

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

6



Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem

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The Story So Far

Tenma entered the martial arts tournament in the royal capital and ended up with a stunning achievement—winning both the individual and team competitions (despite some minor incidents).

A banquet was held in his honor, attended by the people from Kukuri Village, fellow adventurers, aristocrats he'd met along the way, and the runner-up of the competition—a tiger beastfolk girl named Amur who had competed as the Bandit King. Because of her sudden intrusion, the feast became quite lively.

During the feast, Jin and Galatt invited Tenma and Agris's grandson Ricky to go on a hunting trip. And so the four of them (plus Tenma's followers) set out on the trip...

Chapter 6

Part One

“Galatt, there’s a horned rabbit in the bushes up ahead to your right!”

“Okay!”

“Jin, there’s a mushroom by your feet. It’s a reagent.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Shiromaru, there’s a deer behind a tree about twenty meters to the left.”

“Woof!”

“Rocket, that badger is still a baby, so return it to its nest.”

Plop...

“Solomon, you just take a nap in the bag.”

“Squee...”

“Ricky, there are two doves overhead. Get at least one of them.”

“All right...”

The day after the banquet, we had come to the forest that Jin had talked about. He’d said it would take half a day to get there, but apparently that was just by foot, because we’d arrived in about an hour using my carriage.

This forest wasn’t particularly large, but it had rivers and ponds nearby, and a fair amount of small-to-medium-sized creatures seemed to inhabit it. Fortunately, there were no signs of adventurers or hunters having recently come here, and the animals were less wary as a result.

Thanks to that, as soon as we’d entered the forest, we started racking up game.

“We should take a break soon, then hunt solo for a bit. What do you guys

think?” I asked.

Now that we’d all bagged a considerable number of spoils, I suggested resting for a bit.

“Understood, Leader!” Jin and Galatt chorused.

“Got it...”

Jin and Galatt seemed cheerful, possibly because they’d had better luck than they’d expected. On the other hand, Ricky appeared somewhat perplexed by Jin and Galatt’s behavior. I thought maybe it was because Ricky admired the two of them, and he couldn’t quite understand why they were treating me, the youngest out of all of them, as the leader.

“Inviting Tenma was definitely the right call! Right, Galatt?”

“Yeah, definitely! There’s no way the hunt would’ve been this easy if it were just the two of us!”

Up until now, I had been responsible for spotting prey and reporting it to Jin and the others, who would then carry out the actual hunting. During this time, I hadn’t personally killed anything. I’d initially tried to join in, but Jin had stopped me. He’d said that if I participated in the hunting too, we wouldn’t have a good balance of roles, and that if we were trying to do things in an orderly fashion, it was better to have some of us spotting and some of us hunting.

In other words, I located prey, then designated someone to handle hunting it. This system worked well, especially since I had the “Detection” ability, which allowed me to identify nearby creatures and see how many of them there were. Not only that, but Jin and Galatt were already highly skilled adventurers, and Ricky, who often adventured solo, was also pretty good. Along with Rocket and Shiromaru, we made quite a team.

Since Shiromaru was a wolf, he was naturally skilled in hunting, and as for Rocket, he’d become a deadly assassin, circling around wild animals without them noticing and striking from behind. Moreover, he had a knack for finding prey that was hiding in their burrows, making him the top hunter. When Rocket had found the young badger earlier, he wasn’t sure whether to classify it as prey or not, so he’d brought it to me to confirm.

As for Solomon, he wasn't really suited for hunting in the forest, so he was waiting in the bag. He didn't seem happy about this at all, but it couldn't be helped since he wasn't able to fly freely in the forest.

"I wish Namitaro could've come with us too!"

"Jin, he's a fish. Technically, anyway..."

As Jin had mentioned, Namitaro hadn't accompanied us on the hunt. I hadn't wanted him to complain about it later, so I *had* extended him an invitation, but he'd just said, "I'm a fish. I don't particularly like forests."

I'd had way too many replies to that and not enough time to say them all, but at any rate, that was why Namitaro had stayed at home. He was probably eating the snacks I'd given him right about now and just lazing around.

By the way, the only people who knew that we were out hunting were Mennas and Leena, Namitaro, Blanca, and Aina. Well, Gramps and the others technically knew as well, but they'd been so drunk they probably didn't remember.

"Eh, we told Aina, so I'm sure it'll be fine," I muttered as I continued getting lunch ready. Well, I didn't actually have to get anything ready; I'd just shoved the leftovers from yesterday's banquet into my bag, which meant all I had to do was pull it out.

"Hey, Tenma. After this, we're gonna split up and hunt solo, right? We can spread out if we want, but who's going to stay here?" Jin asked.

"Right—we need a base where everyone can meet up... Are we going to come back in shifts?" Galatt asked.

Rocket and Shiromaru stepped forward.

"Don't worry. Rocket and Shiromaru will stay behind at the base. These two can hold their own against any monsters or animals in this area," I said. Jin and the others nodded.

"And in case you ever get lost, just call for Shiromaru loudly," I added. "Unless you're super far away, your voice should reach him. Or, if you just follow the riverbank, you should be able to get back to an area near our base."

Near our current base, there was a relatively large river. Following it ought to bring people back towards our current location. Worst-case scenario, I could just use Detection to figure out where the others were.

Another reason to leave Rocket and the others behind was to not have too many hunters about. If they weren't staying at the base, Rocket and the others would naturally follow me. In that case, I'd catch more prey than everyone else—like, *way* more than everyone else.

While I knew that Jin and Galatt wouldn't complain, I wasn't sure how Ricky would feel, and if the disparity in our spoils became too great, Jin and the others might not like it either.

Besides, this kind of solo hunting was a sort of game in itself. Because of that, it seemed preferable to hunt alone as much as possible.

However, I did decide to bring Solomon along. He hadn't been outside even once so far on our trip, and it would give him a chance to get some fresh air.

"You don't have to worry about all that..." Jin declared. "But, well, now that we're on equal footing it'll just be another competition, and I'm up for that!"

Jin and Galatt probably understood what I was thinking. Ricky didn't seem to know what we were talking about, but unlike the others, he hadn't known me as long. (That said, Jin and Galatt had only known me for a few months, though...)

"Well, let's go ahead and eat," Galatt said, and we dug in. We finished in a few minutes, then scattered into the forest.

After we split up, I decided to focus more on searching for edible plants and herbs instead of hunting animals.

"Ohh! I found an herb! What is this, ginger?"

This forest had a surprising number of edible plants and medicinal herbs, which I was really grateful for.

"Is this some kind of wild garlic...?"

I'd decided to always check anything I wasn't certain was edible. Many of

these wild herbs were unrecognizable to the untrained eye, and even experts made mistakes, after all. I could say as much with confidence, given my knowledge and experience both from my previous life and from being raised in Kukuri Village.

That was why my Identify ability was coming in very handy right now. Of course, even if I knew the effect of a plant and whether it was edible, I didn't know how to prepare it, so I would have to look that up after I got home.

“Wow! This is a truffle!”

As I kept my eye on the ground while I walked, I discovered some round, black objects. When I picked up one of them and used Identify on it, I found out that it was a black truffle, also known as a “black diamond.”

“Amazing, there are at least ten or more... Wait, isn't ‘black diamond’ another name for a Hercules beetle? And coal too...or was it tuna?”

I mused to myself while collecting the truffles scattered around my feet. There were as many as fifteen within my reach alone, and a little farther ahead, I found two more spots where truffles were growing in abundance.

“Twenty-nine in total... I bet I'll make a fortune from these.”

I didn't know the exact value of truffles in this world, but in my previous life, just a hundred grams could have been worth tens of thousands of yen.

Among the twenty-nine truffles I gathered, ten were likely to exceed a hundred grams, while the rest were about fifty grams or less. The largest one seemed to be around two hundred grams.

“Should I keep these, and eat the rest at home? Aina might know how to prepare them.”

While I pondered this, toying with a smaller truffle in my palm, Solomon, who had realized it was food, suddenly reached out and swallowed it whole.

“Squee!”

Not only that, but he must not have liked it, because he chewed it several times before spitting it out.

“Squee!!!”

The moment he'd spat it out, I bonked him on the head. That second sound he'd let out had been his scream of pain.

I couldn't believe I'd let my guard down like that!

"It's a good thing it was a small one—but seriously, eating a whole truffle and then spitting it out?! Unbelievable! You have no self-control! I've never even tasted one myself!" I scolded Solomon for a while, then locked him back in the bag.

After lecturing him, I tried searching the area further, but either the truffles were buried too deep or were too small to be worth digging up, so I decided to give up on truffle hunting here.

"All right! I'll remember this place!"

After that, I went back to gathering wild plants. I didn't find anything as valuable as the truffles, so I decided to return to our base for the moment.

"Yo, Tenma! You're late!" Jin called.

"What's wrong?"

Jin and Galatt were lining up their game, clearly competing with each other.

"I win!"

"No, I win!"

Jin had hunted a boar. It wasn't that big, but it was plump and looked like it had a lot of fat on it. On the other hand, Galatt had nabbed a stag. It was quite large and had incredible antlers.

"Tenma! You be the judge!" they both chorused.

"It's a draw."

They said that wasn't fair, but deep down they probably knew that was the most equitable judgment I could have given them.

In terms of meat, boar was more valuable than stag. Venison was quite inexpensive, but deerskin could be used in many ways, plus you could use the antlers in medicine. That meant the deer was worth much more than just the

value of its meat.

My explanation finally convinced them. Then their attention turned to what I had caught. I was just about to pull out the truffles when...

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, Ricky’s back.” The two of them went over to Ricky instead.

“Oh, you want to see my spoils? That’s fine,” Ricky said, before pulling out...

“Three boars?!”

“Two deer?!”

And so he’d easily beaten the two of them.

“We lost! What about you, Tenma?” they both asked.

I went ahead and pulled out my herbs and other plants. I had two basketfuls of them.

“Seriously?”

“That’s definitely worth way more than what we caught.”

They were already crushed, but I delivered the finishing blow. I should note that at this point, Ricky still looked perfectly calm.

“I found these too.” When I took out the truffles, nobody realized what they were at first. Galatt was the first to realize.

“Hey, aren’t those black diamonds? Truffles, I mean.”

Just what I’d expect from a dog—er, I mean a wolf beastman. Even in my previous life, people had used dogs with excellent senses of smell when searching for truffles. I’m sure wolves were just as good at it.

Now Jin and Ricky finally realized what they were too.

“Are you serious?!”

“I’ve never seen them in person before...”

They were both at a loss for words. After all, even in this world, truffles were a luxury item.

“Solomon ate one...” I said with disappointment.

As soon as Shiromaru heard those words, he came over, but I quickly scooped up the rest of the truffles and put them in my bag before he could get close enough. He seemed unhappy about it, but could you blame me? He’d been about to eat the rest of my truffles!

Anyway, I was declared the winner of the solo hunting contest, at which point we decided to go hunting as a group again. I guided everyone in the opposite direction of where I’d found the truffles, though, and I didn’t feel the least bit bad about it...

“Hey, Tenma, don’t you think that’s odd?” Jin, who was walking in front, suddenly stopped and pointed to the ground. I followed his gaze and saw many gouges on the ground, potentially indicating some kind of struggle.

“It *is* odd... All right, let’s turn back! It’ll be dark soon. Let’s spend the night at the place that was our base before.”

Jin and Galatt agreed that it was better to be safe, but Ricky seemed to be against the idea.

“But why? Whatever made those marks could make us a lot of money! And even if it’s a strong monster, all of us together can take it on!” Maybe he wanted us to defeat it because he was confident in his own abilities and believed us all to be capable individuals, but...

“Targeting an unknown creature in the dark is something only an amateur would do. Give it up,” Jin cut in decisively.

“Jin’s right. Besides, Tenma is the leader of this party, so he’s the one who gets to make the call. Not to mention the majority of us are against it. If you really want to check it out, you’ll have to wait until morning,” Galatt explained. Ricky, having been outvoted by the other two, reluctantly gave in.

That night, I decided to change my plans a bit. Initially, we’d intended to camp separately, but since we’d stumbled across evidence of some unknown and potentially dangerous creatures, we decided to spend the night in the same

place.

So far, Detection hadn't picked up on any creatures that could've made those marks, but the accuracy of my skill decreased the farther you went, plus it could be countered by various concealment abilities. And if the creature was hard for my Detection to pick up, we had to be careful not to let our guard down.

Just in case, I warned Shiromaru about it too. Even if the creature possessed some kind of concealment or stealth abilities, they wouldn't be able to deceive Shiromaru's sense of smell.

For that reason, I spent the night as quietly as possible, with minimal lighting, and made sure at least one person was standing guard. Luckily, there were some wildflowers growing nearby, so I decided to keep myself busy by brewing tea with them. However, the tea turned out quite bitter and astringent, and I was about the only one who liked it.

"Ugh! It's so bitter! Is something wrong with your tongue?" Jin asked.

"The bitterness is fine, but why is it so astringent?" Galatt asked.

Ricky said, "Someone give me some sugar! I'll even take honey!"

Shiromaru and Solomon turned away in a huff, but Rocket sipped on it quietly.

Well, these wild herbs were meant to be used as a subtle flavoring when blended with other ingredients. It was natural that the others didn't like drinking the tea on its own.

However, the peculiar taste seemed to dispel everyone's drowsiness, and we were able to pass the night without any issues. Well, until morning, at least...

When we woke up, Ricky said, "Let's go solo first."

Given that Jin and the others had rejected Ricky's suggestion yesterday, they agreed to it this time, figuring it wouldn't be a problem.

I felt the same way, so I also agreed. Little did I know, however, that I'd come to regret this decision later...

"For now, let's agree not to return to the areas we explored yesterday."

We agreed not to revisit places we had already disturbed yesterday, and scattered in different directions. This time, Rocket and Shiromaru stayed behind again, with Solomon joining them.

Perhaps I'd gotten a bit too mad at them yesterday, given that they chose to stay behind of their own accord today.

Anyway, this time, I decided to start hunting from a point just beyond where I'd found the truffles. On the way there, I slowed down when I reached the spot where I had discovered the truffles, but of course, there were no more to be found.

As I proceeded, I noticed fewer and fewer trees. In their place, low, bushy plants resembling bamboo grass thrived.

"I bet I can use that for tea too. I'll take some home with me."

While I was picking through the bamboo and plucking off the leaves that looked good, I suddenly sensed the presence of a group of large creatures nearby. There were seven of them, and one was much smaller than the others.

I sneaked closer while concealing myself in the bamboo so they wouldn't notice me, and spotted a large white creature about fifty meters up ahead.

"Is that a cow...? Identify!"

Class: White Buffalo

Hm, so they were buffalo with white fur. One of them was a calf. They looked like cows, not monsters. However, unlike normal cows, they had eight legs. The extra legs grew just behind the normal legs. Also, they had four horns on their heads.

"I've never heard of cows like that around here... Maybe they came from somewhere else?"

Anyway, since they were cows, I figured their meat would be superb and wanted to hunt at least one of them. I looked for an opportunity while concealing my presence, but just then, I noticed something strange.

The largest buffalo was being attacked by four others. Behind the big buffalo were a calf and a female buffalo.

“Hm? Are they fighting over the female...?”

Surviving in the wild and having offspring must have been tough... Well, I guess that was pretty much the same for humans.

“But this might be my chance... Those four should be okay for me to hunt. I think so, anyway...”

For a moment, I recalled the lecture I had given Tida and the others—but decided that as long as I left a male and female pair alive, it should be fine. Besides, they seemed like some kind of invasive species; in other words, they didn’t seem like they were native to this area. Maybe my reasoning was too convenient, but...

While I was thinking about this, the four bulls continued attacking, and the white fur of the bull under attack had been dyed red with blood.

“All right. Let’s go with Air Cutter!”

My Wind magic sliced open the necks of the four vicious bulls. They hadn’t even noticed me, so they collapsed without a fight.

I approached them and found the four were still just barely hanging on to life, though their throats were slashed.

“I should bleed them... Hmm, something like this?”

I created four large platforms with Earth magic. Then I used my giant guardian golem, Giganto, to place the bulls on the platforms with their heads slanted downwards. The platforms were angled, and I didn’t fully trust them to support the massive bodies of the bulls, so I summoned a few golems to assist in holding them up.

While I bled them, I made small incisions in the thick blood vessels of all four of their hind legs to allow air to enter more easily. I wasn’t sure if this method was correct, but since I was letting the blood flow downwards, I thought it might be better to have air holes above as well. The blood I drained flowed into a hole I’d dug beneath the platform. I would have preferred to have handled

this near a river, but as long as I filled in the hole at the end of the process, the cleanup would be minimal.

As a precaution, I used Wind magic to ensure that the smell of blood didn't waft away and attract other beasts while I worked.

"So, it's just you guys left now..."

I directly addressed the white-haired bull that had been watching my work from a distance. I didn't expect it to understand my words, but as soon as I turned around, the male stood up and began to show signs of aggression.

"I have no intention of hurting you guys, so hurry up and go. I'll even throw in a free healing spell."

I was in a great mood since I'd gotten such incredible spoils, so I used Recovery magic on the bull. The magic made its wounds disappear, though that didn't mean it had undone all the damage. The bull still didn't move. Instead, for some reason, the calf approached me.

The male and female began to call to it, but the calf ignored them and started sniffing my body and my bag.

"Do you want this?"

I took out a handful of the bamboo grass I'd just picked and held it up to the calf's nose. It greedily devoured it.

"Hm, so I guess cows eat bamboo grass too..."

I was a bit surprised by the calf's appetite, because before I knew it, it had eaten up all my bamboo grass. Its mother and father were cautious of me at first, but once they saw I didn't mean to harm their baby, they settled down a bit.

A while later, I'd pretty much finished draining the blood from the slain buffalo, and it was time for me to meet up with the others.

"The blood's not completely drained, but it'll have to do for now."

I put the four white buffalo in my bag, froze the blood pools, then covered them with dirt.

“Okay, time to go. Hey—stop following me!”

The calf was trailing after me, maybe because I’d fed it. But I couldn’t let it do so. Just as I was thinking that, the male and female also started to follow me. I thought about it for a moment and realized that, once the magic wore off, the smell of blood would fill the area, and that would attract other carnivorous beasts.

If it were a group of males I was leaving behind, they might have been fine, but this one was injured and had a female and a baby with him. It would be difficult for him to protect them all.

Since I’d shown I wasn’t going to hurt them and had killed the four that had been threatening them, they’d probably figured that they’d have a much higher chance of surviving if they just followed me.

I could have been wrong, but that was the conclusion I reached. So...

“If you’re going to follow me, you have to do as I say. If you’re quiet, I won’t eat you. Plus, you’ll have to go in here.” I opened up my dimension bag.

At first they were hesitant, probably because they could smell Shiromaru’s and Solomon’s scents in the bag, but once they saw the calf go in, they followed it.

“There’s Tenma!”

“Time to see who won!”

Jin and Galatt had arrived before me, and were waiting eagerly.

“What do you think about that?!” Jin’s hunt had yielded two wild boars and one deer, plus some mushrooms and wild grasses.

“I did better than you!” Galatt had one boar, one deer, and five horned rabbits.

“Umm, I think it’s another draw.”

“But I have mushrooms!”

“What? But I hunted more animals!”

Neither Jin nor Galatt agreed, but I thought my judgment was reasonable.

“Jin, those mushrooms are all poisonous. That means they’re useless. You can use wild grass as medicine, but it’s a pretty cheap ingredient. Galatt’s five horned rabbits are about the size of one boar.”

Taking all of that into consideration, I’d decided it was once again a draw.

“Wuff!” As I was talking to Jin and the others, Shiromaru sniffed the bag.

“I thought you’d notice pretty fast! Look, Shiromaru and Solomon—these guys are your friends now, so don’t ever try to eat them.”

With that, I took the buffalo out of the bag. Jin and the others seemed even more surprised than the buffalo were.

“Wait! They’re white!”

“Hey! Are you going to slaughter them? I’ll help you, so share some with me!”

Jin and Galatt were quite excited. It seemed that white buffalo was considered high-quality meat.

“No, I just saved these guys. I’ve got others, though. Look.”

