

*Please stop!!!*

*No, seriously, please stop.*

*And if possible, Athena-sama, please don't call me Makoto-kun. It makes me feel like I'm being teased. Just go with Makoto and keep it simple.*

"Now, now," Daikokuten interjected. "We're guests in a foreign land, remember? If we impose too much, we'd be no better than that girl."

That seemed to hit the mark; Athena froze for a beat, her expression shifting to something more sober.

"You're right," she said.

"As Susanoo said, if we restore his body and erase the memories, there shouldn't be any real problems. He may retain a trace of fear imprinted in the flesh, but there's no need to be too thorough with the cleanup," Daikokuten added. "And Susanoo, don't go provoking the lady just because you're pretending to be drunk."

“Tch. It sounded fun.”

I started, “Um, Susanoo-sama, I really don’t need a souvenir or anything.”

“You don’t?! Excellent! Then I can properly surprise you, Makoto! Don’t worry, I promise, you’ll be absolutely shocked!”

*You’re sober! You’re saying this with a straight face, and that makes it even worse!!!*

Considering I literally almost died recently, having a god decide to “gift” me more divine power on a whim was not ideal.

No matter how many times I tried to redirect or reframe the topic, neither Susanoo nor Daikokuten ever actually told me what these supposed souvenirs were.

What followed was a banquet unlike any I’d ever experienced.

Maybe it was because the main guests were gods who could drink entire barrels of sake without batting an eye, or perhaps it was the strange tension of being surrounded by literal deities, but the party was absolutely electric.

The highlight, without question, came when Athena, smiling with the smug delight of a magician before her grand reveal, stood and gestured toward Left.

Raising her voice dramatically, she declared, “*Heal!*”

In the blink of an eye, the little dragon puffball who’d once been a Demon General shed his cutesy shell. In his place stood a massive, awe-inspiring dragon, his serpent-like form reminiscent of a Naga straight out of Hindu myth.

The crowd went wild.

Thunderous applause, cheers, even whistles.

Me? I was too stunned to even blink.

It was so surreal, so instantaneous, that calling it magic almost felt more appropriate than saying it was divine intervention.

Unfortunately, despite the return of his physical form, Left's mind remained fully regressed. His antics—rampaging through the buffet, batting at streamers, getting tangled in lanterns—were somehow just as endearing. The drunkards couldn't get enough of him.

Athena beamed, absolutely *delighted* with herself.

Then Susanoo, not to be outdone, tried to one-up her.

This prompted Daikokuten to step in before things could spiral further. Again.

Somehow... somehow that led to a karaoke tournament. And flying pies.

By the end of it all, my head was spinning. The sheer pace, the divine power, the absurdity, I was barely holding it together. So, I bowed out early, retreating to my room.

Pathetic, maybe. But necessary.

Even so, I later learned that the festivities had continued until dawn, led by volunteers.



*Lying here, completely drained of strength, facedown in the dirt, I ask myself:*

*Was this the right choice?*

*The soil beneath me is cold. That's not the point.*

*I'm sprawled here like a discarded doll. Not a single finger will move.*





*So, this is all I amount to, huh?*

*Was it a mistake to spar with Athena? Would it have been better to face Susanoo-sama or Daikokuten-sama instead?*

*Hell no.*

*That would've ended in something worse.*

*She was the only viable choice. The only one where I might survive with my limbs still attached.*

*My bow, Azusa, crafted by the eldwars, is lying there on the ground next to my unnamed club. Both untouched, both undamaged.*

*Figures. They're masterpieces made by first-rate artisans. Nothing short of indestructible.*

*It's just me who's in pieces.*

*How pathetic.*

*The weapons I entrusted my life to are still pristine, and here I am, flat on the ground, utterly wrecked.*

*“Makoto, how about a little training with Athena?”*

*That had been Susanoo's casual offer, just after the banquet that morning.*

*I declined immediately, of course.*

*Sparring with a goddess wasn't exactly my idea of a recreational activity. But then came the retort, accompanied by an all-too-serious expression:*

*“So what, you'd prefer to go a round with me or the old man here? No guarantees you'll walk away from *that*. Could end in a nice little puff of divine obliteration.”*

*Faced with that kind of ultimatum, I agreed to spar with Athena.*

*And this, this is what became of me.*

*I got flattened. Tomoe and the others watched the whole match. I could sense that Mio almost jumped in partway through, but she was held back, probably by the two divine spectators.*

Funny. Since coming to this world, I don't think I've ever been so physically overwhelmed that I couldn't move a finger. Not once.

*There was a time when I chased this feeling, this sense of exhaustion, and grew anxious when I couldn't reach it. But now I understand:*

I didn't know what real limits felt like.

*That alone is worth the pain.*

At least... at least I managed to whisper "*Thank you*" before I collapsed.

To the true Athena, goddess of battle.

Her name was no empty title.

Her power was terrifyingly real.

Lying there in the dirt, barely conscious, I couldn't help but wonder, *Did I even make her go all out?*

That sharp, career-woman look of hers clearly wasn't a battle outfit: no armor, no helmet, nothing resembling the statues I'd seen back in my world. If anything, the real combat form was probably closer to those old marble depictions. Something regal. A himation, maybe?

The truth is that I had underestimated her.

Part of me, maybe just a subconscious part, but still, had let my guard down because she looked like a woman in a suit.

Another part had started to feel an irrational sense of superiority over *that* bug goddess after everything we'd been through. But the moment Athena struck with her first blow, all of that vanished.

She didn't pierce my body outright, but she did shatter my mana body, forcing me to twist and dodge her lunging spear with sheer instinct.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

I'd gone into this fight with my defenses at max output from the very start, knowing I was up against a deity. And

even then, I couldn't keep up.

Athena fought with a halberd in hand, weaving javelins from thin air like she was sewing with lightning.

A mid-to-long-range fighter, swift and precise, commanding the battlefield like it was an extension of her will.

I responded with everything I had: the magic I'd learned in this world, my bow, my mana body, my techniques.

Toward the end, I even stripped off my clothes and rings to conserve the tiniest slivers of mana. I abandoned defense altogether, relying entirely on my ability to strike first—my *Sure-hit*—a last-ditch clash of raw force and desperation.

She didn't need to humor me.

She didn't need to match my wild, desperate tactics.

But she did. And I still lost.

Not narrowly. Not valiantly.

Completely.

Athena, her breathing only slightly off-rhythm, had already repaired her tattered suit and rejoined Susanoo and Daikokuten, casually chatting like nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, I couldn't even twitch a finger.

Most of my attacks were deflected by her shield, a massive, round thing that moved on its own, floated in midair, shifted shapes at will, and sometimes even multiplied. It was chaos, an unfair cheat of a divine artifact.

During the fight, I must have screamed "That's not fair!" more times than I can count.

Now, lying there in defeat, I finally had a sense of how people might have felt when they faced me.

Some of my shots had landed. But in the end, she swatted them away with her arms. Not even her shield, just

her arms.

They hadn't gotten through at all.

"No, no, that last desperate move was a total fail," Susanoo chuckled, striding over to where I lay sprawled in the dirt. "But overall? Not bad. Not bad at all. Honestly, you put up more of a fight than I expected. Thought I'd made a mistake even bothering to suggest it for a second there."

I turned my eyes toward the sound of his voice. Susanoo wasn't alone; Tomoe and the others were rushing over.

*Thank goodness they were the only ones watching.*

If all of the Demiplane had seen this pitiful performance, I'd never live it down.

*Still, I guess the fact I can worry about pride means I'm recovering, at least a little.*

"I'm impressed," Daikokuten added. "Given how few challenging fights you've experienced, I thought your early blunders would cost you the match outright. I was briefly disappointed. But you turned it around, boy. Well done."

*These gods... They're ruthless.*

Honestly, they reminded me of my bow instructor back home, that kind of severity; that refusal to coddle.

"Indeed. You fought well, Makoto-kun." Athena's voice was gentle, her tone softer than I'd heard her speak until now. Maybe she still hadn't shaken off the lingering effects of the sake. "Shall I heal you now?"

Her hand began to glow with divine light.

But I raised a hand, just barely, and shook my head.

"No, Athena-sama. I'm fine like this."

This was a sensation I hadn't felt in a long, long time. The profound, bone-heavy exhaustion of pushing myself to the very edge—where I couldn't even lift a finger.

Back in my old world, I'd felt this all the time during training. It was familiar.

Reassuring, in a strange way.  
A reminder that tomorrow, I could be better than today.  
That I still had room to grow.

That I wasn't done yet.

"So, Makoto," Susanoo said. "That's a god. Not just something you read about or imagined, now you've faced one. Learned something you couldn't have known otherwise, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. If it ever comes down to a fight between you and that goddess, you'll need what you learned today."

"Yes."

I didn't ask what they'd done to her. I had the feeling she hadn't been destroyed, at least.

"She's been punished. Restrictions on interference with the world, a temporary suspension on adding new management realms, and a few other limitations," Susanoo said, his voice low and colder than usual. "It's provisional, based on the assumption that my brother makes a full recovery soon."

"Tsukuyomi-sama might get better that quickly?" I couldn't hide the hope in my voice. "That's wonderful news."

*If it's possible, I'd like to see him again, just once more, while I'm still alive.*

"Thanks. My brother would appreciate that," Susanoo replied. "And to make sure she doesn't break any of the rules we set, we made her wear something."

"Discipline means a collar," Athena added smoothly. "Of course, she kicked and screamed so much we compromised with a choker. I wanted to go with the spiked kind, but the gentlemen here were soft, typical."

*She's utterly ruthless!*

“We chose not to bother with appearances,” Daikokuten added. “But what I want you to understand, Makoto, is this: we don’t speak her name for a reason. You’ve probably guessed as much, but yes, even we must exercise restraint. Cross certain lines, and we’d be no better than her.”

So it was intentional, the avoidance of her name.

And more than that, it confirmed a growing suspicion of mine.

*The bug goddess, she’s someone I might actually know from back home.*

A few candidates came to mind, but no clear answer yet.

“She still retains power befitting a god,” Daikokuten continued. “Ordinarily, she wouldn’t be able to touch you again. But due to a past promise, there’s one exception: if you ever become an open enemy of humanity, she is permitted to act against you directly.”

“I understand.”

“If we’d gotten here a little earlier, we might’ve ended things before that agreement took effect,” Susanoo added. “But we didn’t. Still, that doesn’t mean we’re just going to sit back. What we can do is give you the experience of fighting a god.”

He smirked, flashing those fierce eyes at me.

“You’ve already got my brother’s divine power in you. Between you and that uppity little insect, you’re the more likable one.”

“Thank you.”

“Damn right. Listen carefully, Makoto. Don’t fight with brute force alone. That calm, calculated approach you used halfway through your sparring match, that’s the good stuff. Hone that. Don’t be afraid of growing stronger. Draw your bow.”

His voice dropped just a little.

“That’s who you are. And if the day comes when you must face her... Whatever happens, don’t let that choker get destroyed. With where she’s wearing it, that shouldn’t be easy, but if it’s removed, the surveillance ends. And when that happens, she’ll come for you. No hesitation. No mercy. She’ll do whatever it takes to erase you.”

*If the choker stays, the fight stays winnable. Thanks for the information.*

It must have been rigged in such a way that the Goddess herself couldn’t remove it. If she could have just taken it off when it was inconvenient, then it would have defeated the whole point of keeping her under watch.

“You fought with no shame today,” Athena said encouragingly.

