

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD



9

Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem

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Chapter Nine

Part One

"I can't believe it's already been three years since this kid was born..." I muttered as I watched the child with tiger ears. They were absorbed in a picture book in the mansion's library.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. It's snack time, so you should go see your mom."

"Okay!" the child answered cheerfully. They left the book open on the desk before running away.

I put the book back and then headed to the dining room for snack time.

When I got there, the child was already seated and munching away with their mother sitting in the next seat. Shiromaru and Solomon were begging for treats as usual and several other chairs were also filled.

However, someone came running into the dining room to disrupt this peaceful moment.

"Yoshitsune! Did you read a book all by yourself?!"

The intruder was Blanca, the tiger-eared child's father. Although his face was usually so scary that he could make a grown man cry, that expression had been replaced with a broad smile. He took a few steps toward his son, but as soon as Yoshitsune saw his face, the boy let out a strange noise and quickly threw his arms around his mother.

"There, there. It's nothing to be scared of. I know his face is scary, but that's all," Sana said for some reason as she patted Yoshitsune's back.

Yoshitsune had tears in his eyes but looked like he was doing his best to suppress them. Meanwhile, Blanca looked deeply depressed by the fact that his smile had brought his own son to tears.

“This always happens. Either you need to get used to it, or just start wearing a mask all the time, Blanca!” Amur said as she pointed to him. She was sitting across from Yoshitsune, stuffing her face full of snacks.

While Amur yelled at Blanca, Yoshitsune left his mother’s arms and escaped. He ran behind me to put more distance between himself and his father.

Amur thought that was hilarious. “Pfft!”

However, Blanca stood up uneasily and approached her. Amur’s attention was focused on Yoshitsune so she didn’t notice, but then...

“Arghhh!”

Blanca firmly grabbed her finger, which had still been pointed at him, and bent it in the other direction. Her finger joint was locked in his painful grip while she frantically smacked the table and screamed.

“That’s exactly why Yoshitsune reacts like that to you,” Sana said, her tone filled with exasperation at Blanca’s behavior.

Blanca suddenly realized what he’d done and looked over at Yoshitsune, but it was already too late. The tiger cub was retreating to the corner of the room, putting even more distance between them.

“No, Yoshitsune! It’s not like that!” Blanca protested although it wasn’t clear exactly what he was trying to deny. He made a desperate attempt to clear up the misunderstanding, but Sana quickly caught him before he could get any closer to his son.

“Go outside for a while,” she said.

“O-Okay,” Blanca stammered, looking dejected as Sana kicked him out of the dining room.

Once Yoshitsune was absolutely sure his father was gone, he cautiously moved closer to his mother. Amur tried to laugh despite the pain in her finger, but her forced smile only made her look creepy.

Yoshitsune returned to his seat and focused on his snacks again at last, seemingly forgetting all about Blanca.

The boy had been born the year after I won the tournament. He didn’t

resemble Amur or the others, not even Sana or Hana. And much to Amur's relief, he didn't resemble Blanca either. That was something she often pointed out, which led Blanca to answer her with his fists. Hana would comment on that the most after Amur. According to the two of them, Yoshitsune took after Amur's grandfather Crow—Sana and Hana's father. Although Crow had been the biological son of Grampy Kei (the Bandit King), he had taken after his mother instead. She had been a calm and gentle person in both appearance and temperament.

Incidentally, I was the one who had named Yoshitsune. The reason was that the baby had just been born when I went to pick up Blanca and the others from the SAR to bring them all to the capital. Neither Blanca nor Sana could agree on a name, so I had participated in the discussion about it with everyone. The suggestions kept getting more and more ridiculous. Most of them had been Amur's ideas, of course. Eventually, Sana had said, "He looks like my father, so maybe we can name him something related to him."

The first name that came to mind was Yoshitsune. That was because the name Crow sounded like the Japanese word "kurou," which meant "to suffer," and I thought this baby should have a name with the opposite meaning.

I had casually muttered the name and Sana overheard me. Before I knew it, it had become a candidate. They'd asked why I had chosen it, and I told them that Yoshitsune was associated with good fortune, and I wanted this child to always have good things happen to them. In the end, Hana, Sana, and Blanca had all agreed that Yoshitsune should become the child's name.

The reason the three of them had agreed was because Crow hadn't done martial arts like Grampy Kei had. From an outsider's perspective, Grampy Kei had been seen as a total warrior due to his physique and reputation, although apparently, he had been more than capable of handling clerical work as well. But Crow had struggled to unite the family because he had constantly been compared to Kei.

But once he had established and governed the city of Nanao, his whole family came to appreciate him and no one underestimated him again. So, Hana, Sana, and Blanca thought that naming Crow's great-grandchild something associated with him would be fitting because of the resemblance. At that point, Honorary

Viscount Lobo had been quickly deemed irrelevant and was kicked out of the meeting, along with Amur since she had only been suggesting joke names at that point.

Yoshitsune had heard that story from Sana and the others many times, so maybe that's why he was so attached to me. On the other hand, he seemed to have a bit of a complex about his real father, Blanca. Maybe he just found him scary. I had a feeling it stemmed from the martial arts tournament that was held every year in the capital, as that was something Yoshitsune had watched ever since he had been born.

The year of Yoshitsune's birth, Blanca had come in second in the individual, pairs, and team competition. He had partnered with Amur for the pairs event and had competed with the top-ranked SAR warriors in the team event.

Under normal circumstances, he should've won at least one of those competitions. However, that year, I had taken first place in the individual event, Gramps and I had won the pair event, and our team Oracion—which had included Gramps and Amur—had been the favorite and won the team event. The polls had suggested that Blanca would come in second in all of those events, and that was exactly what had happened.

The following year, Blanca had placed third in the individual competition and second in the pairs event. He hadn't participated in the team event.

I couldn't participate in the pairs competition this year, so Blanca and Amur had been the favorites to win. They hadn't even made it to the finals. Instead, Blanca had come in third place in the individual event again, and his team with SAR warriors had ended in third place.

The reason Yoshitsune was so scared, however, was because of the way Blanca fought.

He'd always been a hot-blooded fighter who loved combat. But being determined to impress Yoshitsune, Blanca would get even more fired up during the tournaments.

He radiated such an intense aura that it could make his opponents lose their will to fight before the match even began. His matches were brutally one-sided, leaving little room for sympathy for his opponents, in both the pair and team

competitions.

Blanca was probably the most recognizable figure in the tournaments but not in a good way. It was all because of the fear he would spread. But despite his fierce performances, he lost to me in every final.

The matches had been close, but they always ended in a complete defeat for him. He'd lost to me three times in a row.

The following year, Blanca's losses had still stung. He had entered the tournament again only to face me in the individual semifinals, where I had beaten him. He and his partner had faced off against Gramps and me again in the finals only to lose once more. His team hadn't even made it to the team competition due to the other members not being able to participate.

This year, however, Blanca had another shot at victory since I hadn't competed in the pairs competition. That hadn't been because I wanted to give him a chance though—Gramps had suffered a sudden back injury right before the preliminaries. Since there had been only a few minutes left before the match began, it was too late for me to switch partners, so I'd had no choice but to withdraw. This had led to a flood of complaints to the tournament organizers and they even reached the royal family. The king and the archduke in particular had directed many snide remarks about Gramps.

Blanca had ended up losing in the semifinals to a knight who had worn stark black armor. The knight had been the talk of the town ever since the preliminaries due to his mysterious fighting style and hidden identity. They had caused quite an uproar. However, I recognized his style immediately and confirmed my suspicions with Identify.

The knight had been none other than Dean, the kingdom's strongest knight, who went by the nickname "the Black Lion." When I had asked him about it, he just said, "I haven't felt this excited in a long time, so I convinced myself to join."

Blanca and Amur had pulled themselves together and became the favorites in the pair competition. He had been disappointed I wasn't participating but had seen it as an opportunity and became more determined to win than ever. However, his and Amur's luck had been unfortunate when it came to their first-

round opponents.

They'd faced a duo known as the Tiger Mask and the Masked Knight, who had turned out to be Hana and Kriss. Blanca and Amur had suspected something during the prelims, but they had been so excited about their chances of winning that they were caught off guard and lost. Kriss had held Amur off while Hana defeated Blanca, and the match had ended with the two of them ganging up on Amur. The duo had gone on to win the entire competition.

Blanca's team had faced my team, Oracion, in the semifinals team competition and lost, which had been a result of bad luck and overconfidence. There might've been a chance for a comeback if he had realized who his opponents in the pairs event had been...

Yoshitsune probably didn't remember those battles clearly, but Blanca's intense aura had most likely left a deep impression on him.

The atmosphere began to return to normal when Yoshitsune resumed eating his snack, but two people hadn't relaxed at all.

"What are you doing there?" I asked them.

I was talking to two women: Kriss, who had been drinking since noon, and Amur, who was still nursing the finger that Blanca had injured. I thought Amur might've had a broken bone so I made a mental note to heal her later. But for right now, she could reflect on her actions because it was her own fault.

"There just aren't any good men out there!" Kriss whined. "I thought winning the tournament would leave me swimming in men, but I haven't had a single decent offer!"

"Here we go again..."

The reason Kriss had entered the tournament was because she was on the hunt for a boyfriend. Many of her friends and colleagues had gotten married over the past few years, and she was getting closer to being the oldest single woman in the knights' order. The current oldest was a woman in her forties, but she didn't technically count as she'd lost her husband. There were four or five women older than Kriss who were still unmarried, but they at least had boyfriends.

Kriss continued to complain. “And why is it that only old men approach me? And even when someone my age shows interest, they either have a bad reputation, are just after money, or are looking for someone to take care of their aging parents! Seriously, there’s nothing but losers out there!”

Just as I was wondering how to respond, Aina suddenly appeared behind me and dropped a bombshell.

“At least no one’s after your body. Not to be rude, but you don’t exactly have anything to boast about in that department, do you? Although I suppose there *are* some men who may be into that sort of thing...”

I have a feeling she said that on purpose...

“As if you’re one to talk, Aina! Who do you think you are, talking to me like that?!” Kriss protested.

“How rude! I have more than you do,” Aina said.

“You do not! And you’re acting awfully high and mighty for someone who doesn’t have a boyfriend either!”

“Hah!” Aina snorted in response.

Kriss looked at her in disbelief. “No way... Don’t tell me you’re...”

“I am.” Aina held out her left hand, revealing a ring on her ring finger.

“Aina...” Kriss’s voice grew quiet in contrast to Aina’s unusual triumphant expression.

However...

Kriss was utterly appalled. “No matter how desperate I was, I’d never even think of buying myself an engagement ring,” she said. “Even *I* haven’t sunk that low. Aina, you need serious heee~~arrgh~~!”

Before Kriss could finish speaking, Aina smacked her in the face with the tray she was holding.

I decided to step in and reveal that Aina’s relationship was real before Kriss threw a full-out tantrum.

“That was your fault this time, Kriss. But just so you know, Aina really does

have a boyfriend. I've met him myself, but I promised not to tell anyone his name," I said.

"No... God really is dead... Damn it! The gods are jerks after all!"

Kriss collapsed to the floor in despair. But honestly, her choice of words wasn't right at all. If she was talking about the goddess of love, I knew for a fact that she wasn't dead. If anything, Kriss might've just made an enemy out of her with that outburst.

I ignored Kriss as she lay on the floor like a corpse. I also shrugged off Aina, who stood triumphantly over her. Instead, I decided to continue enjoying my snack.

By the way, Aina's boyfriend was Dean. Since there was an age gap and status difference between them, they hadn't gotten married yet.

Kriss wasn't the only one affected by the news of Aina's relationship, by the way. Aura had been eavesdropping from a distance and looked shaken. And for some reason, Jeanne did too.

Meanwhile, Yoshitsune finished his snack. "Thanks for the meal," he said and then ran off toward the library.

"By the way, how long are you planning on staying this year?" I asked.

"Hmm... I'm thinking of heading back south this week," Sana said. "This year, I want to show Yoshi a few things on the way back. We also have to celebrate my sister's victory."

When I had met Hana and her family, I had told her they could always stay at our place in the capital whenever they visited. So, for the past two years, they'd stay with us for about a month after the tournament. But this year, since Hana had won the pairs event, they'd only be staying about half as long.

I asked if she was planning on taking Kriss with her since they had been partners in the tournament. Hana had given up on the idea though since Kriss was still serving in the royal guard—that made it difficult for her to travel alone to another noble's territory.

With all the success she's had, you'd think she could find a boyfriend down

south...

People from the SAR admired those who had power, and a tournament champion would be treated like a celebrity there—especially if that person had teamed up with their leader.

“Kriss really doesn’t get it, does she?” Aina said. “If she were serious about finding a boyfriend, she’d have plenty of options if she went to the SAR.”

It was almost like Aina had read my mind and she gave Kriss a sympathetic look. I’d only seen her give more considerate looks to Aura, who still hadn’t moved from her spot.

As I looked at Kriss, who was still lying on the floor, I heard a voice coming from the foyer.

“I’m home!”

“Oh, sounds like Amy’s back. The other two must be with her,” I muttered.

Just then, the dining room door burst open. It wasn’t Amy who opened it, but Luna.

“Princess Luna, that’s very unladylike,” Aina said, but Luna didn’t care that she was being scolded.

Queen Maria and the others *had* been lamenting about how Luna was starting to take after the king and Prince Lyle in some strange ways as of late.

Luna walked over to me, her footsteps echoing as she eyed the snacks on the table. “I’m hungry, Tenma!”

“Nope. Not until you’ve changed and washed your hands,” I said, pulling the plate of snacks out of her reach.

She grumbled but eventually headed up to her room.

Amy and Tida then came into the room. “I’m home, Master! The quest was a success,” she said.

“That’s good. There are snacks ready, so go ahead and change first. You too, Tida,” I responded.

And with that, Amy and Tida also headed off to their rooms.

This year, they had reached the age where they could officially register as adventurers and had been taking on reasonable quests. Tida was less than enthusiastic about the fact that one of the royal knights always went ahead to the guild to select safe quests from reliable clients for him, but Amy didn't mind. He would complain about it, but since that was the condition Prince Caesar had set forth when he became an adventurer, Tida reluctantly went along with it.

In other adventurers-guild-related news, Jin and I had become Rank S adventurers. Blanca had been promoted to Rank A, and Amur to Rank B.

Jin's promotion had been because of his consistent performance in the tournaments over the past few years in addition to his achievements as an adventurer. The Dawnswords had reached what was believed to be the deepest level of the Sagan City Dungeon, leading them to be highly regarded among our peers. Blanca and Amur had also been promoted based on their tournament performance and various adventuring activities.

As for me, my undefeated streak in the tournaments, along with accomplishments such as defeating the dragon zombie, slaying the earth dragon three years ago, and taking care of the running dragon two years ago, had contributed to my promotion. On top of that, I had discovered and cleared a new dungeon last year, which had only solidified my S-rank status.

I had been visiting Nanao when I encountered a running dragon and managed to defeat it on my own. As for the undiscovered dungeon, I had stumbled upon it while on another quest to the SAR last year. It was located on the mountainside, a short distance away from Nanao.

The dungeon had been about ten floors deep, so it had been relatively young—probably only a few decades old. The monsters inside hadn't been particularly strong. The boss on the lowest floor had been a humanoid golem and not much of a threat. But since it'd been an uncharted dungeon, its resources—ores and the like—had never been touched, so that'd led to a sudden economic boom in the SAR, and especially in Nanao. The effects had rippled out to the capital too.

That discovery had been the key factor in my promotion. I had risen rapidly,

but the guild had found it challenging to promote other adventurers without raising my rank first. With every significant achievement I racked up, my rank continued to climb.

“Snacks!”

Just as I expected, Luna was the first to return. She’d grown a bit in the past three years and was now around 155 centimeters tall. Although her appearance had matured (except for her chest), her personality hadn’t changed much. In fact, she seemed more like the king and Lyle every day. Because of that, every time Queen Maria and Princess Isabella saw me, they asked if there was any way to train or educate her so she’d become more ladylike. Of course, I always told them, “It’s impossible, so please give up.” They just wouldn’t accept that answer, though.

“Luna, you’re going to get in trouble with Mother and Grandmother again!”

Tida, now a young man, followed close behind her. He had grown quite handsome and looked like a younger version of Prince Caesar. He was close to 170 centimeters in height, which was almost as tall as I was. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before he’d tower over me.

Recently, Tida had become quite popular at the academy and in noble circles because of his good looks, but he had remained devoted to Amy. According to Luna, he wouldn’t even look at other girls. Prince Lyle had said there’d even been talk within the royal family—unbeknownst to Tida and Luna—about adopting Amy into a noble family and arranging an engagement between them.

By the way, both Luna and Lyle had gotten scolded by Tida and Queen Maria for letting that bit of information about Tida at school slip to me.

“I brought you a souvenir, Master.”

Amy was the last to return to the room. She had brought me a basket filled with mushrooms she’d gathered from the forest during their quest. The last time she had brought some back, most of them had turned out to be poisonous. But this time, they were all edible, which showed me that she’d been studying diligently since then.

Amy was a bit under 160 centimeters tall now, and her chest was noticeably

more developed compared to other girls her age. I saw Tida occasionally sneaking glances at her too.

Luna was also jealous of Amy's growth and had been eating dairy products nonstop in an effort to catch up. Unfortunately for her, the only thing she had to show for it was a stomachache. From everything Luna had told me, Amy seemed to know how Tida felt about her, but for now, she only saw him as a close friend. And once Tida found out Luna had told me that, he scolded her for leaking that to me again.

"Thanks," I said to Amy. "It's still a bit early in the season, but those look good enough to eat. We can have them for dinner tonight."

I took the basket from her, and several recipes came to mind. Meanwhile, Shiromaru and Solomon were drawn in by the scent of food and peeked into the basket. They quickly realized that they couldn't eat the mushrooms immediately, however, so they turned their attention to Amy and Tida's snacks instead.

As Jeanne and Aura helped me sort and prep the mushrooms, Aina came in. "Master Tenma, Lord Albert and his party have arrived."

Since they weren't the type of guests who required special treatment, I told her to bring them directly to the dining room. In addition to the usual trio of idiots, there was one other familiar face—someone I'd been seeing a lot of recently.

Amy immediately spotted the woman and called out to her. "Oh, Eliza!"

Eliza smiled in response. She politely nodded at me and then quickly moved over to Amy's side.

"Sorry about that," Albert said. "I apologize on Eliza's behalf."

"It's fine. I'm used to it." I waved off his apology, telling him it wasn't a big deal.

After all, Gramps and I had spent so many years living in the countryside or wandering from place to place that we didn't mind if our close friends were casual like that with us. If anything, a certain family who I'd gotten to know over the past few years had only strengthened that attitude...

As Albert and I exchanged our usual banter, Aina led Cain and Leon into the dining room. They took their seats and happily sipped on tea and munched on snacks. This was another typical scene in the mansion these days.

However, seeing the same routine play out every time was starting to get boring. It would be easier if Albert could just be like Cain and Leon and act more brazenly, but I guess he had his reasons against doing so.

And that reason was Eliza, Albert's fiancée. She would be the Duchess of the Sanga family one day, so her actions directly impacted the family's reputation. Albert had no choice but to constantly offer apologies, even if just for appearance's sake. I had asked him once why he didn't just relax in private like the other three, and he had said, "I'm afraid I'll slip if I get too comfortable, so I'd rather just keep myself in check."

Once Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons had heard that, they'd offered him a light warning. They had told him that he was too tense and that he was nervous for no reason, but they hadn't pressed him much further than that.

Gramps had said, "They probably think it's better to make mistakes while he's still young," and I thought he might've been right.

Eliza seemed more confident in separating her public and private life, unlike Albert. In fact, she didn't really seem to care that much. She always handled herself flawlessly, even when she unexpectedly ran into the king or Queen Maria at our place. Eliza never slipped up, even when she was caught off guard.

"It's about time you became my little sister, Amy," Eliza said.

"Um, well..."

Eliza was always trying to recruit Amy like this. About two years ago, Amy had been shopping in the capital when she accidentally wandered into a back alley. She was then attacked by a kidnapper. Eliza had happened to be passing by and noticed the commotion. She rushed over, and they had managed to fight off the kidnapper together.

After that incident, Eliza had grown fond of Amy and wanted to adopt her as her little sister. However, Albert and her parents scolded her as soon as they found out. Still, Eliza had figured that as long as Amy agreed, there wouldn't be

a problem, so she kept asking her to join her family.

By the way, the attempted kidnapper had been so thoroughly beaten by Amy, Eliza, Rocky, Birdie, Spidey, and Amy's golem bodyguards that when the guards arrived, they weren't able to tell who the bad guy had been in that situation.

"Stop it already, Eliza! You're making Amy uncomfortable!" Albert said.

"Eh? She doesn't seem uncomfortable to me."

"Aha ha..."

Albert would regularly scold Eliza after her persistent attempts to recruit Amy into the family. Amy should've been rejecting her more clearly, but since she liked Eliza, the conversation would always turn out this way.

Eliza was also a noble and the same age as Albert, so she went to the same academy. Her full name was Elizabeth von Sylphid, and she was the eldest daughter of a count who belonged to the royalist faction.

She was a top student in magic-related studies, but her overall rank was similar to Leon's, which she found unsatisfying. Her ranking wasn't because she was bad at anything other than magic—instead, since Leon was so good at physical combat, that made up for his academic disadvantages at the academy.

The Sylphid family had been founded by someone who was skilled in Wind magic, and their descendants had also excelled in that type of magic to varying degrees. However, Eliza wasn't that good at it. Instead, Lightning magic was her forte, which made her a rarity in the Sylphid family tree. Eliza and her family didn't seem too bothered by that, but other nobles, especially ones in the reformist faction, gossiped that perhaps it was because Eliza's mother might have had an affair.

The Sylphid family and their noble allies had investigated the source of the rumors and had discovered that the very nobles who'd been spreading that around had illegitimate children themselves. That discovery became a well-known joke among drunk patrons in pubs.

To people who were well-versed in magic like Gramps and me, Eliza's strength in Lightning magic wasn't strange at all. If you were knowledgeable about it, you'd know that Lightning was considered a derivative of Wind magic.

Along with her abilities, Eliza's appearance was also very striking. She was around 170 centimeters tall and had a figure that women envied and men couldn't help but notice. She had curves in all the right places. On top of that, she wore her blonde hair in curly corkscrew pigtails, which I'd never seen before in this world. It was a hairstyle that had been trendy twenty or thirty years ago but these days had become unusual due to its difficulty to upkeep. She also had a headstrong personality and sharp eyes, so people who didn't know her well assumed she was snobby or haughty.

She didn't have that kind of attitude at all, however. She had clear preferences, sure, but she was a fundamentally good person. She was popular among children due to her unique hairstyle, and, since she loved children herself, she often visited orphanages run by her family and those in the capital. Her nicknames at the orphanages were "Curly Tails" and "Twisted Sister."

"Honestly, if you keep pushing it, Amy won't like you anymore," Cain said, butting in. "You should just stop!"

"What did you just say?"

Cain thought he was helping out Amy, but instead, he was just pissing off Eliza. Still, it was all in good fun, so I doubted it would turn into anything serious. Cain looked at me for help, but I wanted to avoid getting dragged into the mess, so I sneaked out of the dining room.

"Do you need something? Or have you become my stalker for real now?" I asked the person behind me.

For some reason, Leon had followed me out. At first, I thought he had run away like I had, but apparently, that wasn't the case. I teased him about something from the past, and he hurried over to me. Whenever he acted suspiciously like this, it was usually because he had something to hide. His behavior was much easier to read than the other two.

"Um, please take this!" he said, pulling two letters out of his pocket.



“Wait! Are you two...?”

And of course, that was the moment when Kriss suddenly appeared. I figured she was trying to get away from Aina and Eliza since both of them had boyfriends. However, the timing was so perfect that I couldn't help but wonder if she'd been secretly watching us from the shadows.

“Kriss, I know that everyone has their own preferences, and I have no intention of criticizing them as long as they don't try to force me into anything,” I said. “And sorry, but please try someone else, Leon.”

“No, I can't do that! I was told to make sure these get delivered to you!” Leon seemed flustered by my joke and tried to force the letters into my hands.

“Told by who? You're not using Tenma for some kind of shady business, are you?”

Kriss seemed to suspect that Leon was working as some kind of delivery boy. She wouldn't have reached such a conclusion normally, but given her current state, she was likely more on edge than usual due to Aina and Eliza.

“I'll take them for now, but they're nothing weird, right? And this isn't a love letter?”

I accepted the envelopes and opened one up. I quickly understood why Leon looked so uneasy.

“Leon, do the king and queen know about this?” I asked. “Because things could get pretty complicated if they don't.”

Leon had a serious expression on his face. “Don't worry, he got the king's approval beforehand, and he told me it was up to you.” He assured me that everything had been arranged correctly.

“So? What does the letter say?”

Kriss was curious about the contents, but she wasn't trying to peek over my shoulder. That was probably because the king and queen had been mentioned in our conversation, but also because she noticed a certain family crest on the envelope.

The crest had a howling wolf. It was the one that represented Leon's family,

the Hausts. And since Leon was using the crest, that meant someone from House Haust had sent it—someone who had enough authority to communicate with the king and send the future head of House Haust out as a messenger. The sender's identity was crystal clear.

“Basically, Margrave Haust wants me to help him,” I said.

“Will you take the request? The king said it's up to you, so it's not mandatory or anything,” Kriss pointed out.

Mandatory requests concerned national defense or the survival of towns and villages. They were issued in emergencies. In those cases, beyond a few specific exceptions, adventurers didn't have the right to refuse. Saying no could lead to severe penalties, including the loss of one's guild card.

On the other hand, a named request was when a client required a particular adventurer. In that case, the adventurer had the right to refuse, so it was okay to turn those down—at least on the surface.

But clients who put our named requests were usually owners of large trading companies or nobles who had significant influence over the adventurers guild. So, if you refused requests from those people, you could run into trouble later on. I'd heard stories of adventurers who had ignored such requests and had ended up being poorly treated by the guild or sold defective tools and equipment later on.

I'd heard tales of worse things that happened to people who had refused named requests. While the adventurers had been taking jobs with temporary parties, they had suddenly been attacked by their companions. The attacks had resulted in severe injuries that forced those adventurers into retirement. Those companions had been hired by those snubbed company owners or nobles, of course, and even if the victims had reported it to the guild, there wouldn't have been any consequences. Too many strings had been pulled to set up that situation. So, in the end, the adventurers had been deemed to be at fault instead.

However, due to recent legal reforms, such tales had become rare, but they still weren't that uncommon behind the scenes. The occurrences just weren't public knowledge.

As for me, everyone saw me as an adventurer favored by the royal family, which meant they had to get prior approval from the royal family to request me. That was why I hadn't received many requests from anyone besides royalty, and when I had, they had usually been from close friends like the people from Kukuri Village or Duke Sanga. Other adventurers were somewhat jealous of my ties to the royal family, but honestly, I found it easier to work with familiar faces—they rarely made unreasonable demands.

The request from Leon's father, the margrave, was for help protecting the domain. Apparently, a number of nobles from the neighboring republic of Gilst were engaging in behavior that could be construed as military action. The margrave had sent out some of his knights to patrol the area, but unfortunately, they had run into a large group of monsters—two groups, in fact.

The first had been a horde of goblins, just like I'd encountered in the SAR. They had estimated the horde was two thousand strong. Margrave Haust was planning to deploy adventurers from his domain to take care of the goblins. He was also considering whether to send a squad of about fifty knights there or a company, the latter of which would be several squads and number around two hundred knights.

The second group of monsters, however, was the main reason Margrave Haust was asking for my help.

"A swarm of wyverns, huh..."

Thirty wyverns had settled into the mountains of the margrave's domain, and it was believed they had gathered there for mating purposes.

The Haust knights were considered to be among the strongest knights in the kingdom, but there was no way for them to handle both a goblin horde and wyverns at once *and* keep an eye on the Gilst Republic while also providing backup to the adventurers who were being sent to deal with the goblin horde. They'd also need to protect the surrounding towns and villages.

Well, if the knights' reputation was true, I didn't think it would be impossible for them to deal with the wyverns themselves. But it would still be very challenging for them to do so, and there'd probably be significant collateral damage. There might even be enough to alter the border with the Gilst

Republic. So, the margrave's decision made sense to me.

But what stood out to me the most was that he had chosen to make a direct request to me. Not to criticize him or anything, but I was surprised—most people thought our relationship was quite strained. Now, it wasn't inaccurate to say that we didn't get along, but I didn't harbor as much resentment and ill will as I had before. My perception of him had changed once I had met Leon, and since so much time had passed, I'd come to see the incident concerning the soldiers he'd deployed to Kukuri Village as having been somewhat unavoidable.

"I'll take the request," I said. "But since we're dealing with so many wyverns, I think the reward should be higher, and I'll need some additional accommodations. Also, I'll accept the request as my party Oracion, but Aura and Jeanne might need to be evacuated to safety during the mission if it becomes necessary. Is that all right?"

Leon agreed. "No problem, that'll help out a lot. I'll tell my father that Jeanne and Aura will join as the party's support staff, and I can arrange for the reward to be paid out to the party. I'll also negotiate for him to include individual rewards based on achievements."

We decided on all the general terms right there on the spot, and the specific details about rewards would be negotiated directly with the margrave. Normally, someone would decide to accept a request like this based on the amount offered, but in this case, there wasn't a risk of unfair payment or default. That was because Leon was acting as the margrave's representative and agreed to my conditions, and the terms of the request had been discussed with the royal family beforehand. Any attempt to avoid payment would be seen as an insult to the royal family. No respectable noble, especially a high-ranking one in the royalist faction, would ever dream of doing such a thing.

"I'm planning on getting ready so I can depart immediately. What about you, Leon? Will you come with us?" I asked.

"Yes, I will. I requested reinforcements from House Haust and our allies Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons, but we shouldn't expect too much. Plus, if our forces are too large, they could draw unwanted attention from Gilst."

He had a point; if we gathered too many knights and nobles near the border,

Gilst might see it as a threat and ready their own knights. They could use it as an excuse to invade, regardless of who started it. That would put the margrave at a disadvantage since he was already dealing with his own problems related to the goblins and wyverns.

If that happened and Gilst won, they would likely seize the opportunity to claim more territory. And even if they lost, Gilst would probably destroy as many things as they could to get back at House Haust as they retreated.

“I’ll let the margrave worry about that. My job is to deal with the wyverns as quickly as possible and then wait with the knights by the border in case of any emergencies,” I said.

It was best to leave complex matters like that to the margrave and the king. In return, I had to take responsibility for dealing with the wyverns. The request to do so was risky not only for the margrave but for me as well.

The margrave had to be careful, because this might be seen as him forgetting about what he had done in the past and him trying to use me for his own convenience now. No matter how much we tried to show that relations between us were friendly, there would inevitably be some who wouldn’t understand or would blatantly ignore that fact.

As for me, if the mission failed or if there was a lot of collateral damage, people could accuse me of sabotaging it on purpose to seek revenge against the margrave. And even if he accepted any property damage as something within the limits he’d expected, I was sure there would be those who would make a fuss.

I informed everyone about the request and told them I had accepted. When we discussed the details and risks, Gramps immediately realized the potential benefits.

“However, that also means there’s a lot to gain,” Gramps said.

“True. It would boost our reputation,” I said, agreeing. “People would probably think the reason we took the request to defeat the wyverns was because we let go of our past issues and decided to help the margrave. And the fact that he went to the king first, before me, could set a precedent for other high-ranking nobles to do the same. We don’t need the money, so adventuring

is more of a hobby for me. I can afford to pick and choose from requests that come my way, but I still need to accept some less desirable ones to maintain my rank...”

“The reward from the margrave is one thing, but the wyvern materials will be even more valuable,” Gramps pointed out.

We’d probably need to hand over a portion of the loot to the margrave, but we could likely claim most of it for ourselves. This was all speculation at this point, but it wasn’t like me, Gramps, and Rocket couldn’t take down one wyvern together.

“Hey, don’t forget me! I’m here too!” Amur said, seeming enthusiastic.

Although there had been discussions about her returning to the SAR that had made me consider excluding her from this mission, she was determined to come along.

Kriss was concerned. “Don’t you think we’re a little short on people considering we’re up against thirty wyverns?”

She had a point. I counted our current party members, and it was true that it didn’t seem like we had enough people to take on that many wyverns.

“So far, we have eight members of Oracion, not counting Thunderbolt, Goldie, and Silvie. Jeanne and Aura will act as support staff and not be taking part in the action. Then, there are Albert, Cain, and Leon, along with Kriss, which makes twelve. Normally that wouldn’t give us enough firepower, but you have to consider my and Gramps’s strength. Also, if we deploy golems, we could have over a thousand members of our party,” I explained. I also assured everyone that a thousand golems should be more than enough.

Kriss pondered what I’d said. “Hang on a second!” she shouted. “Why am I included in that count? There’s no way I can take time off to come on this mission. The captain won’t let me.”

“Well, the letter from the captain says this. ‘If there are any free members of the royal guard, you can bring one to help with the task. Anyone will do.’”

Kriss snatched the letter from me and read it over and over again. She even examined the signature from multiple angles.

“Oh, that’s right. I have a letter for you too, Kriss. From the captain.” Leon pulled out the envelope he’d forgotten about, and Kriss ripped it from his hands.

She read the letter. “This one specifically names me!”

Although the letter to me had said anyone would do, the letter to Kriss explicitly said for her to assist the adventurers traveling to Margrave Haust’s domain. Among the busy members of the royal guard, there were only a few who were close to me, and Kriss was the only one of those who was free, so I was sure she’d been earmarked as soon as the topic had come up originally.

“Let’s go ahead with this plan for now. Worst-case scenario, I could use Tempest to wipe out the wyverns, although it would probably destroy the surrounding area and all their materials too...” I murmured that last bit to Gramps and Kriss to avoid alarming Leon.

Gramps hadn’t seen me use Tempest directly but had seen it from a distance like Uncle Mark had. He had an idea of its power because of that and the accounts from other Kukuri Village residents who had seen the resulting destruction. Kriss had heard about it too, since she had investigated the dragon zombie under the king’s orders to search for me.

“Anyway, the sooner we head to Margrave Haust’s domain, the better,” I said. “Let’s prepare today and tomorrow and depart from the capital the day after that. Leon said it usually takes a month to reach the domain from here, so let’s try to get there in two weeks. I want everyone to make sure you’re fully prepared since we never know when we might encounter wyverns. Aina, please manage the mansion while we’re away. I’ll talk to Uncle Mark about taking care of Jubei, Mary, and the rest of our herd, so you don’t need to worry about that. All right, that should be it!”

Preparing for an adventure with Oracion mainly involved stuffing everything we might need into magic or dimension bags. Other adventurers envied this method since we didn’t have to pick and choose equipment. Being able to make your own magic and dimension bags was definitely a privilege.

A few days later, we were traveling toward Margrave Haust’s domain.

“I’m not sure I can ever go back to traveling in a normal carriage after this

one,” Cain commented.

Albert, Leon, and even Kriss agreed with him. I supposed using magic bags, dimension bags, Thunderbolt, and the carriage—which had practically turned into a dimension box at this point—seemed like they were against the rules of normal adventuring...

Part Two

“Still, Kriss saying that we should all sleep outside just because the girls are going to use the carriage is ridiculous. It’s Tenma’s carriage, and he’s right here too! And isn’t it a bit much for her to still refer to herself as a girl at her age?” Leon said, venting his frustrations. He had made sure Kriss wasn’t around to hear him first.

It wasn’t as if I had no reservations with the sleeping arrangements, but if someone from the enemy’s faction were to find out that Albert and Cain, two engaged men, had slept in the same space as Kriss, it could lead to trouble. She was unmarried. In the worst-case scenario, Jeanne and Aura being there could just be passed off as one-night stands, though, since they were slaves.

Still, Albert and Cain had opted to go along with Kriss’s suggestions and would sleep outside. Leon wasn’t engaged, so the situation shouldn’t have been a problem for him, but Albert and Leon had probably thought that Kriss would be upset, so they had quietly gone along with her wishes.

Just like Leon, there wasn’t an issue if I were there. I’d slept in the same space as Jeanne and Aura before, but it seemed awkward with Kriss. She’d been giving off a dangerous vibe lately...

“An astute man steers clear from danger, as they say...” I said.

“I’m not really sure we can call Leon astute, though...” Albert pointed out.

Cain agreed. “Yeah, probably not.”

Leon didn’t seem to get what they meant, but he did understand that he was being mocked and started to protest.

However, when Cain asked him if he even knew what the word “astute” meant, Leon suddenly stood up and started doing squats. Perhaps he was trying to avoid the question because he didn’t know what else to do...

“Anyway, Tenma. What’s our planned route from here?”

“I’m planning for us to pass through as many villages and towns as we can. That way, we can learn more about the wyverns and see which locations have

experienced the most damage from them.”

If we went directly to the location mentioned in the information we had received and the wyverns had already moved on, other places would suffer more. So, I thought it would be best if we traveled a bit slower and got fresh information. I hadn’t spotted any wyverns with Detection yet, but once I could determine their general direction based on what we’d learned, I was sure we’d eventually locate them. And if I found the wyverns with Detection first, heading straight to the original location would mean we wouldn’t miss them either.

“There’s also a chance that the wyverns could move farther than we expect, so if that happens, we might have to comb the whole domain.”

If that ended up being the case, it would increase our burden significantly. There was also a chance that we could find the wyverns after exhausting ourselves during the search. We’d have to immediately engage in battle, practically making it a suicide mission.

There *was* a way to reduce the risk, though.

“All right, Leon. If that happens, then you should be the getaway driver,” Cain said.

“I agree. He’s the least useful among us but physically the strongest. Since the mission came from Margrave Haust and this is Leon’s future domain, there’s no one better suited for the job than him!” Albert reasoned.

The idea was to shift the burden to one person, which would reduce the strain on everyone else. It was a simple and effective method that would increase the success rate of the mission.

Cain and Albert came up with the idea and immediately threw Leon under the bus. According to Albert’s ranking, the most useful members of our party were me and Gramps, followed by Rocket and my followers. After that would be Kriss and Amur, the three noble idiots, and then Jeanne and Aura at the bottom.

I didn’t think it was unfair to count Jeanne and Aura here since we were using them as support members anyway, so we assigned the bottom rank to the trio instead. Since Leon was the strongest of the three, he was deemed the most suitable for that role.

He attempted to protest but was quickly silenced.

“Since this is Margrave Haust’s problem, it’s only fair for Leon to bear the brunt of the burden!” Albert and Cain cried out in unison. They then tried to convince him to agree.

“No, I think if that does happen, I’ll rely on Rocket and Thunderbolt,” I countered. “Thunderbolt will follow Rocket’s instructions, and since Rocket doesn’t have any useful attacks against aerial opponents, he’ll likely just be part of the reserve forces anyway. Plus, if he stays near the rear, I’d feel more confident that Jeanne and Aura will be safe,” I argued.

If the worst happened, the two of them could hide inside Rocket’s internal dimension bag. That bag could also serve as an evacuation point if they were to be injured.

At that point, Gramps returned from his patrol. He pointed out an issue with this plan. “It might be better to not just rely on Rocket. Tenma and I can join in and can rotate if needed. After all, a carriage speeding along without a visible driver might lead to some unnecessary misunderstandings,” he explained.

“Oh, welcome back, Gramps,” I said.

“Thanks for your hard work patrolling, Master Merlin!” everyone chorused.

Gramps was right—a carriage with no driver could easily be mistaken for some kind of new monster. We could get out and explain if someone spotted us, but I doubted anyone would want to get close enough to investigate. They’d probably avoid the carriage and run to a nearby village or town instead and report it to the guild or knights. Depending on how much that news would spread, it could take a long time to clear up the rumors.

We decided to go with Gramps’s suggestion. He reported to us that there were no enemies in sight here, and no sign of them anywhere either.

“I had Shiromaru mark several places during the patrol, so it’s unlikely monsters will come too close to us,” Gramps said, and with that, he went to lay down for a nap a short distance away from us.

“Well, the next patrol is up to you three. I’m going to sleep, so wake me up if there’s a problem or at the end of your shift.”

I instructed the trio to do the next patrol and went to get some rest near Gramps. As for Shiromaru, who had returned with Gramps, he sneaked into the carriage to get a treat from Kriss.

For this journey, we decided to put the heavier burden of the night watch on the men, and the women would take on the first and second shifts after setting up camp and the final shift close to dawn. That was partly because the trio—especially Leon—had given into Kriss’s silent pressure, and she had actually gotten down on her hands and knees and begged Gramps and me to do that too for the sake of her skin, saying that she needed her beauty rest.

Nobody complained about the women staying in the carriage except for Leon. Kriss could be very intimidating, so she’d struck fear into everyone’s hearts. I agreed to let the girls stay in the carriage under one condition, which Kriss agreed to. And that condition was that she’d manage Amur.