I showed a glimpse of one of the slaughtered white buffalo in my magic bag. Shiromaru and Solomon began drooling involuntarily.

“All right, Tenma! Let’s eat it now, right away!”

“We’ll barbecue it first, right?”

Although Jin and Galatt were getting carried away, we couldn’t eat just yet.

“No—we haven’t butchered it yet. I’ll do it later. I’ll call you when it’s time to eat, so be patient.”

“Okay!” Jin and Galatt replied in unison. The way they were acting, it suddenly felt like I had another Shiromaru and Solomon on my hands.

“By the way, Ricky is taking quite a while... Should I go look for him?”

I moved away from Jin and the others and used Detection in an expanded area. Ricky was closer than I had expected—only about two kilometers away. However, his movements seemed odd.

“Is he running away from something?”

Ricky was zigzagging and changing direction abruptly.

“I’ll expand my search a bit more... What’s this?”

Something very large pinged on my Detection radar, but it had an ability which prevented me from using Identify on it.

Just then, we heard a loud roar.

“Jin, I sensed Ricky’s presence coming from the direction of that roar! He might be under attack!”

I immediately put the buffalo back into the bag and started running towards Ricky’s location. Jin and the others followed my lead. Shiromaru and Solomon were a bit slower, but they caught up quickly.

After running for about ten minutes, we heard the sound of something crashing through the trees, and it just kept getting louder.

When we emerged from the trees, the source of the roar was right before us...

“It’s a dragon!” I screamed without thinking, but upon closer examination I realized it was a bit different from any dragon I’d seen before. The biggest difference was that it didn’t have wings. It looked like a Komodo dragon, with large, hard, pointy scales growing all over its body. It was sizable, probably over fifteen meters in length, which made it much more intimidating than other monsters.

“Identify!”

Name: Earth Dragon

Gender: Male

Rank: S

Class: Lesser Dragon

HP: 40,000

MP: 15,000

Strength: S+

Defense: S+

Agility: A-

Magic: A

Mind: C+

Growth: B+

Luck: C+

Skills

Earth Magic: 8

Debuff Resistance: 7

Vitality Boost: 7

Physical Boost: 6

Regeneration: 4

Conceal: 3

I wasn't sure if it was because the dragon's Conceal skill was relatively weak or because I was now closer to the creature, but I was finally able to use Identify on him. Although this earth dragon was classified as a lesser dragon, judging by his status, he must have been the strongest one around.

"I'll act as bait while you two go rescue Ricky! Make it out of the forest if you can and run as far away from here as possible! I'll lure the earth dragon in the opposite direction!"

I doubted the dragon could beat me. But something unexpected might happen inside the forest, so I decided I needed to lure him to a flatter area, in which it'd be easier to fight him.

"You sure you're all right alone?" Jin asked with some concern. However, I figured that this earth dragon was basically just like the wyvern variant I'd already fought, only on steroids. Not only that, but since he couldn't fly, he would be easier to deal with.

"Don't worry. I've got Rocket and the others with me."

Since this wasn't a tournament, I could use my Guardian Giganto, which would be more than enough.

"All right. Don't do anything reckless!" Jin said before we split up.

When Ricky and the others started heading towards us, I took out a disposable sword from my magic bag. It was made of iron, and thicker than an ordinary iron sword.

“Ricky! Just keep running!” I called out as I passed him, charging straight towards the dragon. I swung my sword down between his eyes.

“Graaar!”

The dragon froze up momentarily, but I’d only managed to crack the scales between his eyes and hadn’t done any major damage. On the other hand, my sword was now badly chipped and unusable.

“Whoa! It’s tougher than I thought! Good thing I used a disposable sword...!”

I’d used a throwaway weapon because I’d thought I could distract the dragon and inflict a little damage at the same time. I was glad I’d made that choice. This guy’s head might have even shattered my beloved *kogarasumaru*.

“Next time I’ll buy a hammer or something... Whoa! Hey, watch out! Well, guess I don’t blame you for being angry...”

I was right in the middle of making plans for what I should get up to back in the city when the dragon tried to bite me.

“All right—time to bring you somewhere a bit more convenient!”

I dodged the dragon’s attack and adjusted my speed to lure him into following me as I ran. He almost gave up several times, so I occasionally whapped his nose with the tip of my sword.

Thanks to my hard work, I was able to lure the earth dragon out of the forest.

“Take this!” I fired several Fire Bullets at him, but they were all deflected by his hard scales and dissipated.

“Damn, they sure are hard... Well, how about this?”

I fired three stronger Fire Bullets in a row, aiming for the exact same spot as before. The first bullet I fired shattered the scales on his legs. The second one pierced his skin and reached the bone, and the third one tore right through him and came out the other side.

“Graaaaar!”

Now the earth dragon seemed to become more cautious. He must have finally realized that I was powerful enough to harm him. He began to retreat little by little, but all of a sudden, something delivered a blow to him from behind.

“Awoo!”

It was Shiromaru. He’d been chasing the earth dragon, and was now attacking him from behind using his Slash ability. However, even that powerful blow from Shiromaru only managed to strip off a few of the dragon’s scales, causing minimal damage.

However, the dragon seemed surprised to be even slightly wounded, and he tried to move to a position where he could keep both me and Shiromaru in his sights. But while he was doing this, Rocket’s Fireball and Solomon’s Light Beam Breath simultaneously shot down from above him.

Although neither attack was powerful enough to penetrate the dragon’s scales, the sudden aerial assaults greatly startled him.

“It seems like lesser dragons are pretty dumb,” I mused to myself.

The earth dragon’s panic reminded me of the wyvern variant we’d defeated before.

“Come to think of it, I still need to take the wyvern to Jeanne and the others.”

I remembered I had that wyvern inspection coming up, so I just wanted to deal with this dragon already.

“All right—let’s go!”

As I approached the dragon, I summoned Giganto. His right arm had already been replaced with the giant sword from Kelly’s workshop.



The sudden appearance of Giganto's massive arm momentarily stunned the dragon. It seemed that he was, indeed, pretty dumb. Despite the dire situation the dragon was in, he couldn't help but be captivated by the giant arm, not realizing that his only chance of survival was to keep moving.

"Graar, grr, gaaar, ghaaar..."

I struck the earth dragon in the forehead with a punch from Giganto's left fist, followed by a blow to the neck with the giant sword in Giganto's right hand. After this, I lifted him off the ground with a left uppercut, and then thrust the sword into his throat.

"Ahh, I don't wanna waste it...!"

Blood spurted from the earth dragon's throat. Monsters of this class had valuable blood, so I quickly used magic to freeze the blood that was about to splatter everywhere. At that moment, what looked like a large water droplet fell from above before the frozen blood could reach the ground. It was Rocket.

Rocket had consumed the blood I'd just frozen. Now, if this had been Shiromaru or Solomon we were dealing with, I'd have made them hurry up and spit it out, but I didn't mind that Rocket had eaten it. Perhaps he'd understood it was an important object when he saw me freeze it, and had decided to store it in the magic bag inside his body.

Eventually, the earth dragon stopped bleeding and ceased moving entirely. To prevent the remaining blood from spilling out, I flipped the dragon onto his back. Then I saw Galatt running towards us from the direction of the forest.

"Hey, Tenma! I came to help, but...well, looks like I'm totally late." Galatt's face tensed up at the sight of the earth dragon lying there.

"Where's everyone else?" I thought Jin and Ricky would be right behind him, but Galatt told me they were waiting at our camp from yesterday.

According to Galatt, the moment Ricky had joined up with the two of them, his nerves gave out and he almost collapsed, so Galatt and Jin had carried him back to camp. After that, they'd been worried about me, and since Galatt was faster than Jin, he'd come to check on me and had been planning to help if I needed it.

“Well, that was a total waste! If only I’d been a little faster, I might’ve claimed a share of that earth dragon!” Galatt said, whacking me on the back. Since the other three hadn’t had any hand in defeating the earth dragon, I had full rights to the spoils.

“I guess I can share a bit with you. Within reason, though.”

“Seriously? That’d be awesome!” Galatt seemed pretty happy about this. But honestly, even though Jin and Galatt hadn’t contributed to the fight, they did have a right to the materials since they’d participated in the overall plan and escaped with Ricky. As for Ricky, well...he’d just lucked out, since he was the one who’d encountered the dragon in the first place.

We could have gutted the earth dragon right there, but we decided to take it back to camp to avoid wasting any more blood. Besides, since it was my first time dressing an earth dragon, I wanted to do it in a place where we wouldn’t be interrupted.

“But where are we going to gut it?” Galatt asked. As for that, I knew just the place.

“The castle. I was planning on going there anyway because of the thing with the wyvern variant, so I’ll just take care of it there. The knights have a place out back where they’ve let me gut monsters before. Plus, if we did it somewhere else, gawkers might show up and cause a scene.”

I could imagine the king, the archduke, the minister of military affairs, the princess, or even Queen Maria showing up and making a fuss, angry about me making a mess or something. So if a commotion was inevitable, I’d rather do it where it wouldn’t matter if there was a commotion in the first place.

“W-Well, I guess you *are* on good terms with the royal family... You can just give me my share later...”

It sounded like Galatt wanted zero part in any potential commotion. Honestly, I didn’t either, but what could I do?

“How much do you think we could sell this for if we put it up for auction?” he asked. “I bet that would cause a huge stir.”

“That’s why I won’t be selling it! Plus, the paperwork for the auction would be

a hassle. By the way, do you think earth dragons taste good?” I asked.

I’d heard that wyverns were yummy. I didn’t know whether that held true for all variants, but it seemed possible. As for earth dragons...well, they seemed tough, but maybe if you simmered them for a long time they might turn out pretty good. Like beef tendons or something.

“We already have some items up for auction, so we’re not short on money... It seems like we’d get more out of eating it than selling it,” I said, eyeing Shiromaru and Solomon, to which Galatt heartily agreed.

“Let’s get back to the others. We’ve got a pretty big haul this time, so it’s about time to wrap things up.”

We headed towards Jin and the others with the earth dragon in my bag. However, it was farther than I had expected, so I grabbed Galatt and flew the rest of the way.

“Hey, Tenma, are you okay? Wait! Galatt, when did Tenma become your mommy?” The moment we returned, Jin teased us about the fact that I was carrying Galatt like a dog would carry her puppy.

“Tenma, remember how we were talking about divvying up the spoils earlier? Well, you can leave Jin out,” Galatt said.

“Got it.”

Jin didn’t understand what we meant at first, so he kept laughing for a while, but once Galatt explained things, he got down on his hands and knees and apologized. “I’m sorry! Forgive me, Tenma!”

He was so desperate, I decided to cut him some slack. It turned out that when he’d rushed off to go rescue Ricky, he’d left his game behind, and by the time he’d returned, it was all gone.

As Jin and Galatt were discussing the incident, Ricky remained some distance away from us, looking uneasy. This was understandable—even though this had happened due to Jin’s team’s carelessness, Ricky was the root cause.

Once Ricky saw Jin apologizing, he started to take his own spoils from his bag so he could hand them over to Jin. But before he could do that, Rocket moved

right in front of Jin and regurgitated a bunch of wild boars and deer.

“Whoa! Wait, aren’t those the wild boars I hunted down?!”

“And this deer was my kill!”

After Rocket regurgitated all of this, he proceeded to consume two of them again quickly. Jin and the others were confounded by this behavior, so Rocket turned towards me and got me to explain.

“Huh? Yeah... Oh, I see. All right. Jin, Galatt—Rocket says that he’s taking one boar and one deer each from you as payment for protecting your game while you were away.”

Rocket puffed out his body enthusiastically to confirm my words. So that was why Rocket had arrived at the battle a little later.

“What?!”

“For real?!”

Jin and Galatt were surprised. After all, if Rocket hadn’t come to collect the carcasses, then they might’ve lost all of it.

It might sound like a dirty tactic, but most of the time adventurers would have interpreted the loot as abandoned and considered it fair game. Besides, the two of them knew they would be getting a share of the earth dragon, so they didn’t complain in the end. Perhaps they did regret their oversight a little, though.

Maybe Rocket and the others had thought that since I hadn’t hunted for animal meat today, they would try to secure some themselves.

“Well, let’s head back. We can discuss how to split up the earth dragon on the way there.”

Since I didn’t intend to convert the materials into cash at the guild at this time, we decided that Jin’s team would receive a share of them. That was why we needed to decide which specific materials each of them wanted in advance.

After our discussion, Jin decided on one upper and one lower fang, Galatt chose the front claws, and Ricky settled for some sharp spines on the dragon’s back. Additionally, I agreed to give each of them one scale and a few kilograms of meat. Although we weren’t sure whether it was edible, since it was dragon’s

meat, we figured there should be plenty of potential buyers for research purposes even if it did turn out to be inedible.

Part Two

Our trip back home was without incident, but as we approached the capital, we saw a large crowd of people gathered there. Upon closer look, I realized it was a group of very familiar faces.

“That carriage over there! Stop!” The man who was leading the group rode towards us on a horse. “We received information that an earth dragon appeared in the direction you came from. Do you know anything about it?” He was addressing Ricky, who sat in the driver’s seat.

I poked my head out the window and answered in his place. “I killed it, Captain.”

I had been pretty sure the person approaching us was the captain of the first order of knights—it turned out I was right.

“Huh? Tenma?! Is that true?!”

This was the guy Dean had thrown at me as a weapon when I’d participated in the knights’ training, before. Well, at the time I had kicked him away, but still...

I remembered greeting him several times when I’d visited the castle. According to the captain, the group we’d just now run into consisted of the first order of the knights and some adventurers.

“Since there are adventurers here, was I summoned too?”

The answer to that was yes. But since the summons had been sent yesterday afternoon, the knights had just missed me and given up on bringing me along.

Among the adventurers were groups that had fought in the tournament, including the Dragon Strikers, Lohengrin, the Blue Hornets, and others. However, when I asked why no one who had been at the banquet was present, he told me that no one who’d been there was even in a state to move.

First of all, since Jin and Galatt were with me, the Dawnswords weren’t participating because they weren’t strong enough alone.

Sagan Tamers A, B, and C were all so hungover they were incapacitated.

The Gunjo Flowers (that is, the triplets and Primera) had all eaten too much and couldn't even move. Same with Amur.

Blanca had turned down the offer, saying finding a souvenir for his wife was more important.

Gramps was in bed with a hangover, and the inhabitants of Kukuri Village couldn't fight anyway, so they had been automatically excluded.

...Most of those reasons were utter nonsense!

Luckily, the summons wasn't mandatory, so none of them would be punished for disobeying. Also, the adventurers who had attended the banquet were all out-of-towners, so they wouldn't have been summoned in the first place had they not been here for the tournament. Still, the person who had been sent to get them was probably quite surprised.

"Well, if you've slain it, can you take it out, please? I'd like to confirm the kill."

And so I pulled out the earth dragon in front of everyone. They seemed to think it was going to be much smaller than it actually was, so they were all quite shocked by its size.

"You mean to tell me just the four of you killed that thing?"

"No, Tenma killed it himself. We didn't do a thing," Jin said plainly. The other adventurers looked stunned. After all, saying something like "We didn't do a thing" could easily have damaged Jin's and the others' reputations.

Under normal circumstances, they'd have said something like "We helped a little" or maybe "We provided some backup."

"There's no sense in lying about it, after all. Basically, the only thing we did was back Tenma up by not getting in his way!" Galatt's phrasing was a little strange, but it seemed to get the message across to the other adventurers.

It would normally have taken around ten skilled adventurers to defeat a monster of this class. So it would have been natural for people to think I was bluffing or telling a tall tale.

However, I had a track record. Although the guard's records hadn't officially recognized my feats, rumors had spread among nobles and the Kukuri Village

residents, and my recent display of strength in the tournament had given credibility to my reputation as the Dragonslayer. Not only that, but the adventurers here had all fought me in the tournament.

It might have been more convenient for them to say they'd been defeated by the "Dragonslayer" than to admit they'd lost to some rookie kid. So I doubted they'd say anything to contradict this.

"Indeed, this seems to be the earth dragon mentioned in the report. However, since we were ordered by His Majesty to go out and slay it, we can't just simply report that it was defeated and have that be the end of it. I apologize, but could you please provide detailed information about where you encountered the dragon? Although the mission has been canceled, we will still have to finish the investigation and other related tasks."

The knights had gone so far as to hire adventurers for this expedition, after all. They needed some kind of achievement in order to save face instead of returning empty-handed. They probably couldn't just outright say, "Hand over the dragon!" but no doubt it had crossed their minds.

"I'd like to have the earth dragon examined at the same time as the wyvern variant. Is that possible?" I decided to lend them a hand. If I brought the earth dragon in, it would give them more work. They'd have more to report to their higher-ups, and they could argue that the expedition had not been not in vain. Basically, it would mean an increase in their operational funds and salaries.

The captain was very happy with my proposal, since it seemed like a great accomplishment had fallen into their laps without much effort.

But this was a negotiation, after all. I would provide records stating their involvement in the "earth dragon incident" to the knights, and in return I would secure free labor for gutting the earth dragon as well as gain favor with their leader, Prince Lyle. And of course, I made it clear that all rights to the earth dragon's materials belonged to me.

Since oral agreements alone were not acceptable in this situation, the captain wrote it all down and one of the knights took his notes back to the capital.

Prince Lyle would decide how to deal with the contract, though I could only assume he would approve it. After all, I'd heard that, due to his various

misdeeds, the majority of his salary was managed by Queen Maria. Despite being a grown man and the head of the military, he still had to receive pocket money from his mother. Although he had brought it upon himself, it was pretty pathetic.

“Tenma! Well done!”

When I returned to the capital after parting ways with the expedition squad, Sir Lyle was waiting at the gate for me. There were guards and gatekeepers in the vicinity as well. I could tell that he wasn’t just directing his words at me, but was speaking intentionally loud enough for everyone around us to hear.

“Tenma, I apologize, but play along with me,” he whispered while patting my shoulder.

“Yes! As per the orders of the Minister of Military Affairs, we discovered an earth dragon, and so I took the opportunity to slay it.”

My words surprised the guards and gatekeepers who were present. Naturally, it was surprising. It wasn’t every day that someone just casually defeated a monster like an earth dragon. Under normal circumstances if you encountered a monster like that, you’d do everything in your power to run away and report its existence. Even successfully escaping would be a story to boast about, and you might even be rewarded just for reporting it. Not only that, but it now looked as though he’d had me slay the dragon before word about it had been officially put out. At any rate, regardless of whether one knew the truth of the matter or not, it was a surprising tale.

“You just ‘took the opportunity,’ did you? I’d expect nothing less! Well then, let’s go!”

Sir Lyle led me to the knights’ training grounds. I couldn’t just take the dragon out where we were standing, after all, so we headed to the grounds, which were pretty spacious and could afford to get a little dirty.

“By the way, Tenma, I’m sorry, but can we continue to say that your visit to the forest was under my orders? Of course, I’ll compensate you for this, and I won’t claim any rights to the materials. Just make sure to say the knights were involved in slaying the beast—on paper, at least.”

Lyle brought up this request once we were inside the carriage, making sure that none of the other guards heard. Apparently, my hunch about the situation had been correct.

“That’s fine. But I’m going to have conditions, you know.”

I told him I wanted five gold coins apiece for all four of us as hush money. In addition, they would purchase the materials we obtained at a price higher than the going market rate.

Regarding the latter, it was decided that the materials the other three had received from the hunt would be sold. They were all items that could be used as provisions, and rather than purchasing them from merchants, it seemed more cost-effective for buyers to get them directly from adventurers.

Although Lyle was disappointed about me keeping the earth dragon’s spoils, I still declined to sell them, and said that I would sell some materials from the wyvern variant instead.

“So you took advantage of Tenma, Lyle?”

As soon as we arrived at the knights’ training grounds, Lyle—who had been in high spirits and was leading the way—was immediately caught by Queen Maria. Apparently she had spotted one of the guards securing the training grounds and had thus been tipped off to what was going on.

By the way, when I asked her how she had beaten Lyle to the punch, she said, “Lyle seemed like he was up to something.”