“Indeed,” Daikokuten added.

I let out a soft laugh, a touch of relief bubbling up inside. If even gods could say that much, then maybe I hadn’t completely embarrassed myself. I couldn’t afford a future where that damn bug goddess would crush me without resistance.

Now... Now I had a frame of reference. This experience, this overwhelming difference in power, would let me push myself further. The images of today’s fight were burned into me. That was enough.

“Well then,” Susanoo said. “Time for us to head out. You make sure to let your followers patch you up properly.”

“Makoto-dono, be sure to draw your bow every day. Also, hurry up and find our gifts, will you?” Daikokuten chuckled.

“I imagine we won’t meet again while you still walk this world,” Athena added. “But when your life runs its course... we’ll be the ones to come for you.”

As the three of them spoke, the great black form of the Yatagarasu descended from the skies, just as it had arrived,

suddenly, without warning, and yet somehow with perfect timing.

*Guess that's just how divine guests come and go.*

"Please, send my regards to Tsukuyomi-sama," I offered. "Tell him I'm still alive... thanks to the power he gave me."

"Yeah... I'll let him know," Susanoo replied, his usual grin softening just a little. "I had a damn good time. Oh, and the Yatagarasu? You're not getting it. Our sister's particularly fond of that bird. And trust me, you don't wanna piss her off. She may be the rare female sun deity and head of the pantheon, but she's got a temper."

*Sister... Yatagarasu... Ah. Amaterasu-sama. Of course.*

Even though I knew full well they could read my thoughts, my mind still wandered freely. It wasn't like I could stop it now.

Same during my fight with Athena, she saw everything. But maybe, maybe that was a good thing. It meant I gave it everything I had.

*Well, whatever.*

*I'm really glad they're taking that bird back with them. I was already thinking of how impossible it'd be to care for a flying creature the size of a commercial airliner.*

The three of them waved to me one last time, and then, just like that, they were gone.

And right on cue, I heard my name being called.

"Young..."

"Young Master!"

"Young Master!"

Tomoe, Mio, and the others rushed to my side.

"No healing," I murmured. "Sorry, I know I'm being selfish. But just for today, let me stay like this. If anyone from Rotsgard asks, explain things as best you can."

I'd been fighting the pull of exhaustion this whole time, refusing to pass out before they left, but now the divine guests were gone.

*Now I can finally let go.*

A long sigh escaped me. My consciousness drifted, soft and slow.

It had been so long since I felt this kind of fatigue, this deep, soul-crushing weariness.

*Damn it.*

*If I ever have to face that goddess, I'll look down at her. Just you wait. I'll crush you. Absolutely. Completely.*



"Now then, Athena-chan, where's it hurt, hmmmm?" Susanoo inched closer to her, grinning like a cat about to pounce.

"That's sexual harassment," Athena quipped. "I'll report you to Kushinada-sama."

"You're going straight to my wife?!"

The three gods, riding the Yatagarasu on their return trip to the world where Japan, and Makoto's old life still existed, were passing the time by picking apart the recent duel between Makoto and Athena.

"Enough comedy," Daikokuten interjected. "Missy Athena, the left arm you kept using for defense; no feeling in it, is there?"

"No. Not in the right one either," Athena admitted, her expression hardening.

“There was a point where Makoto had you seriously cornered, wasn’t there?” Susanoo leaned in, his grin turning sly. “We were just waiting for you to bust out your real, full-power kit. Could barely keep from laughing.”

“You think I could actually pull that against a human, no, a hyuman, one she adjusted herself?” Athena crossed her arms.

“Here,” Daikokuten said casually, then tapped one of her legs with his mallet.

“Hyah!”

She crumpled instantly, collapsing to her knees.

“Still, using Makoto’s magic body technique as inspiration, then driving your own body purely with your own mana, impressive work. A one-woman marionette,” he observed with clear approval.

“Yeah, and that’s how you stole the momentum back from him,” Susanoo added. “Once his focus slipped, he rushed into a bunch of reckless power moves and burned himself out. Classic old Athena, nothing like experience.”

“I am *not* old! And, I’ll thank you both not to talk about age at all!”

“Ahahahaha!”

“Well,” Susanoo remarked after the laughter died down, “at this rate, that kid’ll be fine even against the goddess.”

“Ninety percent sure he’ll manage,” Daikokuten agreed. “He’s something else.”

“I’ll admit it, he pushed me with pride alone,” Athena conceded at last. “That child, when you judge him purely as a hyuman, he’s already transcending that category altogether.”

“And yet, still a hyuman,” Susanoo added. “Thing is, now there are two real, breathing humans mixed into that place. Probably why the Goddess bent an already

checkmated future, hyumans are useful for that. But once you add Makoto to the mix..."

"It's like a chisel paired with a master craftsman," Daikokuten mused. "If a human so much as scratches open the possibility of a different future, Makoto will hammer it wide without hesitation. Hibiki and Tomoe have already spun off countless parallel timelines, and cleaning *that* mess up was an absolute pain. No doubt his acceleration made it worse."

"And that last bit of cleanup," Susanoo said with a side-eye, "This so-called 'gift' you're giving Makoto... You're basically dumping it on him, aren't you, old man? Payback for the trouble?"

Daikokuten chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound.

"Hahaha. Struggle while you're young is worth buying, they say. The missy claims she'll never meet him again, but I'd wager otherwise. I think a reunion's in the cards."

Susanoo's grin turned sly. "You want to bet on that?"

Daikokuten gave a slow nod. "Aye. She says they won't meet, I say they will. And you, Susanoo?"

"I'm with 'will meet.' The kid's a walking jack-in-the-box, feels like he's going to pull off a few more impossible stunts down the line."

"Wait, hold on, I never agreed to any bet!" Athena snapped, glaring at them both.

"Oh? You mean to tell me, Athena-sama, that you don't have confidence in your own words? Tossing them around carelessly, just like that goddess?" Susanoo's tone dripped with mockery.

"Ugh!"

"Don't take it so seriously. Just a bit of fun, nothing more," Susanoo said, slapping her on the back hard enough to make her stagger.

"Fine," Athena muttered.

Daikokuten cleared his throat. "Setting that aside, I've two questions for you, Missy, if you'll answer."

"What are they?"

"First, Makoto's power. Tsukuyomi-dono's divine strength, what form has it taken inside him?"

"That is..." Athena hesitated, her lips pressing together.

"Don't play coy," Susanoo cut in. "You've been probing him with interest from the start, we both noticed. That's exactly why I let you spar with him in the first place."

"You're both far too perceptive. And you already have an inkling, don't you?"

"It's the place he calls the Demiplane, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted at last. "Contracting with someone who manipulates space seems to have been the trigger. He burned through an immense amount of divine power to expand a mere pocket dimension into something on the scale of a world. Almost all of what should have gone into his personal growth was redirected into that instead. In a sense, he and that world are bound together."

"So that's why my brother's power ended up manifesting only as that strange interference ability," Susanoo muttered, almost laughing in disbelief. "What was it called again, 'Realm'? About as inconspicuous as my brother himself."

Daikokuten's voice carried a thoughtful weight.

"Even for an elder god, it is rare indeed for the moon's power to be channeled toward creation. It may well hint at a new possibility for the bond between man and god."

"And that's why his so-called Demiplane ended up looking so damn Japanese," Susanoo went on, shaking his head. "Homesickness bleeding straight into world design... If the Goddess had found it, it'd have been nothing but trouble."

“I believe that was part of it,” Athena admitted. “But rest assured, I’ve shielded it from her interference. She won’t be able to touch it.”

Daikokuten gave a deep, satisfied nod.

“Now, the second matter,” he said. “Makoto’s *Sure-hit*. Is it as troublesome as I suspect?”

“Yes. Extremely,” she replied without hesitation. “Once that child immerses himself in combat, it’s as though his emotions are numbed, he shows no mercy and fights to the absolute limit. He pursued me again and again, relentlessly. When my arms finally refused to rise, I’ll admit, I felt a chill. Even now, the memory makes my back run cold.”

“Troublesome indeed,” Daikokuten sighed. “If only his developing talents were limited to the bow, then it would be safer for him as well. But already, that *Sure-hit* is being applied to magic as easily as arrows.”

His sharp gaze slid toward Susanoo, reproach in his eyes.

“Oi, don’t look at me like that,” Susanoo shot back. “All I did was give him advice so that, if he ever ends up fighting a god, he might actually survive.”

“Then all we can do is pray it ends there,” Daikokuten murmured, his voice heavy. “I only hope the next time we hear news of that world, it won’t be in the form of a destruction request.”

“That makes two of us,” Susanoo said.

“And three,” Athena added quietly. “There are far too many worlds that have perished simply because gods became involved.”

Three deities arrived without warning to visit Makoto.

The “gifts” they left behind for him would soon have his mouth dropping to the floor in surprise.

# Tsukimichi Chapter 7

“So that’s how it is. Not the wrong move, but she’s really gone and done it.”

A woman’s sharp gaze was fixed on the northern horizon. The bitter wind tugged at her hair as she stood, arms folded, in the middle of a lonely grassland a few kilometers north of the ruins of Stella Fortress. Around her, several figures lingered in the open air, the speaker among them.

“We’re turning back. Winter marches aren’t just difficult; they’re suicide. At the very least, advancing north this year is now completely off the table.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, thinking in silence, before lowering her arms and letting out a quiet sigh.

“Nothing, then?”

The question came from a man in the robes of a mage standing just behind her.

“Woody,” she greeted him without turning. “No, nothing we can use. If we head north, I’m sure we’ll meet interference, but the idea that we might find any real allies or settlements? That’s wishful thinking. If we go, we’ll be

building forward bases as we advance. Fighting the demons really is as tedious as it is dangerous.”

The woman was Hibiki Otonashi, Hero of the Kingdom of Limia.

Here, in this stark, windswept plain, the only company was her party, a handful of knights acting as escort, and endless grass.

“Then, oneechan...”

The hesitant voice belonged to a small girl in a robe reminiscent of traditional Japanese dress. Her presence was gentle, yet dignified, the shrine maiden Chiya of Lorel.

“It means we follow Larva’s words,” Hibiki said at last. “It’ll be a little while yet, but yes, Chiya-chan, you’ll be going home.”

“I see. Back to Lorel, huh? I wonder how everyone’s doing. Saimitsu will probably be the same as always, though.”

The tension in Chiya’s face eased into a faint smile as soon as her homeland was named, her earlier solemnity nothing more than a mask.

“Come on, Chiya-chan. Before it gets any colder, let’s get back inside. We’ll return to Ur first, then start getting ready for the trip south.”

Hibiki placed a hand on Chiya’s back, guiding her toward the tent.

Her tone was light, almost casual, but her expression remained taut; her eyes held no hint of a smile.

*That day... After the attack on the capital.*

*Larva and that white-clad figure vanished without a sound, leaving behind nothing but a single message: “Return Chiya to Lorel.” I don’t know their exact reasons, but if it came from Larva, it’s worth following.*

*Besides, the route will take us past the Academy City, Rotsgard. That’s where the Kuzunoha Company is based,*

*the same Kuzunoha Company His Majesty and Prince Joshua think so highly of. There's Mio-san, and that Raidou person I've somehow never met. Just a hunch, but I'd bet Larva and the white one are tied to Kuzunoha as well.*

That day in the capital of Ur, Hibiki had survived by the slimmest of margins. She remembered vividly the lich calling himself Larva and the armored figure in pure white who seemed to be his master.