In fact, Amur was staring at me right now. At first, she’d said she was going to sleep outside like me, so I’d asked Kriss to persuade her otherwise. It seemed like she hadn’t been entirely convinced, but Kriss yanked her inside the carriage. I hoped that Amur wouldn’t do anything drastic that could anger Kriss or me.

Blanca hadn’t been able to come with us since he had to accompany Sana and Yoshitsune on their way back to the SAR. That’d made me anxious, but there had been no problems. We were still able to depart from our campsite at sunrise as we’d planned.

“Still, there’s less damage from the wyverns than I expected.”

Three days had passed since we’d discussed our future plans with the trio, and we’d traveled through five towns on our way to our destination. But contrary to our expectations, it didn’t seem like the wyverns had moved very much from where they had initially been sighted.

“Maybe they’ve found enough food to last them for a while, or maybe they’re just comfortable where they are,” Cain said from the driver’s seat next to me.

I thought it was possible, but I doubted that they’d had so much food to last them all this while. It had been two weeks since the initial report.

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow, I guess. Looks like we’ve reached our campsite

for the day,” I said.

“That seems to be the case. Given the way things are going, tomorrow will be the real test,” Cain said. “We should take it easy today and rest up.”

The place where the wyverns were had fewer places to hide than we anticipated, which meant the original plan about evacuating Jeanne and Aura would be difficult. We decided to take them all the way to the site instead.

The previous day, we’d planned out a new strategy. Basically, Rocket and Thunderbolt would be assigned to guard the two of them, and we would split up before approaching the wyverns. Depending on the situation, we hoped they’d find somewhere suitable to hide.

There was a chance Jeanne and Aura could be attacked at a distance by the wyverns, but we would summon several golems—scorpion-type ones—on top of having Rocket and Thunderbolt with us. The scorpion-type golems were the most advanced kind of golems I had right now in terms of speed, power, and durability. Although there were some limitations when it came to aerial combat, they would be effective enough as a combat force. And if the need arose, Gramps or I could head over to handle the situation.

Under ideal circumstances, the trio should’ve stayed at a distance with Jeanne and the others, but they had signed a written agreement saying that they’d be responsible for any issues. Each of them would be equipped with a hundred golems too, so I didn’t think they’d be in too much danger.

“Sorry for tagging along. I’m sure Oracion can deal with the wyverns and everything just fine,” Albert said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

The reason the trio had joined us wasn’t just to assist with the wyvern fight. They were also here to show that nobles from the royalist faction had participated in the battle. Also, being here would give the three of them some prestige, which would come in handy for supporting Tida. They could’ve just tagged along and claimed they had nothing to do with the mission, but the three of them didn’t want the reformist faction to think they were mere bystanders. They wanted to at least make some kind of contribution and had prepared a written agreement to deflect any potential complaints from their

houses or the reformists. This did mean that we had to be more careful with the three of them along, however.

“You being here has slightly increased the difficulty, though,” I commented.

“I know the three of us are a burden, so I appreciate you saying ‘slightly,’” Cain said with self-deprecation.

Shortly afterward, we arrived at our planned campsite. We made sure there were no issues with our surroundings and began setting up camp.

“So those are the wyverns...” I muttered.

“Tenma, it seems like this is the only place where Jeanne and Aura can wait safely, doesn’t it?” Gramps said.

“Yeah, it looks that way. If we get any closer, they might notice us, and there’s no other good places to hide.”

I took Gramps’s suggestion into account and decided to create a hideout with magic. Jeanne and Aura could stay concealed and secure there.

We were in a forest about a kilometer from the rocky mountain where the wyverns were flying about. Here, we’d hold our final strategy meeting and rest up before we’d put our plan into action.

“I’m going to use some magic, so please watch out for the wyverns,” I told Gramps and the others, and I prepared to cast a spell on a slightly open area of the forest.

First, I dug a hole large enough to fit a few people. It was about three meters deep with reinforced walls and several air vents that extended a bit farther away. Next came making the roof. I covered the hole with an earthen wall that was similar in strength to a stone wall to act as a roof, and then I piled more soil and lightly compacted it. Finally, I widened the air vent on the side opposite the wyverns so it could act as an entrance before covering it with a solid lid made of packed soil.

The hideout looked like a little hill made of exposed soil and was obviously man-made. However, I didn’t think anyone would notice that people could hide

underneath it.

“I want you two to wait inside, but essentially, you should stay inside of Rocket. Only get out if he needs to leave, and if that happens, wait inside the hideout. I doubt the wyverns will notice the hideout and try to destroy it, but if they do, leave immediately. Get on the scorpion golems to escape and go as far away as you can.”

If the wyverns fled, they might notice the hole and attack it, but then someone besides the trio could come to help. Amur and Kriss might take some time to get here, but the rest of us—meaning Gramps, Shiromaru, Solomon, and myself—could arrive quickly. If a wyvern fled from us, it probably wouldn’t land somewhere we could see, and it would likely try to escape if we started chasing after it.

Of course, it’d be a hassle to search for a wyvern that got away like that, so if a situation like that arose, I planned to shoot it down with magic and not worry about the materials.

My basic plan was for me and Gramps to use magic to attack the airborne wyverns while Shiromaru led the charge against any that landed on the ground. Shiromaru would focus on hit-and-run tactics aimed at the wyverns’ vital points, which would allow him to handle multiple monsters. Amur and Kriss would guard the trio while the five of us would focus our attacks on the closest wyvern that Shiromaru would engage.

“Just to confirm, our primary objective is to kill all of the wyverns without regard to their materials. Our secondary goal is to avoid casualties and severe injuries, especially to the trio. Lastly, we want to minimize the damage to the surroundings, right?” I said.

“That’s mainly up to Tenma and Merlin, so that’s not up to us,” Kriss said, and everyone but Gramps and I nodded in agreement.

It was true that any collateral damage to our surroundings would only be the result of powerful magic. That had nothing to do with Kriss since she only knew basic spells.

“Well, now that that’s confirmed, should we head out to deal with the wyverns?” I asked. “Jeanne and Aura can wait inside of Rocket in the hideout,

and Thunderbolt will stay outside to keep watch for approaching wyverns.”

Everyone nodded at my words and got ready, either by preparing their weapons or going into the hideout. Thunderbolt stood still without moving, as if in a dormant state. In golem terms, he was on standby—in biological terms, he was asleep.

“We have to walk from here... That’s kind of a hassle,” Albert said.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. If we get attacked while we’re moving in the carriage, it’ll take some time to get ready to fight,” Leon said.

“Just think of this as a warm-up,” said Cain. “Leon, you have plenty of stamina anyway.”

“Stop jabbering and stay alert! Wyverns could come from any direction, not just the front,” Kriss yelled. She scolded the trio, and her tone sounded different from usual.

Although we were currently dealing with the entire wyvern swarm, there was no guarantee that there weren’t individual wyverns here or there that could come from another direction. The chances of a surprise attack were low as long as I used Detection, but I couldn’t be sure that there wasn’t a wyvern around that could use Conceal. It was best to stay vigilant.

“Understood!”

“All right!”

“Got it!”

The trio replied in affirmative, and Kriss seemed satisfied by their responses. Cain seemed to be joking around, but I could tell by his expression that he was just trying to play it cool to ease his own nervousness.

“Tenma,” Amur began. “It looks like a few wyverns have noticed us.”

Gramps replied instead. “Yes, it seems that way... They haven’t started moving toward us yet, but some are flying around while looking in our direction. The wyverns will probably notice us soon. Everyone stay alert,” he instructed.

Amur and Gramps kept watch on the wyverns’ behavior and told everyone to

remain cautious—especially the trio.

“We’re about halfway there... I think this spot will make the fight easier, though.”

We were currently positioned on a plain. About a hundred meters ahead of us, the terrain changed to rocky, solid ground. A hard surface might have been better for movement, but we had to make sure to watch out for rocks and pebbles scattered on the ground, so I had wanted to avoid locations like that.

“How about we use a minor spell to provoke the wyverns?” I suggested.

Gramps was eager to fight in this location and was the first to support my idea. The others agreed, prepared their weapons, and got ready for battle.

“Here we go!”

I launched a Fireball toward the center of the wyvern cluster. It wasn’t powerful enough to inflict any significant damage, but certainly was enough to provoke them. Angered by the attack, the wyverns turned their attention toward us.

“One, two, three... Looks like twenty-five in total. Quite a group, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. Normally I’d run away, but with you here, I don’t feel like I’m going to lose at all,” Gramps said.

“I’ll do my best,” I replied.

“Honestly, I’d prefer to run away...” Leon admitted. “Help me if things get dangerous, Tenma!”

“Ha! Those lizards are coming at me, only to be defeated! What a bunch of idiots!” Albert yelled.

“Uh-huh, but how do you really feel?” Cain said.

“I wanna run away!”

“Thought so.”

The ensuing battle was in our favor from start to finish. First, Gramps and I used Air Bullet and Air Cutter to damage the wings of most of the wyverns,

sending them crashing to the ground. A few managed to dodge our spells, but as soon as I noticed that, I flew into the sky to decapitate them. That maneuver allowed us to get several wyvern skins that were in good condition.

Among the fallen wyverns, a few had been rendered immobile due to broken necks or head trauma from the impact of hitting the ground. Those that could still move frantically tried to flap their wings and take off but were unable to either due to the gaping holes in their skins or severed wings. That left them almost defenseless against Shiromaru.

Shiromaru focused his attacks on the relatively softer neck areas, causing some wyverns to have their heads severed with a single strike. Those who survived were left with fatal wounds.

Amur dealt with the remaining wyverns by smashing their heads in with her weapon, making sure that they were dead.

Kriss kept an eye on the trio as she stabbed the wyverns' necks with her sword. The three men worked with her to handle a portion of the wyverns.

Solomon leaped down from above to tackle and bite the necks of the wyverns that tried to attack the trio. Although he was slightly smaller than a wyvern, he seemed to be stronger than them.

Gramps had used magic at the beginning alongside me, but then he focused on providing overall support. He also kept an eye on our surroundings to ensure everyone's safety.

Meanwhile, I collected the fallen wyverns into my magic bag while watching everyone's progress.

"I'm gonna die!"

"I can't even take another step."

"My muscles are gonna ache tomorrow..."

"You three are so helpless," Kriss said.

"As if you're one to talk!" Amur said to her. "Your knees are trembling."

The three men were so relieved that the tense battle was finally over—they collapsed onto the ground the moment the last wyvern was killed. Kriss

criticized them, but like Amur had pointed out, her knees were shaking. If the trio hadn't been there, she probably would've been the first one to sit or lie down.

Amur was tired too, but she wasn't as exhausted as the trio or Kriss. She was breathing heavily but still seemed to have plenty of stamina left.

"I had it the easiest, but I'm exhausted too, so it's no wonder you all are tired," Gramps said. "You can all take some baths and relax soon."

Gramps was supporting the trio, but considering he'd done a lot more than them, I honestly didn't think it was fair to say he'd had it the easiest. If anyone had it easier than the rest, it would've been me, and I said as much.

"Hmm, but Tenma used magic first and took down the most wyverns, so I don't think that's true," Amur countered.

"That's right. Just looking at the numbers, Tenma took down about a fifth of them himself. I don't think he had it easy at all, but it does seem like he conserved his strength in case something unexpected happened," Kriss agreed.

I felt a bit embarrassed to have Amur and Kriss backing me up, but fortunately, Gramps was the only one who noticed my shyness. Albert and the others seemed to sense something was up since Gramps was smirking, but since they were dead tired, they didn't press the issue.

"Let's go get Jeanne and the others. By the way, can you three still walk?"

"No way..."

"Sorry, but I can't move a muscle."

"I can't move, and I don't want to either."

That being the case, I had no choice but to go get Jeanne and the others alone. The rest of them could join up with us later by using Thunderbolt's carriage, and perhaps we could set up an early camp in the forest where Jeanne and the others were.

I headed toward the location of the hideout, but I was shocked to find a scene of devastation.

"What on earth happened...?"

Bits of flesh and blood were scattered everywhere around the hideout where Jeanne and the others had presumably hidden. The air was filled with the overwhelming stench of blood and guts. I instinctively covered my nose.

Despite the tragic scene, Thunderbolt stood there majestically, his whole body covered in blood.

“Are Jeanne and the others safe?” I asked.

I was momentarily distracted by the destruction, but I came back to my senses and hurried toward the entrance of the hideout. Rocket emerged from the air vent before I could get there.

“Are they okay, Rocket?”

Instead of answering, he enlarged the entrance. I could see Jeanne and Aura inside—they seemed uninjured but were pale, like they weren’t feeling well.

“What happened?”

“After you and the others left, a horde of orcs showed up,” Jeanne said. “For some reason, the orcs noticed Aura and me and started trying to dig us out. That’s when the battle with Thunderbolt started...”

“So *that’s* why there’s so much blood and chunks of flesh scattered around...”

The orcs had likely picked up on Jeanne and Aura’s scents. If it had been goblins instead, they might not have noticed, but orcs have a sharp sense of smell like pigs—especially when it came to women.

“Master Tenma... There weren’t only orcs, but ogres too.”

Aura then explained that shortly after the battle between Thunderbolt and the orc horde began, they heard footsteps and voices of what seemed to be two ogres. The way the voices had sounded reminded them of how Gulliver talked, which was how they had realized they were ogres.

“Oh... So *that’s* why everything’s such a mess.”

Thunderbolt could’ve dealt with the orc horde easily, but since two ogres had shown up too, it was only natural that this kind of carnage was unavoidable. I found it hard to believe that the orcs and ogres had worked together, so it had probably turned into a chaotic battle with Thunderbolt fighting both the orcs

and ogres at the same time.

Rocket hadn't even needed to join the fight. He'd briefly looked outside once the fight was over and let Jeanna and Aura out of the hole for a moment. The smell of the blood and guts outside had made them feel ill, and the stench had gotten trapped inside the hole.

"Well, we definitely can't stay here tonight," I mused.

Our plan had been that we'd make camp here, but the two of them immediately objected to the idea.

"Other monsters might be attracted by this smell. You two should go with Thunderbolt to gather everyone up. Rocket and I will clean this place up a bit," I said.

If we left things as they were, it could attract disease or undead creatures. And since Thunderbolt's main methods of attacking involved stomping, charging, and magical attacks—including lightning-charged body slams—the meat was unfit for consumption. At least we could still collect the magical cores and other materials while we cleaned up.

"Let's put the trash in the hole and cover it up with the dirt that was on top of the lid."

The smaller pieces of meat and blood would decompose naturally thanks to insects, so only the larger pieces needed to be buried.

I summoned golems to help with the cleanup, so we finished almost right as the others arrived. Everyone, including the trio, had heard from Jeanne and Aura that we could no longer camp here, so they were eager to head somewhere else. According to Leon, there was a small village a few hours away by foot, so with Thunderbolt, we could probably reach it in less than an hour. Everyone agreed that we should head for that village.

"Phew, we're finally here. I'm just glad we made it before it got totally dark. My body's so stiff..." Kriss said as she stood next to me. She was stretching to loosen up her muscles as she looked at the village. Since Kriss'd been in the driver's seat—the spot in the carriage that would shake the most—it had left her feeling stiff and sore.

We had alternated driving duties from the forest to the village, but the three idiots hadn't had enough energy to take the reins. That had left Kriss and me to take over driving Thunderbolt. Jeanne and Aura had still been feeling too sick from the stench to drive safely, so it had been their job to take care of the three still-exhausted nobles inside the carriage.

"Kriss, for now, let's go ahead and explain the situation to the villagers," I suggested. "I think it's best for us to do it since Leon and the others clearly aren't in any condition to do so."

Since the three idiots were useless, I thought it made sense for Kriss and me to handle it. After those three, Kriss held the next highest official rank as a member of the royal guard, and I was the overall leader of our group.

The official ranks in our group varied greatly. At the top was Albert, the heir to a ducal house, then Leon, the heir to a marquise, and then Cain, who was next in line to be a count. Then, we had Kriss, a member of the royal guard, Amur, a viscount's daughter, Gramps, the Sage and former noble, and me, a commoner and adventurer known as the Dragonslayer. At the bottom were Jeanne and Aura, who were both slaves. Jeanne was the higher-ranked of the two since she was the daughter of a former viscount. If she were to be freed from slavery, someone who didn't know any better might think she was of a higher rank than me. That's how modest my own title was.

And just as I had expected, when the villagers took us to their chief, I was treated as an afterthought compared to Kriss. Some villagers even gave me dirty looks since I was beside the beautiful Kriss. They were poorly trying to hide it, but Kriss and I saw right through their attempts. In fact, it was more difficult to pretend we *hadn't* noticed.

Things changed dramatically once Leon arrived. Although I'd informed the village chief that he hadn't been feeling well, Leon insisted on coming along and introducing himself to the chief before sunset. He also introduced me at length, and the surprised chief (along with the eavesdropping villagers) quickly spread the word of my true identity throughout the village. I had a feeling Leon did that to show that I had an amicable relationship with his house despite our past conflicts.

However, the chief seemed to interpret this as a warning that they shouldn't treat me lightly, resulting in a complete one-eighty in their attitudes toward me. The people who had initially glared at me seemed to vanish from the village. Curious about that, I expanded my Detection range and discovered a group of people camped a distance from the settlement—I thought that they might've fled upon learning my identity.

Kriss was the only one besides me who had picked up on the way they had treated me. She had also noticed the hostile villagers' absence and understood why. She seemed to be enjoying herself until we left the village, however.

Seeing that, Leon asked, "Did you find any good-looking men in the village?"

Kriss just glared at him, as usual.

"Uncle Lyle, do you think wyvern meat is yummy?" Luna asked.

"Huh? Why are you asking me that all of a sudden? Oh, right. Tenma went wyvern hunting!" I said.

Technically, he had been sent to slay a whole pack of wyverns, but for Tenma and his party, it was like dealing with a bunch of lizards that simply happened to have wings. Given his and Master Merlin's abilities, they might end up with a few scratches, or minor injuries at the worst. I figured that Amur should be fine too, since she was nearly as powerful as them. Kriss was iffy, but she was a member of the royal guard—I doubted she'd die.

My real concern was for the three idiots...

"So? Is it yummy?" Luna asked again.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Wyvern meat is pretty good. I've had it a few times—it's tasty both stewed and grilled."

As I thought back on the taste of the wyvern meat I'd eaten in the past, Luna took a pen and paper from her pocket and began taking notes.

"Stewed meat... So, like, in soup or something? And grilled could mean like hamburgers, or maybe fried..."

It seemed like she was brainstorming wyvern recipes to suggest to Tenma

later. My niece was definitely enthusiastic when it came to food. She probably got it from my father.

Anyway, I knew she was being well-fed by Tenma. I felt like I might need to think about finding a way to make Luna Tenma's wife, or maybe keep them apart entirely... Perhaps I needed to consult my mother about it soon.

Either way, my main concern was whether the three idiots were safe. I didn't think they'd be in mortal danger with Tenma and Master Merlin around, but if for some reason those two ended up incapacitated and the three were attacked, they wouldn't stand a chance.

If those three ended up dead or unable to recover, putting aside the unmarried and unofficial heirs of the Sanga ducal house and the Sammons marquise, it was hard to predict what might happen to Leon's house. That house could adopt a relative to keep the line going, but there was always a chance that the adopted heir might not align with the royalist faction. That would lead to significant disruptions and loss of power due to their initial heir's incapacitation.

"What would you like to eat, Uncle Lyle?"

"Me? I'd love a thick steak, grilled and seasoned with salt. High-quality meat tastes best when it's prepared in a simple way," I said.

Simple dishes let the flavor of the meat shine through. There was nothing like biting into a big, juicy steak and letting the fatty juices linger in your mouth as you followed it up with a sip of wine.

"You have such simple tastes, Uncle Lyle," Luna said. "Grilled meat wouldn't be enough to satisfy me. I'm a gourmet, but you? Your tastes are more like a country bumpkin..."

"Hey, watch it."

"Ow! Uncle just hit me!"

I knew she hadn't meant it seriously, but I gave her a light tap on the head anyway. I made sure not to use too much force, and judging by her reaction, she wasn't really in pain. Luna was probably just being dramatic.

“Besides, it’s not like Tenma said he’d bring us any wyvern meat. I don’t remember him promising that at all, in fact,” I reminded her.

Tenma had decided to take on the mission on short notice, so even if he had made that promise, it would’ve been a casual one. He could’ve even forgotten about it due to his hasty departure.

“What?! Tenma would *never* forget to bring me back a souvenir!” Luna complained. “And even if he did, he’d definitely set aside some meat for himself, and I could just ask him to cook that for us, and he’d do it! And if he still said no, I’d have Amy ask him, and if that *still* didn’t work, I’d have Grandmother handle it!”

She was right, but it wasn’t a good idea to rely on others like that, especially not my mother. That would lead to a presumably lengthy and intense lecture.

Still, it seemed like Tenma was very indulgent when it came to Amy, my mother, and Luna too. I could understand Amy, but it really didn’t seem like Tenma had a particular preference for younger or older women...

“Hey! You’re thinking about something inappropriate, aren’t you? I’m going to tell Grandmother!”

“Wait just a second! I am not! I was just thinking about how Tenma is very indulgent with you and Mother!”

I grabbed Luna by the back of her collar as she tried to run off and quickly told her what I was thinking. I didn’t reveal everything on my mind, though.

“Are you sure? Well, whatever. It’s only natural that Tenma’s sweet to me!” Luna puffed out her chest proudly as she dangled from my grip. “I’m like a little sister to him, and there’s no way somebody’d neglect such a cute girl! Well, except for my brother, of course.”

Whether or not Tenma thought of her as his sister wasn’t the point, although I could agree that he treated her like one. Tenma was an adopted only child who had no friends his own age in Kukuri Village. He hadn’t had many chances to interact with younger people even after he had become an adventurer, so that was probably why he, Amy, Luna, and Tida were such good friends. Luna probably relied on him the most, and he probably viewed her as a troublesome

little sister.

As for my mother...

“And he indulges Grandmother because she’s scary. And strict. *And* a nag.”

“True...”

Again, that made sense. Tenma had witnessed my mother beating up my father right after he’d met her, so it was understandable that he’d have some lingering fear of her.

“I guess there’s nothing to be done about it, then.”

“That’s right!”

“Indeed,” a new voice said to us.

The moment I heard someone else suddenly speak up, time seemed to pause for both Luna and me. Normally people used that expression metaphorically, but it genuinely felt like my heart had stopped.

We slowly turned to face the person who’d joined our conversation, and it was exactly who we’d imagined. Behind this woman stood my father and other family members, all with exasperated looks on their faces.

Mother, however, had a smile on her face. “I got some tasty sweets, so I was looking for everyone to invite them to a tea party. But it seems you really need a lecture more than a tea party. Don’t worry, even though I’m so *strict*, I’ll let you go before breakfast.”

The sun was about to set. If she would let me go before breakfast started, that meant she’d be lecturing us all night!

“Wait, I still have work to finish,” I protested.

“Oh, don’t worry. Your subordinates are very capable,” the queen said. “The military won’t fall into chaos just because you take one day off.”

This was bad. Now it seemed like my lecture was going to last for an entire day.

Luna stepped in. “Grandmother, that wasn’t what I meant! I was just trying to warn you that Uncle was having inappropriate thoughts about me, you, and

Tenma! I thought you'd be angry if you heard..."

"And what does that have to do with me being scary, strict, or a nag? And Lyle, I want details on what Luna just said. Let's go, both of you."

Mother's lecture continued until well past midnight. We had to explain what those "inappropriate things" Luna had mentioned were in detail. We decided to be honest and managed to get Mother to understand us. She let us go without having an entire daylong lecture. However, even though our punishment had been reduced, we ended up receiving additional lectures on our daily attitudes and behavior. And just when I thought we were free, my older brother started lecturing Luna more, saying that her actions and words were having a negative impact.

During the lectures, Luna dozed off beside me while she was being scolded. I thought it was quite unreasonable, but the sight made me feel slightly better.

Part Three

“We’re supposed to assist with border security, but what’s the current situation?” I asked.

After we had defeated the wyverns, we were supposed to assist Margrave Haust’s border patrol. However, we couldn’t really make any plans to do so without knowing their current status or location.

“I think someone from our army will be stationed in the nearby town, so we could go there...” Leon said, but he sounded unsure.

For some reason, Kriss jumped in decisively. “Well, let’s go!”

Leon mumbled something about me being the leader, but she ignored him.

I was puzzled by Kriss’s attitude. “Well, I can’t think of anything else to do besides go there, but what’s the matter?” I asked.

Kriss tried to evade the question, but Amur spoke up in her stead.

“Kriss forgot to bring clothes. She’s just been the same old rags, including her underwear!”

“Hey!” Kriss said.

“Rags? That’s hardly a fitting description for Kriss!” Leon said.

“Oh yeah? Then what *would* be fitting?” Kriss pressed with a smile.

“A-A peacock! Something with peacock feathers!” Leon declared confidently as if he’d come up with the perfect answer.

“Aren’t peacocks known for being gluttonous and short-tempered? Plus, only the males are beautiful. The females are actually quite plain, aren’t they?” Once Cain had seen Leon’s smug grin, he questioned him with a malicious smile.

Kriss had overheard that. “Now I know exactly what you think of me, Leon...”

“No, Kriss! It was just a misunderstanding! Cain, you bastard!”

“No more excuses!”

Kriss then subjected Leon to her ironfisted punishment. It became evident

watching this scene that perhaps Leon's comparison to a peacock wasn't entirely wrong, although I'd never say that out loud.

"Anyway, putting those two aside... Which town is closest to the border?" I asked. "I don't mind if it's small, but hopefully, we can at least buy some clothes for Kriss."

Albert had seemingly found out already. "It's about six hours away from here by regular carriage, so it should take about half that with Thunderbolt. That's what Leon said, anyway."

This trip hadn't been specifically planned, but since he had known Leon for so long, he had anticipated various scenarios. By the way, Leon was the one who should've conveyed this information to me, but after Kriss had landed an uppercut to his jaw, he had been KO'd.

"Normally, that would be punishable by death—assaulting a noble..."

"Eh, it's fine," Cain said. "The house of Haust seems to condone any punishment Leon gets. Dad told me that Leon's father finds it convenient to not have to administer discipline personally."

"I see. Well, what exactly should we do to assist the border patrol?" I asked.

Cain smiled dryly at my obvious change of topic. He crossed his arms and thought it over, acting like it was pointless to continue talking about Leon.

"I think Master Merlin and Kriss would be more familiar with this, but there are two different types of assistance: direct and indirect," he began.

According to Cain, direct assistance was when you joined the border forces and engaged in direct combat when necessary. It was the most straightforward way of helping.

On the other hand, indirect assistance involved things such as transporting supplies—similar to the duties of a supply unit—or standing by as reserve troops. It could even mean handling miscellaneous tasks.

"I think we should offer indirect assistance then," I said.

"I thought you'd say that, and it's probably for the best. It's awkward to admit it, but aside from Kriss, I don't think anyone else is suited for military actions."

Since Kriss was a knight, she had received formal military training, but me, Gramps, and Amur were adventurers. We typically operated in small groups and therefore were not well-suited for organized military maneuvers.

Even the three idiots could follow along with military actions better than us, although they were more accustomed to giving orders. It was ultimately safer and more practical to have them stay away and not disrupt the chain of command.

“Well, let’s go with the indirect plan, then. Everyone, let’s head out. Shiromaru, you carry Leon,” I said.

“Woof!”

And with that, we decided to head to the border town. I called out to everyone who was resting. Since Leon was still sprawled out and unconscious, I figured Shiromaru could carry him over there. Shiromaru barked in response, grabbed Leon’s leg, and started dragging him along.

Leon ended up being a bit battered from Kriss’s uppercut and Shiromaru dragging him around, but at this point, it was a familiar sight. No one was particularly concerned.

“Hey, Leon, wake up. Isn’t that the town we’re heading to?”

“Huh? What? Oh...”

About two hours after Leon had been knocked out, we had arrived at a place where we could see the border town. I woke him up to confirm, but he seemed disoriented by the sudden change in scenery, looking around in confusion.

“Um, yeah... That looks right,” he said. “Let’s talk to the guards at the gate for now.”

“All right then.”

Leon couldn’t make a definitive statement, perhaps due to his grogginess, so we decided to approach the gate to verify where we were, just in case.

The guards noticed us approaching and had several armed soldiers standing by, probably for security reasons. Only one of us needed to speak with the

guards, and since we needed permission to enter the town, I decided to send Leon. It'd be quicker if he were to do it.

"Leave it to me! I'll handle this in no time!" he said.

"Hurry it up, Leon! The shops are going to close soon!" Kriss said.

"Okay..." Leon had been excited for his time to shine, but Kriss's sharp scolding had left him deflated. He then scurried off toward the guards at the gate.

"We should find a shop that sells clothes first since I'm sure we'll get approved right away," I said.

"Thanks, Tenma. Hmm... You know, it seems like Leon is having some trouble."

Kriss was right—it looked like Leon was arguing with the guards at the gate for some reason. I boosted my senses with magic to eavesdrop.

"It seems like they don't recognize him as the son of Margrave Haust. In fact, they seemed to suspect him of being a spy from an enemy country," I said.

"But why?" Kriss asked.

I had no idea how things had gotten so mixed up, but if we didn't intervene, Leon might end up being detained. Although that would've been entertaining under any other circumstances, the guards could get in serious trouble as a result. Kriss and I decided to help.

"I'm so sorry!"

When Kriss and I spoke to the guards, they recognized their mistake and bowed deeply to apologize to Leon.

"Ha ha... It's fine now..." Leon muttered. He returned to the carriage with a distant look in his eyes after not being recognized as the margrave's son. Having been mistaken for an imposter and almost being detained, his earlier confidence was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't blame him for feeling down.

The reason that the guards hadn't recognized him was because it had been over a decade since he last visited, and back then, he'd come incognito as a part of an inspection. Also, his actual appearance was different from the description

they had heard.

The guards had been told that Leon was a tall, lean, muscular, and ruggedly handsome man. Out of those, the only thing accurate was his height, so it was no wonder the guards suspected him. Plus, according to the women, “ruggedly handsome” didn’t fit either.

Cain groaned. “Argh, my stomach... It hurts!”

“Leon, are you trying to kill us? If you keep this up, you’ll go down in history for making us laugh to death!” Albert said.

They had watched from the carriage as Leon struggled with the guards and had laughed so hard they were clutching their stomachs. In fact, I’d never seen them crack up this much the entire time I’d known them. Cain had been so amused that he’d pulled a muscle and was rolling around in pain, while Albert felt like he might burst a blood vessel from laughing.

“Shut up. Someday, this’ll happen to you...” Leon directed an ominous threat toward the two of them in a quiet voice, seemingly sensing that arguing at this point would be futile.

He was apparently referring to a fictional BL novel featuring characters modeled after the three of them. It had been circulating around the capital’s academy. The description of the character based on Leon had reached this city, which was what had caused today’s confusion. Although the book’s complete contents hadn’t gotten around here, it was possible that other cities were aware of it. And now, the *real* Leon and his companions were being caught up in that story’s drama...

“All right! Once we return to our domains, we’ll immediately work to eradicate that book!”

“I’ll enact a law declaring that any book that disparages the Sammons family will be banned! The author will be punished too!”

The two of them were convinced that this could happen to them next, and so they resolved to use their influence to eliminate the book.

“Hmm... It might already be too late,” Leon said.

The two of them ignored his comment and continued to discuss their plans.

Kriss shook her head. “Neither of you understand, do you? It’ll only draw *more* attention to the book if you do that,” she said.

“Just don’t get caught. Making a fuss about it might even strengthen the bond between the author and their readers,” Amur said.

Jeanne and Aura nodded quietly in agreement. I had to admit that in Japan’s Edo period, there had been times when bans on luxuries had just caused more excitement around them, and artists had found ways around it. It wasn’t out of the question for something similar to happen here. In fact, it could get even more out of hand. After all, most of the people writing these stories were the daughters of nobles. Even though they had far less power and influence than Albert and Cain, they could do as they pleased once they returned to their own domains.

“Once you’re marked, it’s already too late,” I said. “You should just give it up. Really, those three are just clueless...”

I considered myself fortunate in that respect. I had actually heard that fans had written some BL books about me, but thanks to Queen Maria only approving books that were truthful, readers knew that I didn’t share the fetishes depicted in the books. Plus, the fujoshi feared being scolded by Queen Maria, so they were hesitant to create stories about me.

Of course, that might’ve led to more excitement about fantasies about the three idiots...but I didn’t know that for sure. Well, it didn’t have anything to do with me.

“Let’s put these three aside for now... Kriss, let’s hurry to buy you some clothes. The stores will be closing soon, right?” I asked.

“Oh no! I have to go right away! You take care of getting us rooms at the inn. Also, I’ll need to borrow Shiromaru for this. C’mon, Shiromaru!”

“Woof!”

Kriss seemed determined to visit several stores before they closed, and she would take Shiromaru along so he could help her find her way back to us.

I wrapped a cloth around Shiromaru's neck to help him stand out in the crowd and watched as he and Kriss left. Jeanne and the others were invited to join her, but they declined—they had actually brought their own clothes and didn't have time for a shopping trip now.

"Plus, we wouldn't have time to browse if we went with Kriss," Amur pointed out.

I thought it was unusual for Amur to be interested in clothing, but then I realized she probably meant browsing food stalls instead.

"There's more variety in the capital too, so there's no need to look here. As a maid, I'm more interested in what ingredients are available in this area and how they're used!" Aura was prioritizing her job, so we decided to check out the food stalls while we looked for an inn.

After we visited a few vendors, I discovered that while the types and tastes of food here were similar to those in the capital, the prices were significantly cheaper. I was surprised to see that the portions were about the same as what I'd find in the capital, but they were about half as expensive. According to Leon, this was normal for places outside major cities.

"Oh, it's probably because rent and taxes are cheaper here. I assume the cost of living is lower in rural areas?" I asked.

"Exactly. It's impressive you figured that out so quickly. Leon probably only realized as much recently."

Leon looked displeased to be mentioned but didn't complain, probably because it was true.

Jeanne ran up to me with a basket of dried fruit. "Tenma, we're heading for the inn farther ahead," she said. The food stall owner had told her where the inn was.

By the way, we were traveling on foot instead of the carriage because the people in town were afraid of Thunderbolt. He kept making noises at anyone who made eye contact, and I couldn't tell if he was amused or if he was trying to intimidate them. Regardless, it was causing too much of a commotion on top of being embarrassing, so I decided to have him wait in the dimension bag.

“Oh, these look like figs. They taste pretty good,” I said, sampling one from Jeanne’s basket. They were better than I expected.

“This area is known for its figs. They grow various other fruits as well, of course.”

This region had long been known for its fruit, but they grew more figs than anything else.

“Also...” Leon began, but...

“Leon, it seems we have some guests,” I interrupted him and pointed to a group approaching us.

“Oh, those are definitely our soldiers. The one at the front is the leader of the knights.”

As soon as Leon finished saying that, the man was in front of us. He saluted Leon. “Lord Leon, I apologize for the delay in welcoming you.”

“It’s fine. I would like to know the current status of the battle.”

The knights picked up on Leon’s unusual tone and immediately began proceeding toward their headquarters.

“I guess we’ll head to the inn first, then. Let us know what’s happening later,” I said to Leon.

Leon looked surprised, but everyone else seemed to be content with following my lead.

“But Tenma, you’re here on a quest. Shouldn’t you come with me?” he asked.

“No. My mission was to slay the wyverns. Border defense is an additional task I was never formally asked to do.”

Like I’d just said, the official request had only involved slaying the wyverns. There was no need for me to participate in the discussions about border defense at this point since my helping there was just an added bonus.

“Anyway, it would be odd if I participated in your conversation with the knights.”

After persuading Leon of that, the rest of us headed to the inn. I could’ve

gotten to work providing support to the border troops right away, but since we'd just arrived here and wanted to take it easy, I decided it was best to avoid trouble.

Everyone but Leon understood my reasoning, but no one was going to point it out. It seemed everyone else wanted to stay out of trouble too, and the knights were probably too intimidated to say anything. I had a feeling the leader of the knights was probably well aware of what had happened at Kukuri Village, and he might've even felt guilty about his subordinates' actions.

"We'll need to maintain a good relationship with House Haust once this matter is settled. It wouldn't hurt to take advantage of this situation a bit before then," Gramps said.

"The only ones who should be tired right now are Leon, Albert, and Cain. The rest of us can just enjoy the benefits while putting in as little effort as possible," Amur said.

I wasn't sure how easy it would be, but minimizing labor efforts while maximizing profit was expected of adventurers. We all nodded in agreement with Amur and quickly made our exit.

We reunited with Kriss at the inn, and she seemed very pleased with her shopping trip.

"Now I can sleep well tonight!" she said.

I briefly explained Leon's absence to her, but she didn't really seem to care. She just said, "Oh, okay."

"So it looks like we'll split up into groups. Kriss with Amur, Jeanne with Aura, then Tenma, Master Merlin, and Shiromaru together, and then the three idiots. The men will be on the third floor and the women on the second, right?"

Our room assignments were based on our typical travel arrangements. We also decided on mealtimes before heading to our respective rooms.

"Shall we start with a bath then? Jeanne, Aura, let's go together."

Kriss was holding the dimension bag with the bath inside as she called out to

Jeanne and Aura. She firmly grasped Amur's arm with her other hand to prevent her from following after me while Kriss was in the bath. She was still following Queen Maria's orders to keep Amur away from me.

The bag Kriss held contained a large tub that I'd quickly set up for our journey. It was a makeshift setup and not the highest quality, but it was pretty convenient to use at inns without their own baths. I was planning on crafting a more permanent version when we returned home.

"We should take a bath as well," Gramps said.

"I'm pretty sandy from fighting the wyverns," I replied.

Gramps looked to Cain and Albert. "You two will join us, right?"

"Of course!" they replied.

Since Amur was so unpredictable, I had to be cautious. I thought she wouldn't intrude on where Gramps, Albert, and Cain were bathing, but apparently, I underestimated her...

"Oof!"

"Whoa!"

"Argh! Towels, towels!"

"Cain, get out of the way!"

Everyone but Gramps was startled and flustered by the unexpected intrusion.

"I swear, youngsters these days..." he grumbled.

When Amur suddenly appeared, I turned away and sank deeper into the tub. Cain tried to throw his towel at her while looking away, and Albert dove into the tub and tried to cover himself up.

Despite our panic, Gramps continued enjoying his drink calmly. "Will you calm down? Amur didn't come in here naked. Cain, cover yourself with your towel—I can see everything from here. Albert, don't dive into the tub like that. You nearly ruined our drinks and snacks. She's wearing a swimsuit, see?"

Reacting to Gramps's comment, I glanced at Amur and saw that she was indeed wearing one.

She caught my gaze and exaggeratedly covered herself with her hands and feigned shyness. “Tenma’s dirty!” she cried out. “And Albert and Cain are nasty, perverted peepers!”

“Why are you treating Tenma so differently?” Cain and Albert exclaimed.

As I was trying to figure out what to do about Amur, a second intruder appeared in the men’s bath.

“Amur!” Kriss yelled. “I told you not to go into the men’s bath! I took my eyes off you for one second, and you barged in here? If Queen Maria finds out, she’ll be furious with me!” Looking fierce, Kriss then grabbed Amur’s arm.

Amur was completely unrepentant and shouted right back. “Kriss, you’re an exhibitionist! Soldiers! There’s a lady exposing herself in here!” This would only make things worse, considering Kriss’s current outfit...

“Kriss,” Gramps began, “don’t you think it’s a bit inappropriate for a young lady to be walking around the inn only wrapped in a towel?”

“Huh? Eeeeeek!!!”

Only having just realized what she was wearing, Kriss let out a panicked shriek that shook the entire inn.

After those various incidents, we all took baths to wash off the aftermath of the wyvern battle. We were planning on following those up with a nice dinner, but since staff members had heard Kriss’s screams and had rushed to see what was the matter, we had unfortunately been urged to explain the situation to the staff and other guests. Luckily, the owner of the inn knew we were friends of Leon, the future heir of this domain, so she had offered to take care of it for us. The matter had been settled without any further incident.

I thought that we should do something to apologize, though, so I asked the owner if I could pay for the other guests’ meals at dinner.

“Still... Did you have any idea that Amur was going to barge in on us, Gramps?” I asked.

Even though the rest of us had been in a complete panic, Gramps had calmly sipped his drink while it had unfolded. Yeah, he was an old man with a lot of life

experience, but I thought it was impossible that he'd have zero reaction if a young woman—who could've been naked, for that matter—just barged into the bath. Surely he would've at least glanced her way. But, thinking back on it, I found it odd that he hadn't said a word to Amur and had instead lectured us.

"Honestly, Amur told me she was going to come into the bath in order to surprise you. I thought it would be funny, so I gave her permission as long as she wasn't naked," Gramps said with a laugh.

Frankly, that pissed me off. However, he must've been drunk because he didn't seem to notice my anger. Instead, he just turned around and started looking for more snacks.