“Mother, Tenma agreed to all the terms...” Prince Lyle was now sitting formally on the ground in front of his mother. I hadn’t been told to do anything in particular, so after I decided where I would take out the wyvern variant and earth dragon, I told the knights to start getting ready to gut them.

Well, to be more precise, I wasn’t giving them orders, but Tida was relaying my instructions to them as orders.

“Lyle, I’m not angry that you took advantage of him. I’m angry that you kept it a secret from me and used the knights’ accomplishments for your own personal gain. Do you understand?”

Her lecture continued.

“Tenma, what should they do next?” Tida asked.

“Hmm... I’ve never gutted a monster this big before. First, gather up all the sharp blades and tools you have and see if you can find someone experienced in gutting a lesser dragon.”

Tida went ahead and issued those orders to the knights.

“Listen to me, Lyle. This might go down in history! If you’re going to make a deal, it should be done with that in mind! Fortunately, I caught things before it was too late, but if we’re not careful... No, even if we *are* careful, other nobles might exploit this!”

The lecture was still going.

“Tenma,” Tida went on, “they can get the blades and tools, but it seems like there isn’t anyone in the castle with that kind of experience.”

“All right—send them to the guild to look for someone, then. Or, wait...maybe Gramps might know. I’m sorry, but could someone go and check?”

“We’ll go!”

Jin and the others, who were in the corner of the training grounds, had been having a tea party—in other words, they weren’t remotely involved. Nevertheless, they volunteered themselves, borrowing a carriage from the knights to carry out my request.

“Lyle, you’re *always* like this! You never put enough thought into things, and... Are you listening to me?!”

Not only was the lecture continuing, it seemed to be getting more heated.

“By the way, Tida, where’s Luna?”

“She is studying. She’s probably *along with* Grandfather and Uncle.”

The way he said this was rather odd, so I was curious what he meant by that, but at any rate it seemed like she wasn’t able to join us.

“Well, I guess that can’t be helped. Let’s take a break until Gramps gets here.”

I took out a table, tea, and snacks. Luckily, we had lots of things to talk about

to pass the time.

As Tida munched on snacks, I told him about the earth dragon. Suddenly, I realized I couldn't hear Queen Maria's voice anymore. I turned around and saw that her lecture was over and she was walking towards me. Behind her was Lyle, who had a vacant look in his eyes.

"May I sit here?" The queen sat in an empty chair before I could answer her. Lyle settled in behind her, still looking blank.

"So how will the agreement regarding the dragon be changed?" I asked, as soon as she'd gotten settled in her chair.

"You're sharp as a tack, Tenma. I'm not changing the terms on your side. Instead, you will be dealing with Tida, not Lyle. And the official story will be that you didn't *necessarily* slay the dragon due to orders from the royal family."

I understood the first reason. In other words, she wanted to create an opportunity for Tida, who was a candidate for the future king, to have some meritorious deeds under his belt, and also to strengthen the connection between us. That was also beneficial for me, so I could grok that.

The problem was the second part. If I was going to create this opportunity for Tida, then why wouldn't it be all right to say I had slain the dragon by orders of the royal family?

It seemed Tida had the same question, so the queen smiled and explained. "It's simple. If we say you did it by order of the royal family, the truth will get exposed in a heartbeat. And if a certain group of nobles uncover this fact, it'll create unnecessary trouble. So it's better to have it on record that you cooperated with the royal family out of goodwill. That's much more manageable in the long run."

Such was her reasoning. If we used Lyle's approach, there was a risk that it might be interpreted as "the royal family used their influence and power to force Tenma to hand over the earth dragon." Those close to us might not believe that story, but the public might, and the reformists would definitely exploit that. And if it was recorded in official documents, it could become part of the royal family's history, and somewhere down the line it could even be used as evidence of wrongdoing.

Basically, the idea was to minimize criticism while maximizing the use of the truth.

I personally didn't mind, but if I had to choose between the royalists and the reformists, I'd naturally align with the royalists anyway, since I had so many acquaintances among them. A little while ago, I might've chosen to run away rather than get mixed up in these factional disputes, but in my current situation, it was inevitable that I would get dragged into it one way or the other. So it was better for me to have a clear stance on where I stood. After all, I had a good relationship with many of the leaders of the royalist faction. If I was going to be involved no matter what, I might as well use the power of the royal family to my benefit.

"That's fine, but just remember, I collaborated out of goodwill and nothing more," I said.

"Yes, that's no problem at all. Tenma is just an ordinary person who happens to have a good relationship with the royal family," Queen Maria replied.

Tida seemed a bit freaked out as he listened to our rather sinister conversation, but he understood that he was a part of it all now.

Meanwhile, Lyle had remained completely frozen throughout the discussion—except for when he heard his mother's laughter. At that point, all the color drained from his face and he started trembling.

"Come on now, cut a little deeper there! Peel off the scales first!"

As soon as Gramps arrived at the castle, he checked on the earth dragon, then began to harass the knights and other workers for not doing a good enough job. They frantically tried to keep up with his demands. Even though they'd started the work an hour ago, they weren't even twenty percent done with the whole process.

But I'd lucked out, because it turned out that Gramps *did* know how to butcher an earth dragon. Apparently, he'd learned how to deal with them because he'd hunted one when he was young. He'd come across an earth dragon back then and butchered it as an experiment since he hadn't known what he was doing. As a result, many of the materials had been ruined. That

experience had taught him how to do it properly so as to preserve the materials.

“It seems it’s been about two hundred years since the royal family was last involved in butchering a dragon.” Tida seemed to have researched earth dragons in the royal library in the past, and informed us of various interesting things he’d learned. For example, although the earth dragon’s meat was said to be quite delicious, it was very tough. So unless it was tenderized in some way, it would literally be impossible to bite into. The last time there was a record of someone having hunted an earth dragon, it had been a second prince, a boy who had dark eyes and dark hair, just like me. Apparently, when he had been born, it was rumored the queen had cheated on the king and that he was the child resulting from the affair. Another tidbit Tida had learned was that the scales of earth dragons could be melted and processed similar to metal. And so on and so forth...

“Hm—in the same way as metal?”

That was some pretty valuable information. I had just been thinking about getting some new leather armor, so maybe it would be a good idea to go all out this time. Then, just as I was pondering how to use the earth dragon’s scales, the group dismantling the wyvern variant started raising a commotion.

“Something’s coming out!”

“Quick, grab it!”

“Don’t forget to put it in your magic bag!”

I glanced over and saw that they’d just cut its stomach open, and a human torso had tumbled out.

“The Tamer... That’s morbid.”

“Urk...”

Apparently this was the first time Tida had ever seen a corpse like that, and he covered his mouth with a hand.

“Tenma, come over here!” Jean, who was in charge of butchering the wyvern variant, called out to me as he held the Tamer’s bag.

“Is something the matter?”

“Do you think this is still usable?” He handed me a bag which was pockmarked with holes. It looked difficult to repair, but not completely useless, so I could at least transfer the contents out of it.

“Looks like it’s fine. Please bring me a replacement bag—anything about the same size will do.”

At my request, a nearby knight immediately brought over a regular bag. I took it and used magic to create a simple magic bag from it. I stitched this together with the damaged bag and let the space inside them both mingle. All that was left to do now was open the bag that had resulted from my handiwork and take out the contents.

“How did you do that?” Jean looked surprised, but the process had been simple. All I’d had to do was create an opening and attach it to the bag that couldn’t be opened anymore. He looked quite impressed when I explained. Later, though, Gramps informed me that this was actually a new technique and that if it were to spread, it would definitely be misused, so he warned me to keep quiet about it.

I proceeded to examine the magic bag the Tamer had used in the tournament, but there wasn’t anything particularly suspicious about it. However, when I used the same method to investigate the Tamer’s personal belongings that had been entrusted to the staff, I found some pretty crazy objects that made even Jean and the others withdraw.

First, there were all sorts of poisons: weak ones and lethal ones, fast-acting ones and slow-acting ones, and those that worked against monsters and animals, as well as powerful aphrodisiacs. Adventurers sometimes used poison when making traps, so I didn’t think it was so unusual that he had some. As for the aphrodisiacs, well...I’d certainly never used them before, and didn’t plan on using them in the future, so I didn’t take a close look at them like I did with the poisons.

Next, there were all kinds of weapons: some ordinary-looking, some rather unusual, and even some that seemed to be used for torture. This was what initially interested me the most, but even my excitement waned once I realized

that the torture devices showed signs of having been used.

The rest of the items seemed to be stolen goods and food. Jean checked everything, and temporarily halted the butchering so he could write a report and question the remaining members of that team.

“I’m sorry, Tenma. We’ll continue this later.” Tida apologized to me in Jean’s place, but I didn’t really mind because I could just butcher the wyvern on my own.

“Tenma, the earth dragon’s internal organs have been removed and sorted. All that’s left to do now is skin it.”

About three hours had passed since Jean and the others had left, and work had finally progressed on the earth dragon to the point where it could be skinned. Now that we’d gotten this far, I could use magic to move forward.

“All right. I guess we can go ahead and take a break for now.”

Tida passed along the message for me.

“This is quite the challenge, isn’t it?” Gramps approached me and put his arm around my shoulders, but he didn’t seem as tired as he implied. “This guy’s pretty big. At least twice the size of the one I defeated. Not that I have any proof, of course. But here, take a look at this.”

He showed me the dragon’s magic core, which was over forty centimeters long. By the way, the wyvern variant’s core had been about twenty centimeters in diameter.

“This alone should be worth more than 10,000,000G. And if you put it up for auction, I bet it would go for double that.”

“I know that’s a lot of money, but I have no intention of selling it. I don’t have any use for it at the moment, so I guess I’ll just keep it in my bag until I find a time to use it.”

As I spoke with Gramps, Tida interjected shyly. “Um, Tenma? I’ve been wanting to ask for a while now...but what’s the story behind those cows by Shiromaru over there?” He pointed to the white buffalo that were grazing on

grass behind Shiromaru.

“Ah, right. I was curious about that as well. Are you going to eat them?” Gramps asked with concern. He said he would help me butcher them if I did, but I told him I had no intention of doing so.

“I rescued them and they became attached to me, so I brought them here. I think I’ll keep them at home.”

My words seemed to surprise Tida a little.

“Oh, I see. You can keep them in the backyard, and Martha can teach you how to care for them,” Gramps said.

Tida seemed even more surprised when Gramps gave me his permission. I guess it would be surprising to hear someone talking about raising three buffalo as though they were pets.

“The problem is food, though. What should we do about that?”

“Oh, that’s actually not a problem at all. Basically, I’ll cut some grass from meadows in bulk and store it in a magic bag, and I can buy some cheap surplus grain. The trouble will be worth it once we can milk them.”

The white buffalo looked similar to Holstein cows, although much larger. I thought I might be able to get some milk from the female, so I challenged myself to milk a cow for the first time in my life. It was incredible.

Even though I had no previous milking experience, thirty liters of milk came out easily. I pasteurized the milk and gave it a taste. It was rich and delicious, so I packed it into barrels and stored it all in my magic bag.

“Milk from white buffalo is a luxury item. It’s very difficult to obtain because they can’t be tamed. But the meat is even more luxurious than the milk...”

I pulled the meat from the other buffalo out of my bag as if to say, “Rest assured, we have meat too!” Gramps was quite pleased to see it. Tida seemed interested in trying some, so I told him I’d share it once I finished butchering it, which he was very happy to hear.

“By the way, Tenma, what are their names?” he asked. Given this opportunity, I announced what had been on my mind for a while now.

“The bull is Jubei, the cow is Hiro, and the calf is Tama.”

I’d named Jubei after the samurai Yagyu Jubei Mitsuyoshi, since yagyu also means “buffalo,” and since I’d gone with a Japanese name for the dad, I figured I might as well follow suit and name the baby—a female—Tama, after Akechi Tama, an important figure in the Battle of Sekigahara. Lastly, I named the mom Hiro, since Akechi Tama’s mother’s name was Hiroko.

“Huh. Those are pretty unusual names, but I guess it’s fine.”

“Yeah, pretty strange...”

As I expected, the two of them seemed a bit uncomfortable with these Japanese-style names. But I’d already made my decision, so there was nothing to be done about it. They’d have to just get used to it.

Once I was finished introducing the buffalo and we were relaxing, Queen Maria arrived.

“Hello, Tida and Tenma. How are you doing?”

When I glanced in the direction she had come from, I saw Prince Lyle sitting formally on his knees. I asked if it was really okay for a member of the royal family to sit like that in front of other nobles and his subordinates, but all Queen Maria said was “It happens all the time,” which was a bit frightening.

“So? Which parts of the earth dragon are you willing to sell?” she asked. I told her the gist of what Prince Lyle and I had discussed, and that we’d decided to document it officially.

The parts that were to be sold to the royal family were: one eyeball, most of the internal organs excluding the heart, several bones, several large scales, and several dozens of kilograms of meat.

From the wyvern variant, they would receive both eyes, most of the internal organs except for the heart, half the skin, half the scales, half the claws and fangs, and half the meat.

Although they ended up taking more than I’d originally planned, we’d decided on this amount because we wanted to set a fair price, and Jin and the others were also willing to give up more of their share than we had originally planned

on.

“As for your reward...you don’t want a title, correct?”

“No, I don’t need one!” I quickly refused the queen’s offer, which surprised Tida.

“I figured you’d say that. But just in case, I’m thinking of giving you the title of earl.”

“I’m still not interested.”

The queen had known I would still refuse, but Tida couldn’t accept my decision. “But why not, Tenma? I think this is probably the first time in history that a commoner would become an earl at the age of fifteen!”

I understood what he was saying, but that reasoning was only relevant for normal people. Honestly, I didn’t want a title that much at the moment. I’d never been in a position of privilege before, not even in my previous life, so that kind of thing wasn’t important to me. Plus, I thought I lived a much better life than most nobles anyway. At the moment, I didn’t have to worry about money, and I could make a living doing whatever I wanted.

But when you become a noble, you have to do a lot of tedious work like managing your domain and calculating tax revenue and all that kind of stuff. And in my case, I’d have to form a group of vassals from scratch if I received a title. Sure, if the title was only honorary you wouldn’t have to worry about that, but still, my activities as an adventurer might be restricted. There would be many more disadvantages than advantages.

Tida looked conflicted at my explanation, but the queen smiled with amusement.

“Even though you’re not related by blood, you certainly are the son of Celia and Ricardo. You’re just like them!” The queen laughed while Tida and I looked on in amazement, and then she started chatting happily. “Actually, Ricardo also refused a noble rank. And Celia felt the same way!”

I was learning this for the first time from Queen Maria, but apparently Mom and Dad had originally been nobles. Dad had been the son of a knight, and Mom had been the niece of a viscount. When I thought about it, Queen Maria

had said that Mom had been her childhood friend, and that Dad had been a classmate of the king's, so it made sense that they'd been nobles.

I was about to ask the queen why they had lived in Kukuri Village then, but then she said, "I think it would be better for Master Merlin to tell you the rest. Don't you agree, Master Merlin?"

I turned and saw that Gramps was right behind me.

"Why would you want me to tell him that?" he said. "I don't even want to remember it."

"I wouldn't have told Tenma either, if he were a *normal* child. But at this rate, it'll only cause trouble if we don't tell him."

Seeing Queen Maria's powerful smile, Gramps also sighed and sat down in a chair.

"All right—I'll tell you about Ricardo first. However, it's a pretty common story. Ricardo's mother had a relationship with a nobleman, and then she gave birth to Ricardo. He and his mother lived in Kukuri Village when he was a child, but then his father, a knight with no other heir, brought him to the capital to raise him. Ricardo went to school there, but a few years later, his father fell from grace and lost his title. There was talk of Ricardo leaving school at the time, but he was so exemplary that he was able to stay on as a scholarship student."

Apparently, around that time was when he'd met the king. By the way, the school seemed to be equivalent to the junior high schools of my previous life.

"The problem was Celia's family. She's my relative—the daughter of the younger brother of a viscount house—my brother's daughter. She was born after I left home."

Gramps had been born as the third son of a viscount, and my mother had been born as the oldest daughter of the second son of a viscount. Gramps and my mother's father were close in age and got along well, but apparently they didn't get along well with Gramps's older brother—that is, the eldest son.

Because of this, Gramps had left home before coming of age and became an

adventurer. It was unusual for someone to leave home before they were an adult, but luckily, Gramps had a talent for magic, so money hadn't been an issue for him.

But things had been different for Mom's father. Being the second son and not having any magical talent, he hadn't been allowed to leave the house. He'd gotten married after Gramps left home, and my mother had been born. However, since the eldest son had also had a male heir, Mom's father had been given an independent title as a knight. He'd struggled a lot financially, and the eldest son hadn't supported him at all.

By the time Mom's dad—my grandfather—had become independent, Gramps had already made a name for himself as a famous adventurer and was financially well-off. Because of that, he'd been able to send Mom to school, where she became friends with Queen Maria in elementary school. Queen Maria had already been betrothed to the king back then, and Mom had met him soon after.

So that's how Mom had met Dad and they'd started dating. Since my dad had been of aristocratic blood and had had good grades at school, my grandfather had been planning to ask him to marry into the family. So he'd allowed Mom and Dad to see each other, and had also allowed her to become an adventurer after graduation because he thought it would be a good experience for her.

However, the king had been concerned about my mother because she'd been so close with Queen Maria. And, laboring under a misunderstanding, the eldest son of the family had been trying to pressure my grandfather to let Mom become the king's concubine.

Because of that, even though my grandfather had always been quite healthy, he'd suddenly been put under a lot of stress and grew sick. Not only that, but then the eldest son had blamed my grandfather for not being able to perform his duties as a noble and had tried to forcibly adopt Mom.

Around that time, Mom and the others had returned home to the capital in order to participate in the tournament, and once Mom and Dad had found out what was going on, they'd rebelled against the eldest uncle. However, he hadn't listened to them and had gone to the boss of his own faction to try and proceed

with his plan.

Meanwhile, the king—the crown prince at the time—had tried to protest, but in the end it was Cruyff who'd come up with a plan to put a stop to things. Mom and the others had entered the tournament and won the championship. When the king at the time asked what they wanted for winning, she had said, "We don't need a reward. Please accept our marriage and let me cut ties with my family."

Apparently, that had all been Cruyff's idea. Under normal circumstances such a thing might have been considered treason, but since the current king had made arrangements with his father—the king at the time—and some powerful royalist nobles in advance, they'd easily received permission. The king had approved their request, and the two of them had gotten married. Then, they'd moved to Kukuri Village, where Dad had grown up.

On the other hand, the eldest son had been forced to take responsibility for having caused the commotion. My grandfather had replaced him as head of house, but unfortunately, he'd passed away soon after due to his stress-induced illness.

"Not only that, but to make matters worse, the cousin of the eldest son still holds the title of viscount. They continue to hold a grudge against our family, so they might harass you."

"And one of the countermeasures we came up with was to make you an earl."

It seemed that was why Queen Maria was so intent on giving me a title. Well...that probably wasn't the only reason.

"If that's why, I can understand why Queen Maria wants to give me a title. By the way, Gramps, is it okay if I kill the former viscount?"

Tida was stunned by my straightforward question.

"No, I don't think that's okay."

"Yes, that wouldn't be very good at all," the queen agreed.

"That's right, Tenma!" Tida was relieved when the two of them objected, but then...

“After all, it’s still too early for that. Let’s wait and see what happens first!”

“That’s right! We’ll have to plan things carefully so that no one finds out it was us!” the queen agreed.

Now Tida was even more nervous. He seemed shocked that the queen would condone killing someone.

“Do you understand, Tida? Sometimes nobles have to take people’s lives. So troublesome, don’t you think?” I asked.

“But I’m not a noble...and killing him was your idea!” Now Tida just looked exhausted.

It seemed he was too young to appreciate dark humor. Our half-serious, half-playful conversation continued, and before we knew it, break time was over.

“If we don’t get back to work soon, it’ll get dark out.”

“Yes. Let’s get started, Tenma.”

All that was left was to skin the earth dragon. But first, we needed to remove the head and the limbs that would get in the way. It was my time to shine.

“Here we go...”