Both had been absurd, almost unreal, in every sense. The sheer, alien quality of their power, so far above her own, despite all the strength she had amassed, reminded her of the people she'd met from the Kuzunoha Company in the remote city of Tsige.

*And then there's Ilum-kun. The real truth behind his death is still a blank, but I have a feeling I'll find it in Rotsgard.*

*I was already thinking of sending Chiya-chan back to Lorel, just for her own safety, and winter's the perfect time to handle it. Yeah, that's settled. I'll make the request to His Majesty.*

She turned once, letting her eyes sweep over the barren, lifeless wilderness they had just traversed.

“Scorched earth? No, this is beyond that. More like something straight out of a ‘Winter General versus Napoleon’ history lesson.” Her lips curled in a thin, humorless smile. “How petty can they get? Honestly, if this were a game, the developer would be roasted alive. This isn’t the sort of tactic you throw at a *hero*.”

The words slipped into the wind and were carried away. Winter was close now. Very close.



The demon race's capital, despite its reputation, was a city not so different from those where hyumans lived.

An old but unyielding castle stood at its heart, surrounded by a bustling castle town. Even now, in this season, snow lay deep over rooftops and streets alike, and in the pale light of morning or dusk, the stillness was so absolute that it felt vacant even of sound.

“So, Left truly doesn't remember why he was there?”

In one of the castle's chambers, the Demon King sat across from Rona. Their voices were hushed yet heavy with import.

“Yes. It appears he has lost part of his memory. At the very least, within the scope of our investigation, we found no sign of deliberate tampering. However...” Rona's gaze sharpened. “According to soldiers who fled from Kaleneon, we have reason to believe there was a monster-led advance in that area.”

“I cannot imagine who would desire that place badly enough to drive away a Demon General, and yet the facts are plain. No contact from our forces, no scouts returning, and every transfer array in the vicinity destroyed—meticulously, without exception...”

The Demon King's voice trailed into a murmur, and for a moment, he fell into silent thought.

“Rona. Any intelligence beyond that?”

“My apologies. I have my agents investigating, but nothing yet. Nor have we received so much as a hint of contact from the opposing side.”

"It seems unlikely this is a hyuman operation. All the same, it is troublesome." He leaned back slightly, the faintest shadow of fatigue crossing his expression. "Go ahead with your investigation. But be ready to adjust your orders according to the danger; losing soldiers' lives needlessly is unacceptable."

"As you command."

"Given what's north of the Stella Fortress, I doubt the hyumans will mount an immediate invasion. Both the Limia royal capital and the Gritonia imperial city suffered heavy losses." The Demon King's appearance softened slightly. "Io. Rona. You've done well."

"No. We failed to complete our assigned task." The giant-bodied Demon General Io bowed his head, his massive frame almost shrinking under the weight of self-reproach.

The only other people present besides the king and his two generals were four younger demons, seated quietly, listening to every word without daring to speak.

"The same applies to me," Rona followed, her lips twisting in frustration. "I was ordered to gather information, and yet I learned nothing of what happened in Kaleneon. I would deem punishment appropriate."

Different in race, giant and demon, but united in expression, both bore the same visible regret for failing to carry out their king's command.

"Enough," the Demon King scolded. "Reflection is fine, but don't let it cling to you. Io, I want you to oversee military drills in the south. Rona, handle that matter of setting up a meeting with the Kuzunoha Company."

"Leave it to me," Io replied.

"I'll arrange it immediately. Fortunately, Raidou still seems inclined to meet with us," Rona shared.

“Raidou... Hmm. From the reports out of Rotsgard, there’s no doubt he’s an irregular one, but I find myself looking forward to meeting him.”

The recent affair had all but resulted in one of his stratagems being neatly dismantled by Raidou. Yet there was no hint of irritation in the Demon King’s manner, at least, nothing that showed on the surface.

Then, among those present, there was someone else whose expression tightened at the mention of that name.

It came from one of the four who sat quietly at the table.

“Your Majesty, I would like to meet this Raidou as well.”

“Sari? Do you sense something about him?”

“Yes. He interests me. I’ve read Rona’s reports, and I believe the Kuzunoha Company is an extremely unusual enterprise.”

The girl called Sari still bore traces of youthful softness in her features. Yet her tone and the calculating edge in her eyes were as calm and steady as any veteran’s. The mismatch lent her an oddly dissonant air, like a blade still sheathed, but honed all the same.

“Oh? And what makes you call them unusual?”

“Kuzunoha is too stable. The company has existed for only a short while. Its scale is far from great, and yet there’s not the slightest trace of urgency about it. In any other case, these first few years would be a struggle for survival; one bad season could spell the end. But them? They act as if they can provide for themselves entirely... as if they were, in effect, self-sufficient.”

“Self-sufficient?” The Demon King’s brow furrowed. “Not a word one often applies to a trading company.”

“I thought so as well. It leads me to wonder if they are truly a *company* at all. That question alone is reason enough to want to observe this Raidou with my own eyes.”

“Very well. You have permission. If any of you wish to attend, speak now. As my children, I doubt Raidou will refuse you.”

The four seated figures, apart from the Demon Generals, were the Demon King’s “children.” Successors-in-training.

They were not all bound to him by blood. Among the demon race, a monarch’s succession was determined differently than among humans. Noble lineage alone did not grant the right to rule.

Instead, the most gifted youths were gathered, educated in the manner required of a sovereign, and whittled down through repeated trials. The four here were those who had endured to the present.

Sari, the one who had spoken, was the youngest. She lacked the breadth in governance and diplomacy that some of the others possessed, but she excelled in handling information. In that respect, she was closer in nature to Rona than to any of her siblings.

When the council finally adjourned, Rona sought Sari out in the corridor.

“Sari-sama, you truly are interested in the Kuzunoha Company?”

Sari glanced over her shoulder. “Rona. As I told His Majesty, my interest is in this Raidou you reported on. His Majesty seems inclined to judge him as one factor in the war’s future. But my view is slightly different.”

“You believe he has nothing to do with the war?”

“Not exactly. I want to determine whether he will be a boon or a hindrance to the future of demonkind.”

“The *future* of demonkind?”

“Yes. However the war ends, the future continues for our people.”

“With respect, Sari-sama, if we are defeated, there may be no future at all.”

“I disagree. No, I understand, it is right to aim for victory under that assumption. But isn’t it wise to have someone who sees from another angle? That, too, can serve as insurance.”

“As a general entrusted with troops, I cannot fully agree, but I see your point as one perspective.”

“Good. That’s all I ask. You’ve likely already realized, I have little attachment to the Demon King’s throne. Thanks to that, I’m able to see some things others can’t.”

The exchange was nothing like a typical conversation between a grown woman and a girl still in her early years. Sari’s education, carefully tailored for those chosen as heirs, was evident in every word.

“I’ve never thought you inferior to the others, my lady, so why speak as though you’re already stepping back?” Rona asked.

“For domestic affairs, there’s Brother Roche. For diplomacy, Brother Sem. For military command, Sister Lucia. My vision is for Roche to become the next Demon King, with the others supporting him. My role is to maneuver so that, whoever is chosen, things will settle into that shape without strife. Unless something extraordinary changes the game, of course.”

“...”

Rona faltered, caught off guard by such detached, almost fatalistic foresight spoken with that small voice.

“Don’t look so grim, Rona,” Sari urged with a smile. “Truth be told, I most enjoy hearing your reports. Another one today, if you please, news of Kuzunoha will do nicely.”

The girl moved ahead without waiting for a reply, her small boots imprinting neat tracks into the carpet. Rona stood there for a few breaths, watching that steady stride,

before shaking her head as if to cast off some unspoken weight and following after.

The meeting between the Kuzunoha Company and the demon race was close at hand.

Makoto still believed it would be nothing more than an exchange of pleasantries.

It would not be.

The affair with Demon General Left had been weathered, thanks largely to unexpected divine intervention, but that was merely the first ripple before true waves began to rise.

Slowly, inexorably, the footsteps of both heroes and demons were drawing nearer to the Kuzunoha Company.



Survival of  
the Fittest

***If it's yakiniku, it might just work.***

The thought rose unbidden, breaking through the thick air between us.

Across the table, a middle-aged man sat slouched forward, elbows propped on the wood, his fingers laced together as if in prayer. His head hung low, casting his face into shadow. There was no one else, just the two of us in the silent hall of a restaurant closed to customers.

Silent, that is, except for the muffled clatter and voices drifting in from the kitchen, where a few chefs were prepping for tonight's dinner service.

The man in front of me was the owner. He had approached earlier, saying he needed to discuss something important. His expression was so heavy I felt sure it could crush the table between us.

I almost told him he should've saved this talk for the restaurant's day off, except in this world, days off were a rare luxury. Not because people were especially hardworking, but because bad working conditions were the default. Unless something catastrophic happened, most

places closed only a handful of days a year, and somehow that was considered normal.

I finally voiced the idea that had been simmering in my head. “How about yakiniku?”

“Yakiniku?” The owner slowly raised his head, his brow furrowing. “Raidou-san, sure, grilling meat *is* our specialty, but...”

I couldn’t deny it. This place was a butcher’s shop through and through. The name over the door literally meant “meat shop,” and at least eighty, no, ninety percent of the menu was some form of meat.

It was also the very first restaurant in Tsige to ever make me genuinely emotional over food.

A massive hunk of bone-in meat, what people back home would call “Manga Meat.”

*Never thought I’d actually get to eat something like that in real life.*

*Yeah... Even now, just remembering it gives me chills.*

From that first visit on, I’d stop by whenever I could, letting myself get lost in the sheer joy of the place. Over time, I’d come to recognize the owner’s face, well enough, at least, that when he suddenly approached me with a request for advice, I was willing to hear him out.

These days, the Kuzunoha Company name had been making the rounds, which meant I was constantly being flagged down for “quick talks” or invited to sit in on “important meetings.” I’d learned to ignore strangers who came straight at me without an appointment. But this was different.

The issue was simple enough.

Sales had been dropping for months, despite the owner trying everything he could think of. No matter what he did, the numbers kept sliding downward. The city of Tsige itself was buzzing more than ever, with new restaurants popping

up one after another. Yet this old butcher's shop, here since before I'd even arrived, was bleeding customers.

He'd even swallowed his pride at the restaurateurs' gatherings, approaching the trendy new places for advice. Nothing worked.

So now, he was sitting here, staring at me with that mix of desperation and thin hope that said, *If Kuzunoha's representative has even one good idea, maybe I can save my shop.* No, that wasn't it, more like *I'll grab any straw that floats my way and if it happens to be Kuzunoha, so be it.*

I could tell he'd hesitated before coming to me. Kuzunoha dealt in all kinds of goods, but running a restaurant was definitely not our field. Still, here he was. And judging by his body language, I was his last shot before he ran out of options.

The truth was, this wasn't just about him. As he'd mentioned, Tsige had seen growing friction between the old guard and the newcomers in every trade.

In some cases, it was the easy-to-grasp *tradition-versus-trend* divide. In others, the problems ran far deeper. For the food industry, it was the former.

Places like his, around since the city's earlier days, were built to cater to adventurers. They primarily operated at night, sometimes opening for lunch only during festivals or special events.

When I'd first arrived in Tsige, fewer than half the restaurants even served lunch. Now? Lunch-focused places were on every corner.

Apparently, they'd already acted on someone's advice, starting lunch service and adding new, stylish dishes aimed at women, merchants, and their families.