Time for divine punishment...

I decided to play a little prank on him to settle the score.

"I think I'll drink a bit longer—until Kriss's lecture is over."

We could hear Kriss's voice even from our room. Gramps had set a plate of snacks down in front of him and was about to reach for the alcohol bottle when I decided to casually confiscate it.

"Gramps, Amur is the daughter of a viscount," I said. "What would you have done if Albert or Cain had made some kind of slipup?"

"Hey! Tenma!"

"We're not Leon! We wouldn't make that kind of slipup!" the two protested.

"No one ever thinks they're going to make a mistake," Gramps quipped. He was watching Albert and Cain make a fuss and then tipped his glass toward me. I obediently poured some alcohol for him, but since he was keeping his eyes on the duo, he was unaware that there was something odd about what I had poured. He took a big swig of it and...

"Argh! Cough! Blechh!"



Gramps promptly began to flail around in pain. I had actually stuffed several dried chili peppers into the bottle of alcohol. And since that only made the alcohol even spicier, Gramps was tasting a bit of hell right now.

Albert was in disbelief. “I can’t believe you poisoned Master Merlin...”

“Tenma’s scary...”

“T-Tenma, I’m sorry... Please...water...” Gramps choked out.

“Water won’t help. You’ll have to drink milk instead.” I ignored the surprised looks on Albert and Cain’s faces and handed Gramps a glass of milk.

Gramps seemed to immediately understand why I’d put hot peppers in his drink. Once he took the milk and started drinking it, he apologized again.

Cain took a small sip of the pepper-laced alcohol I had given to Gramps. “Argh! This stuff could make someone with a weak heart die from shock!” he said with a mischievous grin. But once I saw that look on his face, I could tell he was up to no good.

Just then, Leon returned from the meeting right on time. “Hey, sorry I’m late,” he said. “Wait, did you all eat dinner already?”

At that moment, I had a feeling that everyone but Cain was thinking the same thing.

Leon, you’re done for.

“Not yet,” Cain said. “There was a bit of trouble, so we were waiting for the women. We thought we’d pass the time with some drinks while we waited for them to be ready.” He poured some of the alcohol into a cup and handed it to Leon. However, he had discreetly prepared another cup filled with water for himself.

As soon as Leon took the cup, Cain raised his glass for a toast. Caught up in the moment, Leon clinked his glass against Cain’s and then downed his drink all in one go.

After that...

“Pfft! Cough! Gag! Blech!” He ended up in the exact same situation as Gramps

had.

Cain should've been laughing as he watched the scene, but instead, he was wailing. "My eyes! My eyes!"

Leon had spit the alcohol out and right onto Cain's face, sending the latter writhing around on the floor in agony. The spray had even reached Albert, who had stood a bit farther away from Cain—he had dropped to the floor and began to roll around as well.

"Tenma, you should never put chili peppers in alcohol again. It's just too cruel," Gramps said.

"Yeah, I guess I'll try not to make it or use it again in the future," I said, only really agreeing with half of his statement.

"At least not against me," Gramps added, but I pretended not to hear that. I figured this would keep him from encouraging Amur's pranks any further.

"Sorry to keep you waiting... What in the world happened here? And why are my eyes suddenly stinging?" Kriss had finally finished lecturing Amur and seemed shocked to see three men writhing on the floor. Some of the spray was still lingering in the air too, which caused her eyes to feel strange.

"It's because the three of them were messing around, as usual. By the way, Kriss? You might want to wash your eyes with oil or milk instead of water," I suggested.

Kriss, Cain, and Albert all followed my advice and washed their eyes with milk, while Leon and Gramps sipped their milk slowly.

Once everyone had recovered, Kriss subjected the trio to a round of questioning to find out what had happened. After she discovered that dried chili pepper liquor had been the cause, she initially directed her anger at me. But once I explained why I'd made it in the first place, Cain was the only one who got a lecture.

"My eyes are *still* burning," Albert said.

"You got off easy. My mouth, throat, and eyes are still on fire!" Cain complained.

“It’s unusual for Kriss to scold just you, Cain. Normally it’s either just Leon or the three of you together,” I said.

“Tenma, you’re acting like you had nothing to do with this.”

“Well, I didn’t,” I insisted. “I mean, if someone kills a person with a knife, is the person who made the knife at fault too?”

The three of them pondered my words. “That might be true, but in this case...” they began, but they weren’t sure if they could protest. Ultimately, they gave up on it.

Jeanne then wandered into the room. “Tenma, what are you... Wait, why is Cain getting lectured now?”

She had probably been wondering where we all were. Kriss had come in here to call us to dinner together and hadn’t returned. And the reason Amur wasn’t here was because she was currently suffering from leg cramps—she’d been forced to sit formally on her legs during Kriss’s lecture, so Aura had to carry her.

Once Kriss was done scolding Cain, we all headed to the dining room and ordered some food.

I asked Leon about his meeting. “So what’s going on at the border?”

“Well, for now, both sides are just watching each other without making any moves. But it’s possible they might try to break through by force since we’ve been adding reinforcements.”

“Should we do something to intimidate them?” I suggested.

“No. If we attack them recklessly, that will just give them an excuse to retaliate,” Gramps pointed out. “It’s a tricky situation.”

Kriss and most of the other nobles, Amur excluded, nodded in agreement.

“I initially thought we could just use some kind of magic from the rear to intimidate them, but that could backfire too,” I said. “What a pain. Maybe we should just say there’s nothing we can do and go home?”

“I agree! Let’s just go home and relax!” Amur exclaimed.

“I’d like to agree with Amur, but we’re here on a request, so we should at least show up to the scene first before we make a decision. Don’t we need to meet with the margrave and discuss the wyverns too? Leaving now wouldn’t be right,” Kriss said.

Jeanne and Aura had been about to raise their hands to agree with leaving but had lowered them after hearing Kriss’s comment.

“Right... I forgot,” I said. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to go there, then. Leon, they gave you the location where the two forces are facing off, right? Let’s come up with a plan based on that.”

“Yeah, sure! But, can we eat first? I’m starving,” Leon said, as he noticed the waitress approach with our food.

The group unanimously agreed, and we all went straight into enjoying a lively dinner. Gramps insisted on pouring everyone drinks, putting a stop to any further strategic discussions.

Meanwhile, Aura muttered to herself. “Being served delicious food while your enemy can’t even fight back? That’s harsh...”

That could be a really useful tactic, depending on how it’s applied...

Part Four

“Oof, I feel like I’m going to throw up...”

“Leon, if you’re going to do that, do it outside!”

“Leon’s technically our client, so why is *his* hangover the worst?” Cain asked.

“Probably because it’s Leon,” Albert said. “He’s the most efficient when he’s just standing around and not saying or doing anything anyway.”

Cain’s and Albert’s voices were sharper than usual—they seemed slightly annoyed. I couldn’t blame them, though. Leon was supposed to be working the hardest here, but, now, he was useless since he’d drank too much at dinner last night. It was only natural that they were irritated when all he did was moan about feeling like he was going to puke right next to them.

Although Kriss, Cain, and Albert were also a bit hungover from last night, it wasn’t enough to get in the way of traveling. We didn’t really have to worry about them.

“Ugh... Tenma... Medicine, please...” Amur whined, which was followed by a loud belch.

Amur was also suffering from a bad hangover, but since she wasn’t our client, she had only received a light warning from everyone to drink less next time.

“I’ll stop the carriage for a moment. Go get some fresh air, and in the meantime, I’ll get some medicine ready,” I said.

As soon as I stopped the carriage, both Leon and Amur sprinted toward the bushes and began throwing up. Kriss and the others inside the carriage didn’t hear them, but since I was driving, I could unfortunately hear everything.

“I’ll give them the real bitter stuff.”

To retaliate, I prepared the most bitter-tasting hangover medicine I could while I waited for the two of them to return. I’d originally brought it for Gramps. When Amur and Leon came back, they were looking slightly better than when they had left.

“What a miserable experience...”

“Tenma is a demon...”

“Stop complaining,” I said. “The more bitter the medicine, the better it is for you. It worked, didn’t it?”

Despite them grumbling about the taste, the medicine had taken effect immediately. The two of them now had enough energy to complain.

“By the way, according to the schedule, we should be seeing the margrave’s army soon, right? Someone should approach us to confirm our identities, so make sure you’re ready, Leon. We can’t afford another incident like what happened at the gate.”

“All right,” Leon said, pulling a Haust crest out of his pocket.

“Kriss, make sure you have something that can prove you’re a member of the royal guard. And we’ll get our family crests ready too,” I said.

“Right. That’ll be the safest thing to do.” Kriss quietly began preparing her proof of identity.

The trio followed suit. Leon looked like he wanted to say something, but he couldn’t because of what had happened before. I also got my own items ready—the request letter from the margrave and my Otori family crest.

Minutes later, several knights on horseback appeared. We must’ve been close to the battlefield, just like I had predicted. Their weapons weren’t drawn, but they seemed alert and ready for combat at any moment.

“Go ahead, Leon.”

“Got it! Leave it to me!” Leon was enthusiastic to redeem himself, but...

“I’ll bet 1,000G that they don’t recognize him,” Kriss said.

“I’ll match that bet, Kriss,” Albert said.

“That’s not fair! I wanna join in too! I’ll bet 1,000G!” Cain piped up.

“Hmm, I bet 2,000G, then.”

“I’ll put in 500G.”

“Shouldn’t a knight recognize his next lord? 500G!” Gramps said.

“I’ll throw in 500G too, matching Master Merlin.”

The betting was getting pretty intense.

Leon overheard all of this. “Don’t underestimate me,” he muttered angrily, but his voice was so quiet that no one else heard. I couldn’t believe he was that confident anyway.

“That carriage over there... Lord Leon! My apologies!” The knight leading the way toward us had originally intended to stop our carriage, but he dismounted as soon as he saw Leon next to me.

“Yesss! Did you see that?” Leon shouted triumphantly at the five of us who had bet on the knights not recognizing him.

The knights seemed confused, but to keep things moving, I showed them the request letter and my crest to confirm my identity. I also told them we’d come here as reinforcements.

In reality, while five knights had come to meet and guard us, only three of those seemed to recognize Leon immediately. The remaining two hesitated and simply followed suit with the others. I had noticed that but figured that wasn’t worth mentioning to Leon—it would be a bit too cruel.

“This is the command tent. Our current highest in command is Lyra Agrissa, vice-captain of the Haust Border Knights.”

The knight who had led the way opened the tent that seemed to serve as the command center and invited us inside. He told us to go ahead and greet the person in charge of the battle first, so Leon, Kriss, Cain, Albert, and I went inside. Gramps stayed behind with Jeanne and the others to supposedly keep rubbernecks away, but they were actually just slacking off.

When I had asked Gramps if he was coming, he’d said, “It’s too much trouble. I’ll just stay here and have some tea. I’m worried about Jeanne and the others.”

The person who stood inside the tent’s entrance was the vice-captain, Lyra.

She was a tall and muscular woman.

“It’s nice to see you again, Lord Leon. And Cain and Albert as well,” she said. “Thank you for being our reinforcements, Lord Otori and Kriss.”

It sounded like she knew Cain and Albert as well. The three of them greeted her normally, but I was momentarily caught off guard when she called me “Lord Otori.”

“Forgive me, I should’ve begun with an apology. The incident that occurred at Kukuri Village was entirely our knights’ fault. I’m deeply sorry.” She bowed her head as she apologized to me.

I figured she had planned to do this regardless of how I reacted since she had apologized on behalf of the knights, not for Margrave Haust. I’m sure it was a bit performative, but it also seemed genuine. Though Leon had already apologized to me for the incident, I thought it was better to go along with it—especially since it would probably make future interactions go more smoothly.

I replied in a deliberately harsh tone. “I accept your apology. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me, but it’s in the past. Now that we’ve exchanged greetings, I’ll take my leave for now. We’ve just arrived and there’s a lot to get ready. Also, please inform everyone not to attack my followers if they see them. My followers were once ferocious monsters, so I can’t predict their actions if they’re provoked.” My tone of voice had made the mood among the knights tense, but I ignored it. Instead, I shook Lyra’s hand and left the tent.

When I glanced back briefly, I saw that Lyra was still clenching the hand that I’d shaken and was trying to calm the knights around her.

“What’s wrong, Tenma?” Kriss asked.

“Nothing. I didn’t come here to make friends, after all.”

Kriss seemed concerned that we’d been immediately called into the command tent the moment we’d arrived. I made my way back to the carriage so quickly that she looked surprised. We left the other three behind in the tent as we passed the soldiers guarding the margrave’s house, some hired mercenaries, and adventurers who had come here on quests.

The other three had to stay behind due to their positions. I figured the atmosphere inside the tent was probably pretty tense, but I hoped they could put up with it. They were nobles, after all.

“Where should we set up camp, Gramps?”

“I arranged an empty spot far from the other tents, just like you said,” he replied.

“Great. Let’s get moving.”

Just like he’d mentioned, Gramps had chosen a spot without any obstructions about fifty meters away from the nearest tent. This position would let us easily spot anyone who approached.

“Let’s get camp ready first,” I said. “Gramps, set up a fence to keep anyone from getting too close—about twenty meters away from the carriage will do. Amur, watch out for anyone approaching. And Jeanne and the rest, please start a fire some distance away from the carriage.”

Once I had given everyone their instructions, I decided to set up a portable toilet outside for the person acting as a lookout. However...

“Hey, Tenma... What was with that confrontational attitude earlier? Did meeting them in person bring back bad memories?” Kriss asked. She had been so worried that she wouldn’t leave my side.

I decided to explain, but...

“What was that all about, Tenma?”

“Your sudden change in attitude confused Leon.”

Albert and Cain had just returned. It seemed that Leon was either caught up in other matters or was hesitant to come back.

“Welcome back, you two. How did the knights react after I left?” I asked.

“Huh? Well, they reacted one of two ways.”

“Some of them thought you hadn’t forgiven them for the past, and they understood. But others thought you were incredibly rude and hostile *despite* what happened in the past.”

“What about the vice-captain?” I asked.

“Actually, it didn’t seem like she was that offended. She was startled, but she quickly calmed down the knights who were irritated.”

It seemed like the first phase of my plan had succeeded. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Uh-oh. You look like you’re up to something bad, Tenma.”

“Wait, did you do that on purpose?” Albert asked.

“Did you trick us, Tenma?” Leon said.

“I guess you could say that. I shouldn’t talk about this out in the open, but...”

From there, I began to explain.

“There you are,” the vice-captain said.

“Sorry to bother you so late.” I reached the vice-captain’s tent just before midnight. “There are more people here than I expected.”

Besides the vice-captain, there were five men and women inside the tent, all appearing to be knights. They weren’t armed, but I could tell they were cautious of me. Even though I had said there were more people than I expected, I could also say that five people weren’t enough, seeing that the leader was receiving a late-night visit from a strange adventurer with unknown intentions.

“Don’t worry. You can trust all of these knights,” she said. “They’re all my children.”

“You have a lot of children.”

“I have five more stationed near the margrave’s estate.”

Ten kids in total? That’s pretty impressive, in more ways than one.

“You didn’t come all this way to avoid prying eyes for a friendly chat, right?”

The vice-captain took a piece of paper from her pocket—the note I’d slipped to her when we shook hands earlier. It said, “I want to discuss strategies to break us out of the stalemate. Please wait for me around midnight with only those who can be trusted.”

“Why didn’t you just say this earlier?” she asked. “You could’ve made enemies out of us with that attitude before.”

“I don’t care if strangers don’t like me. Besides, if you can only trust five people out of the thousand in the margrave’s army—which is still growing—you must share my concern,” I said.

“You mean about spies?” the vice-captain muttered in a bitter voice.

With such a large army, it would be weird if there *weren’t* any spies.

“It’s strange that the enemy hasn’t made any moves even though the situation is increasingly in our favor. We should assume they have spies looking for the perfect opportunity to strike and act accordingly,” I suggested.

“First, you acted like you were reluctantly cooperating, and then you asked for a secret meeting. You must have a plan?” the vice-captain said.

The five knights now began to shift their vigilance from me to our surroundings.

“The task itself is simple,” I said. “We begin by eliminating any chances for the enemy to turn the tables on us. Then, we’ll work on boosting our own morale and demonstrating our strength.”

“Sounds simple enough, but it all comes down to the execution. If we make just one mistake, the enemy could strike,” the man sitting next to Lyra pointed out, which was reasonable.

The enemy’s troops were close to the border, but they hadn’t crossed into our territory yet. We couldn’t attack them first. And if we prepare to launch an attack, they could claim we were trying to invade their lands and use that as a pretext to invade us first under the guise of defense.

“If they win, they’ll seize our territory. If they invade and they lose, they’ll say, ‘That was just a rogue unit, not the Republic! We’ve dealt with the perpetrators, so please return our territory.’ Right?” I asked.

Both the vice-captain and the man nodded. If it came to that, the kingdom would ultimately want to avoid conflict with the Republic. They would likely be compelled to return the seized land, even if they knew that was a lie.

“That’s probably how it would play out, which would also leave us with a huge loss. We’re already in the red with the cost of maintaining our army and paying the adventurers.”

I thought her worrying about the margrave’s finances while we were in a stalemate with the enemy was a very feminine way of thinking. But it seemed like, despite all that, the vice-captain was intrigued by my plan.

“This is all very interesting, but your plan comes at a steep price, doesn’t it?” she asked.

“I won’t make it that expensive, though I might end up making some unreasonable demands from the margrave’s family in the future,” I said.

“I’ll let Lord Leon take care of that.”

“Then we have a deal.”

After our agreement, the vice-captain leaned forward, eager to hear more about my strategy.

“My plan is...”



“Do you think it’ll work?”

My son, who was serving as my secretary, seemed worried. The other four also looked concerned.

“I think it should be fine,” I said. “He’s done something similar to the first stage of his plan before. And the second stage is just a more dramatic version of what he usually does. As for the third part, that’s something we normally handle.”

The plan Tenma had proposed was indeed simple, but if it was successful, the effects would be substantial. It could turn out to be very beneficial to us in the long run too.

“Well, we’ll know at sunrise tomorrow—or today, rather. We should all get some rest since we’ll have a busy day tomorrow.”

Despite what I had said to my children, I wasn’t sure that I fully trusted

Tenma. Deep down, I had a nagging worry. What if he hadn't truly forgiven us for the past and was trying to sabotage us? That anxiety caused me to not get enough sleep that night.

"It's so noisy in the morning... I wish I could get some more rest."

I needed a lot more sleep, but as the vice-captain, I couldn't afford to show any signs of weakness. So with that, I stepped out of the tent I'd slept in and surveyed my surroundings.

However, our camp was suddenly surrounded by something that wasn't there before I went to sleep the previous night.

"Well, that certainly woke me up!" I said. "Maybe we won't be in the red after all..."



"What do you think?"

I finished my work before dawn and took a short nap in the carriage. I woke up to the sounds of surprise around the camp.

During a walk to clear my head, I came across the vice-captain.

"Eep!" She seemed so enthralled by what I'd made that she jumped in surprise and let out a weird noise when I spoke to her. "This is beyond incredible! If the engineers find out you made all this in a matter of hours, they might lose their jobs and be unable to sleep at night!" She was so excited that she couldn't stop praising me. "How did you do it?" She was so impressed that she just had to know how this had happened.

Leon suddenly came running toward us, out of breath. "Stop right there, Vice-Captain!"

At the same time, Lyra finally noticed the crowd around us.

"Haah, haah... Vice-Captain, from the outside, it might look like a high-ranking officer from Haust is trying to steal trade secrets from an adventurer. This isn't the place for such a discussion."

"And if this gets back to Queen Maria, I'll lose my head!" another voice suddenly said.

“Exactly! My head... Wait, Cain? Are you making fun of me?!”

Leon was scolding the vice-captain, but Cain had sneaked up behind Leon and was mimicking him. I had thought it was unusually noble-like for Leon to say something like that, but it made sense once I realized it was because he was scared of Queen Maria. Well, I had kind of suspected it all along—after all, this *was* Leon we were talking about.

“Why don’t we move this discussion to the vice-captain’s tent? I won’t stop you if you really want to talk about it here, but I might say something I shouldn’t. I think it would be wise to move, for all of our sakes,” Gramps said.

Leon and Cain were arguing back and forth, and the vice-captain hesitated to continue. Gramps took that opportunity to intervene and gave her a warning. It seemed he was somewhat upset with her.

Lyra sensed Gramps’s anger and bowed to me and him. “I’m sorry, I lost my composure. Please come to my tent so I can formally apologize.” While she had verbally invited us, she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. She firmly grabbed my arm to take me over to the tent.

“All right. I have some things I’d like to discuss too, so I’ll come with you,” I said. There were a few reasons why I decided to accept this. I could’ve easily pulled away from her, but I didn’t want to damage the friendly relationship I’d worked so hard to build with Leon’s family. More importantly than that, Leon had told me about the vice-captain’s personality beforehand—I’d expected her to act like this.

She smiled at me, immediately clenched my arm, and led me away. It seemed she had no intention of letting go until we were inside her tent.

“Good for you, Leon. You managed to avoid being executed,” Cain quipped.

“Shut up, Cain. You’d better pray that Gary doesn’t get *his* head lopped off after one of his screw-ups.”

“Argh...”

Leon was relieved to see me going with the vice-captain but was visibly irritated by Cain’s comment and even retorted using Gary’s name. Cain was caught off guard by the unexpected counterattack. He was speechless and

looked stunned for a moment.

There were several adventurers who were approaching out of curiosity, but they were ushered away.

Kriss was wearing her royal guard's armor as she called out to them. "Only authorized personnel are allowed past this point! Anyone who tries to approach will be seen as threatening the nobles!"

"Master Tenma is terrifying when he's angry, so please don't come any closer!" Jeanne said, in her maid uniform.

"Yeah, he's *really* scary, so stay away!" Aura agreed, also in her maid uniform.

"Grrr! Step back! If you get any closer, Tenma will make you yell 'Hidebu!' So step back!"

"I have no idea what Amur is saying, but I assure you that angering Tenma will lead to trouble! And if you don't want to draw the ire of the Duke of Sanga, Marquis Sammons, and Margrave Haust, you'd better stay away!" Albert added. He was instantly recognizable as a noble.

The others were busy keeping the adventurers at bay with Shiromaru keeping guard behind. There was no way the onlookers would get close to me and the vice-captain.

After that, knights began to gather and took over the task of keeping people away from Kriss and the others.

"It's understandable to be this cautious, given the possibility of spies," the vice-captain muttered.

"Actually, I have something to tell you about that," I said.

She looked surprised for a brief moment, but when she realized I was talking about spies, she began to walk more quickly.

Once we got inside the tent, her five children who had also been present yesterday were already there, waiting. Our meeting space had already been set up. Apparently, they had been alerted by the commotion.

Aside from them and the vice-captain, Gramps, the three noble idiots, and I were inside the tent too. The rest of my party stayed outside—Jeanne and Aura

were maids, Amur disliked formal meetings, and Kriss, Rocket, and the others were acting as guards for the girls, so they didn't need to be here.

"Sorry for the excitement earlier. I'd like to formally apologize for that and also discuss the wall surrounding our camp." The vice-captain started with a brief apology and quickly moved past it. She got straight to the point as she seemed very concerned about the wall.

Leon seemed exasperated by her attitude. "Vice-Captain..."

"It's fine, Leon. I can't go into too much detail, however," I replied.

"That's fine with me!" she said and nodded eagerly, leaning forward with anticipation.

"I constructed the wall with a method we used in Kukuri Village long ago. The exact method is a secret, but, basically, we used magic to dig out a moat and then built the wall using the displaced soil from that."

The vice-captain gave me a look that seemed to say "Why is he stating the obvious?" but the explanation I'd given was a simplified version of what we'd actually done. I had put golem cores into the ground, activated them all at the same time to dig the moat, and then lined the golems up to create a wall. That was why the explanation *had* to sound so simple—I couldn't reveal that key detail. Thanks to Rocket's expert stealth skills, it would've appeared as if the earth had suddenly risen to form a wall, even if someone had been watching at that exact moment.

"Well, it might not be strong enough, but we can reinforce it later," I said.

"Oh, yes, that shouldn't be a problem. Even if it's not as sturdy as we'd like it to be, the impact of suddenly seeing your enemy having a wall is significant," she said. Then, her excited demeanor took a shift and she now looked at me intently with a serious expression, "So, what's this report about the spies?"

"Just so you know, I can't tell if someone's a spy just by looking at someone," I began, and the vice-captain nodded silently. Meanwhile, everyone looked at me with puzzled expressions. "That said, I took the liberty of detaining those I suspected of being double agents. And by that, I mean only those who acted in a way that made them seem like they were spies."

“In this situation, there’s no issue with you detaining those who act suspiciously. But it’s important for you to provide sufficient cause to convince me of such.” The vice-captain quickly glanced at Leon before turning her sharp gaze on me again.

“That makes sense,” I said. “Anyway, here they are.”

I opened the dimension bag containing the people I had detained and motioned for her to check inside.

“What?!”

“Who *are* these people, Vice-Captain?”

Both the vice-captain and her secretary were shocked, and it was no wonder when they saw who was inside my dimension bag...

I had detained ten people—there were six adventurers and four others dressed in the uniforms or armor of the margrave’s army inside my dimension bag.

Even though both the vice-captain and her secretary had anticipated there had been a spy among the margrave’s soldiers, they were incredibly shocked to see one person in particular in my bag.

The vice-captain’s secretary was the first to lunge at me. “What’s the meaning of this?! You’ve locked the commander of our army in there!”

However, the vice-captain grabbed his shoulder, pushing him back down into his chair. “What made you determine these people were spies? Judging by Lord Leon’s demeanor, I assume you had a solid reason and he approves, yes?” she asked.

“That’s correct,” I said. “First of all, these adventurers all attempted to contact someone as soon as the wall was constructed. This one appears to be a Tamer—he tied a letter to a small bird-type monster’s leg and sent it in the direction of the enemy. Luckily, my follower caught that monster mid-flight and retrieved the note. The man next to him tried to scale the wall and used a mirror to signal something to the enemy. When we interrogated them with Lord Leon present, both men confessed.”

We hadn't had time to question the other adventurers, but we'd caught them trying to leave the area while others were still in shock after the sudden appearance of the wall. They might not have been spies, but since they'd acted suspiciously, that'd been enough grounds to detain them. And given their behavior, it wasn't out of the question to conclude that they could be spies.

"As for the soldiers, their names came up when we interrogated the adventurers. While I can't say for certain where their loyalties lie, I detained them out of caution. I did ask them to come voluntarily at first, but they all refused, so I had no choice but to capture them like this."

Of course, there was always a possibility that the captive adventurers had just thrown out some random names of officers they knew. But the fact that these officers had refused Lord Leon's request when he was the future margrave gave us more than enough reason to suspect them of being spies.

I wasn't quite done though. "One more thing... The commander named one more person as being a spy. And that's your secretary, Vice-Captain."

"What?! There's no way my son could be a spy. Right? Hey...!" The vice-captain tried to protest, but the color drained from her face when she saw the pained expression on Leon's face. She then looked over at her son, and it seemed to dawn on her that we were telling the truth. "But why...?"

"Vice-captain, I understand you have questions, but we need to detain this man first," Leon said.

I moved to carry out Leon's command, and to my surprise, the secretary surrendered without a fight. I'd expected him to resist, so I was honestly taken a bit off guard, but I refocused so I could detain him.

Now that we'd unmasked the vice-captain's son as a spy, Leon decided to temporarily confine the vice-captain herself until her innocence could be proven. This left the margrave's knights without a commander, however. To prevent the truth from getting out, we decided to spread the word that the vice-captain had fallen ill and Leon would serve as temporary commander until she had "recovered."

"Now, most of our mission's objectives should be complete. But while I'm here, I think I should alter the terrain a bit in our favor," I said. "Leon, I'm about

to create a little confusion here, so I'm going to need your help managing things."

"Huh?" he asked, looking confused.

As soon as we made the decision to confine the vice-captain, we also decided to put the rest of her children on lockdown, so Leon, Albert, and Cain discussed how to excuse their absences and divide their duties. Albert and Cain were both hired temporarily to the margrave's army, serving as representatives for the reinforcements from Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons who had yet to arrive. At the same time, Kriss and Gramps came on board as temporary advisors. But when I interrupted their conversation and said I wanted to alter the terrain, that seemed to confuse them all.

"I'm already prepared to do what I planned, so it won't take long," I promised.

When I had made the earthen wall, I'd set up a certain mechanism on the other side. By stopping the enemy's movements, I thought I could buy time for Leon and the others. This was my own way of providing support.

"Hang on, I'm coming with you!" Leon protested. "I don't want you pulling any crazy stunts without my knowledge!"

Cain agreed with him. "He's right. From now on, Leon will be held responsible for whatever you do, Tenma. And that could very well become our responsibility too."

With that, Cain and Albert quickly stood up and followed behind Leon, who was already trailing behind me.

"You can all come, but like I said, it'll be over in no time," I said.

Gramps and Kriss didn't seem to be interested in joining us. Those two were settled in their chairs instead, watching over our four captives as they sipped tea and munched on the snacks I'd brought out. I'd even put out some snacks that were similar to rice crackers, so I figured it wouldn't be long until Amur and Shiromaru came over. They'd certainly be drawn in by the sound and smell of snack time.

Meanwhile, I led Leon, Cain, and Albert to the top of the wall. There were some adventurers gathered nearby as well as knights keeping strict watch to

prevent anyone from climbing up it. It seemed like the warning I had given earlier had been effective—I'd said that anyone attempting to scale the wall would be detained.

It was almost *too* effective, though—when I used magic to try to jump onto the wall, a nearby knight tried to capture me. That led the three idiots—mainly Leon—to laugh and tease me. I swore then and there that I'd make them pay for that someday...

"What exactly are you trying to do here, Tenma? And please have mercy on me when you get your revenge. Take it out on those two instead, okay?" Cain said in a hushed voice as he stood on the wall next to me. He'd also sneaked in an apology, throwing the other two under the bus to save himself. He was being cautious by speaking quietly, but Rocket was still transporting the other two up the wall, so it wasn't like they could hear anyway.

"No, I'm going to get my revenge on all three of you. You're the *three* idiots, so you're a set. Anyway, things are about to get pretty shaky up here, so make sure you hang on tight to Rocket," I said.

"What? All three of us?! Wait, what do you mean, shaky?" Cain tried to protest, realizing that selling his friends out wouldn't save him at all.

Cain didn't seem to understand what I was saying at first either, but the other two immediately hung on tightly to Rocket, bracing themselves for whatever was coming. They raised their fists to signal that they were ready.

"All right then, let's get started!" I said.

"Wait, I'm not ready yet!" Cain yelled.



With that, I began to focus my mind on reshaping the surrounding terrain. Then, I cast a spell.

“Earthquake!”

The moment I activated the spell, the area of ground between the margrave’s army and the enemy forces began to shake. The tremors gradually spread from the epicenter, growing stronger and stronger until they were so intense no one could remain on their feet.

“That should do it,” I said.

“This...is way too much!”

As I spotted the adventurers below being tossed about, I finished the spell and admired the result. Cain had been clinging to me and sounded dazed. Right before I’d caused the tremors, I’d used Float to lift us into the air. Cain must’ve realized he couldn’t make it to Rocket in time, so he’d grabbed onto my leg. Luckily, Rocket had extended a tentacle to wrap around Cain and my leg to make sure we were safe, which was good since Cain probably would’ve fallen in shock.

The other two seemed equally stunned and were left completely speechless at the sight before them. They probably would’ve tumbled off of the wall if Rocket hadn’t secured them.

The reason they were so shocked was obvious.

“That was quite a spell!” Gramps said. “You turned the plains into rocky terrain!” He had come over after hearing the commotion and was now pointing out how the once grassy plains had been transformed into a rugged, rocky mass of brown rock thanks to my spell.

“Perfect timing, Gramps. This spell used a ton of mana, so I’m pretty exhausted. I’m going to sleep for a bit. Can you explain things to Kriss and the others for me?”

The Earthquake spell I’d just used had consumed as much mana as Tempest. Even though I hadn’t used it at its full power, I could already feel the fatigue setting in.

“If you insist. But you make sure you explain everything to them personally once you wake up, got it?” Gramps said.

“Sure...” Since I’d had an early morning anyway, I gave Gramps a lazy reply and headed back to the carriage.

The moment I said I was going to rest, Rocket extricated Cain from my leg and placed him next to Leon and the others. Honestly, it was quite a sight to see the heirs of three great noble families sitting dazedly on top of the earthen wall. Well, it’d seem that way to anyone but me, of course. I’d seen crazier things.

When I reached the carriage, Jeanne and Aura were outside it, pelting me with questions about the earthquake. I told them to ask Gramps, and they immediately understood I’d been behind it and didn’t ask any more questions. I told them I was going to sleep, so Aura tried to send Jeanne inside, but I locked the door before she could enter. I heard her click her tongue in frustration. I made a mental note to report this to Aina later, imagining Aura’s reaction.

“Yaaawn...”

How long had I been asleep? I guessed it’d been around three hours or so. I had woken up to the sound of Kriss knocking on the carriage door. Apparently, she couldn’t wait any longer. I quickly got dressed and went outside.

Kriss was there, looking like she had a lot to say. Amur was next to her and seemed quite irritated for some reason. The three idiots had kept Kriss company while she waited for me. Jeanne and Aura were with Shiromaru and Solomon a bit farther away, preparing lunch. My two followers stayed close to them even after I came out of the carriage.

“Morning, Kriss. Where’s Gramps?”

“Master Merlin is taking over prisoner watch for me,” Kriss said. “You know what I want to say, don’t you, Tenma?”

“Yeah. Sorry that there are no decent men here either, Kriss. Guess you have to settle for Leon.”

“I know, right?! I came all this way, and there’s not a single good man around. But there’s no way I’m settling for Leon. No one would willingly take the short

end of the stick... Er, wait! That's not what I meant!"

I thought that was a rather long-winded joke, but the three idiots were stifling their laughter behind her. I guess they knew better than to let Kriss hear them laugh lest they suffer her wrath. I wondered if Leon even realized that she was making fun of him, but based on how much he was cracking up, probably not.

"All jokes aside, you want to know about the spell I cast before I went to sleep, right?" I asked.

"Bingo! You gotta let me know beforehand if you're going to use something like that! The horses and the Tamers' followers all went nuts because of it!" she exclaimed.

I genuinely felt bad about that. Fortunately, none of the horses or followers had been harmed, and no one had been injured when the chaos had broken out. But Kriss still scolded me, saying that the damage could've been a lot worse had things gone wrong. I knew it was my fault, so I stayed quiet and accepted the lecture.

I still couldn't understand why Amur was looking so annoyed, but...

"I wanted to sleep with you too!" she protested.

And with that, I realized there was nothing to be concerned about there, so I decided to ignore her.

"So, how are the vice-captain and her children? Especially the son who turned out to be a spy?" I asked.

"He doesn't seem to be showing any remorse. The vice-captain and her other children have returned to duty, but we need to keep an eye on them just in case. We should monitor them for a while," Kriss said.

She also told me that, for now, Gramps had been assigned to keep an eye on them. But all he was doing was just sitting in a corner and watching them, letting them go wherever they pleased.

When our investigation had concluded, we determined that the vice-captain and her other children had shown no suspicious activity.

"We have a general idea of why the secretary became a spy," Kriss said. She

then explained that the secretary had told her, Gramps, and Leon that his reason for spying was to prolong the conflict and provoke an attack from the enemy. He'd then gain credit for defeating them.

Another thing we learned was that although the vice-captain had called the secretary her son, he wasn't her biological child. In fact, none of them were—they were all adopted. She had saved them all as orphans, and the secretary wanted to repay his debt to her. But his plan was to ultimately succeed her in her position.

Holding such a role in the margrave's army required both skill and achievement, which the secretary lacked. Not only that, but he was merely average in terms of physical abilities and military leadership skills. He was frustrated by that and ended up falling into the role of a spy after the commander had manipulated him. He'd been told that "if you defeat the enemy, everyone will recognize you as being skilled enough to succeed the vice-captain."

"And because of that, although his actions as a spy were treasonous, he had been coerced. After taking into consideration his and the vice-captain's contributions up until this point, we decided to reduce his sentence. He's been condemned to slavery instead of death. However, since the vice-captain and her children can't own slaves due to their titles, we'll need to consult the margrave about this matter."

Although the secretary had been the primary culprit, someone worse had been involved. Sparing his life was seen as a way to ensure the vice-captain's family's loyalty to the margrave, so that's why they had decided to sentence him to slavery. Meanwhile, the commander had been found to be fully connected to the enemy forces and had thereby been sentenced to immediate execution based on the testimony of the other knights that'd been captured with him. He would be handed over to the margrave to be executed, and he'd already been replaced by several trustworthy knights.

As for the other captured adventurers and knights, they were also to be condemned to slavery and would be sent off once the knights had returned from informing the margrave what had transpired. There had been talk of executing them as well, but their sentences had been lessened due to the

valuable information they'd provided regarding the commander.

"I feel like I've been working way too much..." I said.

"Me too. I have way more work because of this, but no pay raise to match it! Why?!" Kriss then sighed, explaining that one of the royal guards' duties was to keep watch for potential traitors. In this case, monitoring those suspected of being spies was considered to be part of her usual workload.

"So the vice-captain and her kids are working hard to get the secretary's sentence reduced, huh? Well, I guess it's not a sure thing that there are no more spies, but after we caught this many, I doubt any others would make a move," I said. "Just be a little more patient, Kriss. And you'd be better off giving up on that raise."

It seemed like the vice-captain and the others believed that the better their results were, the more likely it would be that the secretary's sentence would be reduced. They might've been hoping that even if they couldn't be the secretary's master, they could at least entrust him to be the slave of someone they knew. And as long as the margrave's family took custody of the secretary and didn't treat him badly, the vice-captain and her family would remain loyal allies.

"Anyway, back to the main topic. What was that earthquake about? I figured it was one of your spells, but what kind?" Kriss asked.

"That was a spell called Earthquake—in terms of scale, it's on par with Tempest. But since I prepared in advance and held back this time, I didn't pass out like I did when I used Tempest. But if I hadn't gotten myself ready for it, I probably wouldn't have been able to move from the carriage for a while, even if I had held back," I said.

"That was you 'holding back'? A spell on par with Tempest? Tenma, you're a walking catastrophe."

I supposed I couldn't argue with her. Tempests and earthquakes were both natural disasters—catastrophes—so she wasn't entirely wrong. But still, it didn't sit right with me.

"By the way... You don't have any other spells like that, do you?" she asked.

“I’m keeping that a secret.”

She sighed, giving me a look that said, “So you *do* have more.”

Well, I did have a few smaller-scale spells that mimicked natural disasters, but none were as powerful as Tempest or Earthquake. To be honest, though, those two spells weren’t even that difficult to pull off.

Sure, they were often seen as extremely difficult high-tier spells due to their large scale and destructive force, but in reality, Tempest was just a big tornado. Earthquake was just repeatedly casting my Earth Wall spell. Yeah, I had to manipulate the air pressure around the tornado or set specific areas for the ground to raise, but when it boiled down to it, it was just brute force powered by my massive mana pool.

I tried to downplay them. “In any case, those spells aren’t anything special. Gramps could probably cast them if he put his mind to it, but maybe not on the same scale.”

“Tenma, there’s no way that’s true...” Kriss said calmly with a glare. She was looking at me like she pitied me.

Leon could barely hold in his laughter. “Pfft... Ha ha ha!”

Kriss and everyone else around—myself included—stared at him like he was the most pathetic person they’d ever seen.

“Putting Leon aside... After you tore up the plains like that, it’ll certainly be harder for them to attack us. But we will need to do some cleanup,” Kriss said.

Right now, there were rocks standing as tall as people in some places, which could be used as cover or shields by the enemy. If we destroyed those, though, all that would be left was rugged terrain that would slow down movement.

“Let’s let the margrave’s army handle that,” I said.

I’d already sent him a letter informing him that someone connected to the vice-captain had been a spy and that she hadn’t been involved herself. I figured he would probably send additional knights and was planning on leaving once they arrived, but if there weren’t enough of them to take over Kriss’s duties—such as surveillance—we might’ve had to stay longer than we’d expected.

Come to think of it, maybe it would be better to leave Kriss and Leon here and head to the margrave's place to claim our reward...

"Tenma, we're in this party together, remember? You're not thinking of doing something sneaky, are you?" Kriss asked, suspicious.

My thoughts had apparently been written all over my face.

"No, no. I was just thinking that if it comes down to it, I'll leave Leon behind..."

"Good idea. Let's go with that."

"Wait a minute, Kriss! Don't you think that's too harsh?" Leon protested.

Everyone ignored him. We all probably just wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"Putting Leon aside for now... What's your next move, Tenma? The enemy might panic and launch a full-scale attack now that their spies have been cut off and they're facing walls and rocky terrain," Cain said.

He had a point. If the enemy commander was reckless, they could decide to attack us out of desperation.