First, I used Giganto to hold the dragon still. Then I used my sword to cut into the flesh just below its head. I sliced along the neck, down to the bone. It was difficult to cut through the bone, though, so I put the tip of my sword against a nearby joint and pushed, putting all my strength into it.

“Oooh!”

I was able to cut off the earth dragon’s head way easier than I’d thought, and the knights around us cheered.

After that, I cut off its hands and feet in the same way.

“That should do it!”

I put Giganto and my sword away, then set aside the parts for Jin and the others before we did anything else. The knights used Boost magic on the butcher knife to make it sharper, and cut along the boundary between the earth dragon’s skin and meat. Occasionally, an inexperienced knight would

make a mistake and cut his finger, or wouldn't be able to remove the whole hunk of meat, but for the most part it went smoothly.

After about two hours, we were completely done. All in all, it had taken seven hours, twenty knights, one Gramps, and one Tenma to butcher the earth dragon.

"We're done!" Thinking we were finished, Tida was excited, but it was actually all thanks to the knights who had completed their duties. Also...

"You're not done here yet, Tida."

"Huh?" Tida gave the queen a puzzled look.

"That's right. We still have to negotiate the price the royal family will pay for the materials. And you're in charge of those negotiations. So be gentle," I said to him with a smile.

The color drained from Tida's face. He looked over to the queen for help, but she ignored him. After all, she was the one who'd told me this plan, so she was the mastermind behind the whole thing. It wasn't like she was telling me to extort money from him, though. Rather, her grandmotherly feelings towards him made her want him to experience this type of negotiation.

"Okay. Would you mind if we go to my room to negotiate?" Tida realized he wouldn't have the queen's support, so he tried to move the negotiations somewhere else, but I said no.

"We should do it here. The knights who butchered it will be curious about how much the materials they retrieved are worth."

I had the right to choose where the negotiation would take place, and I thought it was best to do it where the knights could observe us. Tida didn't really have a choice in the matter—after all, the knights were already looking on expectantly.

Overpowered by the weight of their gazes, Tida agreed to my suggestion. Now he wouldn't get away with being cheap. If he haggled poorly in front of them, they'd think the future king was putting a low price on their work.

Tida didn't seem to have picked up on that, but the queen had a harsh look in her eyes.

"Let's start with the earth dragon. Is it correct that we get one eyeball, the internal organs excluding the heart, some bones, and several dozen kilograms of meat?"

"No—we'll actually be keeping an additional lung, the liver, the gallbladder, and the stomach," I said. "We'll sell you two hundred kilograms of meat to make up for that."

The organs I'd just mentioned were the ones most highly in demand. I'd told the queen I'd planned on selling them, but there was a chance Tida might hold out on them.

"That's fine," Tida said, "but in exchange, would you increase the amount of meat?"

"Sure. We still have plenty, and I want to get rid of as much as possible."

"All right."

Tida was behaving just how I'd expected. Honestly, the meat was just a bonus compared to how much the organs were worth. After all, it could only be used as food, but the organs could be used as raw materials and medicine in addition to being eaten.

At any rate, Tida was just happy I'd agreed to give him more meat, oblivious to the grim look on the queen's face behind him.

"Now, about the price... How were negotiations involving earth dragons done in the past?"

In response to my question, Tida took out some papers he'd prepared in advance. "There are a total of five records of similar negotiations. The first was a transaction made 200 years ago including the head, heart, scales, claws, and meat. The second was made 150 years ago, which involved the eyeballs, all internal organs, scales, bones, and meat. The third was 120 years ago, but only included the meat. The fourth was 80 years ago and contained everything *but* the meat. The last was about 40 years ago, which was the one Master Merlin killed. And at the time, we purchased all of it. However, that one was in quite

bad condition, so it won't be of much help in informing our negotiations."

Not only that, but due to inflation, prices were very different now, so the records could only be used as a reference. Although the information itself wasn't very useful, it was a sign that Tida had done his research in advance, and the queen smiled faintly.

"Let's just do a flat rate for each item, then," I said. "First, the eyeballs. How about 1,000,000G?"

"Um..." Although I'd been a bit abrupt, Tida nodded. "Yes, that price is fine."

"How about 800,000G for the internal organs?" I went on.

"Do you think you could come down on that price a bit?"

"700,000G, then?"

"All right. Thank you."

And so the negotiations progressed quickly in that manner. I thought it would be better if he took a closer look at the items, but he seemed to have decided on the price in advance based on historical records, and as long as what I suggested wasn't too far off from the number he had in mind, it seemed like he intended to agree.

The queen's expression grew more serious, and I wondered if she thought he wasn't going to get much experience if I was dominating the negotiations like this. I was almost certain he was going to get a lecture later—her expression made that clear. Still, the negotiations continued.

"Which bones are the best?"

Tida asked me about the bones, but I honestly wasn't sure. After all, I couldn't think of one good use for them. If they were going to be displayed, traditionally you'd expect to see the skull, but in this case the head had been excluded from the list of materials they would buy. So in that case, it didn't matter to me which bones they took.

"Then can you give me one front leg and one hind leg? For 400,000G."

When I asked him why, he said he wanted to keep them for research purposes, which I thought was a good answer. That was a cheap price for

dragon bones. After all, the only other use I could think of was to make soup stock, so I decided to sell it to him.

“Now the meat. How about 10,000G per kilogram?” I asked.

That would be 1,000G—or ten thousand yen—per hundred grams. That was a pretty high price in this world.

Tida didn’t like the sound of that, as I’d expected. “We’ll be buying two hundred kilograms, so could you lower the price to 2,500G per kilogram, please?”

Before I knew it, he’d reduced the price to a quarter of what I’d asked for. Not only that, but he kept talking before I could object. “I want to feed the knights a hundred kilograms of it as a reward. Therefore, I’d like to pay 2,500G per kilogram, since I’ll also be paying space and labor costs for the party.”

This time, Tida had the advantage. The knights were thrilled to hear that they would be rewarded, so I had no choice but to give in.

“All right, that’s fine. In that case, the eyeballs will cost 1,000,000G, the organs 700,000G, the bones 400,000G, and the meat 500,000G, for a grand total of 2,600,000G.”

“Right...” Tida wrote his name and the amount on the contract. “Now, about the wyvern variant...”

“No—let’s wait until the butchering is complete.”

If things continued in this vein, Tida would be in danger. He nodded, not looking particularly concerned. But I was sure he’d thank me later.

I could tell that the queen had something on her mind. She was probably thinking about how to refine his future education.

After Tida checked that there were no mistakes in the contract, he handed me a copy.

“Please ensure the amount and everything else is correct. I can have the full amount ready by tomorrow.”

I skimmed the contract and put it in my bag.

“Well, I guess it’s time to head home,” I announced.

“Oh, I can walk you out.” Tida got up from his chair and was about to walk towards me, but the queen reached out and grabbed his shoulder.

“Tida, I have something to say to you. Excuse us, Tenma.”

“Sure. Anyway, that bag contains the wyvern variant. It’s still being treated as evidence, so please make sure no one moves it.”

The queen smiled at me, then smiled at Tida too as she pushed him back into the castle.

“Huh? What?” Tida was completely baffled as the queen took him away.



“Tida... I pray that I’ll see you tomorrow...” I put my hands together in a gesture of prayer towards Tida, who was currently being lectured. I wasn’t praying to the god of creation, though—he was surely laughing as he saw this situation play out.

“Tenma, I’m done handing over the materials. Let’s go home.”

Gramps came over with a magic bag that held the rest of the earth dragon. It was getting dark, so I hurried up and cleaned up my things before calling Shiromaru and the others over. He rushed over, and Tama was frantic to keep up. It seemed she was already quite fond of Shiromaru, which was pretty adorable. The knights also smiled warmly as they watched.

I would have to think about what to do with Jubei and the others once I returned home. I didn’t think I could make them my followers, and they didn’t seem to be suited for combat, so I would keep them as pets. Hiro would enrich my diet with her milk, and Jubei could be my guard...cow. I guess Tama would just be a cute mascot?

“I have to research earth dragon meat too...”

I already knew a few methods to make meat tender, but I wasn’t sure if they would work on earth dragons, so it would be an experiment. Even if I failed, I’d be able to give the meat to my followers, so it wouldn’t be a complete waste.

After I put Shiromaru and the others in my dimension bag, I went back home to the mansion with Gramps.

Part Three

When I returned to the mansion, there was yet another crowd of people at the gate. However, the silver lining was that this time they didn't seem to be scammers, and none of them tried to talk to me.

I slipped through the crowd and went through the gate, then was shocked to see that the party was still going on. It was mainly the villagers who were still drinking, while the women cleaned up, looking exasperated as they yelled at the men.

"Well, I dunno what I'm toastin' to anymore, but cheers!"

"CHEERS!"

Most of the food was gone, but the men were so drunk they didn't even need snacks anymore. And some of these people hadn't even been here when I'd left.

"Why are Kelly and the others here?"

"Oh, they came to see Tenma just before noon, but since you weren't here, we invited them to party! I had no idea dwarves were so good at drinking! Who knows how many barrels of alcohol they've emptied just by themselves!" Uncle Mark—incredibly drunk and unsteady on his feet—informed me. He pointed to the empty barrels piled up behind the girls. There were probably about ten or twenty barrels there. I was curious where they'd gotten all this alcohol from, but considering they were dwarves, perhaps it was from their own personal stock.

"It's convenient that Kelly's here, though."

I'd actually been planning on dropping by her workshop later to ask for her advice about making equipment from the earth dragon's materials. Her being here would save me the trouble from going later...if she hadn't been drunk, that is.

"Can I talk to you, Kelly?"

"Oh, the guest of honor is back!" Kelly was drinking from a large mug. Once

she saw me, she raised her glass like she was going to give another toast. “Cheers! I heard you defeated the earth dragon! Congratulations!” She threw her head back and drained the contents of her mug in the blink of an eye, then congratulated me as if just now remembering why she’d made the toast in the first place.

“I have something to talk to you about, Kelly. Actually, I’d like to use the materials I got from the earth dragon to upgrade my equipment, and—”

Before I could finish my sentence, she put her mug down. Her eyes were different from how they’d looked just a few moments ago; now they were the sharp, shrewd eyes of a craftsman.

“You’re going to leave it all to me? I’m sure there are more skilled craftsmen than me if you look in the capital. If you say you want something made, you’ll have them banging down your door. But you still want to use me?”

“What, don’t you have any confidence?” I challenged her.

She smiled toothily. “Don’t be ridiculous. What blacksmith knows you better than me, huh?” she said arrogantly, then held out her hand. We exchanged a firm handshake. She must’ve been really excited, because she nearly broke my hand as we did this.

“So, have you ever made equipment from earth dragon materials before?”

“Only once, a long time ago. There wasn’t much to work with at the time, so I only ended up making a small shield. I used both the scales and the hide, though, so I know how to do it, and I’ve used wyvern materials before, which are similar. So it won’t be a problem,” she said.

Since special preparation was required to process the earth dragon materials, I decided to go ahead and hand them over. The hide was roughly cut, but still quite a large piece. As I took the hide out of my bag, a group of people gathered around and cheered, then started making toasts again.

Kelly gathered all the dwarves present and began pointing out various things about the earth dragon materials. Then she asked me to hand over the leather armor I’d been using previously.

“Tenma! Do you have any special requests?”

“First, I want to prioritize ease of movement. I only want it to be thick in vital areas.”

“Just to give ya a boost, huh?”

“And if you can make boots, I want some of those too.”

“Gotcha...is what I *want* to say, but footwear isn’t my specialty, so I’ll have to consult a trusted friend of mine first and order them.”

“That’s fine.”

I decided to have Kelly make me a set of armor similar to what I was used to. As for the boots, as long as they came from someone Kelly trusted, I was sure they’d be fine. But since the equipment would have to be adjusted, I’d have to go over to Kelly’s to try it on, so I told her when would be convenient for me.

“It won’t be cheap. Is that okay?”

I said the cost wasn’t a problem. After all, I’d sold some of the earth dragon materials to the royal family, so in addition to the savings I already had so far and the prize money from the tournament, I could already retire right now at the ripe old age of fifteen. But...I wasn’t going to.

While I finished up my conversation with Kelly, I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw something crawling towards me on all fours. Four someones, to be exact.

“What the hell are you doing?”

It was Amur and the triplets. Amur was leading the pack, with the triplets following her.

Amur slowly started to get up, but then all of a sudden the triplets tackled her from behind. She covered her mouth and looked at me as she fell, then said...

“I’m pregnant.”

Amur blushed while rubbing her stomach, which I suddenly noticed was swollen. And the triplets, who were hugging Amur, also had swollen bellies.

“Tenma, look!”

“We’re pregnant too!”

“I just felt a kick!”

But then all of a sudden, they fell silent. I had a sense of déjà vu, so I slowly turned around and walked off. The four of them raised their voices in protest, but gave up pretty quickly, and I didn’t look back either.

I left the four of them behind and started looking for Jeanne and Aura. I didn’t have any business in particular with them, but I was a bit worried since I hadn’t seen them in a bit.

But my worries were unfounded; Jeanne and Aura were leaning up against a wall and fast asleep. They actually looked cute. Nah, never mind. It was just my imagination. Jeanne might be cute, but I could never think of Aura in that way. After all, she was...Aura.

Her mouth hung open and she was drooling in her sleep, still clinging to a glass of alcohol. She looked like a middle-aged drunk man.

“Aina’s here...” I whispered softly. All of a sudden, she bolted upright.

“The enemy! Enemy attack! Monsters! Red alert!”

Aura began blurting out some pretty dangerous words. Luckily for her, Aina had already gone back to the castle.

“Aura, if you’re going to sleep, go sleep in your room! And take Jeanne with you!”

“All right... Huh? Welcome home, Master Tenma...” She yawned, half asleep, only just now realizing it was me. She awkwardly began to bow her head to me, then dozed off again.

“Guess I’ll just have to carry you. Rocket, gimme a hand.”

Rocket was sitting quietly in my bag, but he emerged and helped me carry the two of them up to their rooms. He expanded his body and used his feelers to carry them inside. I thought to myself that I’d never seen such a gentle touch from feelers before, which told me that I was more exhausted than I thought.

I decided to go to bed early, but first I went to the garden and used Earth magic to make an improvised shed for the cows, and got them some food and water. I took them from my bag and placed them in the shed.

“I’ll make you a proper one soon, but just bear with this until I have time,” I said. They mooded and began eating. At any rate, I’d done everything I set out to do today. The party was still raging, but I doubted they needed me to continue.

I went inside the mansion, took a bath, and climbed into bed. The moment I entered my room, I cast Boost magic on the door and positioned some golems to be the gatekeepers, then placed several locks on the door as well. There were some ravenous girls out there tonight, so I needed to play it safe.

I had a bathroom adjoining my room thanks to my earlier escapades making a magic toilet, so I wouldn’t have to endanger myself by leaving my room in the middle of the night to use the bathroom.

My hunch ended up being correct, because sometime during the night, four intruders were caught by the golems. I found them tied up like bagworms early the next morning.

Gramps and I let the Kukuri Village ladies take care of those four, the two hungover slaves, and the men who were all complaining of headaches. Then we headed for the castle.

Jin and the others had gone back to their inn, so we dropped by there on the way to deliver the earth dragon materials they were entitled to.

“Thanks for dropping by. Here’s the payment.”

Apparently, Jin had gone to cash in on the spoils from yesterday. He handed me a bag containing 40,000G.

“The meat fetched a higher price than I thought!”

40,000G was a pretty good price for just one hunting trip, although it was pocket change compared to the money I’d gotten for the earth dragon. I didn’t say that to Jin, of course...

Jin and the others said they were going to take it easy until it was time for the auction, so they wouldn’t be going hunting for a while.

We bade goodbye to them and then continued on to the castle. We went to the training grounds just like we had on the previous day, but for some reason, Luna was there.

“Luna, where are Queen Maria and Tida?”

Luna had an amused grin on her face. “My brother is studying with Grandmother! Thanks to that, I’m free! Also, Grandmother and Brother were talking, and it seems they want you to sell them the wyvern.”

So Luna was here to bargain with me in place of Tida today. I hoped he would survive...

She wasn’t alone, though. Prince Caesar was hiding behind her and observing. Well, it wasn’t like he was hiding from Gramps and me, but more like he was watching over Luna out of concern.

“So? What does Queen Maria want me to sell?”

“She said I could pick whatever I wanted!”

It seemed that Queen Maria had given her fairly vague instructions. Not only that, but did Luna even understand how to price items?

And so my negotiations with her began. However, Luna didn’t really understand what a wyvern variant was, so I had to show her first. And the moment she saw it, she said, “Sell me the whole thing!”

Gramps was surprised, but then laughed at her childish statement.

“And how much do you plan on paying for the whole thing?” I asked, curious.

She tipped her head to the side a few times and then said, “Maybe about 20,000,000G?”

Gramps and I almost fell over at hearing such an absurd amount, as did the prince who was observing.

“Hm? Is that not enough?”

When all of us were too stunned to speak, Luna interpreted that silence to mean that the price she’d offered wasn’t high enough, and looked at us with concern.

“How about 30,000,000G, then?”

Then she raised the price even more. I wondered how high she would go if I didn’t say a thing. But just then the prince frantically came over to us.

“Luna, that’s much too high!”

“Hm? You were here, Father?” Luna asked.

Of course, he couldn’t say he’d been hiding out watching her, so he cleared his throat and said, “I just got here.”

“But isn’t this wyvern really rare and important? Plus, Grandmother told me to buy whatever I liked at whatever price I want, right?”

Once the prince heard that, he looked beside himself.

“Why do you want the whole thing, Luna?” I asked.

Her answer was simple. “If I’m going to display it, wouldn’t it be cooler to have the whole thing? I want to mount it and display it at the castle entrance. Won’t that surprise everyone who visits?!”

I was impressed by this idea. It was just what I would’ve expected from the king’s grandchild. Prince Caesar seemed to be thinking the same thing as me, with a distant look in his eyes. I had a feeling he was also thinking that it didn’t matter what kind of education he gave her—it was too late to fix her.

“Luna, I’m going to need the materials from the wyvern, so I can’t give you the whole thing.”

“What? But Brother said you have an earth dragon too! Isn’t that enough?”

The prince began to worry about Luna when she refused to back down. Just as it looked like his anger was about to explode, she suddenly became quiet. And then he lost his chance to give her a lecture.

“How about half, then? Half and half! You already have the materials from the earth dragon, so you won’t use all of them, right? You’ll have some left over, so please just give me half!”

That was her compromise. And I could tell it wasn’t impulsive—she’d put thought into it.

It was true that since I had the earth dragon materials, I probably wouldn’t use all of the wyvern, and there was a good chance I’d have some left over.

“All right, how much would you pay for half?”

“Let’s see... For half, I think 8,000,000G would be good. I’d still pay 30,000,000 for the whole thing, but since you’re only giving me half and I don’t need the organs, and you keep the core...” She counted off various points on her fingers. The prince seemed surprised by this.

“Hey, Tenma. That’s a good price, right? That’s about what it would usually go for.”

“Hmm... I suppose it’s fine.”

“Really?! Thanks, Tenma!” Luna was overjoyed and hurriedly pulled out a contract. It didn’t say anything except Luna’s name and “I agree.” Once I wrote down my name, the materials, and the price I’d sell it for, then the contract would be complete.

I wrote my name and the price, then asked which parts she wanted, and she gave me a puzzled look.

“I thought we agreed on half? Just cut it right down the middle, from its face to its tail!” Luna said, gesturing wildly. That...was quite a difficult order. I’d just thought we would divide it by weight.

But if we did cut it cleanly in half, there wouldn’t be haggling over this or that. However, the act itself would require a lot of skill. I pondered how to do this, but then Luna looked at me with an innocent expression on her face.

“If anyone can do it, it’s you, Tenma!”

Her eyes were filled with complete trust, effectively blocking off any escape routes.

“All right, I’ll try it. Gramps! Hurry up and go to Kelly’s workshop and see if the weapon I ordered is ready! And if it’s ready, please get it!”

“Okay! I’ll go right now!” Gramps said, before flying into the sky.