Nevertheless, the customers kept dwindling.

I couldn't say either idea was bad. The problem was that neither fit the old Tsige style. They were straight out of the playbook of the newer restaurants. For a butcher's shop as old as this one, practically a landmark of the city, it must've taken no small amount of pride-swallowing to bow their heads and ask the newcomers for advice.

*I respect that.*

Still...

Would those fresh-faced owners, who stood to gain the most from eating away at the old shops' market share, really give advice meant to help a competitor? Especially in the cutthroat Tsige of today? I doubted it.

It's not like you can copy lunch service or trendy menus and expect sales to bounce back. Without something unique, something the butcher's shop could claim as its own, the numbers would never recover.

Thinking back, I realized I'd been ordering the same thing here every time, so I'd never paid much attention to the rest of the menu. But now that he'd mentioned it... Yeah, there had been fewer meat dishes lately, replaced by odd new offerings.

I reached for the menu on the table and flipped through it.

*Yep. Chaos.*

Noodles and baguettes infused with herbs, the kind of herbs you usually hear about in dessert recipes. Not too strange on their own. But then came the real shock: an entire spread of jam-and-meat combinations, like someone had decided to bet their life on sweet-and-savory fusion.

The names were cute enough, but the dishes themselves? Piled high like feasts for giants. And despite being a butcher's shop, the dessert section spanned several pages.

This was... Yeah. Like stumbling into one of those special labyrinths where the standard hand-on-the-wall escape trick didn't work.

*No wonder he wanted to talk to me.* And honestly, I had to admit I was partly to blame. Because I always ordered the same thing at my favorite places, I hadn't even noticed how far this one had drifted until he brought it up. If nothing else, it was a lesson that I needed to pay more attention to the changes around me.

And that was what had sparked the idea.

*Yakiniku.*

The more I thought about it, the more fun it seemed. Ideas were bubbling up one after another, rare for me. I couldn't say for sure if it were the answer, but it felt like the perfect match for this shop's strengths.

Sure, food service wasn't my industry. But turning this consultation into a success would be an excellent experience for me as a merchant.

*Yeah... My motivation is climbing fast.*

The schedule would be tight. My to-do list grew by the day.

But I wanted to try.

"Raidou-san?"

I'd been sitting there in silence long enough that the owner spoke up, his tone edged with concern.

"Ah, sorry. I didn't explain myself. Back in my hometown, we had a slightly unusual style of yakiniku. I think it might work here."

"Unusual yakiniku?" His eyebrows drew together. "But, meat is meat. My chefs and I focused on that first, of course, tried every seasoning, every variety we could think of. And yet against the wave of fashion, it was useless!"

His voice faltered, choked with frustration.

“In the end, your customers kept leaving,” I said quietly.

He nodded sharply. “Exactly. I racked my brain, wondering what I’d done wrong, what I should do. I threw away my pride, endured the mockery of my fellow old-timers, and went to every trendy shop I could to hear them out! And *still!*”

The sharp thud of his palm striking the table echoed through the empty hall. He ground his teeth, his expression carved with regret.

“For me, in my generation, to close the shop, and in the middle of the greatest growth this city has ever seen? I will not. I cannot!”

So, it was pride, handed down through generations.

I had no idea which generation he belonged to, but it was clear this man wasn’t the type of spoiled heir who would squander his ancestors’ legacy on a life of excess. If he were, this place would’ve gone under long ago.

In Tsige, industries like raw materials, tourism, general goods, and jewelry were already in fierce competition. The restaurant scene was no different; it was a battlefield.

“Maybe it’s just a layman’s guess,” I began, “but I think one reason your customers left is because they didn’t like the changes.”

“Didn’t like the changes?” His expression shifted, tinged with surprise.

“For example, if the Manga Meat I always order disappeared from the menu, I don’t think I’d come here anymore.”

“Manga Meat?” He tilted his head in momentary confusion. “Oh, that. Lately, more and more customers have started ordering by saying ‘two Manga Meats’ or something like that. I have no idea who started calling it that, but the dish does have an actual name, you know.”

*Yeah, sorry. Pretty sure that one's my fault.*

"In the end, the core of this place's popularity is the meat," I continued. "There might be a handful of people who come for the salads or desserts, but they're a minority. That's undeniable."

"Well, regretfully, yes," he conceded.

"See, I don't think that's actually regrettable."

"Not regrettable? How do you mean?"

"It means there's already a set group of people who think, 'If it's meat, it's gotta be here.' That's your strength as a long-standing butcher's shop, isn't it?"

"Our... strength..."

"And yet, you reduced the number of meat dishes to focus on desserts. I'm willing to bet some customers saw their go-to menu item disappear and decided they were done with the place. If sales dropped, doesn't that mean more people left because of the lost dishes than were gained by the new ones?"

I'd gotten more passionate than I intended.

"You may be right. I assumed the drop in customers meant other restaurants had stolen them away. So I took the signature menus from the newer places, had my chefs put a butcher's-shop twist on them, and kept cranking out new options without ever really questioning it."

*Okay, that does sound a bit like a pretty ruthless way of crushing the competition.*

If he hadn't started losing his way, maybe he could've kept things steady and come out on top in a slow but sure war of attrition.

Which made me wonder, had someone close by nudged him further off course? Someone who seemed helpful, suggesting desserts and lunch service with a friendly smile... But in truth...

*Creepy thought.*

“That’s why,” I continued, “I think it all comes back to meat. The butcher’s shop should stay true to that, meat, through and through. No matter what new place opens, you stand your ground and meet them head-on with what you do best. What do you think?”

“That’s the ideal, yes. But now that my share of the pie has been taken, wouldn’t that approach be too late?”

“It’s not too late. But before I tell you my idea, I need you to promise me a few things. First, drop the dessert route entirely. Second, for now, no lunch service. Focus only on your primary evening business. Third, while we follow this plan, don’t let any other opinions sway you. Can you agree to that?”

“My read says this is a bet with a high chance of winning. But the final decision is yours.”

The owner hunched over slightly, mumbling to himself as if weighing each word.

“A high chance... He’s from a different trade, yes, but his track record, everything he’s predicted so far, has succeeded beyond expectation. But if I stop lunch service with our current sales, how many months could we last? And some customers come specifically for desserts. Yet the decline in numbers is a fact I can’t ignore. Do I have any better options right now? The representative of Kuzunoha says it’s highly likely. A plan worthy of that much confidence...”

*Huh?*

I hadn’t meant to make it sound that authoritative. Honestly, it was mostly momentum talking. But now I was realizing, coming from the representative of the Kuzunoha Company, even an offhand comment probably carried a lot of weight. And if I backed the butcher’s shop, that might automatically put me in opposition to anyone who’d been feeding him bad advice.

I watched him wrestle with the decision, and my own mind spun out possibilities.

*Well, whatever.*

For all I knew, the malicious advice angle was pure imagination, and this was just a self-inflicted spiral.

Still, if this place disappeared, the downsides would far outweigh anything short of being banned from every other restaurant in the city. And personally? I didn't want to lose the best Manga Meat I'd ever had.

*Yeah. Okay.*

*Operation Radical Butcher's Shop Overhaul, full steam ahead.*

“Raidou-san,” he began.

“Yes?”

“I’ll be in your care.”

He stood, bent at the waist, and bowed deeply.

The deal was struck.

## Ryan Nikuya

Back in the day, this was the place in Tsige where adventurers would celebrate after surviving their rookie phase.

Once they’d grown into solid mid-rank veterans or higher, many drifted away to other pursuits. But plenty stayed loyal, keeping us among the city’s long-standing institutions.

I was born here. I grew up listening to the tales those adventurers brought back as souvenirs, stories of dungeons, near-death escapes, and treasures beyond imagining. And, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I eventually inherited the shop.

I'm Ryan Nikuya, the sixteenth-generation owner of the Meat Shop.

Our family name wasn't always Nikuya. The tenth-generation head, apparently a man of... let's call it "boundless enthusiasm", changed it from Zeros on a whim. His reasoning? *"We've been tied to meat for generations, so why not make it official?"*

My father fumed whenever the topic came up, calling him an eccentric with several screws loose. But to me, the tenth generation was a hero, a culinary genius whose unparalleled knowledge of meat solidified the shop's reputation for all time.

And the name change? I'm glad he did it.

The stories my father meant as insults always struck me as closer to epic legends. Like the one where he moved a local lord to tears with his cooking, and received official permission to change our family name as a reward.

*Amazing.*

*Even now, just thinking about it sends shivers down my spine.*

But in my generation, this once-proud meat shop found itself in serious trouble.

The city was amid a boom unlike anything I'd seen in my life. Restaurants were opening one after another, the streets were more crowded than ever, and the sheer influx of people was unprecedented. And yet, our customers kept drifting away, not as a passing phase, but as a steady decline that hadn't stopped to this day.

I tried everything I could think of: I improved the dishes. I made sure the prices were fair, never predatory. I swallowed my pride, visited the trendy new restaurants, asked questions, studied their clientele, and pushed my chefs to create menus that might lure customers back.

The results? *A disaster.*

Like water slipping through my fingers, the shop's decline just continued.

Then, one day, I realized one of our regulars was none other than the representative of the now-thriving Kuzunoha Company.

When I asked the waitstaff, they told me he'd been coming here since before even opening his business. I vaguely remembered hearing he'd rented space from the Rembrandt Company and had been treated with unusual favor. And apparently, Kuzunoha dealt in food as well, but not full-fledged cuisine.

They were just food products from a jack-of-all-trades shop.

Honestly, at first, I couldn't have cared less. Even when I heard rumors of lines wrapping around the block, I figured it was nothing more than a novelty drawing the crowds. Give it a little time, and they'd lose interest.

The reality?

They still had lines. Day after day, without fail. The popularity hadn't waned in the slightest.

Even when I visited other restaurants to scout them out, the name Kuzunoha kept coming up in conversation.

It made me sick with myself.

*All I can really do is judge the quality of meat. Cooking itself? That's up to the chefs. As for the desserts I'd been pushing lately, they were completely outside my field of expertise.*

Even the management I thought I was doing amounted to little more than flailing in the dark. I couldn't even recognize which places had the spark to become popular.

With my pride and shame already long gone, I started thinking: maybe I could somehow get in touch with that woman named Mio, one of Kuzunoha's top brass, and supposedly the one overseeing their food division.

I worked every connection I had among adventurers and merchants to try to arrange a meeting with her, but never succeeded.

I was in the depths of despair when, on the way back from one of Rembrandt Company's regular gatherings, I happened to spot Kuzunoha's representative, Raidou, for the first time in ages.

I decided to gamble on it.

The shop was on a slow march toward ruin, and at this point, I didn't care what it meant to be seen approaching him, especially given the number of enemies he had.

With the man always flying from place to place, who knew when I'd get another chance? The only thought in my head was, *I can't let the Meat Shop die.*

Luckily, being one of our regular customers meant he already knew who I was.

I wasted no time, practically dragged him back to the shop and laid everything out for him.

Initially, I had planned to use him as a bridge to reach Mio and borrow her expertise.

As for Raidou himself... Well, plenty of people had their doubts about him. Many believed Kuzunoha's success was thanks not to his own skill, but to the exceptional talent surrounding him, combined with rare supply routes and strong ties with unusual races.

Compared to the reputation of his company, the things I'd heard about him personally were downright vicious, right down to the absurd rumor that he was Mr. Rembrandt's personal *male courtesan*.

Still, he was the right choice. He would be the one to save me, to save the Meat Shop.