"Yeah, you're right. Should I line up some wyvern heads? Even a reckless enemy can recognize the threat of a wyvern."

It'd be great if that could slow down the more aggressive people on their side. And if the morale of the adventurers on our side got a boost at the same time, it'd be even better.

"Tenma, if you're gonna butcher a wyvern, I want to eat some of the meat."

"Why not share some with the adventurers too? Just chalk it up to necessary expenses and put the bill in Leon's name."

"Hey, wait! Mmph!"

"Leon agrees. He's ready to take *full responsibility* for the bill and pay Margrave Haust himself."

"Yep. He says he's *thrilled* that he can finally be useful."

The moment Leon had tried to protest, Albert and Cain had quickly shut his

mouth and restrained him.

“Okay, I’ll go report to the vice-captain. And I’ll tell him we got Leon’s permission too,” I said.

Kriss quickly scribbled out a makeshift permit and added Leon’s name to it.

“Here, Tenma. I prepared a permit for you with Leon’s name on it, so just hand this over to her,” Kriss said.

The permit was clearly forged, but since Leon’s normal handwriting was so sloppy, his signature was inconsistent and no one would notice. And even if the vice-captain did realize it was a fake, she would pretend not to notice. She was desperate to do well here to secure a reduced sentence for the secretary, and if that meant causing Leon a bit of trouble to boost the adventurers’ morale, so be it.

“All right. I’ll head out for a bit. Kriss, secure a place where we can butcher the wyverns. Amur, explain the situation to Jeanne and Aura. And Albert and Cain, keep Leon restrained.”

“Got it!”

“Argh!!!”

Leon had roared almost as loud as the four of them combined, but Albert and Cain quickly subdued him.

I told the vice-captain my proposal and mentioned my makeshift permit with Leon’s (forged) signature.

She immediately snatched it from my hand and signed it herself to make it official. “All right. Permission granted!”

“Well, let’s start cooking. First, I need to cut the wyvern’s head off.” I pulled out a wyvern whose neck was almost completely severed and finished the job with one clean cut. “Amur, Rocket, take this and display it right in the center of the wall. Make sure it faces the enemy camp.”

“Got it! Let’s go, Rocket.”

Rocket absorbed the wyvern’s head into his body. Amur then picked him up

and ran toward the wall.

“There’s not much meat on the wings, so I’ll just lob those off as well. After that, I’ll skin it and cut the meat into blocks that’ll be easier to manage. That way, Jeanne and the others will be able to handle cooking it more easily,” I explained.

“I’m all set on my end too,” Gramps said.

Skinning such a large creature was pretty tricky, so while I began with cutting off the wings, Gramps made a few incisions in the wyvern’s skin. We came up with a plan to tear the skin off in one go using Guardian Giganto.

“Wow, it’s peeling off pretty neatly!” Albert exclaimed.

“Yeah, but it’s kind of creepy,” Cain said.

Albert seemed impressed by how little meat stuck to the skin, but Cain found it to be more eerie.

“The skin peeled off just as nicely as when we butchered that dragonsnake a while back. Maybe reptiles have skin that’s easier to remove in general?” I suggested.

“Uh, Tenma... Sure, wyverns and dragonsnakes *are* reptiles, but you don’t usually get to butcher creatures that big every day.”

I pretended not to hear Kriss’s exasperated comment. Instead, I focused on cutting the skinned wyvern meat into one-to two-kilogram blocks.

“Albert and Cain, have Jeanne and Aura slice these blocks into thin strips. Take out the stock pot while you’re at it—I’m going to make miso soup,” I told them.

“Tenma, we’re back!” Amur called. “Mission complete. Oh, and the knights’ cooks are here to help too.”

“Great job, you two. Amur, I’m going to make miso soup, so can you work with the cooks to chop up the vegetables we need? You can decide on the size. And Rocket, keep an eye on Shiromaru and Solomon to make sure they don’t sneak any food.”

“But what about me, Tenma?” Kriss asked.

“Could you, umm, explain things to the adventurers who are watching from over there with Leon? Tell them to bring their own cups or get some from the knights and wait patiently. Also, make sure to let them know that each person gets the same amount no matter how big their cup is,” I said.

“Got it! C’mon, Leon, let’s go!” Kriss said.

“Okay!”

Since Kriss and Leon were the two least helpful people in terms of cooking, I was relieved that they were now in charge of the adventurers instead. I resumed my work with the wyvern carcass.

“I’ll put the organs in a bag for now and deal with them when I have more time,” I said.

Once I’d finished butchering most of the wyvern, I explained how to make miso soup to the knights’ cooks. After I demonstrated the method and let them taste it, I left the rest to them. I figured there would be some variation from how I made it, but since they were experienced cooks, I doubted there would be any major mistakes.

Before long, the massive amount of wyvern soup—or “wy soup,” as Amur called it—was ready. The adventurers downed it all in half the time it took us to make it, successfully boosting their morale just as I’d hoped.

“I guess that means our quest is officially complete,” I said.

“Yes, thank you. Now that the additional knights are stationed too, it’s almost impossible for the enemy to breach our lines. It’s all thanks to the wall you built, Lord Tenma,” the vice-captain said.

A few days after our wy soup feast, reinforcements from both the margrave’s army and the other noble houses had arrived. The border forces had swelled to over ten thousand. If you were to include the adventurers, the total might’ve been closer to fifteen thousand.

Plus, the knights who had arrived as reinforcements had already been told that the spies had been discovered and captured. A military police unit had been formed, comprising trusted individuals within each brigade, and they’d

been tasked with keeping constant watch. Because of that, spies would find it much harder to operate than they had before.

By the way, the knights had also been informed that the vice-captain's son was a spy, and that had almost caused a commotion. But since the leaders of Duke Sanga's and Marquis Sammons's armies had been briefed in advance and had been instructed to support the vice-captain, the situation was settled quickly. These two groups of reinforcements only accounted for just over twenty percent of the total army, and since the margrave's forces were already making up the majority, the other noble armies, which collectively represented less than a third of the total forces here, had little say in the matter.

"I've reinforced the wall since then, so I doubt it'll be easily broken either. But please be cautious of enemy Earth magic. I think reinforcing it sooner than later would be wise. You should use not only stone but also wood and iron to make it more resistant to magical attacks," I said.

Although I'd compressed the earthen walls as much as possible, they would still be quite fragile if they were subjected to Earth magic. It could break them down. Reinforcing them with stone, wood, and iron would help buy time before the walls would be destroyed.

When I brought that up to the vice-captain, she told me she'd already ordered the materials.

"There's something else I'd like to ask you," she then said.

"If it has to do with your son, I want to remain completely uninvolved. Leon asked me about it too, but I don't plan on interfering in internal matters," I said firmly.

If I were to get involved, it could easily lead to factions forming within the margrave's family, which could be dangerous. And if there were any relatives of his who had been plotting to take control, they might try to use my power to their advantage. After all, I had the royal family backing me. The margrave's public perception had been tarnished by the incident at Kukuri Village too, since he was seen as having been on the side of the perpetrators. To people with ill intentions, I must've looked like a convenient figurehead.

Because of all that, I decided I'd remain neutral regarding the matter with the

secretary. Of course, that decision had also come with the expectation of some kind of compensation in return, so...

“I wish to maintain a friendly relationship with both the margrave and you,” I said to the vice-captain, stating what I wanted.

To an outsider, it might’ve sounded like I was threatening her, but she actually seemed reassured. Meanwhile, Leon looked rather displeased. That was because he was the margrave’s liaison—me mentioning the margrave or the vice-captain here essentially meant that Leon would be the one doing all the heavy lifting.

“Shall we head over to the margrave’s place now?” I asked. “Leon, lead the way.”

“Leave it to me...” His response was less enthusiastic than usual, probably because he was feeling uneasy about being used as a bargaining chip. But I was certain Leon would be back to his usual carefree self soon enough.

“All right, then. Let’s head down to the town we visited before. Everyone, get in the carriage!” I said.

First, we stopped at the town we’d passed by before we’d arrived here. Kriss drove the carriage first and was eager to drive for a particular reason.

“Hey, did you run out of clothes to wear again?” Leon asked. “You should at least do some laundry... Ow!”

“That’s not it!” Kriss said after smacking him on the head.

“Jeanne and Aura took care of washing everybody’s clothes and underwear, so even though Kriss is bad at laundry, that’s not the issue, Leon! She probably has some embarrassing stains she doesn’t want to mention!”

“Shut up, Amur!”

Leon looked exasperated after Kriss had whacked him on the head, but Amur easily dodged a similar blow. I wasn’t surprised that Kriss was bad at washing clothing, and I also wasn’t surprised that Jeanne and Aura were doing the laundry for everyone.

Kriss started making excuses, but the group brushed them off lightly and got

into the carriage. I thought the “embarrassing stains” Amur had mentioned had probably stemmed from when Kriss had drunk too much alcohol during our break and had thrown up everywhere. Kriss was hiding it, but, thanks to Amur, everyone knew now. Shortly afterward, we heard the sound of Leon being smacked again, but no one said a word—we were just that used to it.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine if we go to that same inn as last time,” Leon said, so we followed his suggestion.

When the innkeeper gave us the keys, the smile on his face didn’t reach his eyes. “Please don’t cause a commotion like last time...” he said, and to Leon in particular.

“Am I really the next heir to this domain?” Leon muttered, but no one answered.

Everyone quickly went to their assigned rooms except for Kriss—she instead went out to shop for clothes.

“This town is livelier than before, huh?” I said.

“It makes sense since the prices here have risen the most here out of anywhere in the margrave’s territory,” Gramps said.

Prices always rose during times of war, so towns near the border were prime locations for merchants to set up shop.

“That’s only until the border stabilizes, though.”

Gramps agreed. “Yeah. I’m sure the merchants planning for the future will suffer significant losses after Tenma’s activities. It’s their own fault, though.”

Normally, merchants would expect to bring in considerable profits from building bases and trading with the military. Walls were the most expensive part of base construction, but I had already mostly completed the one here with my magic. Not only that, but the vice-captain had already ordered reinforcement materials with a supplementary budget. That meant that merchants would be selling materials to the margrave’s army at regular or discounted rates before they could raise the prices.

And even if they were to try to profit from selling materials, there wasn’t

much demand. If enemy forces retreated after seeing the completed base here, other trades might also suffer. That could lead to the merchants just breaking even, or at worst, they could end up in debt from transport costs.

“Well, there’s no point in worrying too much. It’s not my problem. I just did what I had to do to complete the margrave’s request,” I said.

“True. It’s better to prioritize the margrave over the merchants. Let’s just say that,” Gramps agreed.

If anything happened, I would just push responsibility onto our client, the margrave. And since Leon had been with us, he would take the brunt of the responsibility anyway.

Having wrapped up that conversation with Gramps, I turned to the group of people behind me who’d been listening in.

“So from the wyvern hunt, we’ve got the reward, the honor, and the profits. We’ve also got the credit for helping secure the border, right?” I said.

“That’s right!” they exclaimed in unison.

Amur, Albert, and Cain had all answered loudly, giving us a majority in favor. We decided to adopt that as our basic policy.

“I’m just glad we’re all on one page before meeting with the margrave.”

“Actually, we’re not!” Leon yelled.

But since he was the only one who was opposed, we ignored him.

“Man, prices have gone up since before. What’s going on?” Kriss lamented.

“Guess what, Kriss...”

Just as we were dismissing Leon’s objections, Kriss returned from shopping. She noticed something was weird here and Leon went over to her, perhaps hoping to bring someone over to his side. But after she heard us out...

“I have no objections either,” she said.

And so it was settled. Given the situation, it was only natural for everyone to be on my side. Well, everyone except Leon—it was clear that he was the only one against it.

“All right then, let’s meet up again for dinner,” I said. “And make sure to tell someone first if you leave the inn, especially you, Jeanne and Aura.”

I specifically called them out because both of them had previously made the mistake of leaving without telling Namitaro, which had led to their kidnapping. Although I was sure they’d grown since that incident and doubted it would happen again, Aura was the type to slip up, so it was better to be cautious.

“Why are you singling us out?” Aura asked, looking displeased, but Jeanne nodded in agreement with me.

As long as one of them understood, I figured it would be fine. Everyone ignored Aura’s complaints, and the group went their separate ways. As for Aura, she pouted about being singled out and stayed in her room until dinnertime.

Part Five

“There it is! That’s Shellhide, the central town of Haust’s border territory, where my father lives!”

Two days after we had departed from the border town, we arrived in Shellhide. As Leon said, this was the central town of the border territory and had been built upon a vast hill. It was completely enclosed by walls and, inside them, there were numerous plots of farmland that utilized the town’s natural water sources. This layout allowed for siege defense against potential invasions from neighboring kingdoms.

“Actually, there’s only been one siege here, and it was a long time ago. It was only a few days long, so we’re not really sure how long it would hold up under a prolonged siege,” Leon admitted.

The town hadn’t been completely surrounded during that siege. Shellhide had been along the enemy’s advance route, so it’d just been a defensive measure. However, they had managed to repel the attackers in a field battle before they’d even reached the town. Not only that, but the townspeople had even counterattacked and succeeded in expanding their territory, which expanded the margrave’s territory and thus pushed Shellhide far from the border. The residents wouldn’t have been able to withstand frequent sieges, though.

“And the local specialty is horses,” Leon added.

“For food?!” Amur asked.

Fortunately, he meant warhorses. “This area is full of plains and hills. Letting the horses graze freely helps strengthen their legs and backs,” he explained.

Because of that, warhorses raised near Shellhide were traded at high prices. But even the finest warhorse paled in comparison to Thunderbolt, of course.

“Tenma! It’s Thunderbolt’s time to shine!” Amur said excitedly.

“Thunderbolt already stands out enough as it is,” Cain said coolly.

Amur agreed, but I kept a close watch on Thunderbolt, just in case. I saw that Gramps had tensed his grip on the reins in response to Amur’s comment, but he

quickly released them when he caught my gaze.

“Leon, just to be sure... They *are* going to recognize you here, right?” I asked.

“There’s nothing to worry about! I think...” Leon answered.

“All right, then. I’m betting 1,000G on them not recognizing you,” Cain said.

“Me too!” Albert chimed in.

“Count me in!” said Kriss.

“Same here!” Amur said.

“And me too!” Aura called out.

They were all hoping that we’d be right this time. However, Gramps and Jeanne bet that the soldiers *would* recognize Leon. And just as expected...

“You guys are idiots,” Gramps said.

In the end, the soldiers did recognize him. I figured if they didn’t recognize Leon here, he would really need to consider declining his position as heir altogether. On the other hand, Leon could start punishing those who failed to recognize him. That would make sure his face was well-known, but he might’ve ended up with a bad reputation for being the heir who punished people who didn’t know his face...

“Well, I had a feeling...” Cain said.

“I knew it would end up this way too, but it would’ve been funnier if they didn’t know, so I went along with it,” Albert said.

“We should’ve known better than for Leon to meet our expectations,” Kriss said.

“I really thought he’d come through this time,” Amur said.

“My allowance...” Aura lamented.

It seemed that Albert and Cain had bet that Leon wouldn’t be recognized just for fun, despite having known what the outcome would be. Kriss had placed her bet with a glimmer of hope, but Amur and Aura had really thought Leon wouldn’t be recognized.

“All right, enough fun and games. We need to meet with Margrave Haust, so let’s focus,” I said.

We were on our way to the margrave’s estate, escorted by the knights who’d been summoned by the gatekeepers. The two victors of the bet were driving the carriage. Initially, Jeanne and Aura were supposed to handle driving, but Gramps had said, “I want to know what’s going on outside just in case something happens,” and had switched places with Aura. Honestly, I thought his real motive was that he hadn’t wanted to miss out on something juicy.

But Gramps’s idea didn’t seem to sit well with the Haust knights. Even though the incident had happened a long time ago now, the tension from welcoming a famous figure from the troubled Kukuri Village was evident. They had been trying to calm their nerves by talking to the carriage drivers, but according to Amur and Kriss, Gramps had suddenly made a final-bossesque entrance. When the knight realized who he’d been talking to after a few seconds, he had been frozen with shock.

“The knight might’ve had a heart attack if Tenma had been sitting next to Master Merlin,” Kriss later said after the knight had recovered.

Meanwhile, the knight had spoken in hushed tones to his comrades. “I feel like my life just got shorter... If only Lord Leon had been sitting there...”

Perhaps, as their future lord, Leon would be some kind of mental stabilizer for the knights.

“Still, since this town was built on a hill, it means there are a lot of steep inclines. Thunderbolt’s fine with it, but it must be tough for other horses,” I said.

“That’s why there are a lot of different laws here compared to other towns. The guards often scold merchants coming from the outside,” Leon said.

The laws Leon referred to included the fact that most of Shellhide’s roads were one-way for everyone but pedestrians. There were also restrictions on making right turns.

Due to the many slopes in the town, there were frequent accidents when carriages would try to pass each other. That was why the one-way streets had

been implemented. Similarly, the right-turn restrictions on side roads aimed to reduce collisions between carriages and horses.

Other towns had such regulations, but they weren't applied as broadly as they were in Shellhide. Merchants and adventurers visiting here for the first time often inadvertently violated the rules. The first violation would result in a warning, but subsequent ones incurred fines with the amount depending on the number and nature of the violations.

I noticed the carriage beginning to slow down. "It looks like we've arrived," I said.

We were just about to stop in front of a large gate. The gatekeepers there were initially surprised to see Thunderbolt, but thanks to the knights escorting us and Leon explaining, they quickly opened the gate and guided us to a place where we could park the carriage.

"Sorry, but I should go ahead and get things ready," Leon said.

"I'll go with you," Albert offered.

"Me too," Cain said.

So the three idiots left our party temporarily to receive instructions from their respective fathers.

"Maybe they're getting tips on how to handle Master Tenma?" Aura mused.

As soon as she said that, Jeanne thrust her elbow into Aura's side. "What if Kriss tells Aina you said that?" she hissed.

Realizing her slipup, Aura nervously glanced at Kriss, who had a mischievous grin on her face. That made Aura uneasy, and I could understand why she was frightened—Kriss's expression was genuinely intimidating.

As we waited in the carriage, Shiromaru signaled to me that someone was approaching. Jeanne stepped outside to check and then returned to tell us that a maid was here to guide us to the margrave.

"This way, please," the maid said.

All of us walked behind her, and a few moments later, we reached a door guarded by two knights.

“I’ve brought the guests. Please open the door,” she then said.

The knights looked confused for a moment but then quickly bowed and opened the door.

“Thanks for your hard work,” the maid said before stepping into the room and escorting us inside. A man sat in a sturdy chair inside the room about twenty to thirty meters ahead of us. I guessed he was Margrave Haust. A long rug extended out from where he sat toward the doorway, and three people stood next to it quietly. They also looked surprised but didn’t make any noise out of respect.

The maid continued on, looking unbothered about being in front of the margrave. “Please wait here,” she said and instructed us to stand about ten meters away from the man. Then, she walked over to his side.

Jeanne and Aura had also entered the room with us but quickly moved to a corner of the room. Since they were considered to be my maids, they were allowed in here but were not permitted to stand in front of the margrave.

“Oh!” Kriss let out a noise of surprise when she noticed the maid was now standing next to the margrave.

“What’s wrong, Kriss?” I asked quietly, not turning around.

“I just realized the person who guided us here is the margrave’s wife...” she explained.

This unexpected revelation made not only me but Gramps and Amur glance at Kriss in surprise before turning to look at the woman again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Leon holding his head in his hands. The margrave’s wife had a pleased expression on her face as if her prank had succeeded.

As I pondered why she was wearing a maid’s uniform, the margrave began to speak.

“Thank you for coming all this way. I am Harold von Haust, the lord of the house of Haust,” he said.

True to his title, the margrave had a commanding presence—more than any other noble I’d met before. As for his appearance, my first impression was that

he reminded me of Viscount Mustang.

The reason I felt that way was because he was Leon's father—and I saw Leon as being the epitome of a foolish weakling. The other reason I thought that about the margrave was because he seemed more focused on his wife next to him than on me.

"I appreciate your recent efforts to defeat the wyvern swarm and support us at our border," the margrave then said, pausing to glance at his wife. "And I apologize for the inconvenience caused by the vice-captain of my knight order. I'm truly sorry," he added as he bowed his head. He then, once again, cast a quick glance at his wife.

"As for the various rewards, we're still waiting on all the reports to come in and the calculations to be completed. I'm terribly sorry, but I need to ask you to stay here for a while longer. Of course, we'll cover all expenses during your stay. We've prepared guest rooms in this residence for your party, but if you prefer to stay in town, we have also arranged accommodations at the finest inn. Please feel free to let our staff know if there's anything else you need." With that, the margrave lightly lifted his hips as if to stand and adjust his chair, but...

"Somewhat pompous, isn't he?" Gramps muttered under his breath.

The margrave flinched and froze. It seemed like Gramps's offhand comment had quite an effect on him. I'd been put off by the margrave's attitude too, but more so by how he seemed to be so preoccupied with his wife. Meanwhile, his wife had been smiling the whole time.

"Hmm... Twenty...no, maybe fifteen points?" she said.

Hearing that, the margrave began to tremble. However, his wife continued to smile serenely at us without even glancing at him.

"Nice to meet you all. I am Edelia von Haust, the wife of Harold von Haust and the mother of Leon von Haust. Thank you very much for your assistance with the wyvern hunt and at the border. Your support has been invaluable, not only in terms of defense, but financially. I apologize if my son Leon has caused any trouble for you. If he has, please feel free to correct him without regard to his status. Also..."

Edelia then paused and looked over at the margrave. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled before standing up from his chair.

“The incident at Kukuri Village six years ago was our mistake,” he said. “Although some blame the soldiers who were dispatched, as the one who gave the orders, the responsibility lies with me, the margrave of Haust. I am deeply sorry.” He then bowed deeply.

His sudden apology left both Gramps and I slightly bewildered, and we exchanged glances, unsure of how to respond. Meanwhile, the margrave kept his head bowed.

“Tenma, Master Merlin, perhaps we should listen to what the margrave has to say? It feels inappropriate to make him keep bowing like this,” Kriss said quietly.

Gramps and I asked margrave to lift his head and decided to hear him out.

He stood again and was about to start speaking, but Edelia suggested we move to the adjoining conference room. As soon as we got there, she immediately started to prepare tea. Jeanne and Aura rushed to help, but Edelia gently ushered them back to their positions.

The margrave began speaking once tea had been served, but the man was surprisingly awkward, stumbling over his words and occasionally repeating himself. At first, he spoke about his long-standing desire to apologize for the incident in Kukuri Village six years ago. He’d previously apologized to other survivors from the village but had been unable to reach either of us.

The reason for that delay was that, as with everyone else, he had struggled to determine my whereabouts for a long time, and, once he had, political tensions with neighboring kingdoms prevented him from leaving his territory. As for Gramps, even when the margrave had tried to visit him in the capital after he’d moved there with Uncle Mark and the others, he had been in such a frail state that the king had deemed it too dangerous for the margrave to meet with him.

Gramps would have violent outbursts every time he’d heard the name Margrave Haust, so the king had believed if the margrave were to appear before him, he’d be in grave danger. Although the margrave had apologized to the other Kukuri Village survivors who lived in the capital, including Gramps’s

friends, they couldn't accept his apology since the incident had been so fresh in their minds. It hadn't been until margrave's last visit to the capital that the survivors—excluding Gramps—had accepted his apology, which was shortly before they had found out where I was.

“Gramps, did you really cause that much of a scene?” I asked.

“I don't remember that at all,” Gramps said.

“No, it was quite a commotion! Several parts of Master Merlin's residence were damaged,” Kriss said.

It had mainly been Gramps's bedroom that had been damaged, but had Dean not been called in every time, he might've destroyed his entire estate.

I glanced over at the three idiots and the margrave to confirm that. Albert and Cain had sheepish grins on their faces while Margrave and Leon looked pale and trembled. Later on, Leon told me that he'd been anxious and afraid that if word of their presence in the capital had reached Gramps, he would've been totally wiped out without a trace. And the margrave seemed to have shared his concern.

“Well, I can't say there's no resentment at all about that, but I've decided to forgive you.” I also told them that we'd reached that decision after various discussions with Gramps and Uncle Mark, and that this represented the views of the former residents of Kukuri Village who now resided in the royal capital.

Gramps nodded in agreement, and both Margrave and Margravine Haust, as well as Leon, looked relieved.

“However, as I told Leon before, please understand that if the margrave's family were to become hostile toward me or would try to force me to be involved in their affairs, we will rescind our forgiveness,” I added.

The margrave tensed for a moment at that but nodded. “I heard about that. Apparently, that was a pact that had been made before Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons. My foolish son seems to be manipulated by those two, but I'll make sure to inform my vassals that this was agreed upon by my family.”

It seemed like the margrave understood their intentions, but Leon looked surprised. Meanwhile, Albert and Cain couldn't hold back their laughter, which

made this all the more confusing for Leon.

“There’s nothing more to say from our side,” I said. “And regarding the accommodations...”

“Yes. As we mentioned earlier, you may stay here or in the arranged lodgings in Shellhide. Would you like me to show you the inn first?”

“No. We would prefer to stay here, if that’s all right. We promised Leon that we’d visit with his family, so this is a good opportunity. However...”

“Yes?”

“Please arrange the rooms separately for men and women with distance between them. Since we are all unmarried, we’d like to avoid any potential scandals,” I said.

The margrave nodded vigorously to my request and promised to do so, although Amur and Aura seemed disappointed. For some reason, Lady Edelia also seemed displeased.

“Very well, I’ll have the staff guide you to your rooms as soon as they are ready. Until then, you may rest here.”

And with that, the margrave and his wife left the room, saying they had business to attend to. Before leaving, Lady Edelia had glanced at Kriss, who had also picked up on her displeasure.

“Ugh... I feel so tense now. Meeting with the margrave was nerve-racking, unlike Leon,” Kriss said.

“Yeah,” Jeanne agreed.

“The lady was all smiles, but she was so intimidating too...” Aura said.

Kriss stretched out in her chair as Jeanne and Aura agreed with her. Jeanne and Aura had tried to stand in the corner of the room like before, but Lady Edelia had more or less forced them to sit down.

“I guess you have to be intimidating when you’re in charge of a domain that borders other kingdoms,” I mused.

“That’s true. The margrave seemed to be more of a warrior than Duke Sanga

or Marquis Sammons,” Gramps said.

“Well, those two are bureaucrats,” Albert said.

“Still, I think the margrave’s intensity was a bit different from what everyone assumes,” Cain said.

Gramps and the others looked at him questioningly, but Cain just smiled and looked at Leon. That prompted everyone else to look at Leon too, but he wore a conflicted expression on his face.

“Dad was just nervous. He tends to get nervous and shy around strangers,” Leon admitted.

That seemed to surprise Kriss the most, who’d met the margrave several times.

“So your weak spirit is an inherited condition, Leon...”

“When I asked Dad about it, he said that my mom covers for him in those areas, so it’s not an issue,” Leon said.

“So the initial impression of him being pompous was because he was nervous and shy?”

“And his preoccupation with his wife during the conversation was because he was feeling bashful and looking for reassurance? What was with the fifteen points Lady Edelia mentioned?”

“She was grading him. He came across as pompous because of his jitters, and she was also grading him on his attitude during his apology. She’s probably scolding him right now.”

It seemed like even in the margrave’s family, the woman wore the pants.

“What’s your mother like, anyway?” Gramps asked.

Leon thought about it for a moment. “She supports Dad from behind the scenes without stepping into the spotlight herself. I heard she came to the residence as a young girl for training in etiquette and caught the eye of Dad’s mother—meaning my grandmother, the previous margravine. She married Dad shortly afterward. Her hobbies are cooking and cleaning, so she wears a maid uniform for convenience. She came from a baron’s family, but when the

margrave's vassals tried to persuade Dad to take a concubine to strengthen his position, he was too shy to follow through with it."

"That's pretty unusual for a noble. It's the opposite of what I usually hear," Gramps said.

"Oh, that reminds me. When she was greeting His Majesty, she first checked the position of the palace guards and never glanced at them again. It wasn't so much about checking their placement as it was about avoiding unnecessary eye contact," Kriss said.

"That's probably right," Leon agreed.

"Well, that doesn't mean we should underestimate her. From what I've heard, she's skilled at military command but is a warrior in her own right. Dad says she could face the captain of the palace guards head-on. That's without using magic, though," Cain said.

"Yes, I've heard that too," Kriss said.

It made sense for her to have those kinds of skills to help her manage a domain that neighbors other kingdoms.

"In that case, Leon will have to work extra hard, especially on the political front," I said.

Everyone but Leon laughed at my comment. Just as the laughter settled down, Lady Edelia came in to tell us our rooms were ready. Kriss, Albert, Cain, Jeanne, and Aura seemed to think she just happened to arrive at the right time. However, I could use Detection, Gramps had good intuition, Amur had wild instincts, and Leon was family—the four of us had all known that Lady Edelia had been waiting quietly by the door. She had been hiding her presence, much like Aina or Cruyff. It made me wonder if she had martial arts skills similar to those two.

"The four rooms here are for the men, and the three rooms over here are for the women," she said as she escorted us to our lodgings. The rooms were arranged according to my request, keeping men and women at a distance from each other. However, I noticed that there was one fewer room for the women than I'd expected. Jeanne and Aura were maids, so I'd expected they'd share a

room, but two individual rooms had been prepared for them. It turned out that only three of the women's rooms had been cleaned, however, and Kriss's room was next to Leon's.

"Albert, Cain. Is this for real?" Leon asked.

"Yeah, it's for real."

"Lady Edelia's trying to pair up Leon and Kriss, isn't she?"

It seemed likely that Lady Edelia had honed in on Kriss being a potential candidate for Leon's future wife. However, Kriss had always been firm, saying, "Anyone but Leon!"

"Please don't concern yourself with me, Margravine," Kriss said. Then she grabbed Amur, who had been inching closer to me, by the scruff of her neck. "I've been given strict orders by Queen Maria to keep a close eye on this troublesome child, so I must share a room with her."

Kriss had managed to deftly avoid the margravine's intentions. Despite her high status, Lady Edelia had no choice but to back off after Kriss had name-dropped the queen.

"That's how it is, Mom. Anyway, I wouldn't feel safe with Kriss in the room next to me. Sorry... Ah, never mind." Leon had started his usual light banter, but he quieted down when Kriss glared at him.

Lady Edelia seemed quite disappointed to see that, both at missing out on Kriss and at Leon's lack of improvement.

After deciding on our respective rooms, we had some free time until dinner. I chose the furthest room among the men's quarters. Kriss ignored Amur's input and chose the room farthest from mine.

"Hmm, how should I spend my time until dinner? Maybe I'll just take a nap," I said.

There wasn't really enough time to do anything, so I decided to just rest for a little while.

The room I would stay in was plenty big enough for Shiromaru and my other followers—not at their full size, but with their collars on—so they all sprawled

out comfortably to relax. I put a sign on the door that said, "Sleeping until dinner. Do not disturb." I asked Rocket to manage anyone who might come by and let him know he could wake me up if necessary.

Just before dinner...

"Woof!"

"Ugh!"

I was woken up by Shiromaru's paw. He'd apparently slightly misjudged and placed his paw right on my face instead of on my shoulder or chest. It seemed a bit suspicious, but before I could get angry, Rocket, now in his emperor form, scolded and restrained him. I decided to let it go.

"Hey, Tenma! It's time for dinner!" Leon called from outside the door, announcing that food was ready.

"Coming!"

I quickly tidied up, and then Rocket, Solomon, and I joined Leon. Shiromaru was currently inside Rocket's interior dimensional bag. I was sure he'd let him out at dinnertime so he wouldn't go hungry.

"Let's hurry! Everyone else already went ahead."

Lady Edelia had escorted everyone else, but Leon had come to get me.

"I didn't know you were asleep. I thought I'd come by and hang out in your room, but Rocket chased me off," he said. He also told me that he and the other two idiots had been chatting since there was nothing else to do.

"By the way, Kriss caught Amur by your door at around the same time I came by."

"In that case, I'll have to make sure I lock the door at night," I said.

The two of us chatted as we headed to the dining hall where everyone was already waiting.

"Sorry for the delay," I apologized as I entered the room.

Leon showed me to my seat. Margrave and his wife sat at the head of the

long, rectangular table. Me, Gramps, Amur, Jeanne, and Aura were to their left, and Leon, Albert, Cain, and Kriss were to their right. The arrangement split us into groups depending on whether people were acquainted with the margrave or if they hadn't known him well. Kriss seemed more aligned with me, but she was seated on the opposite side. It probably was due to balancing things out and Lady Edelia's scheming. She hadn't put Kriss next to Leon, but she'd probably wanted to.

"Now, let's have a toast to..." Once we had all been seated, the margrave started to lead a toast, but he was interrupted by a nudge from Lady Edelia's elbow. Several maids came around to pour drinks.

"I'll have tea, please. Amur, you need to have juice or tea because you're a terrible drunk. Jeanne and Aura, the same goes for you."

Kriss turned away the wine the maids tried to pour for everyone, banning alcoholic beverages for Amur, Jeanne, and Aura.

Amur was a viscount's daughter and unaware she had a bad drinking habit, so it was best to prevent any mistakes. Jeanne and Aura were maids, and although they were being treated as guests, it was better that they not drink. They seemed to be aware of this and agreed.

Kriss's choice of tea over alcohol for herself was probably for a different reason. She had a higher alcohol tolerance than most people, but she had a tendency to get carried away, which often led to her getting completely drunk. In fact, when she visited Gramps's estate on her days off, she'd sometimes start drinking in the afternoon and end up so drunk that she'd sleep until the next morning.

When that would happen, Aina would stay behind to look after her. If she weren't around, Jeanne and Aura would take care of things and ensure that Gramps and I didn't have to interact with her.

However, if Kriss got drunk at the margrave's residence, there was a possibility that Lady Edelia might take advantage of the situation. She could throw her into Leon's room somehow, since she wanted to marry Kriss off to Leon.

If he were in a state to make a rational decision, Kriss would probably be

returned to her own room, but he never missed the chance to drink. Leon would likely end up drunk tonight himself.

So, the fact that an unmarried man and woman had spent the night together would lead to social pressure to take responsibility for the situation. Since Kriss would be unable to prove her innocence due to her being drunk, it would likely result in marriage.

It seemed like this possibility had crossed Kriss's mind, which led to her refusing the alcohol. This had made Lady Edelia quite frustrated.

"Let's toast in honor of the new friendship between House Haust and the Otori family! Please, everyone, enjoy this modest banquet!"

Now that the behind-the-scenes maneuvering was finished and everyone's drinks had been served, the margrave led the toast, seemingly unaware of the secret maneuvering involved.

I didn't speak to him much during the meal. The only thing we had in common was the incident at Kukuri Village six years ago or matters related to Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons. It wasn't like I could talk about any of those things with their heirs present, however.

Leon was concerned about the lack of conversation between his father and me, so he made an unusual effort to bridge the gap. But since it was Leon, his efforts had minimal impact. In fact, he often changed the subject just as the margrave seemed ready to join in the conversation, so it seemed like his presence might've been counterproductive in the end...

"Honestly, I can't believe my dad... Anyway, shifting topics, what are your plans for tomorrow?"

After dinner, I joined Leon in his room for a board game. Soon, an all-out competition started among the men, excluding Gramps—he was enjoying some local liquor in his room.

We were playing Reversi, which was identical to the game of the same name from my previous world both in appearance and rules. Although they said they didn't know who had invented it here, it had almost certainly been the work of

someone who'd been reincarnated like me.

In addition to Reversi, there were games here like shogi, chess, sugoroku, and even one that resembled Life. I discovered I wasn't as good at shogi and chess compared to the others. I wasn't exactly bad at it, but I couldn't even stand a chance against Albert or Cain. I ended up competing for last place with Leon.

However, I was somewhat better at Reversi, which is why we were holding a Reversi tournament. But despite being somewhat better at that game, my win rate still wasn't great.

Leon's earlier comment had been made during our ongoing battle for last place.

"Well, for now, sightseeing sounds like a good plan. I'd also like to check out the adventurers' guild to see what kind of quests are available here," I said.

But my main reason for going to the adventurers guild was mainly to show that my relationship with the margrave wasn't bad. I didn't plan to actively take on any quests while I was here, but thought I might accept a few that were looking for materials that I already had on hand. It wasn't for the money—instead, it was because once I accepted a quest, my name would be in the guild's records. That wouldn't necessarily prove that my relationship with the margrave was great, but it would be enough to show that relations between us weren't terrible.

"All right! I won!" I exclaimed.

"Damn it! I lost!" Leon groaned.

The Reversi game had ended with my victory, earning Leon the dubious honor of a reverse triple crown champion—he'd lost in shogi, chess, and now Reversi.

"Congratulations, Leon!"

"Hey! Cain, don't throw garbage around my room!"

"It's not garbage, it's celebratory confetti."

"It looks like garbage to me!"

I'd noticed Cain secretly working on something, but I hadn't expected it to be confetti. He'd made a *lot* of it. Honestly, it was a waste of paper.

“I never expected you to be so bad at shogi and chess.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you’d be so close to Leon either.”

“If I’m close to Leon’s abilities, that means I’m average or above average.”

“If it were a card game, I think the competition would’ve been a bit more even.”

For some reason, I couldn’t anticipate the others’ moves on the board very much. I could predict maybe a move or two ahead, but I couldn’t match Albert and Cain, who seemingly could read several moves ahead. I ended up with a one hundred percent loss rate in shogi and chess and an eighty percent loss rate in Reversi. Leon, on the other hand, had a one hundred percent loss rate across the board. We were almost even matched in our games against each other, causing continuous fierce battles.

“Maybe it’s just me, but could it be that fighting with someone who has exactly the same abilities is a problem for Tenma? Maybe that’s the reason he’s mostly a solo adventurer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, your own abilities are so high that you’ve never had to worry about honing your tactical skills. Shogi and chess are often used by military leaders to improve their command skills, you know? But you’re a solo adventurer, so you don’t really need those. Even if you did form a party, it would be a small group of high-level people, and only as many that you can support. So, as a result, you might not have developed the ability to anticipate future moves.”

Cain seemed confident in his guess. While I could understand where he was coming from, I had a hard time fully accepting it, because...

“If that’s the case, then Tenma’s essentially a meathead!”

I had expected someone would say that. It was frustrating to hear it from Leon since he was the biggest muscle brain of all, but before I could get too annoyed...

“Well, comparing a musclehead who defeated an ancient dragon zombie to a musclehead who almost got killed by a wyvern is like comparing apples to

oranges! And by that, I mean, you can't compare them at all," Albert said.

"Even if Tenma was a musclehead, he defeated an ancient dragon zombie—he'll be remembered as a hero for generations to come. On the other hand, Leon almost got *killed* by a wyvern. You might be remembered as someone who did the best he could, or in the worst-case scenario, as 'the one who only slowed down the hero Tenma.'"

"Besides, no one expects Tenma to have leadership skills, so even if those skills are lacking, it's not right to call him that," Albert said, supporting me.

Despite the dire situation, Leon had lost steam. "You guys almost got killed by wyverns too, you know!" he whined.

"Yeah, but unlike you, we're actually good at shogi and chess," Cain said.

I thought that was a little off the mark, but it was enough to make Leon crumble.

"Let's just put that aside and play something else," Leon then suggested.

"Board games are boring and take too long. How about we just play cards?"

And so we decided to invite Jeanne and the others to join us too.

"All right, Leon, as punishment for losing, go ask the women to join us," Cain said.

"Make sure to tell them it's just a game like Old Maid," Albert added.

Leon, now tasked with inviting the women, shuffled out like a zombie, as if still in shock from the previous incident.

I wanted to know what Albert had meant, so I asked him and Cain about it.

"To tell the truth, Leon had a similar experience when we were students. He invited some female classmates to play card games, but everyone suspected he had ulterior motives and none showed up. It was really embarrassing for him," Cain said.

"It was probably because Leon looked pretty sleazy back then. I can't deny that we might've had *some* ulterior motives, but Leon tends to wear his intentions on his face. He's not very good at expressing himself either," Albert

added.

I felt a pang of anxiety hearing this, but I decided to trust that Leon had grown up since then and wouldn't make the same mistakes now.

However, just a few minutes later, Jeanne and Aura entered the room looking frightened. They were followed by Kriss, who looked furious as she dragged Amur and Leon into the room by the collar.



The moment I saw this scene, I thought, *Uh-oh, Leon's done something again...* I immediately regretted having let him go out on his own.

“Albert! Cain! Tenma! What exactly did you mean by sending Leon to ask if ‘*that old maid*’ would play games with you?!”

We froze, unable to understand what Kriss was saying. It took her grabbing Leon and Amur by the scruffs of their necks and taking a step toward us to snap us back to reality.

Sensing danger, we immediately tried to explain ourselves, and as a result...

“All right, let’s start! Cain, hurry up and deal the cards!”

We had somehow managed to clear up Kriss’s misunderstanding—or at least her feelings about the three of us.