By the time he returned, I’d completely finished removing the wyvern variant’s organs. We’d paused yesterday after cutting open its stomach, so the organs had still been inside. It had taken some time because of its size, but since I’d used Giganto to help dig them out, it hadn’t been that bad.

“Tenma, how’s this?” Gramps came back just as I finished digging out the

organs. He was carrying two long objects. “She said they’re done, but if you have any concerns, go tell her.”

He handed me a halberd and a large spear (or something along those lines) that Kelly had made according to my specifications. They were lighter than they looked, and the perfect weight to be wielded at the same time.

I swung both of them lightly and discovered that, thanks to Kelly’s careful craftsmanship, they had the perfect balance. In particular, the large spear was so sharp that it could cut through hair with just a graze. I thought it would be sharp enough to handle the wyvern, so I started making preparations.

First, I used ink to draw a line bisecting the wyvern from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. Then, I summoned Giganto to gently hold the wyvern down so it wouldn’t move.

“Here we go!”

I held up the spear and cut along the line. True, I’d boosted it with magic, but still, it cut through the wyvern’s skin and flesh so easily it was almost amusing. However, it was difficult to cut through the bones, so I decided to hold off on that.

Within ten minutes of cutting, I was able to skin the wyvern. Now all that was left to do was cut the skeleton in two. It seemed impossible to go all the way from the head to the tip of the tail in one go, so first I made a cut in the skull with the tip of a knife.

“Oof!”

After I made the incision in the skull, I carefully tapped it with the halberd and the skull cracked in two.

“Its brain is so tiny,” I couldn’t help but say, once I saw it emerging from the cracked skull. It was only about thirty centimeters in diameter. It was large compared to a human’s, but I thought it was small in proportion to the size of its skull. If the wyvern’s skull were the same size as a human’s proportionally, its brain would be less than ten centimeters in size.

In any case, it seemed that intelligence was not proportionate to brain size.

I went ahead and put the brain in my bag, then continued working. This time, I switched back to the large spear and cut into the wyvern's spine lengthwise. The spine was pretty hard, but wasn't too difficult to cut once I'd separated it into sections.

Partway through, the bone became thicker around its pelvis, and cracked easily in the same way its skull did. Then...

"All done!"

I yanked the blade through the tail, and the crowd of onlookers (which had gathered unbeknownst to me) all let out a cheer. Luna stepped forward and looked back and forth between the two halves of the wyvern, then pointed at one.

"I want that one!" She wanted the left half. Luna was very decisive—Tida would've asked me to choose first.

"You don't want the brain, right?"

"Yeah, it's gross! I don't want it!" Luna refused without even looking at me. Some of the onlookers seemed disappointed to hear that. They seemed to be researchers of some sort.

Ignoring them, Luna poked the cross section of the wyvern. "Hey, Tenma, do you know how to do taxidermy?"

It seemed like Luna was serious about making her stuffed wyvern. I wasn't sure about how taxidermy was done, though. The crocodile shark I'd registered for the auction was supposed to have a cast made of materials like plaster as its stuffing. However, since the insides were made of plaster, it would become quite heavy.

The taxidermist I'd commissioned not only used plaster but also came up with ways to make it lighter, such as using wooden structures. Nevertheless, it still weighed around three hundred kilograms. On the other hand, since it was a four-legged taxidermy, it could stand on its own and remained stable.

But I'd only sold half the wyvern to Luna, so it wouldn't have the same kind of stability.

I was curious how she would deal with all those problems, but I didn't want to point it out in case she suddenly demanded I give her the other half. So I decided to stay quiet on the matter and quickly dismantled my share.

The wyvern's skin could be easily peeled off once its head and wings were removed, so it didn't take much time at all. I thought to myself, *I kind of feel like a chef today*, as I proceeded to butcher the wyvern.

After that, Caesar spotted Luna trying to enact the taxidermy plans on the spot, so he quickly separated her from the body and summoned a knight to put it inside a magic bag. Angry and depressed, Luna complained to Caesar. She turned around and saw my half of the wyvern's body had already been completely butchered, which only made her look more depressed.

Caesar brought the money to pay for the wyvern variant, so I accepted it and went back to the mansion. I was a bit worried about Tida, who still hadn't shown up, but I was even more worried about Luna, who was being dragged away by Caesar. It seemed like a lecture was on the horizon.

On my way back home, I wandered around the various food stalls. The aromas coming from all over made my stomach grumble. Most of the smells came from meat dishes, and all of them looked delicious.

I bought a few of the ones I thought looked good and decided to sample them with Shiromaru and the others. Once I came across something I liked, I went back and bought up a bunch to keep in my bag.

As I walked around, I could hear people whispering from time to time about the earth dragon. It seemed like the rumors about it were spreading. So far, no one had picked up on the fact that I was in disguise, but if I stayed in place for too long, I might be exposed eventually. As such, I tried not to linger.

After I walked around for a while, I came to an area that appeared to be a flea market. I looked around hoping to find some bargains, but all I found was junk and fake items. I was just about to leave the venue, thinking that all the good items had probably been picked clean, when suddenly I noticed a stall in the corner that was selling books.

Printing technology still hadn't been developed in this world, so books were

rare and expensive items. The stall intrigued me, so I stopped by. I was surprised by the wide variety of products they had available. Even the cheapest books were 1,000G, and the more expensive ones were around 10,000G.

The owner of the shop didn't seem particularly motivated, because even when I stood there looking over his wares he barely glanced at me. I browsed through the book titles lined up and spotted a familiar name on one of them.

"The Early Days of the Great Sage Merlin..."

I picked the book up and flicked through it, quickly discovering that it was indeed about Gramps. It was 5,000G. As I pondered what to do, I realized the shop owner was staring at me. His eyes seemed to be coldly saying "no," but I instinctively pulled the money out of my bag and paid.

"Thanks for your business..." he said in a deadpan voice.

I was just about to leave when I saw some grimy old books without titles on the spines. I picked one of them up and looked inside, and was shocked by the contents. I looked for a price, but it wasn't marked, so I had no choice but to talk to the shop owner.

"How much does this book cost?"

"Huh? Oh, that book. That one and the others have nothing but scribbles in them. I'll take 1,000G for all five of 'em."

I thanked him and paid for the books. I had to hurry up and get out of there before anyone saw my face, because there was a huge grin on it.

I hurried back to the mansion, sometimes running and sometimes jumping over buildings.

"What in the world has gotten into you, Tenma? Are you crazy?"

As soon as I went through the gate, I ran into Namitaro, who was taking a walk. Apparently the party was finally over, because no one else was in the garden.

"Namitaro!!! Look at this!!!" I excitedly showed him the books.

"What in the... Is this for real?" Even Namitaro was shocked. "They're in Japanese! That one's a recipe book!"

That's right. I was holding a recipe book that had probably been written by a reincarnated person. The reason the stall owner had thought it was just scribbles was because the entire book was written in Japanese. The writing system in this world more closely resembled the English alphabet, and the numbers were Arabic numerals.

However, this book was written entirely in kanji and katakana. That meant no one in this world could read it. Also, the author's name was written at the end: "Taro Yamada."

Thanks, Yamada-san! I'll treasure this!

Despite how many books there were, there were relatively few recipes in them. However, since he'd substituted items available in this world for the ingredients, it was quite convenient.

There were recipes with instructions on how to make sweet red bean paste, amazake (sweet rice wine), miso, soy sauce, and even the spice blend for curry, all using ingredients from this world.

As I was contemplating what to try first, Namitaro suddenly became excited.

"Tenma! Look at this! I want to make this!"

When I read the page Namitaro had pointed to, it said...

"Sweet potato paste?"

"Yeah, sweet potato paste! You see, in my previous life, fishermen would sometimes use it as bait! I'd take a bit off the hook and eat it like that. It was my favorite!"

Come to think of it, sweet potato paste *was* used as bait for carp fishing... The ingredients were easy to gather, and it wouldn't take much time. However, what worried me was that the method I knew involved using agar to solidify it, and we didn't have that here. Fortunately, the notebook contained a method that didn't require agar, so I might be able to manage.

When I checked the ingredients in the kitchen, fortunately, I did find that we had sweet potatoes (or the closest thing we had in this world). So I decided to try making it right away. The process involved steaming the sweet potatoes,

mixing them with sugar and a pinch of salt, placing them in a mold, and then cooling them to finish.

Since I had a rough idea of the process from the start, it wasn't too much trouble. However, if this had been a dish I didn't know how to make, I would have been incredibly confused trying to decipher the book.

After all, it had been fifteen years since I'd last used Japanese, and the recipe book was written almost entirely in katakana, so I had to reread it multiple times. I'd need to translate the books when I had some free time.

Anyway, it took roughly two hours to make, with my general memories of the process and the use of magic.

Finally, I had the closest version to sweet potato paste I could muster in this world. I taste-tested it and it seemed fine, so I divided it into two and put one portion in a bag.

"Tenma! Over here, over here!" Namitaro waved his pectoral fins to get my attention when I brought out the sweet potato paste. Next to him were the usual gluttons.

I gave them all a portion of sweet potato paste and they began to gobble it up. Namitaro kept shouting, *"This brings back memorieessss!"* over and over again, and demanded refills faster than Shiromaru and the others.

Because of that, even though I had made a huge batch of the paste, it was gone in a flash. Namitaro had hogged most of it, much to Shiromaru and Solomon's annoyance.

I decided to leave the gluttons alone and set to work deciphering the recipe book. On the way back to my room, I ran into Aura and Jeanne, who asked me about the sweet smell that lingered in the kitchen, so I gave them half of the remaining sweet potato paste.

I worked until dinner, nibbling on the sweet potato paste as I deciphered, and eventually I realized that all of it was now gone.

Gramps lamented that he was the only one who hadn't gotten to try it, so I had to make another batch just to get him to leave me alone.

Part Four

The morning after the sweet potato paste commotion, Jin and the others came over to invite me to the auction.

“Tenma, aren’t you going to the auction?” I had originally planned on going since I was putting up a crocodile shark for sale, but those plans had been ruined by my earlier guests launching a surprise attack on me.

“Tenma, play with us!”

“He’s ours!”

“Get out of the way!”

“I’m going to play with Tenma!”

Three cats and a tiger cub were arguing at the entrance while Aina watched over them with a grim look on her face. She was holding a basket full of laundry with one arm and a limp Aura in the other.

“Don’t you think it’s about time you stopped?” Jeanne suggested.

“I think that’s enough,” Primera urged.

The two girls were trying to somehow settle the fight between the four felines.

“It’s pretty tough being a ladies’ man, huh?” Jin whacked me on the back teasingly. It got on my nerves, so I delivered a light punch to his gut, which ended up silencing him.

“Well, there’s nothing he can do about it. Try not to be so dismissive of them, Tenma,” Mennas said.

And with that, the Dawnswords left. Galatt had to support Jin so he could walk, but I was sure he’d be fine.

“Tenma!”

“Tenma, do you want to eat, or do you want to go hunting in the forest?”

“What sounds good to you?”

“I recommend you go to the forest...”

All four of them surrounded me, but my answer was...

“Can’t I just sleep at home?”

“No!” they chorused in unison.

I knew it’d be a pain no matter which option I chose, so I told them what I really wanted to do, which they immediately rejected. *You sure you all don’t actually get along?*

“Um, Tenma? Are you ready for the party at the castle the day after tomorrow?” Primera’s question sounded like a revelation to me. I’d completely forgotten about the party because of all the commotion with the earth dragon. But being invited to a party at the castle was a once-in-a-lifetime event for most people.

However, since I’d visited the place many times, it was no big deal to me.

“Oh, I totally forgot about it. Sorry, you four! But I’m busy now!” I was about to go back to my room when I felt someone tugging at my sleeve. I turned around to see that it was Amur.

“I’ve been invited too. I can help you get ready,” she declared proudly. The triplets bared their fangs in frustration at this, but then it was like they had a flash of inspiration. They began to whisper to each other.

“That’s right! Amur has to get ready too!”

“It’s tough preparing alone!”

“So we’ll help you!”

And with that, they started pulling Amur away from me, trying to drag her off. But even with their combined strength, they didn’t stand a chance against Amur. She ended up dragging *them* back to me as she slowly approached me.

“Let go of me!”

“Hey! You’re smaller than us, so how are you so strong?!”

“Give it up!”

“Nonononono! Primera! Help us!”

Primera wasn't sure what to do, but when the triplets called out to her, she tried to help. She threw her arms around the torso of Lily, who was clinging on to Amur for dear life, then lowered her center of gravity to try to throw Amur off. That gradually stopped Amur's progress, and within a few seconds it had become a battle of tug-of-war.

"Nngh!"

"Heave-ho!"

"Arghhh!"

"Ugh..." Unable to keep up, Primera let out a deflated noise, but the four of them didn't hear her. The four-against-one struggle was pretty evenly matched, but it didn't seem likely to last long, because someone who clearly planned to intervene was approaching at lightning speed. He was as fast as the wind as he chased down the five girls to suddenly stand in front of Amur.

"Perfect timing, Blanca. Help..." Amur started to say hopefully, but all of a sudden, his fist struck her head with a dull thud. She went weak, and the other four gained the upper hand. That meant Amur was violently pulled over, and they all toppled to the floor in a heap.

"Nyaaah!"

"Eek!"

The triplets and Primera all screamed at once. They were behind Amur, who clutched her head and rolled around on the floor. She didn't even have the strength to scream.

"Sorry, Tenma! Amur, I told you we were going to prepare for the party today. We're going home!"

"Wait! Tenmaaaa!" Amur reached towards me as Blanca dragged her away.

"Bye-bye! C'mon, Tenma! Let's go play!"

Now that the collective thorn in their paws was gone, the triplets' moods improved, and they started trying to get me to hang out with them again.

"I said I have to get ready, remember? Why don't the four of you go play?"

Honestly, my preparations would only take a few minutes. All I had to do was get out the formal clothes that Princess Isabella had brought me and tidy up my appearance a bit. Everything else I could do on the day of. But I knew if I went to hang out with the triplets now, Amur would sulk about it, and then *she'd* drag me to go somewhere with her.

So, I decided not to hang out with the triplets. It definitely wasn't because I thought it was a pain or anything, though, honest.

“Whaaaat?!”

Primera tried to soothe the triplets. “Well, Tenma is busy and has things to do. There's nothing to be done about it.”

The triplets accepted this at face value.

“Hmm, nothing to be done about it...”

“Primera, let's go play!”

“Let's eat our hearts out!”

The three of them seemed to have given up pouting, and now turned their attention to Primera. However, she looked at them apologetically.

“I'm sorry. I have to get ready too, because I'm also going to the party.”

“Whaaaat?!”

The triplets all went over to Primera to complain, and I was also surprised that she'd turned them down.

“Why?!”

“How come?!”

“It's unfair!”

They pressed her for answers, and at first even I didn't understand why Primera had been invited. But upon closer thought, it made sense. After all...

“You seem to have forgotten. Despite how I may look, I *am* the third daughter of a duke.”

“Ohhh, right...”

It was true. Although Primera hadn't won anything at the tournament, she had performed well during the preliminaries, and since she was the daughter of a duke, it wasn't out of the ordinary for her to have been invited. Since Duke Sanga was a prominent supporter of the royal family, it would have been even stranger if she hadn't been invited, given that she was currently in the capital.

Besides, even if she hadn't received a direct invitation, the duke hadn't brought his wife along, so she'd likely have to accompany him to the event anyway. Incidentally, though, you didn't even have to bring someone of the opposite sex. Some nobles even brought bodyguards as their companions.

By the way, I had no intention of bringing a partner myself. At first, I'd thought about just bringing Gramps, but he had already been personally invited. I guess he'd been invited since he'd protected the king during the wyvern variant attack and was on good terms with the archduke. All the same, I could still use him to keep away pests.

There were probably some nobles at the party who would try to recruit me. The king, Duke Sanga, Marquis Sammons, and the others were keeping an eye on me, but they were still worried that someone would try to take advantage of this opportunity to get me on their side, so they'd decided to include Gramps as well.

Originally, I wasn't going to bring Rocket and the others, but a certain member of the royal family who desperately wanted them to attend had requested that they come, so we'd decided that all of my followers except for Namitaro would attend, on the condition that they stay inside my dimension bag.

Anyway, the triplets were still staring at Primera in disbelief. Primera looked like she was growing uncomfortable, and slowly began to back away.

"Traitor!"

"Why?!"

Shouting things most inappropriate, the three of them attacked Primera. Primera burst into a run, her reflexes even faster than usual, as she tried to lose them in the garden.

It was definitely more spectacular than watching an ordinary match. The triplets had more explosive power, and tried to corner and capture Primera as if they were hunting prey, using their superior coordination abilities which were unique to triplets. But Primera was able to see through their tactics, and responded with all the skills she had to run away.

The chase lasted for nearly an hour, and before we knew it, other neighbors and passersby who'd heard the commotion were watching from outside the gates and placing bets. The bet was whether the triplets would be able to catch Primera within a set time, and the first time limit since bets had been placed was swiftly approaching.

It didn't look like they would be able to catch her within the first interval, and just as the people who'd bet on Primera were about to celebrate, a rule breaker swiftly descended upon the garden.

"Be quiet! If you want to play, go somewhere else!"

The name of this rule breaker was Aina. She was the formidable woman who moonlighted as the head maid of this mansion. I say "moonlighted" because this was actually her side job.

Aina appeared in the path of the four girls and tripped Primera, who was in the lead, before tossing the triplets one after the other. As a result, all bets were declared invalid, and despite boos coming from outside the gates, Aina silenced the onlookers with a stern gaze. Eventually, the crowd dispersed.

"I don't care if you have fun and play, but there's something called the right time and the right place!" Aina pointed to the clothesline where a bunch of laundry had been hung out to dry, and also, many windows had been thrown open for ventilation.

But due to the girls running about the garden, both the laundry and the inside of the rooms had been covered with flying dust and scattered soil. It was a huge mess.

"I took my eyes off things for just a moment while I straightened up the kitchen. The laundry I spent all morning doing is now ruined! How will you take responsibility?" Aura's imposing presence was very intimidating, and she scolded the four girls so intensely that they all began trembling. Even though

they'd all competed in the tournament preliminaries, they were overwhelmed by her. It made me wonder who Aina *really* was, but I was sure if I asked, she'd stick to the story that she was "just a maid."

As I pondered that, the four girls gave me looks, pleading with me to help them. However, Aina turned to me at the same time, so I had to avert my eyes. At this point, the four girls fell into despair.

I didn't know what happened after that. I was afraid that I would be the next to incur Aina's wrath, so I fled the scene. I figured I would probably get a lot of grief from the four girls later, and started preparing my answer to them: "What could you have said to Aina if you were in my position?!"

I locked myself in my room so I could prepare for the party that would be happening the day after tomorrow. I occasionally heard screams from outside, but just chalked it up to my imagination. However, when I went to the bathroom later, I thought I saw Jeanne and Aura huddled together, trembling in the corner of the hallway. But that was probably also just a hallucination. Then again, I might've seen Shiromaru and Solomon trembling nearby, in a similar state. Nah—surely it was all just my imagination. Gramps might've been counted among their number, now that I think about it, but no matter...

I figured Aina's lecture had finally ended, because eventually she returned to the mansion carrying the soiled laundry. The four troublemakers followed soon after, each carrying an armful of laundry. Now that Jeanne and Aura saw that Aina and the others had moved on, they heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed on the spot.

However, Aina spotted them sitting in the hallway when she came to clean it. She ended up scolding them, then assigned them to clean the hallway instead. Aina said that, while they were there, all seven of them could clean the whole mansion. And as a result, they all suffered severe muscle pain the next day (except for Aina, of course).

By the way, since they were in so much pain, none of them bothered me that day, which made it the most peaceful day I'd had since coming to the capital.

"I still have to get ready..." Primera moaned.

However, though she had to get home in a hurry, she was having trouble

walking. I cast some recovery magic on her, but it must not have helped her fully recover, because her legs were still trembling and she looked slightly teary-eyed.

Feeling responsible, Aina escorted her to the knight's quarters and ended up helping Primera get ready for the party.

The reason I hadn't gone with them was that I thought it wouldn't be appropriate for a man to help a woman with her party preparations, and also because I didn't want any weird rumors to circulate before the party.