*Rumors aren't worth a damn.* I knew that in my head, but I'd still let myself be swayed by them. Embarrassing.

The fact alone that he ran a company of Kuzunoha's scale, and that so many exceptional people had gathered under him, should have been enough to crush the idea that he was incompetent.

That day, Raidou-san had proposed bringing in a style of yakiniku from his homeland.

After all the changes I'd made because meat no longer seemed enough to hold customers. Now he was telling me to return to meat? I can't deny, for a moment, that I felt disappointed.

Then he'd said it, confidently: *"A bet with a very high chance of winning."*

This was the representative of a razor-sharp company that had beaten rivals old and new alike, not with words, but with customers and sales figures. For him to say that...

And the conditions he set for offering his idea stirred my heart.

Drop the desserts. End the lunch service. Abandon all the recovery measures I'd struggled to put in place.

It sounded insane until he explained the reasoning. Then it made perfect sense.

*And one more thing: don't listen to anyone else. Or rather, don't let myself be led astray.*

That, I realized, was probably my greatest mistake. And he had seen it immediately, just from the little I'd told him.

To call him incompetent... What a colossal misunderstanding.

It wasn't just luck or connections; there was something to him.

Those who dismissed him as nothing more than a figurehead could never hope to stand against Kuzunoha.

I see that clearly now.

"Then our contract is settled?" he asked.

“Ah, wait. We haven’t even discussed your payment yet, Raidou-san.”

Up to this point, he hadn’t mentioned a single word about money, no fee for the idea, no contract sum, nothing.

The first thought that crossed my mind was *how much is he going to bleed me for?*

A chill ran down my spine.

But then...

“Payment? This isn’t work for my company, and honestly, it sounds like it’ll be fun for me too. So, just... whatever you feel is right,” he said.

“Wh-Whatever I feel?”

“Exactly. If it works, give me whatever amount you think is fair. That’s plenty. Now, about this yakiniku from my hometown...”

His attitude was the polar opposite of profit-seeking, utterly unthinkable for a merchant. He was essentially saying, *If it fails, you owe me nothing. If it succeeds, you decide the reward.* And he meant it.

Would he truly be fine even if I handed him a single copper coin?

The words were halfway to my lips before they shattered against the force of the Yakiniku Revolution, he laid out next.

“Tomorrow, I’ll bring a preliminary sample. But more important than that is the key: letting the customers finish the cooking themselves.”

“Wh-Wha... The customers?!”

“For this menu, we’ll serve thinly sliced raw meat on plates, and the customers will grill it right at their tables. They can adjust the heat and cook it to the level they like; this is how yakiniku is done where I come from.”

“I... see. It’s certainly an original idea, but depending on the meat, leaving the cooking to amateurs could be

dangerous.”

What was he thinking?! Letting customers grill their own meat wasn’t just about losing control over taste and texture—it risked food safety. The right level of heat was the foundation of whether a dish was safe to eat at all.

“That’s why the meat will be thinly sliced to make it cook quickly. And beef—uh, I mean, here it’d be narwhal or its variants—can be eaten deliciously even if cooked rare. On the other hand, pork—like tang-goat or lucia boar—needs to be cooked thoroughly. We’ll make sure the menu clearly states those details, and of course, the staff will give a quick reminder when serving.”

From the way he spoke, it was clear that this man knew more about meat than most. And the idea of slicing it thin for quicker cooking... That might be a good one.

If we nailed the explanations and got past the rollout, maybe this could work as a new offering.

Back then, I still thought this yakiniku idea was just that, a new menu item. I had no clue it was about to be something far bigger.

“I see...”

“There’s a unique joy in cooking the meat yourself,” Raidou said. “It’s perfect for a lively group, and it plays directly to the strengths you already have. Most of all, with a few precautions, it’s hard for other shops to copy.”

*The joy of cooking it yourself, huh?* It didn’t quite click for me. I was too used to meat and the way it got cooked to look at it with fresh eyes.

He was right about one thing, though: I’d been missing the customers’ perspective.

Even so, his last point stuck in my mind. Something about what he said was odd.

“It does sound interesting,” I admitted. “But isn’t it easy to imitate? If we install the same grills, other places

can make something similar. And if it's just slicing and serving meat, even a street stall could do that."

It was a blunt question, maybe even rude. But instead of taking offense, Raidou chuckled and nodded like he'd been waiting for it.

"Heh. So that's what you think. Good, good. Then let's go ahead with tomorrow. It won't be the finished form, but we'll try it for real. You don't need to prepare anything, open the place at the same time as today."

"R-Right. Got it. I'll be counting on you."

I was uneasy, sure. But there wasn't a hint of doubt in his eyes. In fact, he radiated confidence, enough that even a skeptic like me found myself ready to trust him.

The next day, right on schedule, Raidou showed up at my place carrying a large bundle under one arm.

He'd told me there was no need to prepare anything, but since I'd already asked about the basics, I had the kitchen staff slice up several different cuts of meat in advance.

"Oh, you've already got the meat ready! Yep, just as I expected," Raidou nodded. "In that case, let's get my part set up right away."

He set the hefty bundle in the middle of the table, his gaze sweeping over the neatly arranged trays of meat with an approving nod. Then he loosened the wrapping cloth, revealing what looked like a squat earthenware pot filled with charcoal. After lighting the coals, he placed a wire mesh grill across the top.

*So that's it, he's planning to cook the meat over that.*

It was all starting to make sense now. Much simpler than I'd imagined.

"As you've probably guessed, the idea is to grill the meat on this mesh. The one I brought today is just a makeshift unit since I had to hurry, but ideally, it'd be built right into the table," he explained. "That way, when the

mesh gets dirty, you can swap it out in seconds; maintenance is a breeze.”

“I see...”

“As for the smoke, instead of installing some huge ventilation system in the ceiling, there’s a modern invention called a smokeless roaster, well, the name doesn’t matter. Anyway, if you think this method could work for your place, we could manufacture and sell proper ones ourselves. For today, don’t worry about it. Smoke control isn’t an issue, so you can relax.”

“R-Right...”

“All right, let’s get grilling.”

Raidou brushed a light coat of oil over the mesh, then used a small pair of tongs he’d brought to start laying out the meat with swift, practiced motions.

The tongs were compact enough to be kept at each table without taking up too much space. I followed his lead, placing slices on the grill.

*Interesting...* All I was doing was transferring the meat onto the mesh and waiting for it to cook, but somehow it felt like I was finishing the dish myself. And the key point, cutting the meat thin, was really paying off. The cooking time was much shorter than I’d expected.

Even if the conversation at the table stalled, there wouldn’t be that awkward lull; by the time you’d finished watching the meat sizzle, it would already be ready to eat.

“At this point, you just flip it over!”

Raidou’s hand was already reaching for the still-raw meat, and I couldn’t stop myself from blurting out, “Ah, Raidou-san! You should wait a bit longer before...”

“And see, that’s exactly the kind of back-and-forth customers could have with each other,” he said, utterly unfazed.

“Oh, true. This really does lend itself to gatherings with family or friends.”

*Hmm.*

*Right now I’m facing Raidou across the table for work, but what if it were my friends, or my wife and kids sitting here instead?* The thought stirred a memory, an image of the occasional backyard barbecue we held during home parties.

Normally, as the host, I’d never dream of making guests help grill the meat. *But here, I realized, the grill is part of the dining table, and everyone would cook together, turning the act into part of the enjoyment rather than a chore.*

*Yes, that could work.*

*And if it could be offered indoors, we wouldn’t be at the mercy of the weather.* The longer I thought about it, the more I began to understand the depth of the charm behind the yakiniku of Raidou’s homeland.

“Once the meat’s cooked, you just take it onto your plate like this, and eat it right away.”

He sprinkled a pinch of salt over the piece he had just lifted, then bit into it with an expression that could only be described as bliss.

“So you’re always eating it fresh off the grill,” I said in wonder. “This is simple, but it’s brilliant.”

“As for seasoning, you can marinate the meat beforehand, or you could prepare several dipping sauces for the customers to choose from.”

“I see... So the preparation doesn’t end with slicing. You can add flavor ahead of time, and if it’s a sauce to match the meat, I can provide the absolute best we have!”

“You could even split the meat into salt-seasoned and sauce-seasoned portions, then also offer a few sauces at the table. That way, the variety of flavors far exceeds the

number of menu items, and customers will feel truly satisfied."

"R-Raidou-san, are you a genius?!" The praise burst out of me with complete sincerity; it wasn't exaggeration in the least.

"No, no, no! Like I said at the start, this is already a way of eating in my homeland. I'm just helping to adopt it here."

"Well, even so..."

"So, with the idea of satisfying customers beyond just the number of menu items in mind, I have a proposal."

"Eh?"

Raidou's expression seemed to darken slightly.

"At first, it would be safest to only offer the more standard cuts of meat from your current menu as yakiniku. As you mentioned earlier, there's always the danger of someone eating undercooked meat and getting sick. The majority of your customers are adventurers, so many will already be aware of that risk, but..."

"I-I see."

"No matter how much you explain it, there will always be someone who decides, 'Eh, it's still red but I'll eat it anyway.' You *can* put up warnings, give multiple explanations, and state it's entirely the customer's responsibility so complaints won't be entertained, but protecting the restaurant's reputation is never a bad thing."

"You're absolutely right."

*No matter how carefully you explain, once you leave the cooking to the customer, that risk will always follow.*

"That's why I suggest making use of your extensive knowledge of meats to select three or four cuts best suited for yakiniku, then build the menu from there. I believe that's the ideal first step."

“Raidou-san, you’re incredible!” I exclaimed. “I’m starting to believe this could work. No, I can say with absolute certainty it will be a hit! But...”

“What is it?”

“The grilling setup, the meat selection, once they’re out in the open at the shop, I can’t help but feel they’d be easy to copy. That’s the part I’m worried about. Could you tell me what makes you certain other places won’t be able to imitate it?”

*No matter how revolutionary the menu, if copycats spring up everywhere, it’ll never last.*

Raidou took my concern in stride.

“Oh, that’s all?” he asked.

“That’s all?!”

“Ahaha. This meat you’ve given me, just with salt, is fantastic. Each cut has its own unique texture and flavor.”

“Well, thank you.”

I was glad he was praising the meat’s flavor, but *what exactly is he getting at?*

“I learned something not too long ago,” Raidou began. “For example, if you take the meat of a freshly hunted ikkaku, cut it up, and grill it that very night, would it taste like this?”

“No, it wouldn’t. Generally speaking, game meat needs to rest for a certain period after the kill before it reaches full flavor. For ikkaku... Well, if you ask me, it needs at least a week. Any sooner and it’s tough, sinewy, and barely edible.”

“Exactly. But today’s ikkaku tastes much better than that. That’s because you’re a butcher, right?”

“All I can do is judge and handle meat, but that much, I study relentlessly. Of course, I have the kind of knowledge about ikkaku aging that holds up even in the finest

kitchens. And I always aim to produce results that surpass the standard methods of aging."

"Right. That's a craftsman's skill, one that's not easily imitated."

I gasped softly.

*Craftsman's skill.*

Being called that outright made me feel a little embarrassed, but there was no denying it; meat aging was a skill I'd learned, honed, and would continue to refine for the rest of my life.

It was the one ability I could be genuinely proud of, both to myself and to others.

"And did you notice? The cuts and thickness vary depending on the type and part of the meat. They're not all perfectly uniform," he pointed out softly.