She still hadn’t forgiven Leon and Amur. They were still in trouble with her. Those two were kneeling in the hallway, positioned so we could see them through the open door so they couldn’t cheat and sit cross-legged.

By the way, the reason Kriss was angry was that Leon had said to Amur, “Let’s play Old Maid!” and Amur had replied “Old Maid? Okay, I’ll just go grab Kriss.” Then, Leon had burst out laughing, saying “Not *that* old maid!”

It was a truly idiotic way for them to get in trouble.

And since the phrase “Old Maid” was considered bad luck now, we decided to play “Old Man” instead.

Cain finished dealing out the cards and began to organize his hand. “Here you go. You’ve been pretty tough on Amur lately, don’t you think, Kriss?” he asked.

It was true that Amur could be rather stubborn, but she seemed to listen to Kriss more than anyone else. Well, relatively speaking, anyway. Amur was still a handful most of the time, but it was impressive that Kriss could get her to listen at all. Overall, the people who Amur listened to the most were Gramps, Queen Maria, and then Kriss.

“It’s pretty easy to get her to listen,” Kriss said. “Whenever she starts acting up, I just whisper, ‘I’ll tell Lady Hana about this.’ You see, ever since we teamed up for the martial arts tournament, Hana and I have been writing letters to each

other. And, during one of our talks, she said, 'If Amur ever causes any trouble, just let me know. If she gets too out of hand, I might just take her back to the SAR.' Now, I'm not heartless or anything, so I wasn't planning on tattling on her unless she commits a crime or something. But if she does become too much to handle, I might just have to notify Hana, you know?"

After saying all that, Kriss shot a meaningful glance over at Amur.

"I'm sorry, Lady Kriss! Please don't tell my mother!" Amur pleaded, immediately prostrating herself in an apology.

Sheesh, if she doesn't wanna go back to the SAR that much, then why doesn't she just stop teasing Kriss?

"Conditioned reflexes like that are scary..."

It seemed like Amur had some kind of uncontrollable compulsion to tease Kriss. Kriss just sighed and extended her punishment. Meanwhile, Leon hadn't said a word that entire time. Later, he told us his legs had been too numb for him to even open his mouth.

"Well, there's no sense in worrying about those two. Let's get started," Kriss said.

We began our game of Old Man, but Kriss kept a watchful eye on the hallway as we did. Leon was oblivious to this and tried to shift his legs every now and then and found himself to be the subject of Kriss's glares every time. Amur seemed more composed than Leon, but after a while, even she began struggling to keep kneeling.

"Waah!"

"Leon, be quiet!"

Amur started using her tail to tap and tickle Leon's legs, trying to take him out first so she could sneak in some relief. Of course, she was caught doing this a few times and eventually got bonked on the head by Kriss.

"I'm out!"

After a few rounds of Old Man, we moved on to a game of Tycoon. That

happened because our voices had carried down the hallway through the open door and attracted Gramps's attention.

Now that Gramps was here, Kriss suggested we stop playing Old Man and play another game. We ended up playing with five players, rotating out Commons as needed.

"I'm the Tycoon!"

Unlike chess or shogi, there were surprise comebacks in games of Tycoon thanks to rules like "revolution" and "eight enders." This meant that even Jeanne and Aura, people who weren't fond of board games but liked card games, had a chance to win. Funnily enough, Gramps had been holding Tycoon or Rich rankings since the beginning while Aura seemed stuck between Poor or Rich. Neither of them had been rotated out once.

"How long are we supposed to kneel for?"

"Oh, Cain! You were too slow to use revolution!" Kriss said.

"My bad! Tenma, it's time to switch."

Kriss and Cain had been ignoring Leon's complaints for a while now. Amur, on the other hand, had discovered a trick to make the prolonged kneeling more bearable by supporting more of her weight with her tail. She was currently snoozing away next to Leon, who was still suffering.

Jeanne, who was waiting for her turn, had begun to nod off.

"Hmm? Well, looks like it's time to wrap things up. Jeanne's hit her limit," Gramps said.

"Wow, is it that late already? Okay, let's call it a night. Aura, take Jeanne with you. Amur, wake up," Kriss said.

The ladies decided to head back first, leaving us guys to quickly clean up Leon's room. As we were tidying up, we heard someone yell, "Amur! Your room's not over there!" Apparently, Amur had been pretending to be half asleep so she could sneak into my room.

Now that Kriss had left, Leon was free, but his legs were still too numb to

stand. He let out a strange groan and called for help. “Oof! Albert, Cain... Help me! I can’t get up...”

“All right, let’s carry him. Cain, grab that side,” Albert said.

“Got it.”

“Thanks, you two. I owe ya. Hey, wait! Don’t drag me like that! My legs are killing me! Arrrrghhh!”

The two of them grabbed Leon under his arms and began to roughly drag him to the bed. Every time his numb, tingling legs bumped into the floor or a chair, he screamed in pain. His yelling was so loud that Kriss came back to scold all three of us. That was probably why Kriss had caught Edelia’s eye. In fact, she’d come by and nodded with approval as she secretly watched Kriss lecture us...

After lecturing the three idiots, Kriss suddenly remembered something. “Oh! Tenma, can I borrow Shiromaru for a bit?” she asked.

Since Shiromaru was fond of Kriss, I didn’t mind, but I wasn’t sure why she wanted him.

“Are you going to use him as a body pillow tonight?” I asked half jokingly.

“Yes, but that’s beside the point. This is for your benefit too, Tenma.”

Although I’d meant that as a joke, Kriss immediately admitted it, which surprised me a little. I was curious about why this would be for my benefit, however.

“Look, I can’t say for sure that Amur won’t sneak into your room while I’m asleep. I don’t think she’d go as far as to break the locks, but you never know what she’s capable of. That’s why I want to take Shiromaru into our room—as a precaution,” she explained.

Kriss seemed to think that if Amur were to try anything too crazy, she’d be no match for a real beast like Shiromaru. Still, I had my doubts about who was wilder at this point between Shiromaru and Amur... Anyway, since Rocket would be guarding my room, I figured it wouldn’t be a problem, even if Shiromaru didn’t live up to those expectations.

“Thanks. All right. Let’s go, Shiromaru!”

“Woof!”

“Huh? Where are you going, Shiromaru?” Kriss asked. “Oh, a bathroom break? Yeah, better get that taken care of before bed.”

Kriss had called Shiromaru out from my bag and he’d followed her down the hallway before leaping out a window. She seemed a bit worried for a moment but quickly figured out what was going on.

“Okay, I’m going to go wash up before settling in for the night. Shiromaru, keep an eye on Amur for me!” she said.

“Woof!”

I wasn’t sure whether Shiromaru actually understood her or not, but he barked and followed Kriss this time.

“Well, goodnight!” she called.

After I said goodnight to Gramps and the others, I used the bathroom and then went back to my room. Once I got it locked securely, I asked Rocket to stand guard against Amur so I could finally get some sleep.

“And Solomon, don’t even think about opening that door, even if someone offers you a treat!”

“Squee!” Solomon chirped in protest as if to say, “How could you say that?”

And with that, I got into bed.

Part Six

“Gramps, how about we wrap it up for now?”

“Yeah, I suppose. At my age, it’s tiring to keep up with you, Tenma. I miss the days when you were little.”

The day after our Tycoon tournament, I’d woken up early and sparred with Gramps, another early riser. Lately, Gramps had been talking about how old and tired he felt, but both the king and Dean had said that Gramps’s technique had only gotten sharper since he had begun training them. Ernest even claimed that Gramps was definitely stronger now than when he was young.

Kriss strolled over, looking a bit tired, just as Gramps and I were doing some stretches to cool down. “Good morning! Oh, are you already done?”

“What’s this, Kriss? Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft just because you’re on leave from the royal guard.”

“That’s not it,” she said. “Amur woke me up several times during the night.”

I hadn’t sensed Amur’s presence the night before, so I’d assumed she had decided not to cause trouble in someone else’s room. But it turned out that had only been because Kriss kept stopping her just in time. At Gramps’s mansion, Amur had tried to unlock my door from the outside so many times that, in addition to a regular lock, I had to use a heavy deadbolt made of mythril to secure it.

“Thanks for your hard work, Kriss. And I appreciate the help. Hang on for a few minutes, and I’ll make your favorite tea.”

“Oh, I’d love that.”

I took out a table and chair for Kriss and rushed back to my room to prepare some tea. I always kept food and drinks inside my magic bag for a quick meal, even if I were in a dungeon or the woods.

“Here’s your tea!”

“Thank you very much.”

When I returned, Kriss greeted me with an overly formal air, like a noblewoman. But it was obvious she wasn't used to acting like that, and it didn't suit her either. Since I wasn't Leon, I didn't say anything that could get me in trouble, though. Honestly, I'd forgotten that Kriss was still a noble by birth, though she'd cut ties with her baronet family. As a former member of the royal guard, she held a rank equivalent to that of a baroness, and with her victory at the martial arts tournament and her past achievements, it was almost certain she would eventually be granted the title of baronet or viscountess. In other words, she wasn't just the daughter of a noble, but she was a noble in her own right.

Although I didn't say anything at the time, I later made the mistake of letting that slip in front of Leon and the others. It'd made its way back to Kriss too.

"Since Amur had fallen asleep while kneeling in the hallway, she tried to leave the room several times in the middle of the night. She kept saying she was headed for the bathroom, but when I secretly followed her, she was making a beeline right for your room, Tenma. I ended up making her sleep with Shiromaru right in front of the door, so I missed out on my comfy pillow and everything..." Kriss lamented.

"Well, I appreciate you going through all the trouble. Anyway, what are your plans for today?"

"Hmm... I want to go shopping, but I'm too tired for that. So maybe I'll take a morning nap and then head out to the city this afternoon. How about you, Tenma?"

"I'm thinking of wandering around the city. But first, I'll stop by the adventurers guild to see what quests are available. I'd like to take one that just involves submitting some materials, if possible. After that, I'll explore the town a bit," I said.

"In that case, take Leon with you. That'll be the best way to show off your friendship with the margrave's family," she suggested. "And bring Jeanne and Aura while you're at it. Leon might take you somewhere weird if it's just you two..."

It seemed like Kriss wanted to use Jeanne and Aura as a buffer while she was

away. If I invited Leon, the other two would likely come as well, and if Jeanne and Aura came along, Amur was sure to follow.

“I’ll accompany you to the guild. But after that, I’ll go off on my own. I should pick up souvenirs for Mark and Martha,” Gramps said.

I figured he didn’t want to make Leon and the others nervous by staying with us the whole time.

“Hey, Tenma! It’s almost time for breakfast. Good morning, Master Merlin and Kriss.”

Albert had shown up by himself while the three of us were discussing today’s plans. When I asked where the others were, he said Leon and Cain had overslept and were getting ready while Jeanne and Aura were helping with breakfast. As for Amur, he hadn’t seen her, so she might’ve still been asleep.

“She’s got a lot of nerve sleeping in when she’s the one who kept me up all night,” Kriss grumbled as she headed off to Amur’s room. She seemed determined to get revenge.

“Well, Gramps. Shall we go?”

“All right.”

“Same as always, huh?”

As we made our way to the dining hall after seeing Kriss off, we found Jeanne and Aura sitting there awkwardly.

“I thought you two were helping Lady Edelia?” I asked.

Both of them flinched.

“Well, umm...”

“We’re not slacking off, I promise!” Aura said. “Please don’t tell my sister!”

Aura was frightened, which was clearly suspicious—even more so than Jeanne. I was wondering what was going on when Leon entered the room with Cain.

Leon had an apologetic look on his face. “Mom probably wouldn’t let you help, huh?” he asked. “Mom’s always liked taking care of people, but since

she's the margravine, Dad and Grandma stopped her. Eventually, they reached a compromise where she only waits on guests she's particularly close to or those she knows well. And since you're all my friends, I think she interpreted this as a personal visit rather than you all being official guests. So don't take it personally. It's not that she doesn't trust you or anything like that. And it definitely wasn't because you two did anything wrong."

Jeanne and Aura looked visibly relieved by his explanation.

"I'm glad to hear that... I was worried I'd done something wrong without realizing it and that she was angry with me, and then my sister would find out..."

Aura's relief didn't last long, however. Her face soon turned pale, imagining Aina's reaction if that were to happen.

"I see..." I said, not knowing what else to say to the clearly scared Aura.

Even Jeanne looked a bit pale, although she wasn't as shaken as Aura was. A heavy atmosphere settled over the dining room.

"What's going on in here?" Kriss and the others arrived at that moment, lightening the mood somewhat. Well, that was mostly thanks to Amur, who Kriss was dragging along.

"Kriss? What happened to Amur?"

Amur was wearing her usual clothing, but she was still asleep. She was hugging a pillow as Kriss dragged her by the scruff of the neck with both hands.

"She was still sleeping when I went to her room, so I woke her up, and she got dressed, but as soon as I turned around, she was hugging her pillow and was asleep again. So I just dragged her along."

I didn't really think Kriss needed to go that far... She could've just let Amur sleep. But then, she said, "It's annoying that Amur gets to sleep—I'm exhausted from her keeping me up all night!" so it made sense. Then, Kriss added, "Besides, it's better to sleep after breakfast," although at that point, it just sounded like she was making excuses.

"Well, I guess we should wake her up. Hey, Am—"

Leon interrupted me. “Maybe she’s just pretending to sleep and waiting to pounce on you the moment you get close, Tenma!”

“Tenma, step back. It’s too dangerous,” Kriss said, forbidding me from approaching. “Amur, if you’re awake, then you have until the count of three to show it. And if you don’t, then I’ll exaggerate everything and tell Hana. One, two, th—”

“Tch...” Amur stood up with an irritated click of her tongue before Kriss could finish counting.

“I swear, we can never let our guard down with her. Maybe I really *should* have a serious talk with Hana about this,” Kriss said.

“Please forgive me.” Amur swiftly dropped into a deep bow, her forehead touching the floor.

We were all startled by how quickly she moved, but Kriss just sighed.

“Same old song and dance...”

Apparently, this wasn’t an unusual occurrence when the two of them were alone. The rest of us had no way of knowing that.

“Amur, your hands are dirty now, so go wash up. And wash your face too while you’re at it.”

“Got it.” Amur got up from her dramatic bow and left the dining room to wash up like nothing had happened at all.

“Now she’s acting all high and mighty. There’s no way she’s actually sorry,” Cain said.

“And Kriss didn’t even bat an eye—she’s clearly used to it,” Albert pointed out.

“It must be part of their usual routine,” Leon said, and everyone else nodded in agreement.

The whole exchange felt so natural. Kriss might have said harsh things to Amur, but she was definitely softer on Amur than she let on.

“They almost seem like sisters,” said Gramps.

“Yeah, kind of,” I agreed.

Everyone seemed to accept Gramps’s observation, and before long, we were all laughing together.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Kriss, they’re laughing at me because you left me out!”

To be fair, it was probably Amur’s own fault for being excluded, but she didn’t seem to think so. However, when Kriss bonked her on the head and we explained the real reason we were laughing, the grimaces on her face and Amur’s were identical. They really did seem like sisters.

After we finished our meal, Leon stood up. “All right, let’s get going!”

With him leading the way, we set out into town. Kriss was taking a nap as she’d planned, but she said she might meet up with us later in the afternoon. I suggested that we leave Shiromaru behind just in case, but he wanted to come with us. So, we told Kriss that she could just ask the townspeople where Leon was to find us.

“Let’s hit the guild first. We just took out the wyverns and goblins though, so there might not be any major quests left.”

“Leon, we don’t have time for anything big right now. If you want to take one, go right ahead and do it by yourself. The rest of us will just do some sightseeing in the meantime,” Cain said.

“That’s right,” Albert said, agreeing. “We’ve already been to this town a few times, and the guards already know we’re here. We can just ask them for help if we get lost.”

Leon seemed to have forgotten that the reason we were visiting the guild was to show off my connection to the margrave’s family. When Cain and Albert quickly pointed this out, Leon fell silent.

“I think the guild is this way. Let’s go,” said Cain, now taking charge and leaving Leon behind. It made sense that he was familiar with the layout of Shellhide—his father was a close friend of Leon’s father.

“Here’s the adventurers guild. We sent word earlier this morning that we would be coming here, so there shouldn’t be any commotion.”

“You say that like it was your idea, but Lady Edelia was the one who made the arrangements for us. You were still in bed when she asked me to pass the message along,” Albert said.

I had just been thinking about how Leon had done a good job arranging things for us, but it turned out that Edelia had taken care of everything. Albert had casually exposed Leon’s lack of initiative.

“Well, let’s be sure to thank Lady Edelia when we get home later,” I said.

Everyone except Leon laughed as we stepped through the door. The building was filled with adventurers, but no one approached us, most likely because they’d been notified beforehand of our arrival. One middle-aged man looked like he might say something, but Leon raised his hand and signaled for him to stay put. The man obediently sat back down.

“That’s the guildmaster there. You might want to remember his face,” Leon said.

I glanced at the man, but to be honest, his face was so unremarkable that I thought I’d probably forget what he looked like the moment we left town.

We made our way to the bulletin board, ignoring the stares of the other adventurers. As we approached, the adventurers who’d been gathered in front of it moved aside without a word. Perhaps the guildmaster had warned them about us too, but whatever the case, we decided to check out the posted quests.

“Most of these are the same kinds of jobs we’d find in the capital. Hmm... What should I pick?”

There were jobs posted requesting herbs and various monster materials, just like in the capital. I was mulling them over when Jeanne, who’d been looking elsewhere, noticed something.

“There’s one that really stands out from the others,” she said, pointing to a

post with an exasperated expression.

“Let’s see... ‘Request for wyvern materials, any parts accepted. Bonus for delivering a whole specimen’...”

Although the client wasn’t the margrave himself, they were likely connected to him. This job had been posted just today, which meant that it had been tailored for us.

“Leon, do you recognize this name?”

“Huh? Let me see... Oh yeah, that’s a neighbor from my mom’s side of the family. They’re merchants and deal in all sorts of goods.”

It was hard to say for sure if this posting was connected to the margrave’s family, but the 20,000,000G reward for a whole wyvern was very generous.

“Guess we’ll take this one,” I said. “Though if I don’t, who else would?”

“There’s no doubt the margrave’s family is involved. They probably covered part of the reward themselves to make sure Tenma’s name gets out there,” Albert mused.

That made sense. Involving a third party would be smarter than handling it themselves. Since there were no obvious issues, I decided to accept the request.

“Hey, Tenma. When you come to visit my duchy, would you drop something off wholesale at our guild too?” Albert suggested. It seemed that he had sensed the margrave’s motives.

Cain quickly jumped on board. “Oh! And my territory as well!”

“Sure, if I get the chance.”

If I were to ever visit their territories, I’d probably swing by their guilds anyway. Taking on a quest or two wouldn’t hurt.

“Oh, are you taking the wyvern quest? Please wait a moment!”

As soon as I had handed over the post form at the reception desk, the receptionist looked at my face and quickly disappeared into the back.

“I haven’t even said anything yet...”

“They probably had advance notice that you might take the wyvern job, Tenma. Should we be sneaky and swap it with another quest while we wait?” Cain said.

Albert shook his head. “No way, that’s a bit too cruel. I mean, if *Leon* was the one at the counter, then sure. But that wouldn’t be a nice thing to do to this receptionist.”

“Oh, so you’d do that to me?” Leon asked.

“Of course we would!” the other two promptly replied.

Many of the adventurers around us who had been watching their banter stifled laughter. A few of them, however, were glaring at us with clear resentment.

Leon whispered a warning to me, Cain, and Albert. “Tenma, don’t make eye contact. You two as well.”

Jeanne and Aura were about to glance their way, but Amur quickly poked those two in the sides to distract them. Judging by the girls’ pained expressions, she might have used a bit too much force. But luckily, from the outside, it just looked like they were messing around.

Gramps scolded them. “Stop fooling around in a place like this!”

A man stepped forward to address up, replacing the receptionist.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! If you have any wyvern materials with you, would you mind presenting them now?”

He was the guildmaster that Leon had pointed out earlier.

“You’re the guildmaster, right? Isn’t the guild supposed to keep things like this secret?” I asked.

“I’m very sorry!” he said. “This particular request was marked as being urgent by one of our most valued clients. However, we are currently lacking adventurers capable of hunting wyverns, so we’ve been at a complete loss. Also, if it’s not too much trouble, may I ask to see just a small portion of the wyvern as proof?”

“Guildmaster, what do you mean?!” Leon exclaimed.

“That’s fine... Just one part is all right?” I asked.

“Yes, please.”

Leon had reached out to stop the guildmaster, but something about this piqued my curiosity, so I decided to follow through with his request. I took out a part of the wyvern.

“Please wait a moment. Here, this should do,” I said.

After briefly considering which part to show, I decided on something that would surely make an impression.

“Eek!”

“Waaaah!”

I’d pulled out the head of the largest wyvern we’d slain. The screams had come from Jeanne and Aura. The two of them had been directly in front of where I pulled it out—they apparently hadn’t been expecting to come face-to-face (literally) with a wyvern’s severed head.

“I have the rest of its body stored in this magic bag. Shall I take out the other parts as well?” I asked.

“No, this is enough. Please forgive my rudeness.” The guildmaster’s demeanor shifted abruptly, and he dipped into a low bow.

Leon, who had been about to grab the man, stood there in stunned silence.

“It seems like there’s more going on here than meets the eye. Do you have somewhere private we can talk without interruptions?” I asked.

“We have a VIP room in the back.”

The guildmaster gave some instructions to one of the receptionists before leading us farther into the guild.

Once we were led into the VIP room, I waited a moment for everyone to take their seats.

“Well then, Leon. Before we talk to the guildmaster, I want to ask about those adventurers from earlier,” I said.

“Oh, those guys? Well...” Leon seemed unsure of how to respond and took his

time answering.

“You mean the adventurers who were glaring at you while we were at the reception desk, right?” the guildmaster said, answering for Leon. “They’re related to soldiers who were punished due to the Kukuri Village incident. They aren’t immediate family members of theirs, but more like distant relatives or close friends.”

“H-Hey!” Leon protested.

“Lord Leon, it’s fine. The margrave, and the margrave alone, was responsible for the incident. He took responsibility for punishing those directly involved. If those people are angry at the margrave, that would be one thing. But blaming Tenma, the victim, is completely unreasonable. If those people try to harm you because of it, as the guildmaster of the Shellhide adventurers guild, I will have their heads. And I mean that literally.”

Hearing the guildmaster speak so casually about decapitating those adventurers surprised Leon for a moment, but then he quickly sat back down.

“Lord Leon, have you forgotten? This guild nearly went bankrupt because of those soldiers’ relatives and friends. Honestly, it’s a wonder we were able to recover at all. If anyone tries to drag this guild back into ruin, taking preventative measures is the least we can do.”

That kind of thinking was expected from someone in a leadership position. The guildmaster wasn’t necessarily siding with me here. He was just choosing what would be best for the guild.

“So you had me present a part of the wyvern to make a statement to the adventurers out there. Did you know I would show the head?” I asked.

“Yes. While there was a chance you could’ve shown me the wings or the body, I figured the head would be the easiest to present. Anyone who sees a wyvern’s head is likely to talk about it when they visit the other guilds. And hearing it from a third party adds to credibility more than if the guild just promoted it ourselves.”

“Just like the real client’s aim for this request.”

“Exactly.”

This guildmaster seemed to have more of a merchant's mindset than that of an adventurer.

"I should mention that I probably won't be using this guild much in the future," I admitted.

"Still, the value of a single visit here from you outweighs the number of achievements those others have had thus far and will have in the future."

I thought it was a bit harsh for him to say that about his own adventurers, but I appreciated his straightforwardness and that there wouldn't be any future trouble. I didn't want to have to use their services here too often, though.

"Now that we're finished talking, here is your reward—20,000,000G. That's 2,000,000G for the completion fee and 18,000,000G for the delivery of the other parts. Go ahead and check to make sure it's correct."

The guildmaster had two bags filled with money brought over and placed them in front of me.

"This is quite a bit above market price," I said.

"It includes a reward for the publicity we'll get," he explained.

I was satisfied with his explanation and stowed the reward in my magic bags without counting the money. The guildmaster let out a brief noise of admiration in return.

After the guildmaster had seen us off and we'd gotten some distance away from the building, Jeanne asked me something. "Hey Tenma, what did he mean by your one accomplishment outweighing any of theirs in the future? And what's this about an advertising fee?"

"I think he's probably talking about making other adventurers believe that I've reconciled with the margrave's family," I said. "But the adventurers' future accomplishments would be tied to the possibility that the ones who left might return to the margrave's territory now that we've made amends. Even if some of those people still have complaints about the margrave, the guild is probably counting on experienced adventurers coming back to make up for it. I wouldn't be surprised if they've already spread the word to some old acquaintances of mine. And as for the advertising fee, it's to compensate for using my name

when they tell other guilds I accepted a job in the margrave's territory and took down a whole wyvern swarm."

"Yeah, that's probably it. Plus, they're expecting us to turn a blind eye if any of the information they spread ends up being a little too favorable to the margrave or the guild," Gramps said.

"Sounds like something a merchant would come up with, not a guildmaster," I commented.

"He's pretty shrewd," Jeanne said.

Gramps nodded. "Agreed!"

Jeanne seemed to share more or less the same opinion after listening to Gramps and me. Meanwhile, Aura's and Amur's heads just bobbed along absentmindedly—most likely because each of them had a meat skewer in hand and their mouths were too greasy to speak at the moment. I figured they'd bought them from a nearby food stall right after we had left the guild. They were chowing down like nothing had happened. Pretty sneaky, if you asked me.

"Well then, I guess it's time for me to go my own way." Gramps was going off to buy souvenirs after our visit to the guild as he'd planned.

"Got it. Just make sure you're back in time for dinner."

"Of course. And Tenma, don't go taking Jeanne and the others anywhere shady," Gramps warned.

"I wouldn't mind!" Amur piped up, but I pretended not to hear her.

Instead, I glared at Gramps for saying such an unnecessary comment. He didn't seem to care, though. He laughed it off and wandered away, peering into shop windows here and there.

"All right, let's get moving. Leon, pick out a nice place for us. Somewhere that *isn't* one of your favorite 'shady' spots."

"Hey! I'd never take you guys to a place like that."

"Yeah, Tenma. If you went to places like that here in Shellhide, Lady Edelia would catch wind of it in no time. Even someone as clueless as Leon wouldn't do something *that* stupid. Right, Leon?"

“Even I’m not *that* stupid!” Leon whined.

“Well, the capital is Leon’s usual hunting ground, after all. Anyway, how about we just stroll down the main street and pick somewhere that catches our eye?” Albert suggested.

Except for Leon and Cain, we all agreed with Albert’s suggestion and started walking down the main street with him leading the way.

Leon, thrown off by Cain’s comments, muttered under his breath, “This is my hometown, though...” But since he couldn’t come up with a better plan, he quietly followed behind us.

Shellhide was the biggest city in the margrave’s territory, and it seemed to be about the same size as Gunjo City or maybe slightly larger. Leon claimed it had grown much livelier since the incident in Kukuri Village, but even now, it was only about half as bustling as it had been in its prime.

“Guess we’ll see how much business your wyverns can bring back, Tenma. Maybe if half—or even a third—of the skilled adventurers who used to call this place home returned, it would make handling local quests a lot easier.”

Right now, there simply weren’t enough capable adventurers to take the difficult quests or tasks posted at the guild. They had to ask adventurers based in the capital or other regions to come to handle them.

“Like they did with me this time?” I asked.

“Exactly. Although a full wyvern swarm is rare, it’s not uncommon for one or two of the beasts to show up near the city a couple of times a year. We can’t always send the military to take care of it, but we can’t leave them be either. That’s why we need adventurers who can respond to these situations quickly,” Leon explained.

“But it’s not like you can always count on having someone available when you need them,” I said.

“Right. That’s why we’d like to see veteran adventurers who already know the lay of the land here come back so they can teach the next generation of adventurers. Of course, things usually don’t go that smoothly, but we’d at least like enough adventurers here to handle a few wyverns at a time.”

“Adventurers are generally pretty free-spirited, though. Once they leave a place, they rarely go back. I mean, look at me. I moved from Kukuri Village in the margrave’s territory to Duke Sanga’s Gunjo City, and now I mostly work around the capital and Sagan,” I said.

Some adventurers who had left the margrave’s territory might return out of nostalgia, but others might have settled elsewhere and put down roots in a new home.

“In that case, bringing in new adventurers and getting them to settle down here might be faster than trying to woo old ones into coming back,” Albert said.

“But if it’s veteran adventurers the margrave wants, other places won’t want to let go of them either, right?” Cain asked. “It’s a tough situation.”

One day, these men would have to manage their own family’s domains, and they might find themselves facing the same challenges as Leon was now. No wonder they weren’t taking this lightly.

“What if the margrave’s territory started offering incentives for adventurers? Maybe waive taxes for a set period if they work here?” I suggested.

“But wouldn’t they leave once the period’s up?” Leon asked.

“Then offer them cheap buildings to rent or buy. Encourage them to set up a home base so they will stay.”

“Hmm... I guess I could at least bring it up to my father.”

It was just a spur-of-the-moment idea, and there was no way it’d be that simple to put into practice. Leon’s uncertain response showed that he was thinking the same. Still, since it wouldn’t hurt to bring it up, he decided he’d try anyway since it was ultimately the margrave’s decision.

“Tenma? Lord Leon? I’m sorry to interrupt your conversation, but everyone’s off doing their own thing.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Hearing that from Jeanne, we turned around and realized that everyone

except the three of us had already wandered off wherever they pleased.

“Even Albert and Cain...” Leon muttered.

Well, it was our fault for getting so caught up in the conversation. It was also about lunchtime anyway, so I figured that we should probably eat.

“Hey, Amur! Aura! If you eat too much, you won’t have room for the meal Leon’s offering to pay for us!”

“Wait, hold up!”

“Don’t worry! I’m still only on the first course!”

“I still have room!”

“I’m always ready for more!”

“My stomach’s all set too!”

With Amur and Aura ready and raring to go, Albert and Cain joined in as well. And just as Leon started complaining about having to pay, Albert and Cain piped up.

“Fine, then. I suppose I’ll cover the bill instead,” Albert said.

“Oh! I’ll pitch in too!”

Amur whistled. “Ooh, big spender! And so handsome too!”

“Just what I expected from a future duke and a future marquis! How generous!” Aura gushed.

I could tell that the four of them were up to something. Albert and Cain sounded a bit monotone, while Amur and Aura glanced occasionally at Leon as they showered exaggerated praise on the two others.

There’s no way Leon will fall for such a cheap act...

“All right, all right! I’ll pay!” he said.

Somehow, he walked right into it. And in the next moment...

“Thank you for the meal!”

All four of them bowed in unison.

It'd been a setup, and now that Leon had offered, there was no backing out. After confirming the position and thickness of his wallet, he slumped his shoulders and started walking.

"Phew, I'm stuffed!" Amur said.

"The prices were pretty reasonable, and the food was surprisingly tasty."

"That's probably because of the low cost of living around here. Still, considering the effort they put in, I'd say they did a great job."

"With this many people, we got to order all sorts of dishes. Wasn't that fun, Jeanne?"

"Aura, you should show a little restraint. If word of this gets back to Aina, who knows what'll happen."

"Ugh!"

Everyone walked down the main street again, sharing our thoughts about the meal. The five of them seemingly still craved dessert and kept stopping by stalls selling fruits and sweets, buying snacks here and there.

"Eating all that without a care in the world..." Leon complained under his breath, clutching his now paper-thin wallet.

"Mmm, that was delicious. Thanks for the treat!"

Leon's wallet had been fairly thick before we entered the restaurant, but now it was nearly empty. There wasn't much to its bulk besides the leather. He wouldn't even be able to afford something sweet from a food stall with what little remained inside. Leon shot a glare at Albert and Cain.

"That aside, Leon... Have you noticed something?"

"Notice what?"

I tried to ask if he'd realized we were being followed, but it seemed he hadn't picked up on it at all.

"Someone's been tailing us ever since we left the restaurant. They're just following for now so it's not a big deal, but I can tell they're quite skilled."

“For real?! Ow!” Leon tried to quickly glance around, so I jabbed him with an elbow to keep him from giving us away.

“Don’t let them see you!” I said. “I want you to go on and join up with the others. I’ll slip into the alley coming up ahead and see if I can get behind them. Don’t mention this to anyone.”

If I had been talking to Albert or Cain, they’d have probably asked, “Why keep it a secret?” But Leon was too oblivious to do that. Instead, he just nodded and headed back toward the group.

When I reached the alleyway, I pretended to overtake Leon and ducked into a side street, hiding behind him as I did. Then, I climbed onto the roof of a building, circled around, and approached our pursuers from behind.

“Don’t move. Try anything funny and I’ll take your heads off,” I warned, placing the wooden stick I’d picked up on the roof against the nape of their necks. But...

“I’d ask you not to move either.”

Another man stepped out from behind me, pointing a blade at my back.

“I’ll have the heads from these two before your blade even moves. So, what’re you going to do?” I said.

We stayed locked in a stalemate like that for a moment, until...

“All right, we surrender. But even so, that stick of yours wouldn’t cut off two heads at once.”

The man behind me tossed his blade aside and raised his hands in the air.

“You’re right. I’d probably only manage to get Lani-tan’s head.”

I threw the stick away.

“It’s Lani *Tantan*! How many times do I have to tell you that?! Master Tenma, please don’t joke around! I was terrified because I thought you hadn’t recognized me!”

It turned out that the ones tailing us were Lani, who was a tanuki beastfolk, along with another man and a woman who were also tanuki beastfolk.

“Leni’s been frozen in shock ever since! And Father just disappeared somewhere along the way.”

“That’s because you two lack experience,” the older man said. “I sensed that Master Tenma would catch on, so I slipped away in advance.”

I had been surprised when this stranger had disappeared along the way, but I’d figured he would be lurking nearby, so I’d chosen to ignore it. Lani and Leni hadn’t noticed me sneaking up on them or that the older man had slipped away, so they’d been stunned when I had caught them.

“First off, it’s your own fault,” the man said to the other tanuki beastfolk. “You got complacent despite being known as one of the best spies in the south. How careless can you be, not paying attention while tailing someone? Because of your negligence, poor Leni got caught too. She’s not dead, is she?”

Leni hadn’t moved at all. The man poked her cheek and waited for her to react. From what I could recall, Leni was supposed to be Lani’s more skilled younger sister, but seeing her in this state, I couldn’t help but doubt her reputation.

“Hah! You scared me so much I thought my heart stopped there for a minute...”

Leni seemed to regain consciousness while the man prodded her. She glanced between me, Lani, and the man as she tried to piece together what had happened.

Then, she scolded Lani and me. “Brother, will you be more careful? I’m not good with situations like this! And...Tenma, that’s your name, right? Please don’t go around startling delicate women like that!”

Once we all introduced ourselves properly, it turned out that Leni was indeed Lani’s younger sister, just as Amur had mentioned before. The other man here was their father, Doni.

“Feel free to call me Doni-tan!”

“And you can call me Leni-tan as well.”

Unlike Lani, these two seemed quite fond of the nicknames Amur had given

them.

“So why were the three of you tailing us?” I asked.

“Well, we were actually following the young lady. But since she was moving with you, I realize it ended up looking like we were trailing all of you as a result.”

According to Leni’s explanation, they had originally come to the Haust territory because Hana had gotten wind of Amur’s plans to come here. They were ordered to learn more about the territory while also keeping an eye on Amur.

“Well, Father and Brother’s primary task was to gather information, but mine was a bit different...”

Apparently, Leni didn’t usually participate in such reconnaissance missions in other territories. This time, however, she’d been asked by Hana to handle a matter specifically related to Amur, so she had tagged along.

“Shall we go join up with Amur and the others now? There shouldn’t be any issue, right?”

“Since Master Tenma has already caught onto us and I’ve learned everything I needed to about the young lady, there’s no problem at all!” Doni said.

With Doni’s approval, the four of us headed off to catch up with Amur and the others. The rest of my group had gotten quite a ways ahead.

Although Doni spoke quite casually to others, his tone was much more formal when it was just him and his family.

“Oh! Lady Amuuuur!”

“Hmm? It’s Leni-tan!”

As soon as Leni spotted Amur, she took off at full speed in her direction. Amur also noticed her and rushed over. The two hugged.

“My lady, I haven’t seen you for quite a while. You’ve become...quite hideous.”

“...”

Leni's unexpected jab left Amur in shock.

The rest of us were also stunned by Leni's sudden vicious remark.

"My lady, when I heard it from Lady Hana, I found it hard to believe, but now that I see you with my own eyes, I realize it was all true."

Amur had a puzzled expression on her face, clearly not understanding what Leni was saying at all. In fact, neither Doni, Lani, nor any of the rest of us had any clue what she'd meant.

"No, Leni. I think the young lady hasn't changed at all since before," Lani said.

"Her appearance may not have changed, but that's only natural. People do grow at different rates, after all. However, her inner self has become completely hideous! She was never like this before!" Leni dismissed Lani's words and clutched Amur's face with both of her hands. "When Lady Amur was little, she was such a good girl. So pure and adorable... But now, she's turned into a glutton who craves both men and food..."

"L-Leni, that hurts..."

Then, with tears welling up in her eyes, Leni began to pull on Amur's cheeks. She was tugging so hard, in fact, that Amur was nearly in tears herself. Amur desperately tried to pry Leni's fingers away but to no avail. In fact, her grip only seemed to be tightening, and Amur's body began to lift off the ground.

Just when Amur's cheeks seemed to be at their limit, Doni clapped his hands in front of Leni, snapping her back to reality.

"That's enough!" he said. "Leni, you're going too far. I'm sorry, Amur."

The moment Doni turned to apologize to Amur, Leni's gaze shifted slightly from Amur to Doni. Sensing a fleeting opportunity, Amur tried to dash toward me quick like a rabbit, but...

"My lady! We're not finished yet!"

"Boogyah!"

Leni then grabbed onto Amur's clothes, making her let out a strange yelp as she was recaptured.

Even though Amur looked to us for help, none of us dared to intervene. Leni's presence was somewhat intimidating. Doni, who had just tried to step in, and Lani, who'd been completely dismissed earlier, also held back now.

Amur had no allies left. But at that moment, someone we'd all forgotten about showed up.

"Oh, there you all are. When I couldn't find you, I thought we'd missed each other and you'd already gone back home."

It was Kriss. She seemed much more energetic now than she had been in the morning. Perhaps she'd finally caught up on sleep.

"Kriss, help!"

"Umm, what's going on here?" Kriss took a moment to assess the situation—after all, she was seeing three unfamiliar people, Amur being held captive by one of them, and none of us making a move to help.

I decided to intervene and explained everything.

"I see. So you're Leni, are you? Hana told me a bit about you."

"And you must be Kriss. I've heard about you from Lady Hana as well."

The two of them seemed aware of each other's existence and exchanged sharp glares. Amur glanced at Kriss with expectation in her eyes, most likely thinking Kriss would help her.

"Nice to meet you!"

"You too!"

Leni and Kriss firmly shook hands.



The scene left us nearly falling over from disbelief. Doni and Lani seemed to feel the same—they looked utterly confused like they had no idea what was going on. The only one who seemed to understand what was happening was Amur. Realizing that her enemies had multiplied the moment Kriss and Leni shook hands, she started struggling to break free of Leni's grip.

"Amur! Stop struggling!"

"My lady, that's dangerous! Please calm down," Kriss added.

With Kriss now restraining Amur's arm alongside Leni, they completely subdued her and began to drag her off somewhere.

"Wait, Kriss! Where are you taking Amur?" I asked.

"Good question. Where *are* you taking her?" Jeanne asked, curious.

Leni answered my question since Kriss had already started walking off. "I'm thinking of bringing her to the inn where we're staying and giving her a bit of reeducation on how to act like a proper lady," she said. "Well, I'll be taking the young lady into my custody for a while. And Amur, if you try to escape, I'll have no choice but to send you back to the SAR by force. So don't even think about doing anything foolish."

And with that, Leni took out a letter and showed it to Amur. The moment Amur read it, she stopped resisting completely. Even after Leni released her, she didn't make an attempt to run.

Curious to see what was written, I asked to read the letter. It turned out to be a directive from Hana. In short, it said, "Learn how to be a proper lady from Leni. If you try to run away or refuse, you will be forcibly returned to the SAR. I will dispatch Blanca and other high-ranking officials to retrieve you as a precaution if that happens."

The fact that it mentioned not just Blanca but other high-ranking officials showed just how serious Hana was about this. Amur resigned herself to her fate and allowed Leni and Kriss to haul her away. She reminded me of a lamb being taken away to slaughter.

"I know this is an internal issue with Amur's family so I won't interfere, but

weren't you supposed to be gathering information? Is it really all right to show yourself to Leon, since he's the future head of the territory?" I asked Doni and Lani.