On the other hand, Jeanne, Aura, and the triplets were so exhausted that they were still asleep past noon. When Aina returned from helping Primera, she had to wake them up with a good scolding.

"I think everything looks fine. Shall we go?"

"I just hope no one does anything stupid."

"Oh, I'm sure they will. Jeanne, Aura—hold down the fort. C'mon, Gramps."

On the day of the party, Gramps, Aina, and I boarded the carriage that came to pick us up and take us to the castle. Aina was going because she had to work as Queen Maria's maid during the party. Though it was easy to forget since she'd been at the mansion a lot lately, Aina had originally been Queen Maria's maid.

I had various questions about that, to be honest, such as whether it was okay for a maid assigned to the queen to be working in other homes. But the biggest issue was that since she was only there part-time, she was acting as head maid in our mansion, which made it glaringly obvious how bad Jeanne and Aura were at their jobs.

It made sense for Jeanne since she was a former aristocrat, but Aura was supposed to have been a maid from the beginning. I'd thought she was really excellent when we'd first met, but now that I'd gotten to know her better, I'd come to the conclusion that it was a complete scam. Well, Gramps and I had never needed maids in the first place, so I suppose those two were enough for us.

Aina seemed to read my thoughts, because she muttered something like, “I’m worried I’m not training them harshly enough...”

We arrived at the castle a bit earlier than scheduled, so we were taken to a waiting room after we got out of the carriage. Only special guests were in the waiting room, and I spotted Jin there. I made eye contact with him, but since he was surrounded by other guests, he wasn’t able to come over and talk.

It looked like Jin was surrounded by a bunch of merchants who were interested on this occasion in making connections with influential people and otherwise well-known figures.

“Well then, I’ll return to Queen Maria.” Aina had guided us to this point, but now said goodbye and went back to her work. As if taking that as a signal, other guests began to rush towards me, but they stopped short when they saw the person who’d just entered the room.

“Oh, Tenma! You came!”

It was Prince Lyle. And now that a member of the royal family was present, the other guests except for me and Gramps immediately went silent. After a short conversation, I found out that it was Prince Lyle’s job to check on the different waiting rooms.

“Well, that’s what I’m doing. And Tenma, try not to cause any trouble. If anyone causes any kind of unnecessary commotion, I’ll kick them out, no matter who they are.” He made it seem like he was talking to me, but I knew it was actually a warning to the other guests. It seemed that, upon hearing of my arrival, he’d come to preemptively deal with any commotion the other guests might cause related to my presence. And now that they’d been told off by a member of the royal family, it looked like they’d back down.

By the way, Amur was apparently in a different waiting room, and I was informed that Blanca was standing by her side as a guard and lookout.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. We will now begin the party. Cheers!”

The party began with a very simple toast from the king. Several hundred nobles and specially invited guests were in attendance here in the ballroom.

Once the king spoke, everyone began to move around freely.

I stood in a corner of the room. The special guests, including myself, were positioned away from the nobles. The arrangement served as both a necessity, as special guests and nobles couldn't be kept waiting in the same area until the party proper, and sort of as a place to escape. There was a similar area for nobles as well.

This was primarily to protect special guests from aggressive solicitation from nobles. And occasionally, the reverse would occur, with adventurers trying to sell themselves to nobles. But since that would ultimately result in them being kicked out, nobles didn't spend too much time in our area.

Catering was provided to both groups as well, so there was no need to go out of your way. Only the servers were allowed access to both places, which meant it was highly unlikely I'd get into any trouble if I just stayed where I was.

"It's even better than I thought," Amur said.

"This is pretty good," I agreed.

"Hey, Blanca. This wine is great," Jin said.

"Hm, so's this one."

All of us stood in a group together, sampling the food and drink. Some nobles were watching us from a distance, so we'd decided to stay put. By the way, Gramps had been with us before, but then he'd said, "I think they have better wine over there," and left. I think he'd probably gone over to be by the archduke.

"So are you going to stay here all night, Tenma?" Jin asked as he chose his next drink. Although he wasn't speaking loudly, some people around us seemed to be eavesdropping and overheard. Suddenly, our surroundings became much quieter.

"No, I'm not going to stay here forever. I think someone's about to call me up soon, so..."

Before I could finish saying anything, one of the waitstaff approached and whispered something to me.

“Well, I’m being summoned. I have to go,” I told everyone.

“I’ll come with you!” Amur said, but Blanca put his hands on her shoulders.

“You’re staying put, little lady,” he said with a serious expression. He glanced at my face, probably hoping for backup. If he was that worried about her, he could’ve just come along, but there was no reason to have Amur follow me, so I just left it at that.

“If you see anything that looks good, bring it back with you,” Jin said with a carefree wave. It seemed he’d had quite a lot to drink at this point.

I left, and met with the guests who had come to see me—Duke Sanga and Primera, wearing an elegant dress as she stood next to her father.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Duke Sanga, and Primera.”

“Oh, it’s fine. We haven’t been waiting that long. Besides, we seem to be attracting attention.”

“Father, that’s only natural. After all, don’t you think it’d be strange if he didn’t attract attention from the nobles?”

It was strange to see Primera look like a proper duke’s daughter. I shook hands with the duke, and we began to walk. We were headed towards where the king and the rest of the royals were waiting.

Among the nobles, those belonging to the royalist faction smiled at us, while the reformists shot bitter glares in our direction. I made a mental note of which ones scoffed or glared at us.

We continued walking among the guests and finally arrived before the king. Only he, Queen Maria, and Marquis Sammons were present. It seemed like Prince Caesar was busy talking to other guests.

“Oh! Tenma, you’re wearing the clothes Isabella gave you!”

Before the king could say anything, Queen Maria clapped her hands with delight. Since she’d spoken so loudly, other nearby aristocrats turned and began to watch, murmuring among themselves.

The queen ignored them and looked my outfit up and down, nodding with satisfaction. “Very nice. But I’d like to see you wearing the clothes I choose for

you sometime as well!”

This seemed like an invitation to come over wearing the clothes she’d given me. The king listened to the queen’s words with a smile, patted my shoulder, and then said, “Congratulations on your victory, Tenma! And thank you for slaying that earth dragon!”

I heard murmurs from the nobles around us. “So that rumor was true?”

There’d been no reason for the king to say that and publicly draw attention to me. As usual, he had a terrible personality. The proof of that was the mischievous smile on his face.

“Now, don’t you get too carried away,” Queen Maria warned him in a low voice. I felt the temperature drop. The king nodded quietly, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead.

“I’m sorry, Tenma. I think we need to step out for a moment. Shall we go, Your Majesty?” With these words, the queen led the king to the royal family’s exclusive waiting room. The rest of us just watched in stunned silence.

“Business as usual, I suppose,” I said. Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons nodded slightly. However, this was the perfect opportunity. There were some people I wanted to greet among the nobles who had been watching us.

I glanced over and saw two people approaching. Normally, it would be considered disrespectful to intrude upon a place where a noble higher than yourself was present, so the duke and the marquis frowned for a moment, but once they saw who was coming, they relaxed.

“Oh, it’s you two.”

“Why didn’t you say something first?”

Of the two men approaching, one of them resembled the duke, and the other slightly resembled the marquis.

“Brother, where is Leon?” Primera asked the taller of the two guys. He frowned for a moment.

“I dunno. Screwing up somewhere, probably.”

Primera seemed to think that made sense.

“Enough about him. Let’s start with introductions. I am Albert von Sanga, the eldest son of Duke Alsace von Sanga, and the brother of Primera, the one I’m sure has caused you a lot of trouble. You can just call me Albert. It’s nice to meet you.”

He was one of the three stalkers who had followed me around before, and he was the most handsome of them. He took after Duke Sanga.

“I’m not sure if it’s right to say nice to meet you, since this isn’t our first time meeting, but I’m Cain von Sammons, the eldest son of Marquis Sammons. Sorry about my little brother. You can just call me Cain. Don’t worry about being too formal or anything.”

He was a lighthearted guy who looked like the youngest of the trio. Although we were about the same height, his slender figure made him look younger than I was. He didn’t resemble Gary that much, but his resemblance to his father wasn’t that strong either.

“It’s nice to meet you both. And over there...”

“Stop! It’ll be more interesting if you keep ignoring him.”

I was going to ask about the man who was hiding behind the column in the back and stealing glances at us, but Albert stopped me. Apparently, I was supposed to ignore him until he came over here first.



“By the way, Tenma, have you met my brothers before?” Primera asked with curiosity, picking up on the subtext in our introductions. The duke and marquis seemed to be interested as well. I gave them the humorous account of my stalkers, and both fathers desperately tried to contain their laughter.

Primera, on the other hand, looked at the two of them with disdain. “Brother Albert, Brother Cain... So the two of you prefer men after all?” she said.

Cain had been childhood friends with Leon and Albert since they were little. Primera was close to him in age and had also used to play with him as a child. That’s why she called them both brothers. Gary seemed to have been left out of this arrangement, though.

“That’s a misunderstanding!”

“Yeah! It’s just a misunderstanding, okay?”

Amur, who had shown up out of the blue, saw how flustered they were and chimed in, “Tenma, you like boys?”

I shook my head and pointed at the two of them, along with the creeper behind them. “Not me. These two and that one over there.”

Although the two of them vehemently denied it, I could hear comments around us such as “I knew it!” and “I suspected it all along...” Some young women even sounded excited and thrilled by the news.

It seemed like there were also girls in this world who had a penchant for “boys’ love.” *That kind of thing thrives everywhere, huh?*

The remaining stalker seemed to misunderstand and thought I was beckoning him over, so he approached us. His steps were light and he was smiling.

“You called?” he exclaimed happily while putting an arm around the shoulders of Stalker Number One and Stalker Number Two.

The ladies nearby shrieked with delight. Some even collapsed with nosebleeds and broke down in tears.

“Wh-What the heck is going on? Hey, Albert! Cain! What is happening?” Stalker Number Three was completely confused and started shaking the other boys, trying to figure out what was happening. That only caused another round

of nosebleeds and shrieks.

I casually walked away from the scene to watch from the sidelines. Amur and Primera followed. Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons were doing their best to calm down the commotion, but the young ladies showed no signs of stopping.

In the end, the party was temporarily suspended until the situation was under control, then resumed at a different location in the courtyard.

When the party resumed, none of the ladies from before remained. It seemed they'd left abruptly, citing sudden illnesses, and gone home with their tearful parents.

"What a terrible experience," Stalker Number One said.

"Leon, you're so hopeless. Can't you read the room, you muscle-brain?"

"Hey, how is it my fault?!"

Since the three stalkers had been at the center of the commotion, they'd been interrogated by the king and now looked utterly exhausted. However, in the end it'd been decided that the three of them weren't at fault, and that the commotion had been caused by the ladies having sudden conniptions. If that hadn't been the official reason, those ladies would never be able to show their faces in public again, the king later told me privately.

At the moment, we were in a private room near the courtyard, taking a break to discuss the earlier incident.

"So, now that the three of you are here, why were you following me?" I decided to ask the trio. Duke Sanga and the marquis were also present, and they watched the guys with grim looks on their faces.

"First of all, let me clear up this misunderstanding. Cain and I had no intention of stalking you. We were just following Leon."

"We apologize for inadvertently stalking you, but our real intention was to mediate between you and Leon when he approached you. Since our families were acquainted with you, we thought you'd be willing to talk even if we ran into you on the street. Leon dragged us around for days because he was being so hesitant..."

“Well, that’s because Leon’s so helpless. Anyway, we got involved in all kinds of weird things, like following you around for days.”

They both pleaded their innocence while casting sidelong glances at Leon. Primera seemed relieved that her brothers hadn’t meant any harm by their actions.

“All right, I understand. But why did Leon want to talk to me?”

“Um, well, you see...” All of a sudden, Leon started to fidget uncontrollably, stammering and squirming.

“Creepy, isn’t he?”

“Super creepy.”

Albert and Cain chimed in about his behavior. Despite the two of them saying he was being creepy, Leon still wouldn’t spit out what he wanted, and I was starting to lose patience.

“If you don’t have anything important to say, I’ll be heading back. Excuse me.” I nodded slightly to the duke and the marquis and then started walking towards the door.

Gramps had been silent until then, but he said goodbye to the two of them and followed me. Amur came afterwards, while Primera looked bewildered for a moment. She hesitated, but eventually followed me after her father prompted her to do so.

As I reached for the door, Leon finally spoke up. “Wait! I have a favor to ask!”

I stopped in my tracks and turned towards him. Since I’d halted so abruptly, I caused Amur to run right into me. She seized the opportunity to cling to me, but I quickly peeled her off and handed her to Primera, who looked like she wanted to have a serious conversation with Amur.

“Sorry about that. So what’s this favor?” I turned to face Leon, who seemed determined all of a sudden. “Tenma, come to my place!” he said, with a stern look on his face, in a voice so loud that people outside could probably hear it.

I took a slow step back, putting distance between us. Amur positioned herself between us, looking both protective and menacing. I glanced around and saw

that the duke and everyone else had also taken several steps back.

“Leon, you better rephrase that before everyone around us gets the wrong idea *again!*”

Everyone around us was shaking their heads in dismay, but Leon remained completely clueless.

Cain let out a sigh and said, “Think again carefully about what you just said, Leon, especially in the light of the incident that just occurred. It sounded like you just confessed to Tenma.”

“...Huh? Oh! No, that’s not what I meant! I just want Tenma to come visit me and hang out!” Leon exclaimed, looking shocked that people would misunderstand him. I was certainly relieved, but decided to keep my distance just in case.

“Okay, but why do you want me to come over?” I asked. It would’ve made sense if it had been Albert or Cain, since I had connections with their families, but I didn’t know who Leon was. I’d been wondering about that ever since they’d started stalking me. It didn’t seem like Leon was trying to win me over, though. It was more as though he was feeling guilty about something.

Leon began to chase Cain, insisting, “That’s not what I meant!”

As the two of them ran around the room, Albert launched into an explanation. “Tenma is from Kukuri Village, which was located in Margrave Haust’s domain. Leon is the eldest son of that margrave.”

“He probably wants you to come visit to try to help out the economic situation in the margrave’s domain,” Duke Sanga suggested.

“Is the economic decline due to the incident in Kukuri Village? Because it’s causing adventurers to stay away?” I brought up a rumor I’d heard, and they nodded in response.

“Although the situation is better than it was before, there’s a chance it might get worse again in the future.” Albert added that the possibility of a decline was due to my recent achievements in the tournament.

Up until now, the economy had deteriorated due to the departure of

adventurers who had ties to Kukuri Village. Recently, it had somewhat stabilized, but the downward trend continued.

“Leon wouldn’t have been in such a hurry otherwise, but once people found out Tenma had a dragon as a follower, was the first person to have ever won two divisions at the same time in the tournament, and had even defeated an earth dragon on his own, Tenma suddenly made a name for himself. People started spreading rumors about ‘the place that kicked Tenma out’ or ‘the place that tried to kill Tenma.’ And it’s mostly from nobles who aren’t on good terms with the margrave—those who want to curry favor with Tenma.”

Apparently, Leon seemed to have thought that it was necessary to create an impression that Margrave Haust had a good, or at least a neutral, relationship with me to counteract these rumors. However, even if Leon personally approached me and asked me to visit, he’d thought I would refuse. That was why he’d asked Albert and Cain to help improve his chances.

He’d planned to approach me with the other guys and say something like “Please hear me out,” but his plan had been thwarted by his own incompetence.

“I don’t mind visiting your house, but not if Margrave Haust is involved.”

“Cain and I can guarantee that’s not the case. And if that’s Leon’s intention, then we’ll cut ties with the margrave’s family as well.”

I doubted they could completely cut ties, but they must have been relatively prepared if they were willing to make such a guarantee. I glanced around and saw Duke Sanga, Marquis Sammons, and Primera all looking at me with pleading eyes. However, the one who mattered the most in this discussion, Leon, was still trying to catch Cain and had seemingly forgotten all about me.

“Hang on... I’ll go get them.”

Albert calmly approached Leon and Cain, then gave them both swift kicks. He made them sit down on the floor and started lecturing them. After a certain amount of scolding, Albert dragged Leon over to me and pressed his head down into a bow.

“Why do I have to do this in your place?” Albert muttered, before walking

away and leaving Leon behind.

Now that Leon was alone, he hesitated for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and spoke. "Right now, the margrave is in crisis. Maybe we brought this situation upon ourselves, but we can't let this continue. I know you probably have a lot of other things to do, but please lend us your strength so our domain can be saved. I'm begging you," Leon pleaded with his head bowed. It was hard to believe this was the same person who had just been chasing his friend around the room moments earlier.

"Okay." I agreed pretty much immediately.

Leon looked astonished at how readily I'd agreed.

"However, I have some conditions. First, you must never think of making me your vassal. Second, if anything happens to the people of Kukuri Village, you need to give them your help. Last, you'll assist me to the best of your abilities in case of any trouble. If you promise me that, I'll tell everyone that there's no strife between me and Margrave Haust."

"Deal! I'll contact my father immediately and get him to agree! And if he refuses, I'll figure out a way to strip him of his position as head of the family!" Leon nodded excitedly. He was so excited, in fact, that his words were a little hard to understand. However, since his declaration here was basically on behalf of the margrave, I asked Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons to serve as witnesses.

They willingly agreed and hastily prepared a formal agreement, each signing it with their family crests.

Even if the margrave opposed the decision later, I doubted he would back out of this promise because he wouldn't want to make an enemy out of these two. Leon thanked the two of them...and then I saw it. The moment Leon looked away, the duke and the marquis exchanged wicked glances and grinned...

They were probably thinking that the possibility of me joining the margrave as his vassal was basically zero. Even though they knew there was currently no chance of me joining them either, they wanted to keep the possibility open. So having control over the evidence and taking out one rival while keeping the possibility open for themselves was an ideal situation for them.

There was no need to mention it, though.

“All right! Let’s go, Tenma!”

“Huh?”

Leon put his hand on my shoulder and, just like that, tried to take me out of the party. Just as I thought he really hadn’t learned his lesson, Albert grabbed the back of his hair and pulled on it.

“Oww! What was that for, Albert?!”

“You really are a musclehead, you know that?! Did you already forget the lecture we got from the king and queen?!”

“It’s sad, but Leon really does have nothing but muscles for brains.” Cain mocked Leon, and wiped an invisible tear.

Leon signed and let go of me.

“Tenma, Leon just wants to be friends with you, so he went a little overboard. But as far as I know, he isn’t interested in men... I think...”

“Cut it out! I like women!” Leon retorted.

“Well, in that case, let’s all go back to the party,” Cain said, pushing me back and trying to stand next to me. However, Amur blocked him from doing so. Primera was on my other side, being pushed by Duke Sanga, while Cain clicked his tongue.

Cain told me later that he wanted me to know that Gary was the only one in his house who had a conflict with me, and that he wanted to be friends. I was very relieved to hear that.

Anyway, we all left the room and headed back to the party together.

The nobles who were paying attention to me seemed more shocked that Leon, the future margrave of Haust, was talking to me so amicably than by the fact that I was conversing with both the duke and the marquis. They seemed to think it was a surprising combination.

Leon was very pleased with their reactions. It was the exact situation he had hoped for. The more the other nobles raised a fuss, the more it would point

towards signs of economic recovery for his family's domain.

I was slightly annoyed by the reactions of those around us, but I decided to try to ignore them and enjoy the conversations and the food. Fortunately, I was with people of relatively high status, so none of the other nobles dared to interfere. Even those who came to greet the duke and marquis stopped coming after a while.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside the castle that kept growing louder. Finally, the commotion reached the party. I heard murmurs that someone had suddenly jumped over the wall and crashed the party. This *someone* was very familiar, and shone brightly under the lights in the ballroom as he made his appearance... It was one of my acquaintances.

"Boss! Bossss! We're in big trouble!"

"What is it, Namitaro?"

Finally, Namitaro spotted me and skidded to a halt. He had a lantern attached to his pectoral fin, and despite myself, I thought, *Maybe it's not really that big of a deal?*

But contrary to my expectations, it was.

"We're in big trouble! Tenma, Jeanne and Aura have been kidnapped!"