"The cooks here have worked with our meat for years. Once I told them this was for grilling on a mesh, they... Ah."

"In your shop's eyes, this platter might look like nothing more than neatly sliced meat. But it isn't that simple. I forgot to mention portion size earlier, but these are all cut into perfect bite-sized pieces. Your staff is clearly top-notch."

"..."

*Our butcher shop's strengths. I've. I've been overlooking something this obvious?*

"It's fine. There's no way they can imitate this easily. The aging, the cutting, the selection of meat and cuts, the marinades and sauces, no one is more skilled in all of it than your shop. Or, are you saying other places are just as good?"

"You don't pull your punches, do you? Well, no, whether it's an established shop or a newcomer, none of them can beat us. We're number one. I'll never compromise when it

comes to meat. Hmm... But wait, Raidou, you said '*with just a little countermeasure*' it wouldn't be copied. If no one in this city knows meat as well as we do, then wouldn't that mean imitation is impossible to begin with?"

He'd reminded me of the weapon already in my hand. And not just that, he was showing me the shield to protect the shop as well.

"Sure, somewhere in the world, there might be people that capable," he said. "But instead of opening shop here in Tsige to compete with you, they'd be better off doing business in another country entirely."

"Then why is this *little countermeasure* you mentioned still necessary?" I asked, confused.

"Because your butcher shop's *employees* are capable of it. In other words—poaching."

"!!!"

"That's why you need to be ready for it. At the very least, make sure the core people in this shop come to love it as much as you do, Ryan. That way, you can prevent your most important staff from being stolen away."

"Is that even possible?"

"Depending on the conditions and environment, probably. You'll need to vet people from the start and persuade them. Given that you came to consult with me, you must've been pretty desperate, right? So at this point, go all in. Spare no expense."

"Uh, just to be clear, you mean me, right?"

"Of course. Why not overhaul your working conditions entirely while you're at it? I could tell at a glance you've cut staff to the bone by slashing labor costs first. I think that's a bad move. Your people are your treasure, Ryan."

Coming from Raidou, the words carried terrifying weight.

*People are the treasure.*

*I've always thought of staff as something that was simply there by default. When profits dropped, my first resort was wage cuts and layoffs.*

*And did that ever fix anything? No, it changed nothing at all.*

*Then... Does that mean I've been wrong all this time?*

For years, I'd worked to save on the largest expense so I could offer customers the best meat, in the best condition possible. But, it seemed, Raidou's philosophy was to never skimp on people.

*Maybe I should follow his example.*

Still reeling from the shock of his Yakiniku Revolution, I listened intently as he continued. And that remarkable plan began with these words:

"Because what you really want, Ryan, isn't to make money. It's to have more people taste the delicious meat from this shop, and love it."



One of the oldest dining establishments in Tsige: the Meat Shop.

In recent years, its declining sales had driven it into a spree of clumsy, short-sighted measures, earning it cold laughter and scorn from many in the same trade. Lately, those antics had reached the point of evoking pity.

*Looks like the butcher's finally going to close its doors.*

That rumor had begun to circulate through Tsige's food scene.

The spark that set it off, a particularly outlandish stunt, soon reached the ears of Patrick, head of the Rembrandt Company and one of the city's most capable merchants.

"The owner of the butcher shop is going around bowing his head to the employees he fired?" Patrick asked, his eyebrows lifting in disbelief.

"Yes," Morris replied with a firm nod. The butler's tone was measured, but the faint furrow between his eyebrows betrayed his skepticism. "Reliable sources confirm it."

"So it's come to this. I thought they'd scrape by somehow, but it seems I misread them."

"However..."

"What is it?"

"Lately, I've been hearing the name 'Raidou' mentioned here and there in connection to him."

"Heh. I see, Raidou-dono," Patrick said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Come to think of it, I've heard he's been going back to Tsige from time to time since that incident in the Academy City."

"Shall I move to handle the aftermath?" Morris asked.

Aftermath.

In Morris's mouth, the word carried two meanings.

One concerned the butcher shop. The other, whether they should help Raidou, a merchant Patrick considered both a benefactor beyond compare and someone worthy of his personal attention.

Naturally, Morris expected his master to nod, and he had already begun making a few quiet arrangements in preparation.

Patrick shook his head. "No. Let's watch for now. The last time I saw him was at our regular meeting, but... Well, well, I find myself wanting to see both Raidou-dono's current work and the latent strength of this old Tsige establishment for myself."

“You’re certain?” Morris asked, his eyebrows knitting slightly.

“Yeah, do as I said. Knowing Raidou-dono, if things end in success, he’ll come to me with a smile to report it himself.”

“Understood. I’ll keep it under observation only.”

Completely unaware that his reforms had drawn the interest of Patrick Rembrandt himself, Ryan Nikuya continued steadily preparing for his revolution.



It had been ten days since a third of the butcher shop’s dining hall was closed off behind thick cloth curtains in the name of renovations.

For ten whole days, nearly a hundred seats had been unusable.

For Ryan and me, the renovation was to install yakiniku tables, but to competitors and some customers, it was read as a prelude to closing down.

Given the reality, I couldn’t blame them. Even at peak hours, the hall could barely manage to fill half its tables these days.

Ryan had been on the verge of tears over it. That ended today.

Just as I’d suggested, he had agreed to adopt working conditions remarkably close to modern Japan’s standards, terms that would be unthinkable by this world’s norms.

Of course, that was from the workers' perspective. From the owner's side, it was the kind of employment package that could make you cough up blood.

Ryan steeled himself, saying that if it brought back customers and revived the shop, it was worth it. The butcher shop's labor conditions were now so favorable that you could even call them better than those at the Kuzunoha Company.

*In our case, even if I give the shop a day off, everyone still finds some way to train, either individually or in groups, so they never really rest anyway. I could set their schedule to something like a five-day workweek, but in practice, they take time off like Edo-period public servants: barely at all.*

*Well, enough about us.*

Under the butcher shop's new labor standards, there were two points Ryan insisted on adding.

The first was a severe penalty for betrayal.

I personally wasn't keen on it, but since it was my warning about employee poaching that had planted the seed, Ryan had clearly taken the possibility to heart. The wording was strong enough to be read as, *"If you betray me, I'll make sure you can't live in this city."*

The second was about promotions and future working conditions.

If the first point was the stick, this was the carrot.

Even though the current benefits were already unheard of elsewhere, Ryan made it clear that these were the *minimum* and that as the shop grew, raises would be highly likely. He also announced that he was considering a program to help craftsmen set up independent shops in other cities.

Now, here we were, every employee gathered in the dining hall before opening, a meeting in session.

In the wake of the recent downturn in business, even those who had been laid off were approached by Ryan himself. For the ones still in town, he'd gone out in person, bowed his head, and offered re-employment under the new terms.

For those who had already left the city, he was apparently making efforts to track them down, visiting whenever he could.

It seemed the circumstances of the layoffs, the way he'd gone about them, hadn't been considered bad by this world's standards. Other than a few who had already found new jobs they truly enjoyed, most accepted Ryan's apology and offer and returned to the shop.

Even those who chose not to come back took a fair severance payment, more accurately, hush money, along with a promise not to reveal anything about the butcher shop.

*Severance pay. You almost never see that in this world.*

*For them, it must have felt like money falling from the sky.*

"Starting with today's service, we'll be offering a new menu item, yakiniku!" Ryan announced at the front of the hall, his voice ringing with conviction. "Your training has been thorough, and your knowledge is more than sufficient. Many of our first-day customers are invited guests, but if a walk-in customer arrives and a table is free, don't hesitate to suggest yakiniku. Let's make it happen!"

The employees answered with voices even more spirited than Ryan's. And with that, training was officially over.

Today was the debut, yakiniku's very first day on the menu, with invited guests to mark the occasion.

Not all of them were true invitees like Rembrandt; some were there to create a lively atmosphere, in other words, plants. But whether plant or genuine guest, they were still first-time yakiniku customers.

Among them were adventurers I knew personally, Toa and her party.

Toa's recent exploits had been nothing short of stellar; she was now a first-rate adventurer active on the front lines of the Wasteland. Quite a few younger adventurers looked up to her and her team.

In this case, *calling them "plants" doesn't quite fit; they're more like walking billboards.*

Incidentally, I was also the one who invited Rembrandt. I was relieved when he agreed without hesitation.

*The moment I mentioned his name, though, Ryan-san got unbelievably tense. I wonder if he's going to be okay?*

The curtains hiding the renovated section were finally taken down. Staff bustled about, running through the final checks before opening.

Everyone gathered here had already studied yakiniku and, more importantly, had experienced it for themselves. The verdict was, of course, overwhelmingly positive.

Both the hall staff and the kitchen crew were now confident in this new style of meat dish.

What's more, even staff who weren't scheduled to work today had been called in.

Given the shop's size, the turnout was impressive.

*Just seeing this number of people should make it clear to everyone that Ryan-san really does intend to give them two days off a week.*

I figured that was part of his aim in gathering the full roster today.

To make it happen, he'd dug deep into his own pockets, the most significant expense being labor costs.

*I don't think it'll happen, but if this flops, the Meat Shop could really be in trouble. Might even be the end for good.*

Still, he had plenty of backup options, offal cuts, rare meats, and other hidden aces. The reserve strength was there.

*It'll work. It has to.*

While those half-formed worries and memories of the butcher shop's long struggles turned over in my mind, the meeting wrapped up.

Opening time was close.

I didn't have any pressing tasks myself, so I planned to watch from the sidelines and step forward with Ryan to greet the handful of guests I'd personally invited, once they arrived.

"Raidou-san, we've finally made it this far!" Ryan declared, his voice brimming with conviction. "Today, this shop will claim the crown as Tsige's ruler of meat!"

He was practically snorting steam.

*Ah, right.* Lately, Ryan had been fired up about becoming the King of Meat.

During training, I'd prodded their sense of craftsmanship here and there, and somewhere along the way, both he and a few of his cooks had wound themselves up into a fervor.

I'd only borrowed a few of the phrases Tomoe or Mio use when training the residents of the Demiplane, choosing the lighter, softer ones, and tossed them out as encouragement. But it seemed to have worked better than I'd expected.

There were even cooks now seriously eyeing franchising opportunities, their determination plain in their

eyes.

"That's the spirit," I told him with a smile. "I'll be watching quietly from the hall's edge. If any of the guests I invited arrive, call me over. There aren't many, but it wouldn't do to skip the greetings."

"For the guests you've invited, Raidou-san, the issue isn't the number, it's the quality. If you're not with me, I'll be in trouble. I promise I'll call you over, so please don't worry."

Having said this, Ryan gave me a firm, decisive look before heading back to coordinate the staff.

Not long after, the shop opened its doors.

While a few regulars filtered in and made their way to their usual tables, the invited guests for today's grand re-opening began to arrive through a separate entrance.

*Ah, there's our very first yakiniku customer.*

After spending so much time and energy on this project, partly as a way to unwind after the battle in Limia's royal capital, I was just as curious as Ryan to see the results.

Especially since there was a decent chance I'd be touring major nations before long.

A server led the first invited guests to their yakiniku table.

*Come to think of it, building that table was more complicated than I'd expected.*

We couldn't simply drop something like a shichirin grill into a hole. The center of the tabletop had to be cut into a perfect circle, with the shichirin and grill set into it. It needed depth, and around the inner wall of that cutout, we had to install vents to draw in the smoke.

The captured smoke was then channeled down through the table's legs and out of the building via underground ducts—a fairly elaborate setup.