"Oh, there's no problem at all! It's not like we're planning to cause any trouble or have anything to hide. Well, I did think I'd make a little profit on the side while gathering information, but it's nothing to worry about as long as we don't go too far...probably."

After they gathered intel in Shellhide, Doni and Lani were planning to head to a fort near the border and do some business there.

"So that's why we showed up here! We wanted to get the margrave's permission for our activities!" Doni declared.

In other words, they were confident that Leon would give his approval without much difficulty.

"Yeah, if Leon hears you're friends of Tenma and Amur, he'll probably listen," Cain said.

"He'll probably give you permission if you flatter him a little," Albert suggested.

If there were no problems with their business dealings, they could easily get a permit from the vice-captain at the fort. But direct permission from the future margrave would be more valuable and give them a competitive edge against other merchants.

"Of course, if it doesn't work out, we'll be no worse off," Lani said, but it was clear she was optimistic about their chances.

"Well, since you're friends of Tenma and Amur, I'll hear you out at least, but I'm taking this straight to my father."

That was more than enough for Doni and Lani.

Leon then asked which inn they were staying at and promised to have someone inform them as soon as there was a response from the margrave.

Meanwhile, Cain and Albert had moved a short distance away and were shaking their heads.

“He should’ve asked what *kind* of business those two plan on conducting first before going to the margrave. Now it’s going to be a hassle since he’ll have to go back and forth,” Albert said.

“Yeah, but it’ll be fun to see how this plays out. I’m not going to anything,” Cain grinned mischievously.

As they had predicted, Leon was promptly reprimanded by Edelia for how he had handled the situation with Doni and Lani. She didn’t raise her voice or insult him, but she pointed out his mistakes one by one and made him think about how he could have handled things better. During the entire exchange, the margrave himself just stood idly by, not contributing to the conversation. According to Leon, the idea of meeting people he had no prior connection with must’ve made him depressed.

“Looks like he got scolded,” Albert said.

“Exactly as we expected. Pretty boring, really,” Cain said dryly.

“I’m baaaack!”

Kriss returned to the margrave’s estate by herself just before dinner. Amur was going to remain in Shellhide under Leni’s supervision while Kriss stayed at the estate overnight. She’d rejoin Leni in the morning.

“I must say, Leni’s stories were quite interesting! Apparently, she’s the most popular woman in Nanao!”

Kriss had heard from Amur that Leni was known as the most desirable woman in Nanao. She’d shared her experiences with Amur as lessons, and Kriss had found her tales both amusing and educational.

“If you put what you learned into practice, you’d finally be popular with men too!” Leon teased Kriss, as usual.

However, she didn’t bonk him on the head like she normally would this time. Her unexpected reaction left us all stunned, especially Albert and Cain.

“Honestly, Leon, when are you going to stop acting like you’re in high school?” Kriss said.

Perhaps hearing Leni's experiences with Amur had made Kriss reflect on something. Maybe this whole ordeal was affecting Kriss as well. While she still clenched her fists tightly, if things continued like this, it wouldn't be long before she found herself a boyfriend.

Jeanne and Aura were curious about Leni's stories and started to bombard Kriss with questions.

As Leon watched the scene unfold, he muttered, "Hey, Tenma. Think she ate something bad?" He sounded genuinely concerned.

If only Leon could manage to grow half as mature as Kriss... I thought with a sigh.

Albert and Cain seemed to be just as exasperated with Leon as I was.

That night, I thought we might end up playing another round of Tycoon until late like we had the day before, but the three ladies decided to sit out. They'd claimed that staying up late was bad for their skin.

"Looks like they're finally at the age to start caring about those things... Well then, I'm ending the game with Eight Enders!"

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Master Merlin. In that case, I'll finish it out with a Revolution!" Cain said.

"What the?!" Leon exclaimed.

"Cain, you've been targeting Leon all night. All right, I'm out here too," Albert said.

"And that leaves me to finish as Poor... Leon, that makes ten losses in a row," I said.

Since the girls weren't playing, we could keep going without having to rotate anyone out. But, as usual, Gramps had held on to the Tycoon slot while Leon remained stuck as the Beggar. Well, it wasn't all that surprising. Gramps had held on to his title thanks to his sharp instincts and incredible luck whereas Leon couldn't crawl out of the bottom thanks to a combination of his own terrible luck, poor prediction skills, and Cain's interference.

"Argh, damn it! If only Cain hadn't messed me up back there..."

“Yeah, I did interfere with you, but you lose even more when I don’t!”

“Oof... Guess I’m just having an off day,” Leon said.

“Every day’s an off day for you...”

Cain and Albert had a counter for every excuse Leon made.

Leon ignored the duo’s snarky comments and changed the topic to buy some time. “How about we take a break? Hey, Tenma? What’s the plan from here on out?”

Well, no matter how much time he bought, he’d still be starting the next round as the Beggar.

“The plan? Well, since we’re already here in the margrave’s territory, I was thinking we should take this chance to visit Kukuri Village,” I said.

“Are you sure about that?” Gramps asked.

He had been the first to react. Up until now, I had rarely brought up Kukuri Village, even when we were with Uncle Mark and the others. It was no wonder he was surprised that I had mentioned it out of the blue.

“I’ve always been meaning to go back, but I kept making excuses like it was too far away or I was too afraid,” I explained. “But if I don’t go now, I think I never will.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I won’t hold you back. But don’t push yourself. If it feels too tough, you can always turn around,” Gramps said.

Albert and Cain nodded in agreement. However, the one person who couldn’t read the room just had to pipe up too.

“Kukuri Village is way out in the far corner of the margrave’s domain, so it’s a long way from Shellhide. Well, at least it’s closer than if you were coming from the capital. If you have to turn back, you can always try again from the capital when it’s more convenient!”

The moment Leon finished speaking, Albert and Cain jumped all over him.

“That’s not the point! Read the room, you idiot!”

Both of them punched Leon. Albert’s fist connected to his side while Cain

landed a hit to his solar plexus nearly simultaneously. Leon was left gasping for air.

“Even I felt a little irritated by that one,” Gramps muttered as he stood up.

As soon as Gramps got to his feet, Albert and Cain each grabbed one of Leon’s arms, locking him in place.

“Go ahead, Master Merlin!” Albert said.

“Anywhere you like!” Cain said.

“I won’t use my fist since that’s too cruel, so I *will* show some mercy,” Gramps said. “Don’t worry. I won’t use much force.”

“W-Wait, I’m sor— Mmph!”

Gramps’s choice of attack was a flick to the forehead. I’m not sure what part of it he considered “light” because the impact sent Leon’s head snapping back. Leon lost consciousness, perhaps the result of a slight concussion.

The commotion here must’ve reached Kriss’s room because three of the women burst in, looking flustered.

“What was that noise?!”

“Kriss, no running in the hallway! You’re acting just like you did yesterday,” Gramps cautioned.

“Ha ha ha. Anyway, what was that sound?!” she asked again. “I swore I heard a whip cracking!”

“It’s nothing serious. Leon was being an idiot again, so Master Merlin was just correcting him.”

“Master Merlin doesn’t usually get involved, but he had no choice. In fact, Leon should be grateful it ended with just that.”

Kriss seemed to accept Cain and Albert’s explanations, but she still didn’t quite get why Gramps had intervened.

“Leon asked about our plans, and I mentioned I wanted to pay my respects at the graves in Kukuri Village. And, as usual, he couldn’t read the room.”

Now that Kriss seemed to grasp the situation, she didn’t ask any further

questions. Still, I knew I had to explain why I was so determined to go to Kukuri Village, so I told her a bit more.

“I see,” she said after listening to me explain further. “I’m not against the idea of going to Kukuri Village, but if you’re only doing it because you feel obligated, then it doesn’t have to be right now.”

“I know. I gave this a lot of thought.”

“In that case, I’ll say no more.”

That’s where our conversation ended, but Jeanne and Aura still didn’t seem to thoroughly understand the circumstances. Well, even if they opposed it, I couldn’t exactly leave them behind at the margrave’s estate, so they had to come with us either way.

“I can’t go against your decision, but I can’t exactly stay behind either, so I guess we’re going to this Kukuri Village place. What’s the situation there now?” Albert asked.

“After the incident, the village seemingly became uninhabitable, so it’s just a ghost town now.”

“So is this just going to be a day trip?”

“No, I’d like to stay for a few nights,” I said. “I don’t know what condition it’s in now that it’s abandoned, but I want to pay my respects and take care of the graves. Maybe do some basic upkeep.”

I’d heard there was a simple grave for my parents there. I wanted to clean the area up so that anyone passing by would recognize it was a cemetery.

“That’s why you don’t really need to come along, Albert,” I then added. “I’ll probably make a few other stops on the way back too.”

The trip to Kukuri Village would be a long detour, and adding more stops along the way back could delay our return to the capital by months. That’s why I thought it was better to part ways with the nobles now, but the three of them didn’t seem inclined to agree.

Albert spoke up first. “If you’re making stops on the way back from Kukuri Village, one of them must be Gunjo City, right? If that’s the case, I’d like to join

you. I can make it an official visit and go see Primera too. And even if you're not stopping by there, I'd like to accompany you at least part of the way."

"Same here. Marquis Sammons's territory is too far off the route so I can't visit, but since I'm already here, I'd like to drop by Duke Sanga's territory. I seldom get a chance to visit other domains, and I expect those opportunities will only decrease in the future," Cain said.

"My goal has already been accomplished, so I'm free to do as I please from here on out. Besides, if I left you now, other nobles might accuse me of using Tenma only for my father's benefit," Leon pointed out.

And so it was decided that the three of them would come along after all. I thought Kriss couldn't join us because of her duties back in the capital, but...

"Of course I'm coming! My mission was to accompany you, Tenma. Remember? So, if you extend your trip, that automatically extends my mission too!"

She'd called it a "trip," but since the margrave's request had been fulfilled, it wouldn't be wrong to say that everything after this point was just traveling for pleasure. Whether or not Kriss's reasoning would hold up at the castle was unclear, but if she were to go back to the capital alone, it would probably cause problems. Even if she got scolded for this later, she could argue that she'd made the right call based on the situation at the time.

"All right, then. For now, we haven't finalized the details, but our general plan is to visit Kukuri Village, pass through Russell City, and then stop by Gunjo City. I'll be roughly retracing my original route back to the capital."

I hadn't technically gone through Russell City to reach Gunjo City, but since it was along the route from Kukuri Village, it would be a good place to rest.

"Hmm, I might actually know the area in that region better than the margrave," Gramps said.

"Should I guide you partway there and then let you take the lead near Kukuri Village, Master Merlin?" Leon asked.

Leon's guidance would likely rely on maps belonging to his father. Perhaps he was eager to make up for his earlier blunder—he had surely put a lot of

enthusiasm into this suggestion.

“That might be best,” Gramps said.

“Okay. I’ve also been to Kukuri Village via Russell City, but Cruyff was driving and I was on guard duty. That was the time when we got ambushed by orcs,” Kriss said.

“It was a horde led by an orc king, remember? It was unusually clever for an orc,” I said with a dry chuckle, backing up Kriss’s story.

“That’s right! The king was ridiculously smart for an orc! And to top it off, the person in charge at the time was Jean, and I was a low-ranking guard. I couldn’t even speak up!”

With that, she not only talked up the orc king but also subtly shifted the blame onto Jean. It almost sounded like she was implying that things would’ve gone differently if she had been in charge, but she didn’t seem to realize what she was saying either. Well, aside from me, no one here was going to tattle to Jean, so it was probably fine to let it slide.

Albert and the others weren’t close enough to Jean to casually share gossip. Jeanne and Aura couldn’t either because of their positions, and if they were to, Aina wouldn’t let them get away with it. Gramps might’ve considered saying something, but judging by the expression on his face, he seemed to be thinking more along the lines of “It’s only natural for the mice to play while the cat’s away.”

The person most likely to spill the beans was Amur, and she wasn’t here. So that left me as the most likely suspect.

Kriss was oblivious to those thoughts and began to recount the tale with some embellishments, captivating Albert and the others.

“Tenma...” While everyone’s attention was on Kriss’s story, Cain called my name softly. “I’ll be your witness.”

Cain gave me a thumbs-up and I returned the gesture in silence. Gramps watched our exchange with a look of exasperation but didn’t comment.

“Well, it’s too late for another round of cards. We should turn in for the

night,” Gramps said instead.

“Yes, let’s.” Leon practically jumped at Gramps’s suggestion. He must’ve been convinced that with the way things had been going, he’d never escape his losing streak.

“All right, let’s pause here. Next time, we’ll start from Master Merlin’s winning hand. And, of course, the one starting as Beggar will be Leon.”

“No way! Don’t we have to start fresh next time?”

“I’m fine either way,” Gramps said.

“Cain came in second, so he can choose.”

“We’ll continue where we left off today,” Cain said.

“Damn it!”

Cain’s swift decision sealed Leon’s fate. Leon’s shouts echoed throughout the estate, and as a result, Kriss, Edelia, and the maids all scolded him.

The next day...

“Meeting the margrave will be nerve-racking!”

“I’m sure I’m even more nervous than you,” Doni said.

Doni and Lani had been summoned by the margrave to discuss business.

Normally, such permits would require documents to be submitted to a local office, and that office would then assess whether to forward the matter to the margrave if they couldn’t make a decision. But since Leon had taken responsibility for this, they’d skipped several steps and had ended up with a direct meeting.

Leon showed up at their place early that morning. He explained the situation and then led them to the estate. His visiting them personally was partly a punishment for his reckless behavior in the matter.

By the way, Leni wasn’t here, and neither was Kriss. That was because the two of them had a mission to educate Amur on how to be a proper lady.

“What am I doing here?” I asked.

“We would like you to act as Lady Amur’s representative, Master Tenma. Even if just in formality. It’s better for us to have someone of higher status to vouch for us than not. She’s quite busy at the moment, and we apologize for the inconvenience, but we’d like you to assist us.”

Apparently, I was supposed to be Amur’s standin. Other than Amur, the only ones familiar with Lani were me, Gramps, Jeanne, and Aura. Since I was the designated leader of the party, that was probably the reason they had chosen me.

“Well, it’s not like I have anything better to do.”

After the meeting was over...

“There really *was* nothing for me to do. I didn’t even need to be there, did I?” I asked.

“That’s not true at all, Master Tenma! You helped facilitate the meeting in a way so that we would be listened to, and more importantly, your presence was quite intimidating to the margrave!” Doni explained.

“Sorry if it seemed like we were using you, but it really did help,” Lani said, and it genuinely sounded like he meant it.

Since I was the one who had come to vouch for them, the margrave couldn’t turn them away without damaging *my* reputation. And since he still owed me big, he wouldn’t dare do that.

“Well, there might’ve been some truth to that, but Dad would’ve listened to them even without Tenma. There’s no need to worry about it. Besides, since we’ve now built a relationship with the SAR, giving out permits for trade shouldn’t be a big deal. That’s what Mom said, anyway,” Leon said.

If he hadn’t mentioned that this’d been Edelia’s idea, Doni and Lani probably would’ve thought, *Wow, that’s impressive! Even if he’s rotten to the core, he’s still a proper successor to the margrave!* But Leon had spilled the beans without hesitation, which was typical for him. Well, I preferred that to him keeping quiet about it.

Later on, when I relayed an abridged version of this to Albert and Cain, they

both shouted in unison, “There’s no way Leon could come up with an idea like that on his own! Someone definitely helped him!” And immediately afterward, they both rushed off to confront Leon, saying, “We’ll get the truth out of him!”

“You said you were planning to sell food, but what exactly are you going to offer?” I asked.

“Pork miso soup.”

“Master Tenma served wyvern miso soup and everyone liked it. That’s why we thought we’d try something similar with pork miso soup.”

Since the wyvern soup had been a hit, the idea was that pork soup, which was similar, would also do well. Plus, miso was considered to be a rare ingredient in the margrave’s territory, so the risk of it being copied was low. That was why they were so confident they’d succeed.

“We’re planning to serve it with rice balls to make it more filling for adventurers and laborers.”

“Oh, that’s good. You can even put the rice balls in the soup! They’d go well together while also being filling,” I said casually.

Lani was briefly taken aback but then flashed me a mischievous grin. “I knew you’d understand, Master Tenma.” He made it sound like I was some kind of scheming villain or something.

“If you buy cheap vegetables from nearby towns and change the ingredients daily, like a special of the day, you could really turn a good profit.”

“He he he. But of course. I’ve already sent our people to nearby towns to buy up large quantities of cheap produce at higher prices than what our competitors pay.”

Even if the cost of ingredients went up a bit, pork soup had the advantage of being able to be stretched by adding more ingredients. Factoring that in, they planned to corner their rivals’ supply routes.

“Ideally, I’d like to get some wyvern meat too...”

“That would blow your budget to the point where you’d be in the red,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s a shame, but I’ll have to give up on that. I wanted to

make it special for the last day, but there's no point if I can't profit from it."

Even if I were to sell wyvern meat to them at a low price, using enough to make a stew would still eat up their profits. As for me, I used wyvern meat I'd hunted myself, and since I'd received it as a reward for a quest, I could afford to go all out. But if they sold it, they'd have to reduce the amount to about a tenth of what I used. They'd also have to charge at least 100G per bowl. It might be barely profitable at a food stall in the capital, but for adventurers and the laborers in the less-affluent margrave's territory, it would only sell as an occasional payday treat. It wouldn't make for a sustainable business.

"Well, I'll focus on selling large quantities of pork soup and rice balls for now. I am curious about how wyverns taste, though. Would you sell some to me?"

Since he had the chance, Lani wanted to sample the taste to prepare for a potential future venture involving wyvern meat. So, of course, I could sell it to him at a special price for friends and family.

Well, I'd gotten a few discounts from Lani before, so I didn't mind giving him a deal now. But asking for that first discount on something like wyvern... That's a savvy merchant for you.

"By the way, Doni, is it true that Leni is a better spy than Lani?"

I decided to ask that while Lani was busy discussing business with Leon about trading at the border fort. I'd been curious about this for a while.

Doni seemed a bit surprised by my question, but once he realized I had heard it from Amur, he nodded as if it made sense and began to explain further. "In a way, yes, that's correct. While they're both spies, their styles are quite different, so it's hard to say which is superior. But on average, Leni gathers more information per mission."

He went on to say that Lani was skilled at undercover missions and gathering intelligence, like the first time we had met or when he had slipped into Duke Sanga's army. He was also good at sabotage and combat. Leni, on the other hand, rarely interacted with her targets. Instead, she gathered intel by blending into her target's surroundings. She'd work in taverns in the area or listen in on conversations with people acquainted with them.

In Lani's case, the information he provided was often important, but it also came with a fair share of risk. On the other hand, Leni's information tended to be a mix of useful and not, but it had the advantage of offering a broader perspective.

"Information is still information, even if it's not necessary. Besides, when it comes to Leni, she's not just good with people—she's also very good at flattering men. The sheer volume of information she gathers is way beyond what others can obtain using the same methods. But as her father, I have rather mixed feelings about that..."

So that's why people call her Nanao's most popular woman...

"It might be better to avoid having her interact with Leon too much, then," I said.

"That would be wise. No offense, but she might just strip him bare. In an informational sense, as far as his family is concerned, of course."

It seemed like Doni didn't want to damage this new connection just days after it had been formed. Moreover, while learning more about the margrave would be valuable, he didn't want to overdo it and risk making an enemy out of him.

With that in mind, I called for Albert and Cain. I explained the situation to them, and asked for their help. After hearing from me and Doni, they both immediately agreed to cooperate, saying that sounded like a possible outcome if Leon was involved.

"I'll speak to Leni about it as well, because even if it's not her intention, she might still inadvertently set something up. It's what you might call an occupational hazard," Doni said.

"Well, Leon's got a similar problem in that regard." According to Cain, Leon's slipups were also occupational hazards.

"Well, since Leni's probably busy looking after Amur, there shouldn't be any issues as long as someone else is keeping an eye on Leon."

Just as we were wrapping up our discussion, it seemed like Leon and Lani had also finished theirs. Judging from their expressions, it seemed like they'd reached an agreement that was favorable to Lani.

Afterward, I suggested we head out into town with Doni and Lani, but it seemed they had things to prepare and business meetings to attend. Those two decided to head straight back to the inn.

“So, what should we do? Jeanne and Aura are out with Master Merlin, right?”

“Yeah, Gramps kept going on about how he hates stiff formalities, so he took the two of them along with Shiromaru for a walk and said he’d give them a job to do. He mentioned it’d be good for them to take on requests in a different environment every now and then. It’d be a good experience and might even help when it’s time to raise their levels,” I explained.

The fact that I had taken requests across various territories like Gunjo City, Sagan, the capital, and the SAR had apparently been a factor when I had been promoted to Rank S. Jeanne and Aura had only worked in Sagan and the capital, both of which were under the direct control of the royal family, so this seemed like a good time to let them build up accomplishments in the margrave’s domain.

“So it’s just us guys now, huh?” Leon said.

“Leon, I’m sure I don’t need to remind you, but no shady places, okay?” Albert said.

“Yeah, you’ll have to wait until we’re back in the capital for that,” Cain agreed.

“I get it, I get it!” Leon replied, irritated.

While Albert and Leon had apparently visited nightclubs similar to cabaret clubs before, it seemed like they hadn’t been to one in the past few years because of Cain.

Albert’s fiancée Elsa was rather understanding about men going to such places as long as it was just for fun, but Cain’s fiancée wasn’t like that at all. She seemed to care quite a bit if Cain went to such places, so in the end, he simply stopped going. It seemed like he never had much interest in going there in the first place, though.

“I prefer going out for drinks with friends,” he’d said when I had asked about it.

I felt the same way, so I agreed with him. As for Albert, he didn't seem to care either way. But Leon enjoyed going out with friends to places where girls were.

"Come to think of it, I've met Elsa several times, but I've never met Cain's fiancée," I said.

"Really? It seemed like she's run into you a few times. She said you've never talked, though."

We chatted more, and after I heard her description, I did recall a woman who fit. I had never heard her name, but I'd run into her a few times in the castle's library in the capital and in the archives. I'd probably nodded to her whenever we had made eye contact.

"She said it'd be weird to approach you when I wasn't around, and she's shy too. She's kind of an introvert."

"Yeah, I got that impression. Elsa didn't know that and went up to talk to her, but she was afraid she just scared her," Albert said.

"I'll introduce her soon, once we get back to the capital. You'll probably be seeing her more often once we get married, after all," Cain said.

Meanwhile, Leon didn't have a girlfriend or a fiancée, so he hadn't said a word during the entire conversation. He just looked mildly impatient.

"Albert, Cain... We should seriously keep Leon away from Leni. And maybe other women too. At this point, he might fall head over heels with any woman he finds remotely attractive and who shows him a little kindness, no matter how awful her personality might be."

The two of them nodded earnestly, apparently thinking the same thing, and we swore to keep women away from Leon for a while. I noticed that Cain had a bright smile on his face during this discussion in particular.

A few days later...

"Souvenirs, check! Food, check! Pass, check!" I said.

Since we were headed to Kukuri Village, we had to leave Shellhide a little earlier than I had planned. I rushed out to buy souvenirs and finished prepping

in order to leave the next day.

“It looks like you’re done getting ready, Master Tenma.”

Doni came to see me as I was sorting out souvenirs and packing them into my magic bag. The only ones in Shellhide were Doni and Leni, as Lani had gone ahead to the border fort the day the permits had been issued.

“Yeah, I’m thinking of setting out tomorrow. If we don’t head out soon, who knows when we’ll make it back to the capital?”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Doni said. “While there’s not much to worry about south of the capital, if you delay too long, you might run into snow.”

It was currently October, as one would say in my previous life. Even if we were to visit all of our planned destinations without any incidents, it would still take just over a month. If all went well, we’d be facing mid-November weather, and if any troubles arose, our journey might stretch into December.

“Snow shouldn’t be an issue for Thunderbolt, but the carriage is another story.”

Even though my carriage was far superior to a normal one, its wheels still wouldn’t glide effortlessly over snow. Being sturdier than average wouldn’t help in that regard.

“Depending on the conditions if it snows, it might be quicker to travel on foot and use the carriage while you’re stopped. Still, I’m quite jealous...” Doni said.

His suggestion relied on us having large-capacity magic and dimension bags. However, under normal circumstances, people would have to brave the cold and risk freezing to death or just avoid traveling altogether during the winter. Thinking about it that way, having a safe place to rest that felt like home during snow conditions would be more than enough.

“Speaking of which, I have something to discuss. Or rather, a favor to ask...”

In a way, I couldn’t say that I was surprised by what Doni asked for.

“Is everybody ready?” Kriss asked as she did final checks while looking at the group. Well, she was mainly looking at the three idiots.

We were setting out earlier than we’d planned, but thankfully, it seemed like

everyone had gotten their supplies ready in advance and hadn't forgotten anything.

"Don't worry so much, Kriss. We'll be fine!" Leon said with a laugh.

I then noticed there was a group of maids carrying a large basket behind him.

"Leon, I thought I told you to come pick up a few days' worth of meals from the dining hall," Edelia said, scolding him with a pleasant smile on her face. She was standing at the head of the group of maids.

"Sorry, Mom."

The fact that no one except Leon had known that meals had been prepared for us meant that he'd forgotten to let anyone else in on that tidbit.

"Albert, Cain! Check Leon's belongings!"

"Yes, Lady Edelia!" the two nobles replied in unison, bowing to Edelia before checking her son's luggage.

And the result of their inspection was just as I expected...

"Hey, Kriss! Leon didn't pack his weapons or his armor!" Albert complained.

"His wallet's missing too!" Cain said with exasperation.

"Oh, he left his wallet on the table."

Apparently, Leon had forgotten some very crucial items for our journey.

Cain took the wallet from Edelia and checked its contents. "It's empty!" he said and then turned it upside down to emphasize this.

Edelia sighed and headed back into the estate. I figured she was going to get her son some money. Meanwhile, Leon rushed back to his room to get his weapons and armor.

"Did anyone else forget anything?" Kriss asked.

"I keep my weapons, armor, and wallet in my magic bag to make sure I don't leave anything behind," Gramps said.

"Same here," I said.

"I have everything too," Jeanne said.

“I think I’m good...” Aura said.

We all looked over at Leon again and confirmed that we had everything we needed. While Aura wasn’t sure, Jeanne said she had checked the room before they’d left, so they should’ve been okay.

“What about you, Amur?”

“I checked and she has everything. At least, I don’t think there was anything left in the room,” Kriss said, answering for her.

“And I checked the inn, so there’s no problem there,” Leni assured us.

Amur had been quiet this whole time, but she looked over her belongings once more, straightened herself up a bit, and nodded.

“This is bad, Jeanne. Amur is evolving,” Aura said in a stage whisper.

“Well, I think it’s good that Amur’s growing, but what I’m more concerned about is how eager Leni is to join us...” Jeanne replied.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you two about that,” I said.

The request Doni had made of me the previous day was to let Leni accompany us on the journey back to the capital. The official reason was that since Amur was the daughter of a viscount from the SAR, she needed an attendant for her journey. But the *actual* reason was that Leni had insisted that Amur hadn’t finished her etiquette lessons yet, so she was going to tag along with us whether we liked it or not.

Gramps and Kriss had agreed to the plan. We’d informed the three idiots about it later, although Albert and Cain gave me a hard time about it. They said, “You just said it wasn’t a good idea to let any women get close to Leon!”

However, it had totally slipped my mind to tell Jeanne and Aura about it.

“Well, if that’s Tenma’s decision, we won’t say anything. But what will happen once we reach the capital?”

“It’ll depend on Amur. But either way, it seems like we won’t be staying there long. It seems she has a boyfriend back in Nanao,” I informed them.

If Leni decided that Amur hadn’t shown any growth by the time we reached

the capital, she'd said she would take Amur back to the SAR and give her a more thorough education there.

"Boyfriend..."

Jeanne and Aura looked satisfied with that explanation, but at the same time, it seemed they were very curious about Leni. I supposed that made sense since they hadn't been around many women who had boyfriends or who would openly talk about such things. She was the perfect person to satisfy their curiosity.

"So, everyone, please get along with Leni," I said.

"Got it!"

"You can count on me!"

They had both replied eagerly.

Hmm, so they're actually going to be reliable for a change?

"Sorry, sorry! I have everything I need now!" Leon returned with his weapons, armor, and the money he had received from Edelia. He proudly tapped his magic bag to show that he was fully prepared now.

"Well, looks like we're all set," I said.

Now that we were done with our preparations and it was time to leave, the margrave appeared from inside the estate.

"I haven't seen you around in a while, Dad. What brings you here?" Leon asked.

"Obviously he came to see you off, you dimwit!" Cain retorted.

"Oh, right," Cain nodded.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were thinking, *Why couldn't he have figured that out himself?*

"Thank you for all the help you've given us. Please accept this as a token of my appreciation," the margrave said. He then handed me a letter along with his family crest. It featured a howling wolf. "This crest will be quite useful to you while you're in my domain. At the very least, it will be more reliable than Leon.

And as for the letter, please give it to the captain of the knight brigade, which is responsible for maintaining order in the territory, when you come across him patrolling. It says he's to provide you with his assistance."

"Thanks. I appreciate it," I said.

The margrave's crest would allow us to pass through most places when we'd stop at towns and villages since it served as a travel permit, plus we would have Leon with us.

"By the way, there have been several reports of adventurers going missing around Kukuri Village and the Elder Forest after they accepted quests. Many have ended up injured too."

The missing adventurers were mostly young or inexperienced rookie adventurers who hadn't been to the Elder Forest before. The guild believed they might've gotten too cocky, misjudged the situation, and had gone too far into the forest, which had led to them getting attacked by powerful monsters. The ones who had returned safely other than some injuries were considered veterans who had been to the Elder Forest before.

"According to adventurers and knights who know about the old Kukuri Village and the Elder Forest, the forest has basically remained the same size it was before. It has gotten creepier, though. I have a feeling that's probably because a lot fewer people are venturing into it than they used to. That's just my own personal feeling, of course, but it's better to be cautious."

The margrave asked me to subtly warn any adventurers we saw who were planning to venture into the Elder Forest.

"I can do that, but..."

I knew there would be adventurers who wouldn't listen to their peers. However, they would at least take notice if I showed them Margrave Haust's family crest and mentioned that I used to live in Kukuri Village. After that, they were free to make their own decisions—I wouldn't have any responsibility for what might happen to them.

"You don't have to do anything beyond that. I was planning on alerting the guild as well, but ultimately, it's up to the adventurer."

That was the message Margrave Haust had wanted to convey, and it seemed like the captain of the knights was away from Shellhide right now in an effort to increase awareness about the forest's dangers.

"Well, I appreciate everything," I said.

"Mmm. Well, take care."

Margrave Haust seemed to have grown more used to us because he was a lot more talkative than before. He still wasn't at ease like Duke Sanga or Marquis Sammons would be, though. Even so, it wasn't really fair to compare them—those two had exceptional communication skills.

"Gramps, about what the margrave said... Do you really think that many adventurers are going missing in the forest?" I asked.

"Well, the medicinal herbs found there are said to be the highest quality in the region. And when you get young or inexperienced adventurers who don't earn that much, there will always be some who keep pushing the envelope. In the past, we villagers would guide them to safer areas, but there's not anyone around to do that anymore, of course," he explained.

"We should be careful then too. It's been a long time since we left Kukuri Village, so we shouldn't think of the Elder Forest as a place we're familiar with anymore," I said.

Gramps agreed. "That's true. The areas around the village won't have changed much, but we have no idea how much the forest's ecosystem might have evolved. Perhaps monsters that were driven away by the dragon zombie have settled in the shallower parts of the forest. Make sure none of you enter the forest alone."

Everyone nodded at his advice—it carried the weight of his knowledge and experience as a seasoned adventurer. If I had said something like that instead, Leon probably would've brushed it aside with a joke.

We said our final goodbyes to the margrave, and then I hitched Thunderbolt up to the carriage. I took my place in the driver's seat next to Leon, as he would be acting as my guide and a form of identification for us. After all, he'd be more useful than the crest in Shellhide.

“Let’s go!” he called out enthusiastically, but Thunderbolt didn’t budge.

That was because I held the reins, and Thunderbolt was only supposed to respond to my or Rocket’s commands. Recently, he’d begun obeying Gramps and Jeanne, but those were just simple requests rather than orders. At any rate, there was no way that he would obey Leon since the two of them barely knew each other.

“C’mon, Thunderbolt.” I lightly tugged on the reins, and Thunderbolt began a slow walk.

The margrave, Edelia, and their other relatives who’d come to see us off laughed at Leon, who was now flushed with embarrassment.

Part Seven

“Hey, Leon. How long until we reach Kukuri Village?” I asked.

“Hmm... According to this map, I think it should take about two or three days. Even though it’s our territory, I don’t know every bit of it. Plus, I’ve never been to Kukuri Village.”

Leon said we were about halfway between Shellhide and Kukuri Village now. There were no towns or villages nearby.

“Still, there’s not a single person in sight, not as far as the eye can see.”

We were crossing a grassy plain and I could see for several kilometers beyond the carriage. There was no sign of anyone around.

“Well, there’s not much out here,” Leon said. “Some people might come out this way and cut the tall grasses in the spring and summer, though.”

He said they would use the cut grass as fodder for livestock like horses and cows, and it could bring in valuable income for inexperienced adventurers. That grass sold for a little over 100G for ten kilograms of fodder, so even if someone collected and sold a hundred kilograms, it would barely cover the cost of lodging and meals for the day.

“Still, if the adventurers stay at cheap inns and work efficiently, they can turn a decent profit. Then, they can buy slightly better weapons and armor with the money they saved and take on quests to slay low-level monsters for more experience. That’s a basic strategy for new adventurers working in this area. And while they’re cutting grass, occasionally, they’ll come upon weak monsters like horned rabbits that can still bring in some decent money. Adventurers who take on grass-cutting quests a certain number of times are given preferential treatment within the margrave’s territory.”

Although the profits might’ve been small, it was still an opportunity for extra income and experience. And since Shellhide’s specialty was horses, it was a necessary task for adventurers. The preferential treatment Leon had mentioned included things like receiving slightly higher rewards for their next grass-cutting quest or discounts at inns and restaurants run by the guild or the margrave’s

family.

“It’s quite a blessing for new adventurers with limited ways to make income.”

So it made sense that those quests had become popular with rookies. Otherwise, they’d probably set up their base of operations in busy places like the capital or dungeon cities, where jobs were more abundant.

“It’s worth mentioning that those discounts and inns and restaurants were added after the incident at Kukuri Village,” Leon said.

They had been put into place to prevent adventurers from leaving and to try to lure back those who had already moved on. Nevertheless, the experienced adventurers had never returned. Those adventurers probably wouldn’t be taking on a quest like cutting grass anyway, so they’d be better off staying where they were instead of coming back to the margrave’s territory. The incentives just weren’t that great for them.

“I think it’s a pretty good policy for the margrave’s territory. It helps secure future combat strength,” I said.

“Yeah, as long as we don’t lose the adventurers we’ve raised here,” Leon said.

That was a common issue for any territory, though—they wanted adventurers to grow fond of a place before they got too strong while also creating a place attractive enough that even if those adventurers left, they’d want to return.

“That’ll be your job when you take over as margrave,” I said.

“I’ll do my best,” Leon said enthusiastically.

“Tenma, it’s almost time to switch,” Cain said. He offered to take over as I chatted with Leon, and I accepted.

“It’s your turn too, Albert,” Leon said.

Cain disagreed. “No way, Leon! You’re our guide, so you have to stay there so we don’t get lost!”

After that, I heard Leon exclaim, “It’s just a straight shot. Why do you need a guide?” but I didn’t hear him call out to Albert again. I figured Cain had convinced him to give it up.

“Hey, Tenma, Master Merlin,” Cain suddenly opened the window and called out to us after we’d traveled a while without incident. “There’s a swamp up ahead that Leon has never heard of.”

According to Cain, there was a depression in the terrain about fifty meters ahead of us. Muddy water had collected there, and it resembled a swamp.

Gramps and I went out to check. There was definitely a swampy area filled with murky water up ahead, and it clearly looked suspicious.

“Don’t you think that swamp looks like someone made it, Gramps?” I said.

“I think so too. I’d wager there’s frogs lurking there.” It seemed like Gramps had an idea about the creatures who created the swamp too.

I used Detection to take a look and found several monsters called mad poisonous frogs hiding inside. I couldn’t tell how many there were, and I wasn’t sure if that was because they had a Conceal ability or because of the distance between us, but either way, it didn’t seem like there were too many of them.

Everyone was curious to hear that there were frog monsters up ahead. They all came out to look.

“I’m almost certain those are mad poisonous frogs,” Gramps said. “As winter approaches, they gather in groups to create a place to hibernate in swamps. Normally, they build them in forests or groves, but sometimes, they’ll make them in open areas like grasslands. But when they do, they often freeze to death. There’s nothing out here to shield them from the elements.”

He also said that adventurers sometimes underestimated them, assuming that they were easy prey and charging in unprepared. In that case, they ended up providing nutrition to the frogs for their hibernation.

“They might be frogs, but they can grow up to a few meters in size. Long ago, I saw one that was nearly five meters long. And although their name sounds scary, what with the poison and all, their meat is quite tasty. Some of their materials are very useful too,” Gramps explained.

Their meat tasted similar to chicken, and their skin was stretchy. Their tendons could also be used for bowstrings. However, although they were both delicious and useful as materials, they could also be troublesome.

“First of all, they’re resistant to blunt attacks. Their skin and flesh can absorb impacts from blunt weapons such as hammers—they’re totally ineffective. Bladed weapons work normally, but the frogs’ skin is poisonous. You can use blades only if you’re willing to discard the meat. So at any rate, I wouldn’t recommend close combat,” Gramps said.

Frogs were known for their ability to change color in order to blend in with their surroundings. They could also extend their tongues to capture their prey and jump quite high. It seemed like the mad poisonous frogs shared those traits.

“What I mean by that is the frog’s tongue will strike before you can get close enough to attack. And even if you *do* manage to get close, it’ll hop away with its impressive leaping ability. Blunt attacks are ineffective, and bladed attacks ruin the materials. So, in order to defeat them efficiently, you must use magic. Freezing or paralyzing them is the best strategy. Because of that, while the monsters themselves are Rank B or C, hunting them for materials is considered Rank A in difficulty.”

Gramps said that when he had defeated one, he hadn’t been trying to get its materials, so he’d decapitated it with Wind magic. He had been able to skin it before the poison had spread to the meat, but he still only ate its hind legs. Because of that, while he had to dispose of most of the meat, the skin had remained in good condition. The guild that had received it was pleased.

“Should I go alone, then?” I asked.

“Yes, I think so. I think it’s better for me to stay here and guard the carriage in case any of the frogs evade your spells and come this way,” Gramps said.

The vanguard group—Leon and Amur—looked a bit disappointed when they were told blunt and bladed attacks were ineffective, but once they heard I could get them some delicious meat, they gave me hopeful looks. The two greedy goobers Shiromaru and Solomon gazed at me with similar expressions behind them. With four sets of eyes on me, I suddenly felt a lot of pressure not to fail.

“I’ll bring out some golems first. All right, advance!”

Following Gramps’s advice, I used golems to lure the frogs out of the swamp

without getting too close. I summoned five golems, each around the size of a person. Since I'd used the dirt at my feet for the materials, they'd probably be easily defeated by a frog's attack, but that didn't matter as long as their cores weren't destroyed. They were just decoys anyway.

The golems lined up and approached the swamp. Then...

"Got one! Whoa, that was close!"

Four of the golems were attacked. The frogs' attack power and speed were more impressive than I'd imagined.

The frogs had noticed the golems approaching when they were about ten meters away from the swamp and had emerged from the water. I had been hiding behind the golems, poised to unleash Lightning magic, but the golems had exploded before I could even cast my spell—all four of them, in fact, and at the same time. The fragments had flown toward me with such force I had jumped back in a panic.

"Their bodies move slowly, but their tongues shoot out as fast as a speeding bullet! Well, at least I'm out of range..."

I jumped back to a spot out of the range of their tongues as the frogs slowly approached me. Since I knew they might leap toward me if I let my guard down, I used the Lightning spell Stun to take them down first.

Despite their blazing-fast tongues, they were powerless when I was out of their range, so the mad poisonous frogs all toppled over on the spot.

"Looks like I got them all. I guess I'll bury them for now."

I ordered the one remaining golem to retrieve the destroyed golems' cores and then fill in the swamp. Meanwhile, I washed the surfaces of the defeated frogs with Water magic.

Gramps and the others had come over once I had killed all the frogs.

"I was worried when I saw the golems get blasted apart, but I guess it all ended smoothly," he said.

"Yikes. Small frogs are cute, but ones this size are downright creepy!" Cain commented.

“I think they’re more scary than creepy,” Albert said.

“Either way, I wouldn’t wanna deal with a frog that’s twice as big as me! Especially after seeing what they did to those golems,” Leon said.

Everyone turned to look at the shattered remains of the golems. Once the surviving one had retrieved their cores, he’d tossed the other remnants into the swamp, helping to fill it in.