Part Five

“Jeanne and Aura have been kidnapped!”

Those words caused an uproar throughout the party. The ones who made the most noise were the neutral nobles, and some of them looked ready to spring into action at any moment.

“Duke Sanga, if the person who kidnapped them was a noble, and let’s say that, hypothetically, someone injured or killed that noble, what kind of crime would I, as their master, be responsible for? Hypothetically speaking, of course.”

The duke thought about my question for a while, then said, “Well, if there’s truly a noble behind this, it would depend on his rank and the severity of his injuries, but the girls might not be acquitted if they were the one who caused the harm. If that happened, you might be charged with some kind of crime as well. However, there’s a decent chance the whole thing would just end with a light fine. Of course, if the culprit is a low-ranking noble or someone who’s not a noble at all, the courts will surely write it off as self-defense. You’re not planning on killing anyone, are you?”

Upon hearing this, everyone around looked at me in unison. But that wasn’t really the problem—there was a very good chance I wouldn’t be killing anyone, but...

“I won’t rule it out, but I think there’s a greater possibility that Jeanne and the others will end up killing them. Not directly, but because they’re in possession of my golem bodyguards.”

“How much power do the golems have?”

I thought about it for a minute. “In terms of sheer combat strength, they’re about as strong as Shiromaru. There are two of them.”

In terms of magic and speed, however, the scorpion-type golem bodyguards didn’t come close to Shiromaru. They were made almost entirely out of metal, and since they lacked pain receptors, in a battle they would just continue to move even after being injured, pummeling their enemies until their cores were

destroyed, no matter how much their own bodies were damaged in the process.

I couldn't imagine Jeanne telling them to kill, but if she panicked and ordered the golems to protect them, the golems could do as much damage as a rampaging earth dragon. Speaking of which, I had just been thinking about using the core of an earth dragon to make my next golem...

"Tenma, I know you're probably thinking about something weird again, but now is *not* the time!" Namitaro interjected with astonishment, somehow reading my mind.

"Sorry, Namitaro. Anyway, go ahead and tell me what happened."

"Okay."

According to Namitaro, he'd been napping in the garden when all of a sudden Leena ran into the yard and informed him that Jeanne and Aura had been kidnapped. Apparently, she and Galatt had been in town when they'd spotted Jeanne in the distance. They had been about to go say hello when all of a sudden someone jumped out of a carriage and kidnapped them.

The area of town where they'd been kidnapped was usually pretty deserted, so this seemed to be the work of someone experienced. But it wasn't clear whether the perpetrator had been specifically targeting Jeanne, or if it had been a random kidnapping.

"Then, Galatt and Mennas chased after the carriage while Leena came to find you. She said if you weren't at the mansion, she intended to run all the way to the castle to tell you!"

Luckily, Namitaro had been there to receive the message, so she'd let him take care of things and was currently resting at the mansion.

"I understand. Thanks for letting me know, Namitaro. I'll go right away." With that said, I used flying magic to float up into the air.

"I'm coming too, Tenma!" Gramps said, joining me. Meanwhile, Duke Sanga and the others were doling out instructions to the people around us.

"I'll help too, Tenma!" Leon shouted from below. I appreciated the offer, but I

couldn't wait for him; there was no time to spare. Namitaro nodded and said he would show Leon and the others the way.

"We'll catch up later, Tenma! Namitaro, we'll let you guide us!" Albert said, following Namitaro out of the venue, with Leon and Cain on his heels.

I expanded the range of Detection until I got a ping for Jeanne and Aura.

"Gramps, let's go! Jeanne and Aura are this way!" Gramps seemed curious as to how I knew where they were, but when I explained that I'd set up a mechanism to detect the current location of the bodyguard golems I'd given them, he accepted my answer.

According to the map I saw in my mind's eye, the ping for Jeanne and Aura was on the outskirts of the capital, and it seemed like the two of them were together, though surrounded by the presence of a hundred other people. It would take less than ten minutes to get there flying full speed from the castle. Once I told Gramps that, he said to go ahead and leave him behind if he would slow me down, and that he'd catch up in a few minutes.

As I flew through the air, I used Detection to constantly monitor the girls. The number of people around them kept growing. My initial count had been somewhere around a hundred, but after a few minutes that number had grown by at least thirty.

Meanwhile, I saw movement on the map when we were about halfway to our destination—ten people around the girls were making contact with the people who had just joined. After a few seconds, those ten scattered in response to two new pings. I guessed that the latter were the bodyguard golems, because their actions overlapped with the movements of Jeanne and Aura.

As soon as the girls started moving, the people surrounding them rushed towards them, but the girls didn't stop. In fact, once the other attackers made contact with Jeanne, Aura, and the golems on the map, their pings suddenly went flying in all directions. Some flew as far as twenty to thirty meters. They'd be lucky if they still had their shirts on. Though as long as they didn't end up mincemeat like those orcs had that time, it should be fine...

Just then, a large estate came into view. The grounds of the estate were

roughly similar in size to Gramps's lands, but the building was more than twice as large. From the outside, it looked like a fairly tall four-story building with a basement, so it might have even had double the rooms that Gramps's mansion did.

The first floor of the mansion suddenly began to collapse, causing a chain reaction where the other floors began to crumble as well.

A bunch of disheveled-looking men—probably those working in conjunction with the kidnappers—emerged from the pile of dust and debris and began to flee. Once they were clear of the cloud of dust, they aimed their weapons back towards the collapsed building.

The dust settled, and two large scorpions appeared. Jeanne and Aura, caked in dirt and dust, were riding atop their backs. They noticed us flying in the sky and waved at us. The men looked up and finally spotted me, then began trying to flee. But it was too late for them, because they were already within range of my magic.

“I’ll try to go easy on ya, but don’t hold a grudge if it’s fatal! Thunder Wall!”

Thunder Wall was a wide-range attack using lightning, originally intended to be used on large groups of monsters. It wasn’t meant for use in personal combat because it was a difficult spell to control. If used carelessly, it could easily result in instantaneous mass murder, even against creatures tougher than humans.

But there was no need to think about these guys as human. However, I did try to hold back enough to leave one or two of them alive, because I needed someone to speak during the interrogation later. They all looked like they had high vitality, so I decided to go with that excuse.

Thunder Wall sent several pillars of lightning spreading out in a fan shape from my hands towards the enemies. Electricity flowed between the pillars, electrocuting every man in its path.

The unlucky ones seemed to have been killed, but there were still some survivors, so for now, I considered the mission a success. I checked Detection again and saw that fifty people were lying up ahead of me. Another sixty or so had fallen victim to debris from the mansion. And the remaining twenty were

out back. It seemed like they'd been trying to escape the mansion.

"Jeanne, Aura! Gramps will be here soon, so I'll let you take care of things here. I'm going to capture the survivors!" I shouted instructions to them as I flew through the air. They nodded and resettled themselves on the scorpions' backs. Once I saw they were safe and could handle things, I headed towards the back of the mansion, where the men were trying to flee, but were surrounded. Beside them all, I saw a familiar little figure. It was Baronet Podro il Chloride.

"Just where do you think you're going?" I asked as I descended, blocking the way forward for Podro and his crew. I had a feeling I'd just found the mastermind behind this plan.

Rocket, in his emperor form, was to their left, and on their right was Shiromaru. Solomon flew above them. We'd intentionally left their rear open, since Gramps and the scorpion golems were in that direction, and we expected the reinforcements from the castle shortly too.

"Just so you know, every single noble who attended the party at the royal castle tonight knows what you've done. There's no longer a place for you in this kingdom." I exaggerated a little bit to give them a scare. Rocket and the others played along, looming over them for effect.

"How dare you speak to me like that, you brat! Take him down, men!" Podro commanded, but the men around him hesitated, clearly on the verge of fleeing altogether. I drew my sword from my bag and rested it on my shoulder.

"Okay. Who wants to die first?" I asked with a grin. Everyone except for Podro and the five men standing next to him ran away from me at breakneck speed. However...

"Whooo! Kill them all!" The fleeing men scattered as three men on horseback raced towards them. It was Albert, Cain, and Leon, and with the way they were acting, I could hardly believe they were nobles. Leon was the one who'd shouted those words, by the way. Albert was wielding a sword, Cain had a bow and arrows, and Leon carried a glaive.

In an instant, the three of them incapacitated fifteen men. Only the four people Albert had dealt with were still standing; Cain killed all his targets with headshots, and Leon killed the seven he took on with a single swing.

“Looks like almost all your friends have been wiped out. Let’s see—” I spotted the nostalgic face of an idiot right away. “The only ones left are Guise, the self-proclaimed noble and thief who’s already gotten his ass kicked by me once, and his cronies.” I couldn’t help but wonder what they were doing here. “So? What’ll ya do?”

Just then, a woman behind Guise fired an arrow. It was aimed precisely to strike me in the head, but I caught it in midair. Liquid—probably poison—dripped from the arrowhead. The arrowhead and shaft were grooved and serrated to make it easier for the poison to stick to them.

“Lose something? Here ya go.” I snapped the arrow in half and sent it flying back at the woman like a dagger. It hit her right in the shoulder, piercing through her armor and lodging in her flesh. She frantically reached into her bag and took out a small bottle to drink from, but the moment she tried to open it, Rocket extended one of his feelers and smacked it out of her hands.

“G-Give it here...” The woman started to say, still reaching out, but then she began foaming at the mouth and collapsed. That was one fast-acting poison. She wasn’t dead yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Guise drew his sword in a fit of rage. “You really screwed up this time!” However...

“There’s more over here!” Leon charged him down on horseback, and Guise was mercilessly kicked away. Apparently, Leon realized that defeating seven people earlier had cut the kidnappers’ numbers, so this time he went for an all-out strike.

“You took away the best part,” I grumbled as I shoved the contents of the vial that Rocket had swiped into the lady’s mouth. She managed to swallow, but if this didn’t save her, she was out of luck.

“Tenma, are these the only ones left?” Leon seemed to have calmed down now that the enemy was taken care of, but for some reason he still looked restless.

“Is that any way for you to talk when you’re the one who stole my prey? Well, anyway, that’s not important. Leon, help me tie these guys up. And don’t forget to gag them.”

I decided to drop the formalities with Leon from now on. It just didn't feel right. He didn't seem to mind either, because he was already enthusiastically tying up Guise and the others.

"I'll help too!" Cain happily joined in while I was tying up Podro, and I had to wonder why he was so quick and skillful as he tied up the woman...with a very elaborate kind of knotted pattern...

Marquis Sammons... You've got quite the freak for a son.

Cain, oblivious to my thoughts, happily tied up a second person. This one was also a woman, and he tied her up using the elaborate rope bondage again.

Even Leon seemed to be creeped out by this.

"What in the world are you doing?" Albert showed up, and let out a sigh when he saw what Cain had done.

"I thought Leon would like it... I just wanted to try it once!" Cain said playfully. Leon, who still seemed amped up from the battle, glared at him.

We divvied up the tasks and bound everyone, then lined them up. Albert noticed Guise and scowled deeply. I'm sure he had a lot on his mind since Guise was the son of his father's former subordinate who'd caused plenty of trouble, and had in the end tried to dishonor Duke Sanga's name.

"Leon, why didn't you just kill this guy? You could've torn him in half without a second thought," Albert asked.

"If I did that, I'd be the one getting in trouble!" Leon protested.

"Should I cut off his head right now?" I asked, placing my sword to Guise's neck. Albert sighed and shook his head.

"No, there's no use. It'd be different if he was some nobody, but he was definitely a key player in this incident. So if I interfered, His Majesty would definitely reprimand me."

"Then give it up," Cain said to Albert, who then distanced himself from Guise.

As we were pondering how to transport Podro and the others, we heard a rustling noise from the direction of the ruined mansion.

“Tenma! A bunch of nobles have arrived!”

“Master Tenma! Master Merlin is here!”

It was Jeanne and Aura, of course, riding on the scorpion golems. The sight of the golems shocked Albert and the others, and their horses began to spook as well.

“Both of you dismount and get down here!” I called out to the girls. “The horses might get spooked by them and bolt!” The two of them swiftly hopped off the scorpion golems and rushed towards me. Leon was intently fixated on Aura’s chest as she ran, but of course she was oblivious to this.

“Hey, hey, Miss Maid. Careful, because a wild beast has got his sights set on your chest,” Cain warned her nonchalantly. Leon quickly averted his eyes, but it was too late. Aura hid behind me and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Master Tenma! What’s the deal with that guy?! He’s staring at my chest! Is he an enemy? Or just a pervert?!” She was raising a huge commotion behind me.

Now labeled a pervert, Leon looked dejected while Cain doubled over with laughter.

“Aura, I think he’s a noble...and quite a high-ranking one at that,” Jeanne said quietly. I nodded when Aura looked to me for confirmation, and all the color drained from her face.

“Don’t worry about that. After all, it was true that he was staring at your chest,” Cain pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s Leon’s fault. How’d you know he was a high-ranking noble, though?” Albert asked, looking concerned about Aura.

Aura seemed relieved, but it could’ve been a major issue had she said or done the wrong thing. I’d have to have Aina give her a stern lecture later. However, Jeanne had been correct when she’d said that Leon was a noble from a prestigious family.

Jeanne shyly confessed she’d seen the emblem embroidered on his clothing and which decorated his glaive. Still, I thought this inference was pretty

impressive. Even if I had been able to tell Leon was a noble, I wouldn't have been able to tell he was a high-ranking one just by looking at him.

"Well, putting that aside... Let's get these guys out of here."

I took out Valley Wind and the carriage from my bag, connected them, then loaded Podro and his cronies up. I had used this same method before when transporting Guise.

"All right, let's go."

I rode on Valley Wind while Jeanne and Aura rode on Shiromaru.

As we cautiously circled towards the front of the mansion, we saw Gramps there along with Jin and the others. Jin was sorting through the injured, but Gramps was scolding one of the nobles. The others looked surprised at Gramps's aggression, but they didn't appear to want to intervene.

"You were too fast, Tenma!" Amur didn't seem pleased at being left behind because she'd wanted to fight together with me, but since I'd flown ahead and there were no horses left, she'd had to wait until the third group. And by the time they'd arrived, everything was over. By the way, Gramps and I had been in the first group; Albert, Leon, and Cain had been in the second group; and the third group had consisted of Amur, Jin, Blanca, and the nobles.

It sounded like the knights would be coming later to process the scene as well.

"Hey, Tenma. There's trouble brewing." Blanca pointed. I looked over and saw Gramps holding the noble he was scolding by the collar, lifting him up with one hand.

"Wow, I've never seen Gramps that angry. Who is that?" I asked.

Albert provided the explanation. "Viscount Henkel von Braun. He's a man from a fallen noble family and a former cousin of Celia, your mother."

The reason for Gramps's anger was now obvious.

"He tried to use his connection as your distant relative to gain favor, which angered Master Merlin. He's not a total idiot, but the consensus of the viscount is that he's mediocre at best." Cain spoke in a mocking tone, and I agreed with

his words. Personally, having been reborn in this world, I couldn't consider someone I'd never met or even heard of as my relative. And since my parents had already severed ties with these individuals, they definitely didn't get to call themselves my relatives. Even the royal family acknowledged this.

"That's true, but...seriously, if we don't stop Master Merlin soon, he's going to kill the viscount," Leon said. He pointed at Henkel, whose face had turned pale as Gramps tightened his grip. I figured this wasn't the greatest time or place to kill a noble, so I went to stop him.

"Put him down for now, Gramps. It'll cause too much trouble if he dies." I intervened and persuaded Gramps to let go of Henkel. Gramps did let go, but somewhat violently. The viscount flew about two meters before landing on his back and rolling across the floor. As he lay there motionless, I realized he'd hit his head and fainted.

"So what'd he do?" I'd already assumed he'd done something, and judging by the reactions of the other nobles, I was probably right. After all, they were all either glaring at Henkel or looking disgusted.

"While Jin and I were handling things over there, these nobles rushed over. They thanked me for my help, and we began to discuss how to process the scene. Then suddenly this guy appeared and said he'd take over on my behalf. Not only that, but he started talking about marrying you off to one of his relatives!" Gramps said.

No wonder the nobles were angry—Henkel had treated them as though they'd gathered here all for his sake, even though that wasn't the case.

"Well, let's set this idiot aside for now. Who are those people?" There were about twenty nobles and fifty knights behind them. I recognized some of them from the party, but I didn't understand why so many had come.

"Oh, yes. Those are the nobles from the neutral faction. It seems they owe Jeanne's father a debt, and they rushed straight here once they heard his daughter had been abducted."

Now I understood. I was about to thank the nobles when suddenly an elderly one stepped forward. "I hope it won't stir up too much trouble, but I have a favor to ask of you regarding this matter. My name is Viscount Andalusian von

Mustang.”

Although he was an older man, he still exuded a warrior’s presence. His gaze was sharp as he looked at me.

“A favor? You’re not going to ask me to hand over Jeanne, are you?”

He ignored my joke, instead explaining his request. “Please don’t abandon these girls. If you must part with them, please contact me first. And if I can’t help, ask the neutral nobles here for assistance.”

Viscount Mustang bowed, and the other nobles followed suit. Not having expected such a request, I was a bit confused. The viscount noted my confusion and proceeded to explain.

According to him, the nobles gathered here were all indebted to Jeanne’s father, Viscount Armelia, in one way or another. When his family had lost power, those nobles had been unable to do anything to help and had regretted it ever since.

However, Viscount Mustang wasn’t just indebted to Jeanne’s father. In fact, he had offered them help. He was like an older brother figure to her father.

“I was there the day Jeanne’s family fell. I heard from an acquaintance of mine, a merchant, that there was unrest in Armelia’s domain. I wasn’t sure how much I could help, but I felt the need to go see what was happening. I led a small group and headed there, but that was a mistake. We were unable to make it there in time due to the complicated procedures for passing through the territories of other nobles.”

It seemed like Viscount Mustang had learned that the Armelia domain had been destroyed in a rebellion when he was only a few days from reaching it. Still, Viscount Mustang had rushed there, hoping for some kind of miracle—but all he’d found when he arrived was a burned-down mansion, a ruined garden, and a rebel army that had run rampant.

The viscount had been enraged, and had charged at the jubilant rebels with the small force he’d brought, causing considerable damage to the rebel forces and taking the head of their leader. The majority of them had turned out to be mercenaries, and he’d realized it hadn’t been just a simple rebellion. Upon

further investigation, however, he'd only been able to find vague information, including Podro's potential involvement.

"Honestly, I wanted to be the one who cut off Podro's head. But I can't lay a hand on him. Considering all the chaos he's caused, I have a feeling that this time, after all these decades, he won't escape the death sentence."

By orchestrating a kidnapping while a party had been in progress at the castle, not only had he disrespected the royal family, but he'd also tarnished their reputation. And covertly amassing such a large number of people in the capital even suggested he might have been plotting a coup d'état. So it was almost a certainty that he would be executed.

I say "almost a certainty" because he could still kill himself or be assassinated by someone else before the official penalty was doled out.

"In any case, if you accept my request, we will ally with you. Not as neutral nobles, but as individuals."

The distinction of not entering this deal as the nobles they were was crucial, but it was still beneficial for me. In the first place, though, Jeanne and Aura were like family to me, so Mustang's concern was unwarranted.

But since he'd gathered the nobles up to come here, he seemed pretty dependable, and the people he'd brought with him all appeared to be competent individuals. I was already reluctantly seen as a member of the royalists, so another source of information and connections would likely come in handy for me.

I was just about to shake hands with the viscount when Henkel regained consciousness.

"Even if you *are* my uncle, such disrespect to a viscount will not be tolerated!" Henkel screamed at Gramps as he rose to his feet, before shrinking back again in the face of Gramps's intimidating hostility.

"I've never once thought of you as my nephew!" Gramps bellowed.

Henkel began to tremble in response to Gramps's outright rejection. Several neutral nobles began laughing, including Viscount Mustang. Henkel glared at them, but the stern gaze of Viscount Mustang kept him in check. Although

Henkel and Mustang were both viscounts by rank, they were vastly different kinds of people. In fact, the nobles behind Mustang were ranked lower than viscounts, and some were probably younger than Henkel, but they seemed altogether more respectable.