Back when I ate at yakiniku restaurants in Japan, I'd never given much thought to the smokeless roasters, but it turned out they were surprisingly sophisticated pieces of equipment.

I'd underestimated the complexity, and during the prototype stage, the eldwars ended up putting in a lot of extra effort. Fortunately, they seemed to enjoy the challenge, which was a relief.

I still remembered them smiling as they left, saying, "*We'll make sure you can do yakiniku in the Demiplane too.*" At this rate, it was only a matter of time before my own home had a dedicated yakiniku table.

Toa and her group weren't due for a while yet. Since they tended to draw attention, I'd told them to come during an off-peak time.

As for Rembrandt, given how busy he was year-round, I had no idea when he'd show up.

*For now, it looks like I'll have time to watch how customers react. Huh?*

*What's this?*

Ryan was coming toward me with a look of sheer alarm on his face. His pace was almost a run, but unmistakably

still a walk.

*Man, this guy really has some insane customer service skills.*

Eris was always going on about “hidden arts of hospitality” and such. *Maybe that really is an actual thing in the industry.*

“Raaidouuuuu-saaan!!!”

Even his pronunciation was off.

*What is that supposed to be, a Chinese name?*

He was clearly in full-blown panic, but still managed to avoid drawing any customer attention—a textbook case of calm panic, if there ever was one.

“Uh... Trouble?” I asked.

“No! Rembrandt-sama, his wife, his butler Morris, and six associates from partner trading companies have just shown up!!!” Ryan blurted.

*What?!*

*That was fast; we haven't even been open for thirty minutes.*

I followed Ryan's gaze, and sure enough, there were the Rembrandts, accompanied by three trading-company heads I recognized from a few meetings. Morris was holding a quiet conversation with one of the servers.

*Didn't Rembrandt-san laugh about having mountains of work? Did he already finish all of it?*

*He must have. The man really does live up to the title of super-merchant. I can't help but envy that.*

“Well then, let's have them seated at the special table we've prepared and go greet them,” I suggested.

Ryan gave me a sideways glance. “You don't look even the slightest bit nervous, Raidou-san. As expected of a big shot.”

“I only know the others by face, but I'm on friendly terms with the Rembrandt couple and their daughters. I

spoke with them both earlier today, actually. They're dependable people, I don't think you need to be so tense or intimidated."

"From my perspective, they're people high above the clouds. In any case, I'm counting on you to cover for me."

I gave him a wry smile and led the way toward Rembrandt's table. "Ryan-san, you're the owner of a shop that's been running in this city for more than ten generations. You should believe in yourself more."

"Ah, you two!" Rembrandt greeted us warmly, rising slightly from his seat. "Congratulations on the renovations! I heard there's an interesting new meat dish to try, so I couldn't resist bringing along a few extra friends, unplanned. My apologies."

Morris also stood, bowing politely. "The server accommodated us promptly and graciously," he said. "We're grateful."

I'd honestly expected them to come as just the three of them, Rembrandt-san, his wife, and Morris. Still, the table and seating for six were already perfectly prepared.

It was a touch extravagant for the original headcount, but thanks to Ryan reserving a large table equipped with three roasters, we were ready for anything.

*When little things like that work out in your favor, I can't help but take it as a good omen.*

"I am Ryan, owner of the Meat Shop," Ryan said, his voice formal but steady. "Thank you sincerely for visiting us despite your busy schedules. Please enjoy the new meat dish we proudly recommend."

He moved smoothly into explaining the meal and offering the necessary cautions. Midway through, I noticed everyone at the table, including Rembrandt, turning curious, slightly surprised eyes toward the roaster itself.

*Ah, and speaking of things catching my eye, his wife's outfit is something else.*

While Rembrandt and the others were dressed in what looked like a natural extension of their work attire, she was in full formal wear.

Not flashy, exactly, her ensemble was a deep blue, almost indigo, with a calm elegance. The color was dark enough that any accidental stain would hardly show; unlike white, which, even I'd have to admit, would be a terrible choice for yakiniku.

She'd paired it with a delicate necklace at her chest, and her hair was done up to frame her face, adding a refined air.

*Mm. Now that's a grown woman.*

Not gaudy in the slightest, yet incredibly attractive, a woman who clearly knew how to present herself.

*It's not about how much skin you show.*

Not to mention that outfit. It was no doubt expensive.

*I'll have to remember that one.*

*And no, not "taking notes" in the sense of cross-dressing research. I don't have that hobby.*

I hadn't meant to be staring at her, but perhaps sensing my gaze, the lady of the house turned to me with a warm smile.

*Ah, thank you. Wait, no.*

*Focus, focus. Can't just sit here admiring her all day.*

Still marveling at the self-cooking setup, Rembrandt and his party began placing meat on the mesh grill.

For now, there wasn't anything on the menu that required tricky grilling skills. In general, once a guest felt the meat was done, it was perfectly fine to eat.

Even without expert-level technique, they could enjoy meat aged to perfection.

"This is excellent!" Rembrandt exclaimed, eyes brightening. "It's already seasoned in advance, I see. And there's salt and sauce, four kinds! Hmmm. Serving meat like this never even crossed my mind. Remarkable *and* fun."

He sampled slice after slice, testing different combinations each time.

"Ordinarily, when grilling on mesh, the meat sticking is the real problem," Morris observed, leaning in for a closer look. "But here, you've not only brushed oil, you've done something to the mesh itself, haven't you? I feel as though it's less prone to burning as well."

He continued eating with a slightly biased selection, clearly having found his favorite sauce.

"The smoke intake is such a thoughtful touch," Rembrandt's wife added, turning a satisfied glance toward the grill. "Of course, you can't remove every trace entirely, but the visibility is wonderful, and my eyes don't sting at all. Even with the fattier cuts, I can grill without worry. And the pieces not being too large is a welcome detail for women."

She seemed to favor the richer, kalbi-style cuts, occasionally refreshing her palate with lighter ones.

The three merchants Rembrandt had brought along also began offering their own praise in turn.

It seemed they were particularly pleased with the way the meat was sliced and portioned.

"I'd heard rumors that this old establishment was in its death throes," one of the merchants admitted with a slight chuckle, "so I confess I had some doubts. But they were completely unfounded. As expected of Patrick-sama's discerning eye, you foresaw that such a remarkable style was being developed here."

“I’m truly impressed,” one of the merchants said, leaning back with a satisfied smile. “No chasing trends, no relying on appearances, just this pure, honest flavor of meat. This is the butcher’s essence. You saw it clearly. I’m certain many of your shop’s fans have been waiting for a menu like this, my good sir. I’m delighted.”

“Indeed,” another merchant chimed in. “Now I’ve got another restaurant I can use for business meetings. Patrick-san, thank you for inviting me today, and Ryan-san, splendid work. This will catch on. And not as a passing fad either. It has the strength to become the signature dish of not just the butcher shop, but the entire city.”

The merchants Rembrandt had brought were unanimous in their praise.

From the way one of them spoke, I suspected he knew the shop fairly well, perhaps a former regular disappointed by its recent decline.

Beyond the repeated “*Delicious*,” there was another word they all seemed to use. They called it “*fun*.” And *that’s exactly what I wanted to hear*.

Yakiniku is fantastic because it’s both fun and delicious. If they’d grasped that, then as far as I was concerned, we’d already succeeded.

“And this,” Rembrandt said, catching my eye during a lull in the merchants’ banter, “is the latest example of Kuzunoha magic, or should I call it *magical renovation*? You do seem to have a knack for bringing fascinating ideas to the table, Raidou-dono.”

Magical renovation.

*Oh, ha ha. Who told you you could be clever?*

I chuckled and waved a hand modestly. “No, no, without Ryan-san’s depth of expertise in meat, none of this would have been possible. And this time, it wasn’t a

Kuzunoha Company project; I helped purely in a personal capacity."

"So you acted as a personal adviser?" Rembrandt asked, his eyebrows lifting slightly.

"I only shared a few ideas from my homeland's cuisine," I replied with a shrug. "As a regular customer, I just wanted to lend a little support to the shop. If we called this 'Kuzunoha magic,' it would be unfair to the staff who've been working so hard every day. Ahaha."

"You haven't changed," Rembrandt said, smiling in that warm yet knowing way of his. "But that's exactly what makes you who you are. Yakiniku, hm? Butcher's yakiniku, the name is as simple as it is fitting. I'll be sure to patronize the place in the future. And of course, I'll spread the word. Now then, Raidou-dono, what would you recommend?"

"Thank you so much!!!" Ryan bowed deeply, his voice ringing with genuine gratitude.

*Looks like Rembrandt-san's given his seal of approval.*

While Ryan was still expressing his thanks, I quickly sorted through my mental list for a recommendation. *Let's go with that one.*

"Well," I began, "since I can't possibly choose between the meats, they're all excellent, I'll recommend this mushroom, the shiitake. And also this vegetable dish, the Kamihā steam."

Kamihā steam was something like foil-steamed vegetables, but using the large, sturdy leaves of the Kamihā tree. The leaves had no unpleasant grassy flavor, and their heat resistance made them a perfect substitute for aluminum foil.

"Oh, that looks delicious," Rembrandt's wife said, her expression brightening. "Of course, this place serves vegetables as well, doesn't it?"

*Well, with meat this striking, it's easy to forget. And the shop literally has meat in its name.*

Maybe I should suggest to Ryan later that the tables for invited guests get a complimentary vegetable platter, as it would help balance the presentation.

"Hmm. You're saying mushrooms and vegetables?" Rembrandt mused. "I've never heard of these 'shiitake' before. Do you eat them grilled directly?"

"Yes," I said with a nod. "They're mushrooms my company supplies, so it's half a sales pitch, but I can vouch for them. If you're not opposed to mushrooms, please do try them at least once."

"In that case, we'll take six servings," he said.

"Right away."

Catching his glance, a server who'd been waiting discreetly nearby swooped in to take the order with brisk efficiency. The enthusiasm was apparent in their quick response.

"Since we're at it, let's have six servings of this Kamihā steam as well," Rembrandt added.

"Coming right up," the server replied with a bow before heading off.

*Good, seems like no one here has an issue with mushrooms.*

Grilled shiitake was delicious, no question, but with its strong, distinctive aroma, it wasn't something I could honestly recommend to anyone who disliked mushrooms in the first place.

"As for this Kamihā steam, I recall a certain steamed dish by that name being a staple for adventurers camping in the wild," Morris said, his tone thoughtful as he searched his memory.

*Bingo.* That was precisely where the name came from. It was a simple recipe, wrap your ingredients in the easily

prepared leaves of the Kamihā tree and set them over the fire. Since it didn't require any elaborate cooking tools, it was popular among adventurers who traveled light.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "Tsige is a city that draws a large number of adventurers. I thought it might be interesting to have at least one menu item inspired by them, so I made a special request this time."

"It's not as though anyone holds exclusive rights to such a thing," Morris replied, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "And I find it amusing that you've clearly labeled it as 'butcher's style' on the menu."

"Yes," I agreed. "This is another dish I'm proud of. In the wild, you can't be picky about ingredients or seasonings. So here at the Meat Shop, we deliberately leave out all meat from the filling, using only vegetables, and steam them with a special sauce."

"No meat at all? How bold!" Morris leaned slightly closer, intrigued. "Indeed, if you place the Kamihā-wrapped ingredients on the grill, you can steam them as well. The fact that you can prepare both grilled and steamed vegetables here is a brilliant touch. I'm impressed."