“I bet Lady Amur would’ve ended up like that if she’d tried to take on those frogs,” Leni remarked.

“Not just Amur, but Leon too,” Cain said.

The color drained from Amur’s face, and Leon’s expression tightened too. If Gramps hadn’t explained things to them, they probably would’ve rushed in right away, so the likelihood that they would’ve ended up like those golems was pretty high.

By the way, if Leon had charged in, Albert would’ve gone to support him, and then Kriss would’ve gone to stop them both. Those two must’ve been thinking about it because they looked pale as well.

“Jeanne, from now on, let’s be careful to have a golem from Master Tenma ready to summon at any time we go outside...” Aura said anxiously.

“Good idea,” Jeanne agreed.

Since both of them had been kidnapped before and had faced danger, they began to check on their golems.

“Well, the biggest advantage of this situation is that everyone has regained a sense of urgency. Anyway, do you know how to skin these frogs, Tenma?” Gramps asked.

“I’ve dealt with normal-sized frogs before, but never ones this big,” I said.

Gramps told me he would teach me how while we took a break. “Leon, is there a water source nearby?” he asked.

“The nearest one is a river about ten kilometers away. It’s not that big, but I think that’s the best place around here to rest. There’s a small village farther upstream too, but that’s another twenty to thirty kilometers away.”

We could cover ten kilometers in about a half hour with Thunderbolt, so even reaching the village seemed doable within two hours.

“Let’s take a break by the river, and then we can try to find a place to stay for the night either in that village or somewhere nearby,” I said.

We could head straight to the village, but since we would be skinning the frogs, that might be a nuisance to do it close to there. We decided to head for the river Leon had mentioned first. The golem had finished filling in the swamp once we made our decision, so I retrieved its core and then loaded it onto the carriage.

“We’re here!”

We reached the river a bit sooner than we’d expected. We quickly split up and got to work preparing for our break. As usual, we set up chairs near the carriage and took a quick look around, which didn’t take much time at all. Eating was the most important part of our break, and Leni was in charge of today’s meal. Jeanne and Aura would usually help me take care of that, so Leni’s helping gave me more free time.

“Gramps, can you teach me how to skin the frogs while we wait for the food to be ready?” I asked.

“Of course. I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it quickly. Anyone who’s free and interested can come along to learn too. It’s a rather unique method, so I think it’ll be a good experience for you,” Gramps said.

Kriss, Albert, Cain, and Leon all decided to join in. Amur tried to come over as well, but Leni caught her and took her over to help with the cooking. That left me and the other four as Gramps’s students.

“Okay, we’re going to head out now. Rocket, Shiromaru, Solomon, you all keep an eye out for any threats here.”

I didn’t see any immediate dangers, but I asked my followers to be vigilant just in case, as we headed toward the river.

Gramps began his explanation. “First, there are three main ways to butcher frogs. The first is to skin and cut them up like any other monster or animal, but

that requires someone else to hold the frog in place for a clean butcher. However, this is the most basic method. The second is to hang them from a tree or something while you work, but that can only be done if you have something large enough to hang the frog from. You'll also need the strength to lift a frog of this size. But once you get used to it, this method allows you to separate the meat more cleanly than the first one. The third way to do this involves freezing the frogs before you process them. You have to make sure you don't freeze them completely, which means you need a certain amount of magical skill and mana, but this method lets you maintain the freshness of the meat while making skinning easier."

Hearing all that, it was decided that Kriss and the others would use the first and second methods while I would use the third to process the frogs. Personally, I found the second method more interesting because it reminded me of hanging monkfish, so I decided I'd try that after I successfully used the freezing method.

"Also, when you're preparing frogs, you must wash their skin thoroughly beforehand. Their poison coats the skin's surface, but they're also just plain dirty. Additionally, these frogs have poison sacs near their shoulder blades—make sure to remove those first."

Their poison wasn't usually enough to kill someone, but it could cause victims to go numb or slow down considerably. It was dangerous to children, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems. Even some adults could go into shock if they were to accidentally become exposed to too much of the poison, and they could even risk blindness if it got in their eyes. For all those reasons, it was important to be cautious.

"There used to be places that fished using this kind of poison frog, but sometimes they didn't remove all the poison from the fish. Also, in small rivers, there was a risk of wiping out all the fish living there, so that method is mostly banned now," Gramps said.

For that reason, we took care to scoop water out of the river with a bucket and cleaned the frogs a distance away from its banks instead of washing the frogs' poison directly in the water.

“Let’s all do it at the same time! One, two, three!” Albert said.

“I’m done tying it up! How about you, Cain?” Leon asked.

“I’m good over here!” Cain said.

The three idiots were struggling to hang the frogs from the two earthen walls Gramps had created with magic. They were probably planning to wash the frogs after they had been hung.

“Yuck! They’re all slimy and squishy!”

Currently, Kriss was washing the smallest frog by herself with a scrub brush. Although it was the smallest overall, even that one was easily over a meter and a half long.

“Everyone seems to be having a hard time,” I mused to myself.

Meanwhile, I had summoned two golems to hold the frogs while I used Water magic like a pressure washer to get rid of the dirt, slime, and poison. As I cleaned them, I felt someone watching from behind, and I turned to see Kriss staring intently at me. Then, she silently held out her hand toward me.



“Are you trying to shake hands? Ha ha, just kidding,” I joked.

But then, Kriss began to scoop up the slime that had fallen to her feet with both hands. I quickly handed her two cores to summon medium golems.

The speed of her work increased dramatically after she started using them, and she quickly surpassed me and Albert. It made sense since she was working with the smallest frog and now had two additional sets of hands—plus, her helpers were willing to tackle the unpleasant task without a single complaint.

Albert and the others wanted to use golems too once they had seen what Kriss was doing, but since they’d already hung their frogs up, the golems would just get in their way.

“Looks like everyone did a fine job. Now, we need to remove their organs, skin them, and break them down into manageable parts, just like we would do with any other animal,” Gramps instructed.

Once the slime and dirt had been cleaned off, everything after that was pretty straightforward. It wasn’t too hard. It seemed like Albert and the others had the easiest go of it with the hanging method.

“The meat has a nice color. It looks and feels a lot like chicken, so it should work well for similar dishes.”

I cut off a small piece of the meat, grilled it a bit, and gave it a taste.

Yep. Tastes like chicken.

“It’s good, but...I’m picturing a frog while eating it, so it’s kind of confusing. And that seems to make it not taste as good,” Kriss said.

“Really? It doesn’t bother me,” Albert said.

“I get where you’re coming from, Kriss. The frog’s appearance is definitely a disadvantage,” Cain agreed.

“Well, if you didn’t know what it was and you just ate it, you’d have no idea,” I said. “So once it’s cut up, it’s not really a problem.”

We all agreed that it was tasty, but in the end, the appearance of the food was also quite important.

“Let’s eat this meat during our journey, then. I can take the other materials, right?” I asked.

“I don’t have a problem with that. Leon would’ve found himself in quite a predicament if you hadn’t killed the frogs, and except for Master Merlin, the others probably would’ve ended up with serious injuries,” Kriss said.

Those frogs could easily kill inexperienced adventurers at first sight. If adventurers blindly approached the monsters in an attempt to kill them, the frogs would strike with their tongue attacks. Their tongues were far too forceful and dangerous to defend against.

“I think we should spread the word about the frogs when we reach that village. If this place is an area new adventurers come to often for experience, those frogs are far too dangerous. I don’t know where they came from, so I can’t say they won’t return here since we already found some lurking,” Gramps said.

Leon nodded intently.

Well, if there were dangerous monsters lurking about in places meant for new adventurers to gain experience, it would discourage those people from making this area their base. Perhaps it would be wise to commission veteran adventurers to investigate the frogs on behalf of House Margrave.

“Well, I’m grateful I got some interesting materials. And the meat is pretty good too. I’d like to try making some tools with what I’ve gotten,” I said.

So far, the only unusable part of these frogs were their internal organs. That was because since they lived in muddy environments like swamps, their organs were smelly and filled with bacteria. They could apparently be used in medicine, but processing them was a huge hassle and they didn’t fetch a high price if you sold them either. I just decided to dispose of them by digging a hole and burning them.

Anyway, the most interesting material of all was the tongue muscle. From my brief research, it seemed to possess properties similar to rubber, so I could probably use it as a substitute for rubber in various ways. I couldn’t extract enough of the tongue muscle to experiment too much, so I’d have to try using the frog’s skin and other muscles as a substitute.

I already had several plans swirling around in my mind as we headed back to the carriage where our meal was probably ready and waiting for us.

“This is delicious! It’s amazing!” Leon gushed to Leni about the frog meat she had just cooked up.

“All I did was sprinkle salt on it and grill it up.”

“Sorry, Jeanne and Aura, but can you keep Leni occupied? Cain and I will take Leon to the back of the carriage. Amur, we’re counting on your help too.”

Albert noticed Leon trying to charm Leni and immediately sprang into action, separating him from her. Meanwhile, Amur had been tasked with revealing the cruel truth to the totally oblivious Leon.

“What about me?” Kriss asked.

“You keep an eye on Leni too,” Albert said.

Kriss took on the responsibility of watching Leni since she got along with Amur so well. It was probably better for a woman closer in age to handle a matter like this. I was grateful, though—if either Gramps or I had to do it, I knew that we wouldn’t have had the first clue about what to say.

“What the heck do you guys want? We were having such a good time talking!” Leon protested.

Albert and Cain dragged him away, but Leon was quite upset about it. He probably thought he and Leni had a good thing going.

“We’ve got some bad news for you, Leon,” Amur announced, towering over Leon with her arms crossed while he pouted in front of them. “Leni...already has a boyfriend! The rumor going around Nanao is that they’re serious and she’s pledged her future to him—they’re going to marry soon!”

“No way...” Leon froze for a moment after Amur dropped that bombshell on him. Then, he crumpled to the ground. “Why was she being so nice to me?” he asked.

“She’s like that with everyone,” Amur said.

“That’s right,” Albert agreed.

It was true. Leni treated me, Gramps, Kriss, Jeanne, and everyone else the same way—even including Albert and Cain. It wasn't like Leon was an exception. The only person she acted differently toward was Amur. Sometimes she was sweet with her, sometimes strict, and then she'd be sweet again. Maybe if Leon had been more observant, he would've noticed her behavior toward him wasn't special at all. But unfortunately, he had been so caught up in his fantasy world that he'd been totally oblivious to that.

"I guess the goddess of love hasn't smiled upon me after all..." he whined.

While that *sounded* cool, of course, he'd never had a chance with her to begin with. And even if things had gone the way he imagined, it would've only caused more trouble.

"Well, now that that's settled, shall we get back to eating?" I suggested.

"Great idea!" Cain said.

Albert and Amur shot sympathetic looks over to Leon and didn't answer me. And Leon was still on all fours, showing no sign of moving.

"C'mon, guys. He'll get over it eventually," Cain said and began to lead the way. I noticed he was stifling his laughter as he turned around.

"Sorry about all this," Leni said.

"It's fine. Just try to be a bit more careful next time," Albert said, responding to her apology on Leon's behalf.

Albert didn't press the issue any further since Leon's misunderstanding had caused this whole mess. After all, it wasn't like it was Leni's fault. The only reason she had to apologize was because Leon was a noble, but things still felt awkward.

"Anyway, let's just put this matter behind us," Kriss said. "Leni, try to keep some distance from Leon from now on. And Leon, you need to reflect on this and ask for advice next time before you get carried away like this again. Understood?"

Leni nodded, and Leon, who was still on the ground, raised one arm in acknowledgment. Kriss had brought the conversation to an abrupt end.

“All right, let’s get back to lunch!”

Kriss merely glanced at Leon once more before digging into her food again. We followed her lead, although Leon remained frozen on the ground. Jeanne and Aura seemed worried about him and were debating whether they should bring him some food, but Kriss shot them a warning glare.

“You don’t want to end up like Leni, do you?” she asked.

That brought them back to their senses, so they returned to their seats.

I kept glancing over at Leon during lunch, but he stayed in the same position the whole time.

“Well, lunch is over so it’s time to get moving. C’mon, Leon!” Cain called out.

Leon stood up and trudged over to us at last, deliberately avoiding eye contact with Leni. No one said a word about it, not even Cain, who usually loved teasing him. I had a feeling Cain had been in a hurry to get Leon off the ground.

“Leon, you’ll be driving the carriage again,” Cain said.

That wasn’t a coincidence—it was a decision made on purpose to keep Leon as far away from Leni as possible.

“Everyone, I see a village up ahead. How about we stop there for the night?” Cain suggested.

It hadn’t even been two hours since our last break, but if we didn’t stop here, we would probably have to camp outside.

Gramps quickly agreed with Cain. “If there’s a chance we’ll need to camp later if we continue, we might as well get a good night’s sleep in a village instead,” he said.

The majority of our party was already in agreement. Unsurprisingly, Kriss was the first to back the idea, followed by Leni, Jeanne, and Aura.

“It’s important for the leader to find a place where everyone can comfortably rest—especially when traveling with mixed company since that can get stressful,” Gramps advised.

Now that it'd been decided, we approached the village gate. Leon and I would handle the conversation with the gatekeeper since I was the party leader and Leon was the heir to this territory. Still, I couldn't help but worry about whether or not the gatekeeper would recognize him...

"I'll go get the village chief. Please wait here for a moment."

Just as I had thought, the gatekeeper couldn't decide if Leon was really who he said he was, so we were stuck there waiting for the chief to show up. This was a small village, so I guess it made sense that they didn't recognize Leon. In retrospect, things might've gone more smoothly if we hadn't mentioned he was the next margrave and had just shown my guild card instead.

"Maybe they think we're suspicious and there's some fraudster claiming to be the margrave's son with us?" I said.

"Ugh, you might be right. I have to ask—this isn't just my fault, right?" Leon asked nervously.

It could be a problem if no one recognized Leon in a larger town, like where we'd been before, but it made sense that the locals in a small village like this wouldn't recognize him.

Leon looked a bit relieved after I said that. He was gradually regaining his usual energy and slowly recovering from the shock of the Leni situation.

Not long afterward, the gatekeeper returned with the village chief. He didn't recognize Leon either, but once Leon showed him the margrave's family crest, he let us inside without an issue.

"I bet that chief never leaves the village because he's so old. *That* must be why he doesn't recognize me!" Leon said, trying to make excuses even though we had gotten in without any problems.

Albert overheard him and smiled. "It's not unusual for people in small villages not to recognize the future head of the territory."

Cain laughed. "But let's not tell Leon that. It's more fun this way."

"Well, now that we've got a place to stay, everyone's free to do as they

please. Gramps and I will go meet with the village chief,” I said.

“That’s right,” Gramps agreed.

Even though we had free time, there wasn’t really much here to see. This village was around the same size as Kukuri Village had been, or maybe even smaller. Still, the girls decided to look around to see if they could find anything interesting in the shops while Albert and the others chose to explore on their own inside and outside of the village. They’d tagged along on our journey with a bit of recon in mind, but honestly, I thought they were just trying to distract Leon from his heartbreak with Leni.

Meanwhile, Gramps and I headed off to see the chief so we could warn him about the frog monsters we had encountered on the way here.



“It’s a small village, but they seem to have a solid defense. The wall around the village isn’t very tall, but it’s made of stone and reinforced with earth and timber, so it won’t collapse easily,” I—Albert—said.

“They could buy themselves some time if they needed to with this setup.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

Even though we’d brought Leon along with us, he was acting gloomy again. I could tell it would take him a while to get over this. His mood swings were pretty drastic.

Cain, probably fed up with Leon’s pouting, suddenly yelled at him. “Sheesh. If you wanted to win over Leni, you should’ve asked Amur for info first. That way, you would’ve figured out it was a hopeless situation before you got crushed like this!”

He had a point, though. If Leon had asked Amur for information, his chances of success would’ve been much higher. And what I mean by that is that he would’ve known from the start that he didn’t stand a chance.

“Cain’s right, Leon. This is on you,” I said. “It’s unfair to make Leni uncomfortable just because things didn’t go your way. Don’t you think it’s wrong to cause trouble for someone you wanted to be with, even if it only

lasted a short time? Is this the kind of man you want to be?”

“Exactly. You should see this as a chance to redeem and better yourself!” Cain said.

I knew the logic was a bit forced, but if Leon didn’t snap out of it soon, it could end up affecting diplomatic relations with the SAR. I wasn’t sure how much influence Leni had down there, but considering the viscount had personally requested her presence to escort Amur, it was safe to say she was well-trusted. And if Amur held her in high regard, it was likely the other officials from the SAR did too. I didn’t think things would sour right away, but we’d definitely leave a bad impression on them if Leon kept sulking.

“Besides, the whole purpose of this journey is to prove that there’s no friction between the margrave and Tenma,” Albert explained. “So Leon, if you cause trouble for Tenma, it’ll ruin everything.”

It was a bit underhanded to do so, but bringing up Tenma would push Leon to pull himself together, even if we had to force it.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Thankfully, Leon was determined not to cause trouble for Tenma with his personal issues and was starting to come to his senses.

Just then...

Several villagers came running in from the fields, their faces frozen with fear. “Hey, you over there! Run back into the village now! A goblin horde is coming!” they yelled.

“How many are there?”

“Around thirty! They’re probably looking for food for the winter. There’s a lot of them, but if we hold our defenses and fight together, we can manage!”

While they claimed they’d be fine, the anxious looks on their faces said otherwise.

Leon ignored the villagers and pulled his weapon from his magic bag. “Leave the goblins to me!” he yelled and ran in the direction they’d come from.



“That idiot! Hey, we’re with House Haust, so get back to the village and alert everyone about the goblins,” I told the group. “Prepare for the worst. Also, go and inform the rest of our party for us and ask them to come here! I think they’re at the village chief’s place!”

The villagers had started to kneel once I’d told them who we were, but after I said there was no time for that, they ran off toward the chief’s house instead.

“Cain, we gotta go after Leon. I don’t think thirty goblins would give him trouble, but we can’t take any chances here,” I said.

“Yeah, especially since he’s not exactly at his best right now. Let’s hurry up.”

We sighed and rushed after Leon, knowing how reckless he could get when he didn’t have his wits about him.



“It must’ve been tough for you since then.”

Gramps and I were at the village chief’s house to warn him about the frogs, but we ended up chatting for a while. Apparently, he’d visited Kukuri Village several times and knew who I was. We’d never spoken to each other, but he’d seen me from a distance and had remembered me because the sudden appearance of a new kid had caught his attention. He also knew of Gramps due to his reputation and had always wanted to meet him, but it had just so happened that every time he’d gone to Kukuri Village, Gramps had been on a trip somewhere.

“Hmph. Well, once you’ve lived as long as I have, you experience such things. Still, Kukuri’s a long way from here. What made you keep visiting?” Gramps asked.

“Well, to be honest, the medicine from Kukuri worked better than anything. It pains me to admit that our village didn’t have any special products of our own. I was hoping I could figure out how to make Kukuri’s medicine for ourselves.”

Apparently, the chief’s visits had been motivated by a desire to steal the recipe at first. He’d hoped to do that not by sneaking around, but by watching and learning. Unfortunately, he’d had no luck. So, in a last-ditch effort, he had

just come right out and asked, and to his surprise, they had told him everything without hesitation.

It turned out that it had actually been my mom who'd shared the recipe with him. The chief hadn't known what ingredients to use since my dad and I had been the ones gathering the herbs from the Elder Forest.

"But even with the recipe, I couldn't match Celia's skills. And our ingredients here just aren't of the same quality. We couldn't make anything good enough to sell. However, we *did* manage to make medicine using ingredients around here that are more than sufficient for everyday use, so thanks to those, injuries and common illnesses rarely claim lives around here anymore."

The overall health of the villagers had improved now that they had better ways to deal with sickness and injury, which in turn boosted their food production. The chief also told us that they also started visiting Kukuri Village more regularly to buy more of Mom's medicine and herbs from the Elder Forest. I'd never known any of this, and neither had Gramps, but Uncle Mark had actually been here before, which meant there had been more of a relationship between the two villages than we'd realized.

"Well, I suppose that makes sense since both villages are in the same territory."

Gramps said he hadn't been involved and probably hadn't known anything about this village because he'd always let Dad and Uncle Mark take care of troublesome things.

"The dragon zombie's attack on Kukuri was a real shock, though. It was considered the most well-defended village in this region. We wouldn't have lasted even an hour if it had attacked us instead," the chief said.

The reason Kukuri had such strong defenses was because of Gramps, Dad, Mom, and several other villagers who were former adventurers and were used to hunting in the Elder Forest. While Kukuri hadn't had the number of people Shellhide did, their warriors were said to have been even stronger.

"After that incident, we started asking ourselves how we'd defend the village if we were attacked by a horde of monsters. That's why we upped our patrols and built the wall around the village," the chief explained. "It may not look like

much, but it's better than nothing. Even if it only holds them off for a little while, it'll increase our chances of survival."

The attack on Kukuri Village had changed things for the smaller villages across the margrave's territory. Some villages like this one had focused on bolstering their self-defense capabilities, while others had been abandoned when their residents had left their homes and relocated to larger towns. Some villages had strengthened alliances with others too. The reason behind all these changes had been the realization that when it came down to it, the margrave might not come to help immediately.

"We talked it over with the neighboring villages too. It's not easy to abandon the place where you were born and raised, though. That's why we decided to try to make this place as livable as possible. And having a good supply of medicine was part of the reason we felt confident staying here," the chief said.

"So that attack made everyone more aware of how vulnerable they were here."

As Gramps and the chief talked, a villager suddenly burst into the room in a panic. At first, the chief scolded him for barging in, but once he heard the reason, he started panicking too.

The report was regarding someone we knew all too well.

"There's trouble! Lord Leon's surrounded by a horde of goblins!"

"I'll head over there, Gramps."

"Okay," Gramps said. "I'll check the opposite direction, just in case. Ordinary goblins won't try to attack from two sides, but if there's a higher-ranked one among them, anything's possible."

Gramps and I rushed out of the chief's house and headed in different directions.

"It wasn't supposed to be too far, so I should spot them any minute now... Oh, there he is. Looks like he's fine."

I only had to fly for about a minute before I spotted Leon fighting the goblins. They didn't stand a chance against him. He was just slaughtering them, and they

were helpless to fight back. Half of them had already begun to flee and run for their lives while the other half lay shredded at his feet.

Leon was doing fine on his own, so I turned to Albert and Cain. “Hey, you two! You’re okay, right? Not that I needed to ask...”

“Yeah, we’re fine.”

“We’re good.”

For some reason, the two of them looked oddly gloomy. I was about to ask what was wrong, but then they silently pointed at Leon.

Leon had tears streaming down his face as he chased after the fleeing goblins, slicing them clean in half. “Why...can’t I...ever get a girlfriend?! Damn iiiit!” he yelled.

“Well, umm... I guess those goblins showing up ended up being useful after all if it’s helping him blow off some steam...?”

I felt oddly conflicted, but in the end, I decided to follow suit with Albert and Cain. We all just quietly watched over Leon.

Anyway, I thought we were only dealing with ordinary goblins, but when I used Identify, it revealed that nearly half were actually hobgoblins, the stronger species of creatures. Hobgoblins were as strong or even stronger than the average adult man. If that horde had attacked the village directly, it could’ve resulted in serious casualties.

“I’m not sure it was a good idea to charge in alone like that, but he did well this time, considering how strong they were and his state of mind...” I said.

I was certain that Kriss would scold Leon for acting without orders, but we decided we would stick up for him when the time came.

“Leon, you *do* understand that if you made one wrong move, you could’ve put everyone in this village in danger, don’t you?!”

“Sorry...”

As expected, Kriss rushed over to give him a piece of her mind. The moment she showed up, though, Albert and I jumped in to intervene and explained why

Leon had charged at the horde. Of course, we polished the story a bit to make him sound better. While we distracted Kriss, Cain whispered to Leon, instructing him not to say anything other than “Sorry.” Thanks to that, Kriss wasn’t able to scold him as harshly as usual.

We had told Kriss that “The goblins couldn’t get near the village because Leon charged at them first” and “Leon tried to protect the village on his own to improve the margrave’s reputation!” Plus, when we had talked to the village chief, he’d mentioned that the villagers had built walls to strengthen their defenses because they hadn’t been sure how much they could trust the margrave’s family. That additional explanation seemed to convince Kriss that Leon had his reasons for acting alone.

“Looks like Leon was the hero today, eh?” Gramps said.

He’d been keeping an eye on things from the sky, waiting for Kriss’s lecture to end before he landed, and since I was the only one who’d even noticed his presence, the others were quite startled when he came down.

Kriss seemed to have more to say, but now it didn’t seem like the right time, so her lecture ended there.

“I scouted the area around the village,” Gramps said. “Besides the goblins, I didn’t see anything else that posed a threat.”

Some of the villagers hurried back inside the walls to spread the news.

“How are you going to deal with the goblin corpses, Leon?”

“I don’t know. Maybe dig a hole somewhere and toss them in?”

There weren’t many valuable parts that could be harvested from the goblins’ bodies. Some cities would buy them for fertilizer, but they weren’t of much use to this village.

“Disposing of the bodies is one thing, but what about their magic cores?”

“Hmm, they’d probably be worth some pocket money at least, but extracting them is a pain... Oh, I know! Someone go ask the chief to send us a few villagers with experience in processing monsters. They can keep any magic cores they harvest and sell them to fund a feast for the village or something,” I suggested.

Initially, the villagers were hesitant to touch the monsters Leon had slain since he was a noble. But when he made it clear he wasn't interested in the goblins, they began processing the goblins' bodies without hesitation. Since removing a core just involved cutting open a goblin's chest, they finished the task quickly. I had dug a pit as they had been working on the bodies, so once they were done, we dumped the corpses into it and burned them to ashes.

When we returned to the entrance of the village, a huge crowd of villagers were waiting there to greet Leon. Although his behavior had been reckless and fueled by him venting his frustrations, they had no idea about any of that. From their perspective, he had performed a heroic act to protect their village, and that was more than enough to wipe away their distrust of the margrave.

So, of course, the best way for them to honor Leon was to throw a huge feast in his honor, which had been the custom in Kukuri Village as well. Leon was being celebrated not just as the future margrave, but as their hero. All of a sudden, he was incredibly popular...with the elderly men and women of the village.

Unfortunately for him, it turned out that in this village, anyone considered "young" was already over thirty as anyone younger than that had already left the village or was married. Basically, there were no eligible bachelorettes here—not Leon's age, at least.

"That's just cruel..."

"Way too cruel..."

Even Cain, who usually laughed at Leon when this kind of thing happened to him, pitied him too much to make a joke.

"Even I feel sorry for him. He's the most popular he's ever been, but there's not a single girl in sight..." Kriss murmured sympathetically.

"Well, maybe it's disappointing from a man's perspective," I said, "but Leon's done more than enough as the next margrave. Especially since this village seems to have ties with other nearby towns and villages."

We enjoyed the feast, watching as Leon basked in the praise of the old

villagers.

Part Eight

“Sorry, Tenma... I can’t go any farther...”

“Got it. Cain, switch with Leon.”

“Okay. Leon, take it easy and rest, okay?”

We resumed our journey toward Kukuri Village as planned the morning after the feast in Leon’s honor. However, Leon was suffering from a nasty hangover. He’d had way too much to drink the previous night since the villagers had kept pouring drinks for him one after another. Nevertheless, he had leaned out of the driver’s seat to wave enthusiastically at the villagers who had gathered at the entrance to see us off.

He’d waited until they were out of sight before he finally requested to switch places with someone.

“I asked the village chief for directions to Kukuri Village and information about the other villages on the way to make sure we wouldn’t end up going in the wrong direction. Besides, once we get close enough, Gramps might be able to recognize where we are, and Shiromaru might remember the scent. Basically, I think we can manage,” I said.

Even if those plans were to fail, I could use Detection to map out the terrain within a range of about ten kilometers, so I’d probably find something familiar to guide us. But I’d rather not do that because using it with a range that wide would be very exhausting.

“What are you making over there, Tenma?” Amur asked.

Once I had taken over for Leon, I had driven for an hour before it was my turn to rest. I was keeping myself busy working on something inside the carriage during my break.

I realized this was the first time Amur had spoken to me in a while. If she had been the old Amur, she probably would’ve tried to hug me the moment she had seen me. Maybe Leni’s lessons were paying off.

“I’m using the materials from the frog monsters we killed yesterday to make a hunting tool.”

I had some key materials laid out before me—a Y-shaped wooden stick, the frog’s muscle fibers, and some animal hide. I’d already processed the frog’s muscles to create thin cords, and my plan was to use everything to make a slingshot. It felt a bit odd to call it a slingshot since that sounded more like a toy while it was going to be a real weapon, but I wasn’t sure what else to call it.

“Okay, so I tie this part here and... That looks right, doesn’t it?”

I took a square of leather about five centimeters in size and folded it in half. Then, I poked holes on both ends and threaded the cord through them, tying it securely. After that, I fastened the other ends of the cord to both ends of the Y-shaped stick. And just like that, my prototype slingshot was complete. Although it was just a prototype, it seemed pretty sturdy since I had doubled the cord and looped it through the holes.

“Seems fine to me,” I said after I had given it a few pulls.

Everything looked good, and I didn’t see any issues. The next step would be to load it with some stones, but since I couldn’t exactly fire it inside the carriage, I reluctantly put it away in my bag. Or at least, I tried to. However, Amur and Kriss were immediately intrigued by it, and before I knew it, they’d snatched it right out of my hands.

I thought Leni would scold Amur for that, but even she seemed curious about my slingshot once I explained how to use it. All three of them were studying it with great interest.

I could see where this was headed. I started making more slingshots before they even had the chance to ask, and I managed to make two more. Naturally, the three slingshots ended up in the hands of the three girls who’d been so fascinated with them to begin with.

“Albert, Cain—I know it’s a little early, but could you find us a place to rest? It doesn’t have to be near water either. I just want to stop somewhere.”

“Huh? Okay.”

Cain quickly caught on. “Something’s going on, isn’t it?” He then suggested

we go to a nearby rocky area. It sounded like the perfect spot since it had plenty of small stones for ammo and suitable targets for testing out the slingshots.

“I think that’ll be great. Let’s go there.”

“Got it!”

A few minutes later, the carriage stopped at our destination. The three girls immediately jumped out to test out their slingshots on nearby boulders.

“This is so fun!” Amur exclaimed.

“These would make the best concealed weapons,” Kriss said.

“For a spy like me, I appreciate how portable it is. It may be a bit lacking in power, but it’s more than enough to distract an opponent or launch a surprise attack,” Leni mused.

While Amur treated it like a toy, the other two seemed to realize its practical uses. The small size of the slingshot was its best quality—its power couldn’t match that of a bow or other projectile weapons. However, I could increase its power if I had more of those frog muscle fibers, and if you replaced the ammo with something sharp like arrowheads—or if I could get it to shoot bolts like a crossbow—it’d be even deadlier. I had no idea if any of that would actually work in practice, though. I’d never tried shooting arrows with a slingshot before.

After a quick lunch, the three of them continued to test out their slingshots while I got to work on another one.

This time, I focused on making it more powerful, durable, and accurate. I added more frog muscle fibers since that was my substitute for rubber, made the frame from magic iron instead of a stick, and shaped the handle to resemble a knife’s handle. The result was a more stable grip with less recoil, which made the slingshot more accurate.

“Here, Jeanne. This one’s for you, and this one’s for Aura.”

Jeanne and Aura had been glancing enviously at the other girls’ slingshots while they’d prepared lunch, but Leni, Amur, and Kriss were oblivious to their stares. I didn’t make the improvements to impress them, though. I’d envisioned

the slingshots as being weapons suitable for dense forests where bows would be too difficult to use or for women who might not have the same physical strength as men. But the trio who had claimed the first batch—well, mainly Amur and Kriss—were much stronger than the average woman, so their feedback wouldn't be very helpful.

“Thanks, Tenma!”

“Thank you, Master Tenma!”

“Just a reminder—don't point these at people unless it's absolutely necessary,” I warned. “You can use them in self-defense against anyone who attacks you, but don't forget that they're lethal weapons.”

I spoke loudly enough for all the girls to hear me, including the two in front of me and the three who'd taken the prototypes. I knew two of those three were more interested in these weapons' potential so my warning wouldn't make much of a difference for them, but as long as they understood the dangers, that would be enough.

The three with prototypes eyed the upgraded version of the slingshot with jealousy, but since they'd grabbed the prototypes for themselves, I decided there would be no returns or exchanges.

There was another person behind me who seemed eager to get his hands on a slingshot. “That looks so cool... I bet they're fun to use too.”

I thought it would be too dangerous to give him one, so I stalled by saying, “I'll make you one next time if Kriss says it's okay.”

I knew that Kriss would say no, especially since she didn't even have an upgraded version herself. And sure enough, she refused, so Cain never got to have a slingshot of his own.

“They're simple to make, so anyone who wanted to could probably toss one together,” I said.

“Yeah, but how would they get the frog materials? You have all of them.”

Still, I told Cain he couldn't have one without Kriss's permission. He glanced in her direction, sighed dramatically, and stopped nagging me about it.

Incidentally, Kriss was also in the middle of begging Aura to let her borrow her upgraded model.

“Enough playing around already! Shouldn’t be getting back on the road?” Gramps said sharply.

And with that, everyone who’d been playing with slingshots quickly scrambled to get ready for us to depart. Unfortunately for Kriss, her negotiations with Aura had failed. But Amur had managed to try out the improved model a few times thanks to Jeanne’s generosity. Meanwhile, Leni was testing out ways to upgrade her own prototype model.

“Tenma, are you really okay with giving away the prototypes like that?” Cain asked.

“Cain, do you really think I could get them back from Kriss and the others at this point?” I asked. “Leni might return hers, but I’d have to wrestle the other two for them.”

It didn’t seem right to only make Leni return hers, so I decided to give up on the prototypes. I’d get my revenge by refusing to make any upgrades to their models. Plus, I was planning to make one for myself once we were back in the capital anyway, and when I did, I’d use the proper materials and get input from a professional.

“Yeah, I guess that’s a good point. When I asked Kriss for permission, she had a smile on her face, but her eyes could kill...”

I figured I would receive more requests for upgraded versions once we were back in the capital. In fact, I could think of three people right off the bat who would come asking for one—the queen, a princess, and a certain high-ranking military figure...

“Well, in that case, maybe if I offer one to Queen Maria first, Kriss will hold back a little,” I said.

If I were to bring a prototype to the queen and ask her to act as a point of contact for future slingshot requests, it might help keep the others in check. Although they’d probably go back to their usual behavior when she wasn’t around.

“Anyway, I’ll worry about that when we get back to the capital,” I said. “For now, we should get going.”

“You’re right. Kriss and the others are almost done packing—I don’t want them to complain that we were the ones holding everyone up.”

Cain and I quickly got our stuff together and rejoined the group.

Gramps was driving now. “Tenma, I reckon we’ll reach Kukuri Village the day after tomorrow, or maybe the day after that,” he said. He then pointed to the mountain ahead and said the Elder Forest was beyond it. “But we’ve still got a ways to go before we get to the village even once we get to the forest. So I think we should camp right before we reach the mountain today.”

The road beyond the mountain would skirt along the edge of the forest where stronger monsters might appear, so Gramps suggested we camp before we reached the mountain. That way, we would be passing through the most dangerous areas during daylight, which would be safer.

“I trust your judgment, Gramps. If we have Thunderbolt run at full speed, we won’t need to worry about monsters catching up to us, but the carriage might not be able to take it. The carriage could even break, and I know some monsters like to lie in wait and attack in groups.”

Monsters like the dragonsnake that had killed Shiromaru’s parents could swarm us, so I wanted to avoid camping near dangerous places as much as possible.

“It’s settled, then.”

Gramps knew the area we were in better than Leon now, so we left all decisions on where we would rest to him.

Up until now, Leon had been the one guiding us, but even he said he felt more comfortable relying on Gramps’s memories and experience than the margrave’s maps, and he quickly agreed with Gramps. I got the feeling Leon was sort of relieved to be released from the responsibility of guiding us since he didn’t have much firsthand knowledge about this area.

“Have you been here before, Master Tenma?” Aura asked.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I mostly stayed around Kukuri Village. I used to play in the Elder Forest sometimes, but Dad or Gramps always came with me if I went deeper in. Oh, there was one time when I went to Russell City to call for help when the zombies attacked, though.”

But thinking back on it, every time I’d sneaked deeper into the forest when I shouldn’t have, I had ended up getting in trouble. Just then, I noticed Leon had a guilty look on his face—he was probably thinking about how even though he hadn’t been directly involved, his father’s subordinates had botched their efforts to defend the village.

“It was a long time ago, Leon. Don’t worry about it. And stop making that face, Kriss.”

“What face?” she asked.

Kriss was probably remembering when she had met my parents. Other than Gramps and me, she was the only one here right now who had been familiar with Kukuri Village, so it made sense that she felt that way.

“Listen, you guys can’t be sadder about this than Gramps and me. Otherwise, how will that make us feel?” I said, joking a bit to try and lighten the mood.

Even so, Leon and Kriss still looked like they were forcing themselves to act cheerful.

I guess it’s not easy for things to go back to normal. Oh well, I’m sure a good night’s sleep will do the trick, I thought, and hoped they’d be back to themselves by morning.

“Die already!”

“Get wrecked!”

The spot Gramps had chosen for our camp had turned out to be a goblin nest, so Leon and Kriss, who had been moping in the carriage until now, were ruthlessly taking out their frustrations on the goblins.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking down goblins, of course, but the way those two are acting it almost makes them seem like they’re the villains here...”

I said.

“Yeah. From the goblins’ perspective, they were just trying to live their lives, and then suddenly, they got attacked by demons,” Cain agreed.

“So that’s *two* times now that goblins have saved Leon. Kind of funny when you think of it like that,” Albert said.

“Exactly. Demon incarnate!” Amur said.

“Lady Amur, I’d usually advise against phrasing it like that, but I suppose it’s fitting in this case.” Leni had been about to scold her, but she decided to let it go under the current circumstances.

“Well, it’s only natural for an adventurer or a knight charged with keeping the peace to destroy a goblin nest. But at any rate, it looks like camping here tonight will be impossible.”

This area had been completely filthy, thanks to the goblins. And thanks to Leon and Kriss’s handiwork, it had transformed into a scene of mass carnage. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn’t a suitable place to camp for the night.

“Well, we’ve got no choice but to go on a little farther and make camp there.”

“Yeah. Cleaning this up will take a while, so I’ll go ahead and start preparing dinner in the carriage,” I said.

We couldn’t just leave this mess, so I would start getting dinner ready. That way, we could eat as soon as we arrived at our new campsite.

Leni immediately volunteered. “I’ll help!”

“Me too!” Amur chimed in, raising her hand.

“I’ll help as well!” Jeanne said.

“Same!” Aura said.

But the carriage was too cramped for this many people, and I didn’t really need that much help.

“Okay, Jeanne, you can go ahead and help me. Aura, please clean the bathtub. Leni and Amur, could you prepare drinks and towels for Kriss and Leon? Actually, no—Leni, you help me with dinner, and Jeanne, you go with

Amur and take care of Kriss and Leon.”

I wasn’t trying to treat Leni as a guest, but I had unconsciously assigned her a simple task. But then, I realized that might be problematic. After all, Leni was the source of Leon’s initial bad mood, so it wouldn’t be a good idea to put the two of them near each other. That was why I had switched Leni’s and Jeanne’s assignments.

“I was thinking miso soup with frog meat would be good, but what else should I make?” I wondered.

“Well, white rice is a must with miso soup. And in the SAR, we commonly eat pickles as a side. Aren’t you afraid the others might get sick of having miso soup all the time, though?” Leni asked.

When we camped out, we’d often prepare late-night snacks for those on watch duty as we made dinner. And large batches of broth-based dishes were staples since they were easy to reheat. Miso soup in particular was my go-to. It was easy to make since it was just made from broth and miso, and partly because of my Japanese background. My second most common dish was stew, but since miso soup was quicker and easier to make, it had a secure place at the top of the list of dishes in my repertoire.

“Well, I doubt anyone’s going to complain about the food we eat while we’re camping, and if they do, I just won’t feed them anymore,” I joked.

Our party had an adventurous spirit and would eat pretty much anything, so I doubted anyone would say something. Besides, if they wanted something specific, they would’ve asked me by now. At the very least, there was no one on this trip who’d shy away from making a request.

“All right. Could you make the miso soup, Leni? I’ll handle the rice balls and pickles.”

Ideally, I would’ve had real pickles on hand, but instead, I had to make some quick ones. I took some cabbage, carrot scraps, thinly sliced kelp, and salt, and then I mixed them all together and left it to marinate. After that, I started making rice balls from the rice I had in my magic bag and cooked a fresh batch of rice for next time.

“I’m hungry, Tenma,” Kriss whined. She had walked out with post-bath wet hair after having cleaned off all the grime from her goblin hunt.

“Dinner’s ready, but please wait until everyone’s here first.”

Kriss had taken a bath first, and the other women were currently using the one in the carriage. The men had set up an old tub a short distance away outside to use instead.

“Aw, man...” she grumbled as she tried to sneak a rice ball.

“I don’t mind if you take one, but you’re acting just like Amur,” I teased.

“Oof.”

I had a feeling she realized it probably wouldn’t be a good look to behave like the person she was trying to discipline, especially since Amur had recently stopped acting so badly. If Amur were to find out, she might not respect Kriss anymore.

“Would you keep this between us, Tenma?” she asked.

“I don’t mind, but Aura saw you too.”

Aura had also wandered in for a sample, and just in time to see Kriss try to swipe a rice ball.

“Come here, Aura,” Kriss said.

Aura sensed trouble and had tried to escape before Kriss could get to her, but she had been just a bit too slow. Kriss pulled Aura over to the edge of the campsite for a little negotiation. I wasn’t sure what was said there, but judging how exhausted Aura looked and how cheerful Kriss was, I’d say the latter had gotten what she’d wanted.

“All right, it’s time for you guys to take over the night watch now. When you heat up the miso soup for those keeping watch, just move what you need to the small pot,” I instructed.

“Got it.”

We decided to split night watch duty into four shifts, with the women taking

the first two and the men taking the latter two shifts. For the men's shifts, Albert and I were up first and would be followed by Cain and Leon. Gramps had drawn the lucky straw this time and didn't have to participate in the night watch.

When I was in the middle of explaining the handover and a few important details to the next group, Albert suddenly interrupted me. "Sorry, Tenma, but I'm at my limit. I need to go rest." He was struggling to stay on his feet and apologized before heading into the men's tent to sleep.

"I'll take over from here, Tenma. You should go rest too. I'll wake you up if anything happens," Cain said, reassuring me.

I left him to it and went inside the tent. Albert was already fast asleep as I lay down next to him.

"Found you... Come closer..."

"Huh? Sorry, Albert. I didn't mean to wake you up."

As I settled in, I thought I heard a faint voice. I assumed I'd disturbed Albert, but when I glanced over, he was still in a deep sleep.

"Must've been my imagination."

I could faintly hear Cain and Leon talking outside while the quiet buzz of insects filled the air around the tent. I figured that Albert was probably just talking in his sleep, so I pushed it out of my mind and burrowed under the blankets.

But just as I began drifting off to sleep...

"You're a little far away, aren't you? It's fine, though. I've waited this long already, so there's no need to rush..."

The voice was soft, but this time, I could make out the words better than I had before.

"Who's there?" I got up and went outside the tent to look around, but there was no one else in sight.

"What's the matter, Tenma?" Cain asked.

“How long have you been standing there?” Leon asked.

They had been so focused on their watch that they hadn’t noticed me for a little while.

“Cain, Leon... Did anyone else come close to the tent? I swear I just heard a voice.”

They exchanged glances before responding.

“No, nobody came here. Right, Leon?”

“Yeah, we’ve been by the fire the whole time,” Leon said. “If someone else came close, we’d notice right away. Maybe you just overheard us talking. Sorry about that.”

“I don’t know... It really didn’t sound like either of you, though,” I said.

“Well, our voices probably sound different through the tent, don’t you think? Sorry again. We’ll keep it down.”

Something still didn’t feel right, but Leon’s explanation *did* make sense, so I went back to the tent to go to sleep.



“Tenma! Hey, Tenma! Are you okay?”

“Huh? What?” All of a sudden, I woke up to Albert shaking me.

“You were tossing and turning in your sleep like you were having a nightmare,” he said.

“What’s going on? Did something happen?” Leon asked.

“I heard Albert’s voice. What’s going on?”

Leon and Cain suddenly came into the tent, hearing the commotion.

“Whoa, Tenma! You’re drenched in sweat!”

“Yeah, you’re soaked!”

It wasn’t until they pointed it out that I realized that I was covered in sweat. My entire body was dripping with it, and even the bedding underneath me was damp.

Albert looked down at me with concern on his face. “Are you feeling sick of something?”

While I felt a little sluggish, I was otherwise fine.

“What’s with all the ruckus this early in the morning?” Gramps had come over from the next tent. He’d probably been woken up from the commotion now that Leon and Cain had joined us.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I guess I was just having a bad dream, and the others were checking on me.”

“Hm. Do you have any headaches or pain?” Gramps asked.

“I feel a little worn out, but that’s all,” I replied.

“Just some mental fatigue, then? Go wash off—that’ll make you feel better,” he suggested.

“Good idea. We’ll clean your bedding, so go wash up,” Albert urged.

I decided to take them up on the offer.

Luckily, it wouldn’t take long to heat up the bathwater from the night before.



“I’m sure Tenma’s fine, but...”

“What’s wrong, Master Merlin?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say this if Tenma were around, but honestly, I’m not crazy about the idea of him going to Kukuri Village,” I admitted.

But since it was Tenma’s decision to make, I didn’t think it was my place to say no. Perhaps my worries had been justified, though.

“Tenma’s probably the strongest person in our kingdom. His magical abilities exceed even mine, and he’s even defeated Dean in direct combat. One might stand a chance if he were just gifted in magic or combat, but he’s got both,” I said.

The three of them nodded in agreement.

“But he’s still immature mentally. After all, he’s still only a young man.”

He might have possessed greater mental strength than his peers, but he still displayed some typical youthful traits. I couldn't help but worry whether or not he could endure visiting the place where his parents and many other villagers had died.

"I sure hope my concerns are unfounded..."

As the three of them listened to my musings, they silently gazed in the direction of where Tenma was cleaning up.



"Wow, that's a huge puddle of sweat!"

I squeezed out my clothes, and an astonishing amount of sweat dripped out. I didn't feel any symptoms of it yet, but I thought I could very well be on the brink of dehydration, so I hurried to get something to drink. I decided to just take a quick dip in the bath and wash off instead of taking my time.

"Is anyone in there?"

"Jeanne?"

I had just finished rinsing off the sweat and was drying myself when I heard Jeanne's voice from outside. Kriss or Aura would've just barged into the changing room without knocking. Well, Amur *had* been improving lately so she should've been fine, but honestly, I still wasn't sure.

"Oh! Is that you, Tenma? Do you have any laundry that needs to be taken care of?"

"I'll put it in the basket when I come out. Could you just grab it later?"

"Sure."

The idea of handing my sweat-drenched clothes to Jeanne was a bit embarrassing, but it was her job to wash them, after all, and she'd always done my laundry, so it seemed pointless to feel awkward about it now. I didn't want to give it to her directly, though, so I just asked her to handle it later.

"What was that voice from yesterday, anyway?" I wondered out loud.

Leon had explained it away by saying their voices might've sounded different

through the fabric of the tent, but I wasn't sure if that was really accurate.

"It didn't sound like anyone in our party, though."

I kept ruminating over it as I got dressed, but couldn't come up with a good answer.

After I returned from the bath, I told Gramps what had happened.

"Maybe it was a fairy?" he suggested.

"A fairy? Like the creatures in the stories?"

"Yes. No one has actually confirmed the existence of fairies yet, though, so who knows what the truth is?"

"Aw, Gramps. Don't joke around like that, then!" I exclaimed, prompting him to laugh.

However, his expression then turned serious. "Whether it was a fairy or not, it's possible that the voice you heard was something supernatural in nature. Maybe some kind of god."

"A god?"

When I'd met the gods in my dreams before, they'd mentioned they occasionally watched over me. It certainly could've been them.

"Some researchers have said it might be possible. Others have said they heard the gods talking, or mentioned hearing the voices of the dead or vengeful spirits," he explained.

Gramps speculated I might've just been on edge, and being in that kind of state could make normal sounds seem like voices. We talked about paranormal phenomena and other possibilities, but in the end, we figured it was probably just a misunderstanding.

"Good morning! What were you all talking about, Master Merlin?" Kriss stepped out of the carriage and called out to Gramps, who was surrounded by me and the other guys.

"Oh, nothing much. I was just worried about Tenma hearing ghostly voices in

his sleep,” he said.

“Gramps!”

“Huh? *Tenma* had trouble sleeping because he’s afraid of ghosts?” Kriss teased me with a grin.

I was so irritated that I blurted out something I knew Kriss didn’t want to talk about. “Speaking of which, I heard *you’ve* had many sleepless nights worrying about not being able to find a husband, Kriss.”

She smiled at me for that, and I returned the gesture. But the other guys immediately took that as their cue to hightail it out of there.

“Just what do you mean by that, *Tenma*?” she asked sweetly.

“Exactly how it sounds.”

My quiet exchange with Kriss continued until Aura, lacking the ability to read the room, came in to announce breakfast was ready. Later on, I learned that Jeanne had asked her to go fetch us. While I felt a little bad that Jeanne had used her like that, I was grateful the topic had shifted.

“How much longer until we reach Kukuri Village, Gramps?”

“I told you earlier that it’ll take a few more hours.”

“*Tenma*... It’s barely been an hour since you last asked him,” Cain said.

“Really?”

It felt like a lot more time had passed since then, but I guess it hadn’t been long at all. And now, Gramps and Cain were both exasperated with me.

“*Tenma*, you need to calm down a little. You’ve been fidgeting and looking on edge for a while,” Kriss said.

Even Leon joined in, chastising me for my lack of composure. “Yeah, *Tenma*. You’re our leader, so you shouldn’t be like this.”

“How about some tea, *Tenma*?” Jeanne asked.

“We have snacks too. My special ones!” Amur said.

They both looked very concerned about me.

“I’ve never seen you this restless before. You’re always the one more composed than us,” Albert said.

“It’s true,” Kriss said, agreeing with Albert before reminiscing about the past. “When I first met you, you calmly defeated a horde of orcs, and you barely batted an eye even when you discovered you’d saved the king!”

“I’d like to hear that story,” Leon said, showing interest. Jean, Aura, and Amur seemed to want to hear more too.

“I was really panicking at the time!” Kriss began. “All of a sudden, the king said, ‘The shortcut is this way!’ and forced us to go off the route Cruyff had determined. We were in a blind spot and ended up being ambushed by a horde of orcs led by an orc king. They were surprisingly coordinated and caught us off guard. And just when we thought it was all over, Tenma dropped in and defeated them all in an instant. Honestly, as a member of the king’s guard, it was pretty humiliating... Anyway, after we returned to the capital, the captain found out we’d struggled against the orcs, and he made every single one of us who was there pay for it. It was pure hell...”

Kriss recounted some other events that had occurred during her visit to Kukuri Village too, but then she got off track and started reminiscing about Shiromaru. Leon playfully interrupted her several times during her story.

Thanks to that, the atmosphere in the carriage lightened, but I still couldn’t calm down. In fact, just the thought of us getting closer to Kukuri Village was filling me with anxiety. I didn’t want anyone to notice though, because they were all being so considerate.

Kriss casually glanced outside and noticed the carriage had veered onto a different path than the one that skirted the forest. “Aren’t we pretty far from the Elder Forest now?”

“What’s going on, Gramps?” I asked.

Apparently, Gramps was worried enough to change our plotted route. “We’re taking a bit of a detour, but this route is less dangerous. We can move faster since we don’t have to be as vigilant. We might even arrive sooner going this

way than if we were to continue along our original path.”

“Sorry, Gramps.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I just remembered a safer and quicker route than the one we were on.”

Cain nodded in agreement from where he sat beside me.

Gramps pointed off ahead of us. “See that horde of orcs up there, Tenma? Why don’t you go and blow off some steam?”

I followed his gaze. Sure enough, there was an orc horde eyeing us, likely waiting for a chance to ambush and hunt us. However, since we were approaching from an unusual direction, they had lost their chance to hide.

“That sounds good. I’ll go ahead and do that.”

And with that, I flew up into the sky, leaving the slow-moving carriage behind. Then I swooped down upon the horde of orcs from above.





“He really just flew off.”

“It seems like he’s really stressed out.”

This was the first time I’d seen Tenma so flustered.

“Do you think it has something to do with how close we’re getting to Kukuri Village, Master Merlin?”

“I can’t think of any other explanation,” I said.

Although Tenma was filled with extraordinary talents, he was still only a young man of eighteen. Perhaps it was natural for him to feel this way at his age.

Kriss opened the window in shock, and I could see Amur right behind her too. “Master Merlin! I just saw Tenma fly off really fast!”

“There’s a group of orcs ahead, so I sent Tenma ahead to clear them out for us,” I said.

“Oh.”

The girls seemed to accept that explanation, but Leon was dissatisfied.

“You could’ve at least asked me too,” he muttered.

It seemed like he wanted to take the initiative regarding his domain rather than to cause trouble, but Kriss and Amur still glared at him as if to say, “Read the room!”

“You can’t do that, Leon. By the time you got there, the orcs would’ve scattered and run away,” Cain said. “And if they didn’t, the way you fight would ruin all their meat. It doesn’t matter if goblins get smashed to bits, but orc meat is too valuable to waste.”

That seemed to convince Leon, who nodded in agreement. Behind him, Shiromaru and Solomon had perked up at the mention of “meat” and began wagging their tails as if to say *Tonight’s dinner will be meat!*

“Oh! Looks like he’s all done.”

Hearing Cain say that, I turned my gaze to Tenma just as he lopped off the head of the last orc.

“Impressive. Not only how fast he did it, but how clean it was too. I could see that clearly even from this far away,” Kriss mused.

Tenma had decapitated all the orcs.

“Aura, prepare the bath.”

“I don’t think Master Tenma is bloody, though.”

“Even if he doesn’t have blood on him, he’ll still be smelly and sweaty. Hurry up and get the bath ready like Jeanne said, or I’ll tell on you to Aina,” Kriss threatened.

Aura was a bit ditzy at times, but Jeanne was quite observant. Plus, taking a bath would be good for Tenma.

“Come on, Thunderbolt. Go ahead to Tenma,” I commanded Thunderbolt as Aura quickly zipped off to help Jeanne, thanks to Kriss’s threats.



The carriage pulled up beside me as I was putting the orc bodies into my magic bag.

“Have you settled down yet, Tenma?” Gramps asked.

“A little bit, yeah, thanks to you.” I didn’t feel completely better, but I did feel a bit more at ease after fighting the orcs—especially compared to how I had felt before.

“Just a little, eh? Well, that’s fine. Jeanne’s preparing a bath, so you should take your time and relax. You need to rest your body.”

“Thanks.”

I used Water magic to wash away the puddles of blood around me and brushed the dirt off from my clothes. After that, I boarded the carriage, where Jeanne was waiting for me with a towel.

“Here’s a towel for you, Tenma. You have a change of clothes, right?”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, Jeanne.” I took the towel from her and was about to head

to the bath when I noticed that everyone inside the carriage except Leon was looking at me with concern. Even Shiromaru and Solomon seemed to realize something was off because they snuggled up to me, but I opened the door to the bath, Shiromaru quickly darted away, and Solomon followed him. Shiromaru probably thought I was trying to give him a bath, and Solomon probably thought he'd get a snack from someone.

“I’m not in the mood to bathe you anyway, Shiromaru.”

Shiromaru’s behavior upset me a little, but I decided to get in the bath and rest for a while. I was so tired from the combination of mental fatigue and physical exhaustion that the bath’s magical effects led me to fall asleep in the tub.

I was taking a long time, so Albert and Leon came to check on me because they were worried. They mistakenly thought I was drowning, so they pulled me from the bathtub. The two of them shouted so loudly when they saw me that they startled the women, who almost walked in on me naked in response. Thankfully, I managed to cover up with a towel before that happened. Gramps and Kriss both scolded me after I got out of the bath, but that was a lot better than dealing with the awkward situation of people seeing me without anything on...



“I think Tenma’s asleep now,” I said.

“It seems that way, Master Merlin. He was yawning the moment he left the carriage.”

We’d found a good spot to camp out and had an early dinner together, but Tenma had been yawning during the entire meal.

“He fell asleep in the bath and went back to sleep after he came out too. He must really be exhausted.”

“Well, he competed in the martial arts tournament, the wyvern hunt in the margrave’s territory, and he made that giant wall too. Any normal person would have collapsed from exhaustion by now. Not to mention everything involving Kukuri Village...” Kriss said with concern as she glanced at the tent where

Tenma slept.

“I’m worried about taking him to Kukuri Village in his current state too, but I doubt he’ll agree to go back at this point,” I said.

“I agree. We’ll reach the village by the afternoon if we leave at our usual time in the morning. Ricardo’s and Celia’s graves are there, right?” Kriss then asked.

“That’s right. We waited for Tenma to return after he fought the dragon zombie, but given the injuries and everyone’s mental states, we needed to move to the city quickly. We couldn’t leave the bodies of the dead lying around either. Most of the villagers who passed away, including Ricardo and Celia, had either been born and raised there or had married someone from the village. Some villagers took their relatives’ remains with them, but I buried Ricardo and Celia near Shiromaru’s parents.”

Truthfully, I had wanted to take their remains with me, but due to how severe my injuries had been, I hadn’t been in the position to do so. And Mark and Martha hadn’t been in the right state of mind after Ricardo and Celia died either, and what with Tenma’s disappearance... Well, it simply couldn’t have been helped. But even to this day, that decision was something I deeply regretted.

“I know Tenma has a lot on his mind, but hopefully he can overcome it,” Kriss said.

“I agree... There might not be much we can do about it, but for now, we’ll just have to trust in Tenma’s strength,” I said.

I didn’t know what kind of change Kukuri Village might bring about in Tenma, but I decided I’d do everything I could to help him.

Extra Story: How Amy and Eliza Met

“Huh? Where am I?”

I’d gotten pretty used to the royal capital by now and thought I could go shopping on my own, but after just one wrong turn, I ended up getting totally lost. I knew I should have turned back earlier, but I thought if I just kept going straight, I’d reach the road that led to the shop I always went to. However, I was wrong.

“Maybe I should just turn back?”

The moment I made up my mind, a man suddenly appeared from around a corner and blocked my path. I quickly tried to run away, but then another man appeared behind me. I could tell by their faces that I was in danger—they certainly didn’t look like nice people.

I immediately called out, “Somebody, help me!”

There was no sign of anyone coming. To make matters worse, the men snickered at me mockingly, as if to say my cries were pointless. I could hear more laughter behind them, which told me that there were even more of them nearby.

Once they’d made fun of me to their satisfaction, the two men pulled out a knife and some rope. It was clear that they were threatening to tie me up. Since I was trapped between the two of them, I knew things would be bad if I didn’t do something fast. I turned my back to the wall and reached into my magic bag.

But just then, I heard the sound of something slamming against a wall. It was followed by a new voice from in front of me.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

A beautiful woman with an unusual hairstyle had appeared. She seemed both dignified and intimidating.

The moment I saw that the men were distracted by her, I quickly took five

balls from my magic bag and threw them onto the ground.

“Come on out!” I yelled.

These balls were actually golem cores my master had given me. He’d told me to carry them with me at all times and that I should use them when I was in danger.

As the golems sprang up from the ground, Rocky and Birdie flew out of my dimension bag. As for Spidey, she was still pretty timid when it came to battle, so she only poked her face out of the bag.

“Number One, stay by my side! Number Two, help that lady! Number Three, make sure no one hiding on the other side escapes. Number Four, attack the man in front! Number Five, attack from the back! Rocky and Birdie, provide aerial support! And Spidey... Well, you can just cheer everyone on from inside the bag!”

Each of my golems had their own unique traits, and although each one was strong individually, their true powers were unleashed when all five of them worked together. When Master Tenma had given them to me, Namitaro had wanted to paint them in bright colors. He’d said, “Number One is red, Two is blue, Three is yellow, Four is pink, and Five is green!” He had been just about to paint them when Master Tenma had stopped him. Personally, I’d thought it was a great idea to distinguish them, but then I’d remembered that bright colors would attract attention and make things even more dangerous. In the end, I kept them all black. They were all different shapes, so they were easy to tell apart anyway, and each one had their colored sphere on their chest too, so it worked out just fine for me.

The woman looked surprised when a golem appeared near her, but she quickly returned her gaze to the men and glared at them. “Hey, those things are pretty nice. Now, are you men ready to face the consequences?”

The men soon realized they were trapped and couldn’t escape because of the golems, so they resigned themselves to a fight. They rushed toward us.

“You over there! Let’s teach these scoundrels a lesson!” the woman called out to me.

“All right!”

And so our fight began...and it ended almost immediately with our overwhelming victory.

The guards came over after hearing the commotion, and the men were in such bad shape when they arrived that they almost mistook *us* as the bad guys! But after the woman who'd helped me explained everything to them, the misunderstanding was cleared up. Her name was Eliza.

“Amy! You should become my sister!” she said. “If I tell Mother and Father so, they'll take care of the paperwork right away!”

Apparently, Eliza had grown very fond of me, and she began inviting me to join her family every time she saw me after that. She *was* a kind person, but still...

Extra Story: The Birth of a Golem Squadron

“Whatcha makin’, Tenma?”

I was working in my room when Namitaro barged in without knocking. It seemed like he’d heard the noise and was curious.

“Can’t you at least knock?”

“Oh, it’s fine. We’re best friends, right? Anyway, what’s that doll thing?” Namitaro drawled casually, his eyes drawn to the source of the noise.

“This? It’s a new golem model,” I explained.

It was still just a prototype, but it was probably among the best golems I’d ever created—even in its current state.

“Ohhh... Is this new model even stronger than the ones you gave to Tida and Luna?”

At Queen Maria’s request, I’d given the prince and princess golems I’d made especially for the royal family. When Namitaro heard me say that this one was a new model, he probably thought I meant it was stronger. However, this one was a bit different.

“It’s a new model, but it would probably lose to the ones I gave to Tida and Luna in a fight, even when it’s finished,” I said.

The ones I’d given to Tida and Luna had been built for speed, attack, and defense. They each had a distinctive shape too. However, the one I was making now more resembled the build of an average human man.

“It looks like one of those dolls you use for sketches,” he said. “So, what makes this one special?”

“It’s just a prototype, but I’m making a basic golem. It doesn’t have any special characteristics, but if I had to name one, I’d say its strength is that it’s a highly versatile golem.”

I wanted to perfect this golem even further and make it so it could use

weapons and armor just like people did. Ideally, I wanted it to be able to use regular, unmodified weapons and armor without any issues.

“Yeah, if you can do that, it’ll be easy to switch weapons and armor according to the situation. You could buy equipment for it anywhere,” Namitaro commented.

Currently, the only golems who used weapons and armor were the ones I had made for the royal family and the Guardian Giganto. But those were all equipped with gear made especially for them, so if they lost their weapons, they’d have to fight bare-handed. I could control Giganto so it could use different weapons in that way, but its skill in combat decreased if it used weapons it wasn’t compatible with. It was more powerful for it to just throw punches than to use a weapon that didn’t suit it anyway.

“There’s a problem with that, though. If I try to make it the same size as a person, it won’t be as strong, especially at the joints.”

If I made a hollowed-out golem entirely from mythrill like Thunderbolt, strength wouldn’t be a problem. But since this one was the same size as a regular human, the surrounding metal had to be thinner. That meant that if this golem were to be struck with a heavy weapon, it would break easily. The joints were especially problematic—even a slight distortion would cause issues with its movement.

“You have to consider flexibility, strength, and weight... Yeah, that’s tough,” Namitaro said. “I can’t think of a good solution. Well, Tenma, in times like these, you need to refresh with some snacks! Let’s head to the dining room!”

I’d been hoping Namitaro was going to give me some kind of useful advice, so when I heard his suggestion, it nearly made me fall over. Still, he was right. I decided to take a break and head down to the dining room.

Jeanne and the others were there preparing dinner. It looked like they were making meat skewers for tonight. The two girls were busy putting meat and vegetables onto the skewers.

I watched them, trying to figure out something simple I could make for a snack, when Namitaro spoke up.

“Tenma, I want something with whipped cream.”

I thought for a moment and decided to make some crepes. Fortunately, there was still some leftover whipped cream made from Hiro’s milk, and I could easily make crepes with that and some fruit.

“All done. Jeanne, Aura, you two can take a break, but can you go get Gramps first?”

Aura went off to find Gramps, who was somewhere in the house. I hadn’t seen Amur around all day, but she magically appeared out of nowhere, drawn in by the smell of the crepes cooking. She took a seat right in front of the plate stacked high with crepes.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” Gramps said, and then everyone took their seats.

We all began to eat at our own pace.

“Amur, Aura, don’t be so greedy,” I warned as I watched the two of them. They were overfilling their crepes so much with whipped cream that it spilled out and made a mess on the table with each bite.

“Yeah, you only need to fill them with enough whipped cream to fold them up like this. Like this... Er... Tenma, could you fold up my crepe for me?”

Namitaro had tried to demonstrate for the girls, but he couldn’t manage to fold up the crepes very well with his golem hands. He had failed three times before asking for help. I wrapped one up like a spring roll for him. He took it and then gave the girls a smug look before he popped it into his mouth.

“Anyway, if you eat it like this, you won’t make a mess! You use the fruit as the core, so it’s easier to wrap!” he said.

Amur and Aura gave Namitaro incredulous looks as if to say, *I can’t believe the guy who failed three times is giving us advice*, but nevertheless, they followed his suggestions and began making and eating their crepes.

“You’re right. They’re much easier to eat this way, and now my beard won’t get messy,” Gramps said.

I kept making crepes until I ran out of batter, and when that happened,

Jeanne and Aura went back to making skewers. Amur looked a bit sleepy, but once she saw that the others were busy making skewers, she must've felt bad being the only one not doing anything. She joined in to help them.

As I watched the three of them put meat and vegetables on skewers, I suddenly had an idea for something I wanted to try with my new golem type.

"I'm going to get back to work now. I might not be done in time for dinner, so don't mind me—go ahead and eat."

I rushed back to my room and started experimenting, trying to turn my idea into reality.

"Tenma, don't you think it's time to take a break?"

Some time later, Gramps barged into my room with Jeanne, Aura, Amur—and, for some reason, Kriss—all in tow.

Jeanne threw open the curtains, and sunlight poured into my room. I had been so absorbed in my work that I had lost track of time and assumed it was still early in the morning, but...

"Tenma, it's already noon." Amur's announcement shocked me, and when I looked out the window, I saw that the sun was directly overhead.

"Wow, I didn't notice at all. But now that I know I haven't slept, suddenly I feel really sleepy..."

With that, Amur pushed me toward the bed, and I was tucked into the covers in no time. Now that I was lying down, everyone gave me an exasperated look and left the room.

"Tenma, now you've slept too much!" Gramps said.

I didn't wake up until the next morning. I *had* slept too long. But thanks to getting so much rest, my mind felt a lot clearer.

"Are you done with your golem? It looks quite thin, like a skeleton or something."

"It's not quite done yet, but it can already move," I told Gramps before

activating the golem to make it do some light exercises.

“Hrm? Oh! This is quite something!”

“It’s creepy, though.”

“It’s more agile than the previous golems, but it could be mistaken for some new kind of monster in this form,” Kriss said.

She was right—this golem moved with a lot more agility than the others, but its appearance was quite unsettling. It was made of ball-shaped joints and bone-like rods, giving it an eerie look. But when I put additional joints in places humans didn’t have them and drastically reduced its weight, it moved more like a human.

“I’ll add armor to act as its body and then cover it with monster skin.”

Thunderbolt’s armor supported its body, but this golem would have armor and skin to protect it without exposing its core. My idea was that this kind of construction would replace the need for a solid body and skin with something more durable.

Once I explained that to everyone, I began to craft a temporary set of armor made from clay before moving on to the metal version. I used Earth magic to mold the armor and then shaved it down to refine its shape to my liking while checking its overall balance. Once it was the right shape, I would cover it with cloth to mimic monster skin. I knew that if I had to divide the covering into smaller parts and sew them together it would weaken the overall structure, so I decided to cover the whole thing with one piece instead. It sort of resembled a full-body stocking.

“This should work.”

I finished the prototype a few days later, and it looked like a 3D version of a faceless character you’d see in a CG model. Its earthen armor was fragile if you treated it too roughly, but its movements were flawless.

“It’ll be plenty durable once I replace its clay armor with metal and put the monster skin on top.”

A golem with a metal body, monster skin, and armor on top would be quite strong. The joints were thicker now too since I had put metal over the ball joints, so now, they looked like human elbows and knees.

“I just need to consult with Kelly before I start on the final form,” I said.

I decided I’d consult her since she was an expert at making armor. I went to visit her and we worked on the armor that same day. A few days after that, the final version was completed.

“A golem wearing a full-body stocking... It looks like some kind of pervert,” Namitaro remarked.

This golem was Number One, which would later become Amy’s golem. I didn’t give it to her until I’d completed all five, but when they were finished, Namitaro suddenly said, “Now that we have all five, let’s paint them!”

I stopped him right away because I thought painting them bright colors would attract too much attention. Namitaro didn’t like that, though, and the moment I looked away for just a second, he put colored spheres onto the center of each of the golems’ chests.

Amy seemed to like how they looked, so I couldn’t really complain. But now, they kind of looked like a certain “giant of light,” which bothered me. No one would really pick up on that in this world, though, so I figured they’d just think it was a distinguishing feature.

Namitaro grinned. “They look like Ultraman, huh?”

All right, there was *one* person—er, fish—who would pick up on the resemblance here. And he was the same troublesome guy who might tell everybody about it, just for fun.

Namitaro... Please don’t tell people about Ultraman...

Extra Story: Kriss's Ambition

"What do you mean a date with your boyfriend? You traitor!"

It had been a long time since I had invited my friends out to dinner, but every single one of them had turned me down with the same excuse. Since when had they all gotten boyfriends, anyway? Teach me the secret to getting a man!

I let out a sigh. "On days like this, I should just go pet Shiromaru, drink some alcohol, take a bath, and go to sleep..."

Luckily for me, I had time off tomorrow and the day after. I'd taken those days off hoping to go out with my friends, but alas...

"If you're looking for Shiromaru, he's out with Master Tenma," Aura informed me.

What?! He stole away my precious fluff ball?! Oh, wait, I guess he technically belongs to Tenma, but still...

Then, I figured I'd just go pet Mary and Aries. *Oh wait, they got sheared recently...*

Oh well. There was nothing to be done about it. I asked Aura for a snack and a drink and then headed into the dining room.

"Hmm?"

"Oh?"

There was already someone there. I didn't recognize the woman, but I thought she was probably Amur's mother. She was a tiger beastfolk, but more importantly, she looked just like Amur. If I recalled correctly, this woman's name was Hana. I knew she was older than me, but she looked so young—she could've easily been my age. I remembered Tenma saying that he'd mistaken her for Amur's sister before too. If I hadn't known that, I probably would've made the same mistake.

Hana was very friendly and nice to me. As the drinks flowed, we had a great time together just chatting. And before I knew it, the next day, we were planning on entering the tournament together in the pairs competition.

“Why don’t we cover our faces like this?”

“Ooh, good idea. I’ll go with this one.”

Our preparations were already underway. We decided to enter because Amur had been bragging to Hana nonstop about winning the tournament. Hana told her Oracion would’ve won even without Amur, but Amur just wouldn’t let it go, insisting that she’d still won. So, Hana had decided that she wanted to beat Amur, or at least perform better than her in the tournament.

As for me, I had a more personal reason for entering—basically, I wanted to raise my stock. If I did well in the tournament, I might catch some men’s eyes. Maybe I’d even find a husband!

I had some doubts about my own strength, but Tenma had told me Hana was even stronger than Amur. As we finished registering for the tournament, I figured that as long as I did my best, we could at least make it to the finals, even if we didn’t win.

“The preliminaries were a breeze, weren’t they?” Hana said.

“Yeah, they really were.”

Hana was even stronger than I imagined, and we had made it through the preliminaries without much effort at all.

“We won’t attract too much attention winning like that, so maybe our opponents will let their guards down for the first round of the finals,” she said.

Since we had worn masks while we fought, that might have sparked some interest in the crowd, but our victory hadn’t been that flashy, so I didn’t think we’d get too much attention. Also...

“Poor Tenma, having to withdraw from the prelims. I really wanted to fight against him again.”

“Well, Master Merlin threw his back out, so there was no getting around it,” I

said. "I'm sure the spectators who were hoping to see Tenma fight were disappointed, though."

Tenma had wanted to continue to compete in the prelims solo, but since it was a pair match, the rules stated that each side had to have at least two people, so he had been turned away. If Master Merlin's injury had happened during the prelims, they might've allowed him to continue participating, but, unfortunately, it hadn't worked out that way since his group had been incomplete before the round even started.

"I feel bad for Tenma and Master Merlin, but that helped get the attention off us."

"Yeah."

Since the preliminaries had ended with a surprising result, there weren't any clear favorites in the finals. We ended up facing off against Blanca and Amur in the first round, who were the top contenders.

"They must've been overconfident. I didn't feel like it was much of a fight at all."

"Amur was too excited, so her attacks were predictable. It didn't take much to beat her."

We had scored a decisive victory against the toughest contenders. Surprisingly, we went on to win the whole thing.

"Now that we've won, how about we celebrate in style?"

"I agree!"

We'd both achieved our respective goals of winning, but unfortunately...

"Aina, what about this man?" I asked.

"Kriss, this one is drowning in debt. This one may look young, but he's over fifty and has got a terrible personality. Oh, and this one doesn't get along with his elderly parents; he's been divorced several times too."

Even though I had won the tournament, my most important goal remained out of reach...

Afterword

Thanks so much for reading volume 9 of *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World*. This is the author, Kenichi, signing in, despite some health concerns I've been dealing with recently.

As I mentioned on the cover flap, I've reached a big milestone now that volume 10 will be coming out too! Well, regardless of whether it's a milestone or just another step along the way, it's still a big deal! Ha ha, I got a little carried away there. Honestly, though, I'm really happy about it.

There was a three-year time skip between the events of volume 8 and volume 9, and Tenma's environment changed a bit. It felt like the ending of a boy's journey and the beginning of his life as a young man.

This arc started with a new character showing up, but I hadn't actually been planning for Yoshitsune to appear. In fact, he was a character that came to life on a whim when I was writing the Nanao arc. It made sense, considering I'd already established Blanca's backstory as a married man. Thanks to Yoshitsune, Blanca became more of a gag character, but because I wanted to portray him as a doting father, that's just the way it turned out.

Then, there's the second new character, Eliza. Unlike Yoshitsune, I was planning on introducing her a lot earlier in the story, but as I was waiting for just the right moment, I almost forgot about her entirely. So, I used a gap in the tale to force her into it. I also gave her the trait of being Amy-obsessed.

Yoshitsune might not have as much screen time in the future, but hopefully, I can write him into the story more. As for Eliza, she's an intense character right off the bat, so I'll definitely be writing more scenes featuring her.

There's a lot going on in this volume because it covers the events of the past three years. The first half is packed with information, and then we go right into the stories about the wyvern hunt, the fort, Shellhide, and even the beginning of the return to Kukuri Village at the very end. I suppose you could say this might be the most information-packed book in the series so far...maybe even a

bit *too* packed!

When my editor asked me to come up with an idea for the cover of this volume, a lot of things came to mind. One of them was Tenma and the others planning their battle strategy with the wyvern swarm in the background, but I just couldn't decide in the end. I ultimately left the decision up to my editor and Nem.

As for the next volume, Tenma and his party will finally reach the abandoned Kukuri Village and end up facing an unexpected, powerful enemy. And right when Tenma is in grave danger, one character in particular will save the day! That'll be the main highlight. You'll be happy to know that things will finally start looking up for our heartbroken Leon too. I hope you'll look forward to it!

Finally, I'd like to thank you again for purchasing this volume. Whenever I had to write down my occupation in the past, I could never bring myself to proudly write "author," so I always said "part-time employee" instead. But with volume 10 right around the corner, I can proudly say that I am an author now. And I want to continue being one, so I'll keep writing stories that I hope you all will enjoy.

Thanks to all my readers for their support, along with my publisher, my editor, and Nem. Please continue to support *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World*, and me—its author, Kenichi.

—Kenichi



Eliza

Amy

"Amy, just become my little sister already."

"Um..."

Eliza was always trying to get me to join her family like that.

ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD

9



Lani Tantan

Doni Tantan

Leni Tantan

Amur

“When Lady Amur was little, she was such a good girl. So pure and adorable... But now, she’s turned into a glutton who craves both men and food...”

“L-Leni, that hurts...”

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

9

Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem



Bonus Short Story

Carelessness is the Enemy

“Ehe he! Aha ha ha! Sorry, Tenma and Master Merlin. But our chance has finally arrived!” I said.

“Yes! This is our chance!”

I knew this wasn’t the kind of thing I should be celebrating, but the pair that had been our biggest threat had just withdrawn, so I couldn’t help but have a huge grin on my face. It was only natural.

“I can’t believe they had to pull out of the prelims right before they began because Master Merlin threw out his back. I guess not even he can fight aging anymore, huh?”

“I know... Poor Gramps. Well, don’t worry. We’ll crush the competition in your honor! Just watch!” Amur exclaimed.

The way she put it made it sound like Master Merlin had died instead of having just thrown out his back. At least she was enthusiastic. Maybe winning wouldn’t be the pipe dream I’d thought it was.

“Yoshitsune! I’ll win this for you, son!” I yelled.

“Blanca, keep it down! You’re bothering everyone around us!”

I had gotten caught up in the moment and ended up being too loud. Thankfully, the other competitors around us didn’t seem to mind too much. Still, I felt a bit guilty that I’d shouted at an important moment right before the match.

“Right, I should try calming down a bit... Ehe heh,” I said.

“Blanca, you haven’t calmed down at all. Honestly, you’re being kinda scary and creepy right now.”

Well, that’s rude, I thought as I glanced around. However, I realized that as I

made eye contact with the competitors around me, every one of them immediately turned away.

“Blanca, go stand in the corner. That way, you won’t bother anyone.”

“Fine.”

I moved to an empty corner of the room, trying to settle my nerves. But no matter what I tried, I couldn’t help being so excited.

Eventually, my and Amur’s names were called. However...

“What ridiculous names.”

“The tiger guy totally copied me!”

Our first opponents were a pair called “Tiger Mask” and “the Masked Knight.” Well, considering that Amur had previously competed under the name “Bandit King,” it may have been the inspiration for these guys’ names. But competitors like them usually didn’t live up to the dramatic names they gave themselves, and since they hadn’t made much of an impression during the prelims, I had a feeling they were just more of the same.

“Let’s see how much fun we can have with ’em.”

“Yeah, let’s see!”

We started the match feeling incredibly confident, but that confidence was shattered in no time. In reality, our opponents turned out to be Hana and Kriss.

The moment the signal to begin rang out, Hana closed the distance between us. I foolishly thought I’d take her first strike to test the waters, but her speed left me completely off guard and forced me to go on the defense to avoid everything she was throwing at me. Even worse, she tossed aside her mask mid-attack, revealing a ferocious grin underneath. I felt the blood drain from my face at that moment, both from her unexpected strength and the revelation of her identity.

Even in a fair fight, the probability of me beating her was no better than about forty percent. I would’ve needed my brother by my side to do that too. But now here I was, completely vulnerable because I’d treated her with far less caution than she deserved. If I was going to claw my way back to a victory here,

I'd have to work together with Amur and coordinate to create a two-on-one advantage.

"Take this!" Amur cried. "And this! And this!"

"What's wrong, Amur?" Kriss asked. "You're not looking too good... Oh, watch out! That one was close!"

Meanwhile, Amur was being completely outmaneuvered by Kriss. Even though Kriss was a member of the royal guard, Amur should've been the stronger fighter in a head-to-head battle. But Kriss was well aware of that, so instead of facing Amur head-on, she chose to dodge and provoke instead, leading her away from me and Hana.

"I won't go down like this!" I said, renewing my focus. I tried to launch a counterattack of my own, but unfortunately, trying was about all I *could* do.

"Blanca, are you awake?"

"Where am I...?" I asked. "The infirmary...?"

When I came to, I found myself lying in bed in the infirmary. Amur told me that I had been knocked out shortly after my desperate attempt to turn the tables. Hana had overwhelmed me with a series of relentless attacks and knocked me unconscious. Once I went down for the count, Amur was left to face both Hana and Kriss alone. That, of course, had ended up being futile.

After our bout, Hana and Kriss kept winning matches and advanced to the finals without much difficulty.

The final match was held a few days later, and the two of them worked together flawlessly, completely dominating their opponents. They won the tournament and claimed the title of champions.

"If it wasn't for Mom and Kriss, we totally would've won," Amur grumbled, complaining about how unlucky our matchup had been.

Tenma hosted a celebration after the tournament, but Yoshitsune wouldn't even come near me. Instead, he stayed by Sana, Hana, and Tenma the whole

time.

“I bet if I had won, Yoshitsune would be by my side...”

“That’s not true, Blanca...” Amur stifled a laugh as she teased me, and I silently bonked her on the head with my knuckles.

Unfortunately, Yoshitsune had looked over at that exact moment and burst into tears, so ultimately, I was the one who had to apologize.



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 9

by Kenichi

Translated by Andria McKnight Edited by T. Burke

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2024