"Thank you," I said with a little bow. Then, lowering my voice, "This is a secret, but since you're all here, I'll share it with you. If this style takes off, the next step is to incorporate seafood."

"What!" one of the merchants breathed.

*Not just meat.*

Grilled vegetables, steamed vegetables, and soon, seafood as well.

By hinting at that, I was planting the idea that this approach was meant to capture a much wider audience.

There was some risk the idea might be stolen, of course, but the only people here who could leak it, aside from Rembrandt and his two merchants, were the guests at

this very table. And since this was happening in Rembrandt's presence, even that wouldn't be easy.

*So no, I'm not overly worried about it getting out.*

"Well then," Rembrandt said with a genial smile, "since Raidou-dono has given us an even more entertaining vision for the future, I think it's time we enjoy ourselves at our own pace. As you can see, the place is bustling; it wouldn't do for us to monopolize the two of you."

Just then, steam began to seep from the gaps in the Kamihā leaves, and the large shiitake mushrooms I'd ordered arrived, laid out neatly on a plate. Rembrandt's words were a polite signal that the greetings had gone on long enough.

Ryan and I bowed together before stepping away from the table.

The door at the entrance opened, and I spotted Toa coming in with far more people than she'd originally promised. Outside, I also caught sight of Tomoe and Mio already waiting.

*Toa, I appreciate you accepting the invitation, but why bring more people without telling me? What if there's no table for you?*

Tomoe and Mio, *I told them to come after peak hours, yet here they were, waiting outside just as customer flow was likely to spike.*

*Don't tell me they plan on standing out there the whole time.*

Even I wasn't cruel enough to make them wait outside while the mouthwatering *aroma*—not *odor*—of yakiniku filled the air.

*Maybe I should combine them with Toa's group. No, that might not be the best idea.*

After all, I'd recently given those two separate orders in Kaleneon, some of them rather troublesome.

*Sigh. Fine. I'll use this as an excuse to bring up the vegetable platter suggestion, and at the same time, see if Ryan-san can find them a table.*

"Excuse me, Ryan-san," I said as I caught up to him. "It seems two of my people arrived earlier than planned. Any chance there's a small table open for them?"

"Two? You mean Tomoe-sama and Mio-sama?!" Ryan's eyes widened ever so slightly.

"Yes, they're waiting outside. Also, I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye, looks like Toa's brought quite a few extras as well. They're a handful, but could you accommodate them?"

"Of course! Their seats are already prepared. When an invited guest brings more than double their number, it's actually a customary way of honoring the host. It's no problem at all."

*Seriously?*

So in Tsige, bringing more people than you were invited for actually made the host *happy*.

*Gnnn. Another local custom I thought I knew, but didn't. Better file that one away for later.*

*So that's why Rembrandt-san's table was so large; he must have anticipated this.*

"By the way, for the greetings, I'll handle Toa and Tomoe's groups first," I told Ryan. "While I'm doing that, could you make the rounds with the other invited guests?"

"Understood," Ryan replied with a nod. "Since Rembrandt-san wrapped things up earlier than expected, there's no problem. Thankfully, the free-seating area is starting to fill up, so let's each move independently from here. I'll see you later."

"Right."

We parted ways, and I made for Toa's table, already full with her party plus a few extras.

She'd brought along a five-person party she'd been exchanging information with recently. I explained the yakiniku style to the newcomers and pointed out a few recommended menu items.

It wasn't long before Toa's younger sister, Rinon, had taken up the role of yakiniku grillmaster in earnest, tongs in hand. I couldn't help but let out a wry smile.

After introducing myself to the group, we exchanged the usual greetings and shared updates, recent adventurer trends, and Wasteland exploration news. Their feedback on the yakiniku menu was very positive; they said it reminded them of camp meals while still being restaurant-quality, and they offered genuine praise.

I made sure to slip in a request for them to spread the word about the shop, and mentioned that Tomoe and Mio would be dropping by tonight, before taking my leave of their table.

In the meantime, Ryan seemed to have already completed several other greetings.

*If I could manage those kinds of quick, casual introductions, short enough to save time, yet subtle enough that customers don't feel rushed, it'd be a real skill to have.*

*Tonight alone might not be enough to learn it, but I'll try to keep my eyes on how Ryan-san moves.*

Next up: Tomoe and Mio.

Out of everyone at the Kuzunoha Company, I'd only invited those two to the reopening.

Since I hadn't known about the local custom earlier, they were naturally just coming as a pair. Not that it mattered, they were family.

*Oh?* They were both in outfits I hadn't seen before.

Tomoe was in a sharp, mannish Western-style suit, and the princely beauty look was still going strong.

Mio's was Western in cut, but had a certain air, almost like a Meiji-era dress. From my perspective, it had that retro blend of Japanese and Western elements, and she wore it with perfect poise.

I sent a telepathic message to the two of them, letting them know they could come in now.

They were in front of me almost as soon as I sent the message.

*That's some ESP-level intuition right there.*

"Since it is a rare honor to be invited to the shop by Young Master himself, I took the liberty of putting extra thought into my attire," Tomoe announced with a pleased grin.

"I hardly ever wear clothes like this," Mio added, smoothing her skirt, "so I can't quite relax in them, but I don't look strange, do I, Young Master?"

"You both look great," I said honestly.

"I knew it!" Tomoe chuckled. "I thought it might be nice to wear Western clothes for a change, hehehehe."

*Western clothes are one thing, but a suit? I didn't see that coming from Tomoe.*

"I feel as if I've been wearing clothes like this my whole life," Mio said serenely.

*Mio... Just how far are you taking this?*

"Today's main event," I told them, "is yakiniku prepared by a true master of meat. It's a completely different experience from doing it at home, new perspectives, new flavors. Tomoe, make sure you don't pick fights with Mio over portions. The meat won't run out. And Mio, don't spend the whole time studying, make sure you enjoy it too, all right?"

"And of course, Young Master will be joining us at the table?" Tomoe asked, her smile sharpening ever so slightly.

“That is so, is it not?” Mio followed up, her eyes expectant.

“Yeah, not for the whole time, but as much as I can,” I assured them. “Besides, I wanted to thank you both properly outside of the usual group banquets. Really, thank you, both of you.”

“The verdict is already in, the meat is the best thing today,” Tomoe said with mock solemnity.

“The seasonings are supreme, so it was inevitable,” Mio added smoothly.

*Ahaha. You two better appreciate the meat too, you know.*

I settled them into their seats and took one myself. I’d already told Toa’s group that the two would be here, so they’d probably come over to say hello, but with both Tomoe and Mio in good moods, that wouldn’t be a problem.

“Nuohhh! Delicious!” Tomoe exclaimed, already mid-bite. “As expected, shiitake is best grilled over the mesh! And the meat, ah, what a rich aroma and deep flavor! I thought I was merely assisting with ordering the equipment and vegetables, but this is extraordinary, Young Master! To see and to do are two entirely different things, exactly so!”





Tomoe had been saying things like, “*Yakiniku? At the end of the day, it’s just indoor barbecue, isn’t it?*” Now look at her.

*With her pickiness finally out of the way, yakiniku might spread across the Demiplane in no time.*

“I never knew meat could be aged like this.” Mio murmured, gazing at the slice on her plate. “And this thickness, this size. Each cut is clearly calculated to maximize flavor for its specific part. The sauces prepared are simply exquisite. There are plenty of meats out there that exist just to be carried by the sauce, but this meat is something else entirely. The respect for the ingredient here. I had completely overlooked it. How such a shop could also serve something as sacrilegious to food as that berry jam and ikkaku meat ice cream parfait is beyond me.”

*Ah, so Mio knows about the butcher’s darker menu history.* It wasn’t surprising as she was the queen of gourmet wanderings and uninvited apprenticeships, after all.

Still, praise was praise. I was glad they liked it.

At some point, the butcher shop’s yakiniku section had become *completely full*. The regular seating area was lively too, bustling with those who couldn’t get into the grill section.

*This is the perfect start.*

The shop hadn’t seen this level of busyness in a long time.

And later that night, the smile Ryan wore after closing said everything about the day’s success. It was the kind of smile that needed no words to explain.



There is a name known to every adventurer who visits Tsige at least once.

The Meat Shop.

For many years, this shop was loved by the city's people. The shadow of closure that had once loomed over it was now gone.

Where the inspiration for its revival came from is unclear; some say it was a spark from overhearing adventurers' idle chatter, though no one can say for sure. But the new style introduced by Ryan, the butcher's sixteenth-generation owner—*yakiniku*—proved to be more than just a passing trend. It took root as a true specialty of the city.

Armed with his vast knowledge of meat, the Butcher ran at the forefront of the culinary scene, confident and unshaken.

It wasn't only adventurers who came. Townsfolk, merchants, friends, lovers, families, all began frequenting the shop.

At dusk, the hall doors would swing open toward the street, and lines of customers would be drawn inside one after another, greeted by the lively voices of the staff.

This venerable establishment, now counted among Tsige's famed specialties, bustled without pause into the night.

Only a couple of things had changed from before its revival.

One: among the staff now worked demi-humans, seamlessly part of the team.

And two: a particular menu item had officially been named Manga Meat.

Other than that, nothing else was different, the rest of the meat dishes remained as they always had been. And yes, from time to time, that unremarkable young man with a weakness for Manga Meat still came in to eat, just as he always had.

The Meat Shop's name continued to resound throughout Tsige.

## Back Matter

### **Author: Azumi Kei**

Was born in Aichi Prefecture. In 2012, Kei began serializing *Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū* (*Tsukimichi: Moonlit Fantasy*) on the web. It quickly became a popular series and won the Readers' Choice Award at the 5th Alphapolis Fantasy Novel Awards. In May 2013, following revisions, Kei made their publishing debut with *Tsuki ga Michibiku Isekai Dōchū*.

### **Illustrations by Mitsuaki Matsumoto**

**<http://transparnaut.web.fc2.com/>**

This book is a revised and published version of the work originally posted on the website “Shosetsuka ni Naro” (<http://syosetu.com/>)

## Footers

[←1]

Makoto momentarily mistakes トギ (togi, "nightly companionship") for トゴ (tōgi, "councilman"), since both sound the same when spoken.

[←2]

The "forty-eight positions" (四十八) is a traditional Japanese euphemism for a wide range of sexual techniques. Think Kamasutra, but Japanese-style.

[←3]

In this case, togi (トギ) refers to the act of washing or polishing rice before cooking.

[←4]

Here, togi (トギ) refers to sharpening a blade.

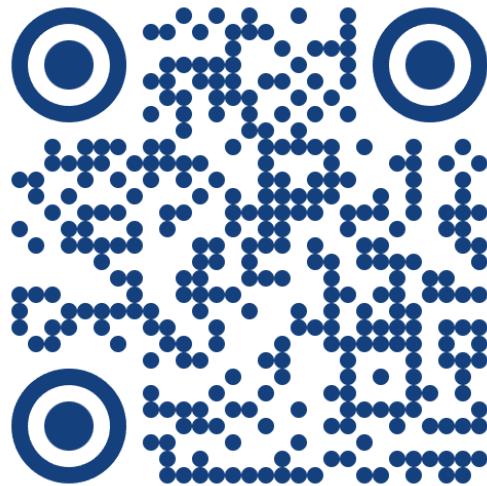
## Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of **Tsukimichi Moonlit Fantasy Volume 10!** We hope you've enjoyed Makoto's continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

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