Then, as soon as Henkel spotted me, he tried to crawl towards me. “Oh! So you’re Tenma! I’m your...”

However, I silently drew my sword. I directed a hint of hostility in his direction, and his expression instantly changed.

“Gramps, Viscount Mustang. When someone you don’t know approaches you in a combat situation and claims to be related to you, it’s acceptable to dispose of them, right? There won’t be any issues?”

After all, this place could be considered the site of Podro’s coup, and Jin and the others were working on the postbattle cleanup. So it wasn’t unreasonable to call it a combat situation. And given that, if a complete stranger suddenly approached me in such a fashion, it seemed perfectly justifiable to prioritize safety and cut them down.

Gramps and the viscount both nodded earnestly.

“It’s not a problem. It’s common for enemies to pretend to be allies so as to carry out sabotage from the inside. And when this happens, the results can be disastrous.”

“That’s right. And to make matters worse, he pushed aside Master Merlin, who was supposed to be in charge, and tried to insert himself into the chain of command. That’s much too suspicious. First of all, the notice from His Majesty clearly stated that Tenma’s only family member is Master Merlin. Which means this guy is up to no good.”

The notice from the royal family would also have undoubtedly reached Henkel’s place. So was it possible this guy was an impostor? I used Identify on him, but as it turned out, he was the real Henkel.

“Presumably, they thought they could gain some advantage by claiming to have some connection to Celia...after all they did to Celia and Ricardo!”

Gramps’s anger flared up once again, and the viscount added fuel to the

flames by stating, “In the first place, once Lady Celia and Ricardo asked to sever ties with her family and had their request accepted, they ceased to be related to Henkel altogether!”

“Hey, Tenma! Sorry to bother ya, but can you help us? There are some survivors, and we need to confirm the numbers and stuff!” Jin, incapable of reading the room as ever, suddenly called out to me. Gramps was startled by his voice, but at the same time it seemed to jolt him back to reality, and he calmed down a bit.

“I can send a few from my side to help. It’s convenient to have nobles around for witnesses anyway,” Viscount Mustang said, signaling to the neutral nobles behind him. Some of them headed towards Jin and the others. Meanwhile, I noticed Albert and the others approaching from the back of the mansion. Jeanne and Aura had put away the scorpion golems and were now riding on Shiromaru’s back.

Albert led the way, followed by Shiromaru (carrying Jeanne and Aura), Valley Wind (carrying Rocket), and Podro’s group on a cart. Leon and Cain followed slightly behind, while Solomon hovered above everyone.

“What a fancy escort.” The viscount chuckled with delight, stroking his beard. I suppose it was quite a sight, with a future duke, marquis, and margrave acting as guards, along with my followers, who had all gained fame in the tournament. Additionally, a metallic horse-shaped golem was towing the criminals. It was a rather unusual sight.

When Jeanne’s group reached me and Jin’s group had finished their work, Albert began looking around.

“Hey, Tenma. Where’s Namitaro? He was the one who brought us here.”

It was only then that I finally remembered Namitaro. Knowing him, he was probably wandering around somewhere nearby, but just to be sure, I used Detection to find him. The moment I activated it, however, what remained of the mansion collapsed. The suddenness of it startled everyone, and we all raised our weapons in response.

Once the debris had settled, Namitaro emerged from the ruined mansion.

“Tenma! I found all sorts of treasures in there!”

Namitaro wriggled towards me, showing me what he referred to as treasures. These were a hundred pieces of weapons and armor, dozens of kilograms’ worth of preserved hardtack and dried meat, and several jars filled with gold and silver coins. He had ten times of all that in his bag, so the possibility that this was a failed coup d’état was increasing.

“We should consider the fact that there may be other accomplices,” Gramps said.

“Yes, it seems likely,” Viscount Mustang agreed.

I felt the same way. Podro was way too dumb to manage a coup alone, and he certainly didn’t have the courage for it either.

“In that case, it might be best to wait until the knights from the castle get here.”

“You’re right. If we leave, the place might be recaptured, or other evidence might be collected or destroyed.”

Well, it was too late to say that because everything had already been destroyed, but there might be more important things hidden in the wreckage, so it was probably necessary to stay here.

“In that case, let’s send a messenger to the castle and leave the others in charge of guarding the place.” Viscount Mustang, seemingly accustomed to handling such matters, immediately sent out the neutral faction’s nobles to the castle and began giving instructions to the remaining nobles.

“Is this acceptable to you, Master Tenma?” For some reason, though, he asked me for my approval. Also, I wasn’t sure why he was addressing me with such respect when he outranked me. I subtly inquired about this, and he replied, “You were the first to arrive here, were you not? And you also brought about the destruction of this place. It wouldn’t be right for me to take credit for these achievements. Besides, we only came here as reinforcements. So it’s only fitting that you’re the leader of the group. And fortunately, you’re close to His Majesty. He won’t object to you leading us.”

Thus, I was forced into the role of the leader, and no one even questioned it.

It seemed that Viscount Mustang and the others had temporarily joined my forces.

“First of all, let’s take turns positioning ourselves around the ruins. Reinforcements from the castle should arrive soon, but don’t let your guard down.”

The viscount was right, of course. All I had to do was ask Shiromaru to protect the perimeter, and I could patrol the sky along with Solomon.

However, although the viscount had beaten me to the punch in giving orders, at least I could save face as the leader by giving my hungry troops some food I had in my bag...

Part Six

Around thirty minutes after we confiscated the treasures Namitaro had discovered, the knights from the castle arrived. An hour more, and we were finally able to hand the situation over to them and leave. Jeanne, Aura, Namitaro, Albert, Cain, Leon, Gramps, Viscount Mustang, and I all headed to the royal castle to explain in detail what had happened to the king.

Meanwhile, the third group—led by Jin, and which included the remaining neutral nobles—returned home.

Once we arrived at the castle, we were immediately taken to the throne room. By the way, apparently Podro and the others the knights had arrested were taken down to the dungeons below.

Prominent nobles, including the king, Prince Caesar, the prime minister, and other ministers, were already gathered inside the throne room. As I got closer, I realized they were divided into three groups.

The largest group, who I guessed were the royalists, stood behind Caesar. The other two groups were standing right next to each other, so I couldn't quite tell them apart. But since one group was glaring at the other, I could roughly guess what was going on.

"You did well making the journey back so late at night. According to the reports, I hear there's a possibility of a coup led by Baronet Podro il Chloride. Can you give me more details?"

Since Viscount Mustang was the highest among us in rank, he took a step forward and began his report. He mainly confirmed what the king had already said, but then also added, "It's possible there were other collaborators involved," which created quite a stir in the throne room.

"Silence!" shouted the person who had been introduced as the prime minister. The nobles gradually went quiet. Once no one else was talking, the king spoke.

"The evidence supporting Viscount Mustang's report has already been

submitted, and investigations are underway by the military. Right, Minister?”

“Yes, Your Majesty! The viscount discovered a large quantity of weapons, provisions, and funds. There’s enough evidence to consider it a coup. And taking into consideration the quantity of those items, we suspect the possibility of other collaborators or accomplices, and are currently investigating the matter.”

Prince Lyle’s statement caused another hubbub in the throne room, and the atmosphere grew tense.

Since Podro, a reformist, was the ringleader of this incident, the royalists and neutral nobles were casting critical glances at the reformist group. The reformists then responded in kind, which made the situation begin to deteriorate rather quickly.

“Are you saying that the military suspects us of being complicit in Podro’s crime, Minister?” The person who spoke was a rotund, balding old lech who, according to Luna’s research, was probably the most unpopular person in the castle—Duke Kyzen von Durham. He was exactly how Luna had described him. And although I’d never seen him before, I recognized him right away.

However, given that he was the prime minister, the way he glared at Prince Lyle was quite formidable. I could practically see the sparks flying between the two of them.

“Isn’t it natural for them to suspect us?” Surprisingly, the finance minister, Prince Zane, joined the conversation. He usually projected a quiet image, but now he was glaring at the duke. “On a previous occasion, did you not incite Prince Tida and Princess Luna to go out of the castle and slaughter cows, exposing them to danger?”

“That’s a completely different matter, Minister. I was merely stressing the importance to the prince and princess of practical experiences and the breeding of cattle during this season. They were the ones who chose to leave the castle and attacked the herd. Let’s not make baseless accusations here.”

The confrontation between the three men gradually evolved into a standoff between the royalist faction and the reformists. The tension escalated to the point that the neutral faction began trying to distance themselves from the

unsettling atmosphere.

“Let’s all calm down,” a man from a different group than the duke intervened, clapping his hands. “Arguing like this in front of His Majesty is shameful.” I figured he was probably an important person within the neutral faction, but I didn’t know his name.

“Master Tenma, that gentleman is one of the central figures in the neutral faction, Count Alan van Cromfell, the minister of foreign affairs,” Viscount Mustang whispered to me.

Despite being the minister of foreign affairs, Count Cromfell didn’t give off the stern impression I’d have expected for someone of his post. He seemed like a pretty friendly guy.

Once everyone had fallen quiet, he said, “Ministers of Finance and Military Affairs, injecting personal feelings into your reports is inappropriate. Minister of Internal Affairs, I understand that being suspected of a crime may make you uncomfortable, but this was in fact a misdeed committed by someone from your faction. Keep that in mind, and please refrain from provoking further arguments.” Despite his cheerful demeanor, Count Cromfell’s words carried a sharp undertone. He had a smile on his face, but it was clear that he didn’t care for the duke.

“Your Majesty, what shall the punishment for Baronet Podro and his conspirators be at this time?” The prime minister, apparently undeterred by the tense atmosphere, inquired about Podro’s punishment.

The king pondered this for a moment, then said, “The baronet Podro il Chloride shall be stripped of his title and imprisoned while the investigation is underway. His exact punishment will be determined once we have finished the investigation. As for those captured at the scene, first-time offenders or those with minor criminal records shall be sold into slavery and sent to a mine or labor camp. Those with a history of serious crimes shall be sentenced to death. And let the public know this is my royal decree.”

The moment the king spoke of the death penalty, a commotion once again erupted across the throne room. After all, there hadn’t been an execution in the capital for decades that had been publicly acknowledged by the king, even in

conflicts involving nobles.

That was partly due to the scarcity of criminals deserving such punishments, but also because the monarchs preferred to conceal executions to avoid public scrutiny. Even in a world like this, where life wasn't always highly valued, there were still anti-death-penalty advocates among the elites, whose aim was to avoid openly sowing seeds of contention. Besides that, there were some nobles who also opposed the death penalty, making the situation even more complicated.

However, this situation was far too grave to be overlooked, and the king seemed confident that it would be all right to announce his decision without giving the opponents of the death penalty a chance to voice their objections. According to Viscount Mustang, Podro was almost certainly headed for the gallows.

"It's probably in the best interests of the reformists to execute Podro, and ours too."

"Well, it's a win-win for us too. Handing down the death sentence helps prove that we're not involved in the coup, and that Podro is expendable since he's not a noble of great influence."

The reformists likely considered Podro a traitor who had betrayed Viscount Armelia, so cutting ties with him probably wouldn't be that great of a source of conflict.

While the viscount and I talked, it seemed that the standoff between the royalists and reformists ended, and all that remained to be done was to discuss the details before we all dispersed.

"Tenma, Viscount Mustang, you may be excused. Refreshments will be prepared in another room, so please relax there."

The king asked us to leave the throne room and wait in another room. We bowed and exited the place, upon which we found Cruyff and Aina waiting for us in the hallway. They took us to the designated room where Prince Tida, Princess Luna, and Princess Isabella were present. Surprisingly, Amur and Blanca were there too. The moment Amur saw me, she tried to rush towards me for a hug, but Blanca gently pressed down on her head to stop her. I glanced

at Cruyff, and he explained why the two of them were here.

Apparently, once we'd parted ways with them, they'd come all the way to the castle out of worry, but were denied entry by the gatekeeper. After they'd pleaded for a while and Blanca name-dropped Aina, Aina had been summoned. With Princess Isabella's permission, they'd been brought to this room.

"Tenma! I was so worried, I ran all the way here!" Amur struggled to hug me, even though Blanca continued to restrain her. Meanwhile, I felt a couple of cold stares piercing my back, but I pretended not to notice.

I took a seat across from Princess Isabella and the others, and we chatted for a while. Blanca had scolded Amur when she'd desperately tried to hug me again, and she was now sitting on her knees nearby. Jeanne and Aura were also kneeling in the same fashion, though their legs seemed to have gone numb. Aina stood over them imposingly.

She was glaring sternly at them while delivering a very long and drawn-out lecture. It seemed they'd confessed the reason for this whole commotion and how they'd ended up being kidnapped by Podro's crew. After Gramps and I had gone out, the two of them had noticed we were running low on food while cleaning the kitchen. They'd wanted to go shopping, and had ended up getting kidnapped.

Now, if that had been the end of it, maybe Aina would've gone easy on them. But Aina specifically took issue with a few things. First of all, they'd left the mansion without permission. I mentioned that I had granted them a certain degree of freedom, so she let them off with a minor warning on that point.

The second issue was them not seeking Namitaro's protection for their outing. Since the two of them attracted attention in various ways, and Namitaro, as my follower, could have protected them, Aina thought it had been stupid not to bring him along. If Namitaro had been there, they wouldn't have been kidnapped. Aina said they should've woken him up, even if he was asleep. I agreed with her on this point.

The third issue—and the main cause of Aina's anger—was that they hadn't brought weapons along, and they'd completely forgotten about the scorpion golems. Neither had thought bringing weapons would be necessary, since they

weren't planning to go far, and they'd somehow forgotten about the golems until the last minute.

Both Aina and I had trained them well in combat, so Aina said that it was much too irresponsible of them to not carry weapons even for basic self-defense, and that negligence was the primary cause of this whole commotion. To some extent, I agreed with her. The point we differed on was the idea that the girls themselves had caused this incident. Although their negligence had attracted the attention of the criminals, I thought that the kidnapping itself had basically been inevitable. According to Aina, however, "as servants of the current champion, you must be more cautious."

She continued to lecture them on various other points, and it seemed like there was no end in sight.

Putting all that aside, our casual conversation gained momentum when we began eating the new snack that had taken the capital by storm—sweet potato paste.

After an hour of talking, the king and the others finally arrived. The king let out a heavy sigh and walked over to me. He reached over my shoulder, picked up a piece of sweet potato paste, and ate it.

Albert and the others stood up to bow to the king, but he gestured for them to sit back down.

The king sat across from me, where Princess Isabella had previously been seated. She scooted down to make room, and Queen Maria sat next to him. Prince Caesar and the others took a seat as well, then Luna and Tida moved to the opposite side of Caesar, while Aina wisely concluded her lecture.

"I'm exhausted..." The king sank back against his seat, but quickly sat upright again when Queen Maria elbowed him. "Ouch! Tenma, Master Merlin, thank you so much for preventing the coup. Albert, Leon, Cain, I am very pleased with your swift actions that also contributed to the prevention of the coup. Once we decide the punishment for the criminals, I will summon you to the castle to reward you properly."

I nearly burst out laughing at how unusually serious the king sounded, but Albert and the others hastily knelt down and bowed.

“Well, that’s enough of the formalities. Good job, Tenma. That should calm the reformists down, at least temporarily.”

Since the events of tonight would be made public, according to the king, this would go down as a significant crime in the kingdom’s history. However, it seemed that the primary goal of the king’s actions was to undermine the power of the reformists.

The king mentioned that the things we had done—and that included Gramps, Albert, and Viscount Mustang—would also be publicized. That likely meant more trouble in our future, but he asked for our understanding. I knew this would be best for me in the long run, so I agreed, but deep down I wished they would omit my name. I guess that was just wishful thinking, though...

Later, as we were reviewing the upcoming announcement, Zane spoke up. “Tenma, can I purchase some combat golems for you?”

Everyone in the room froze at his sudden request.

“Oh? The Minister of *Finance* is seeking the use of military force?” Gramps said, as if to keep Zane in check. He said it in a half-joking manner, but his eyes weren’t laughing—he was genuinely angry.

“Gramps, let’s at least hear him out.” I tried to calm Gramps down before turning my attention back to Zane.

Zane didn’t seem fazed by Gramps’s response, and looked at both of us before continuing. “I’m sorry, I phrased that poorly. I don’t need combat golems—I need bodyguards. We managed to prevent the incident this time, but next time, someone could target the royals. Although we do have bodyguards here, a secret weapon for unforeseen circumstances would be beneficial. I’m not talking about something on the level of the scorpion golems. Of course, they’d need a certain level of combat ability, but they wouldn’t be treated as military assets. They’d be strictly for personal use.”

Although he claimed he wasn’t going to use them for the military, the phrase “strictly for personal use” sounded more like a provisional statement.

“Don’t the royals have enough bodyguards?” I asked, but Zane shook his head.

“Not nearly enough.” His swift response surprised most people in the room. “When you hear about royal bodyguards, what do you think of, Tenma?”

“Private royal guards. Like private soldiers, and also trained butlers or maids like Cruyff and Aina.” Those were the types that came to mind, although I was sure there were others.

“That’s about right. Occasionally, we may hire adventurers, but that’s more unusual. We mostly rely on the royal guards, who are assigned to His Majesty, the crown prince, and the crown prince’s son, in that order. To put it bluntly, they get the strongest guards and we get the leftovers. There aren’t many of them, and they’re not always with us. As for private soldiers and servants, finding those who meet the criteria for royal service is quite difficult, as is gathering enough of them.” Zane finished his tea, then went on. “Do you know how many royals there are currently, Tenma?”

I thought about it for a moment. “About ten?”

I wasn’t sure if “royal” had a strict definition within the kingdom, but I assumed the term included the king and queen, Caesar, Isabella, Tida, Luna, Zane, Mizaria, and Lyle.

“You’re roughly correct. Now, how many of these individuals are in line for the throne?”

“Let’s see. Excluding the women...seven people? Wait...” It wasn’t until I’d said it out loud that I noticed something was off. No matter how I looked at it, that was too few people. If something bad were to happen during a gathering when all of them were present, the entire royal family would be annihilated in one fell swoop.

“The correct answer is fifty—certainly not seven. And among the remaining forty-three people in line to the throne, there are some who are even more troublesome than the reformists—people from whom we must defend ourselves, even more than from enemies.”

“Zane, let me take it from here,” the king interjected, commandeering the discussion. He hesitated briefly, but after a short pause, began to speak. “During the era of the previous king—that is to say, my father’s time—those referred to as the royal family numbered over a hundred. It seems I had over a

dozen uncles and aunts.”

Archduke Ernest had been quiet this whole time, but at the king’s words, his expression changed.

“This is something of a tangent, but do you know what Tida and Luna call my uncle Ernest here?” he asked, suddenly veering off topic. I gave it some thought, recalling how Luna had addressed him before.

“Something like ‘Great Uncle’...? Wait...”

“Don’t you think that’s strange? That my grandchildren call my uncle ‘Great Uncle’?”

Come to think of it, typically you’d have expected the king’s children to call Ernest “Great Uncle.” I wasn’t sure what one called one’s great-grandfather’s brother, but it did seem a bit peculiar.

“I’m the adoptive son of my late brother—the previous king. It’s a bit complicated, but the title is not entirely incorrect,” the archduke said.

Although the idea of a younger brother being adopted by an older brother wasn’t common, it had happened in Japan’s history as well. Now my question about Ernest was answered, but the phrasing the king had used to describe his aunts and uncles left me with lingering curiosity.

“I was the youngest child of the king before the last one, but even I don’t know the exact number of siblings I had. The numbers went up and down at points unknown to me,” Ernest said, casually stating something that sounded simply outrageous. I glanced at the king, wondering if it was okay to say such things, but he didn’t seem fazed. However, the younger noble family members looked surprised. Gramps and the viscount didn’t seem bothered, though.

“Well, this is somewhat common knowledge among people of a certain age,” Viscount Mustang explained. Still, I was surprised that the younger nobles in the room didn’t seem to have a clue.

They were whispering to each other, saying things like “I never knew that” or “First I’ve heard of it!” or “That damn old geezer!” And it was true; Leon really didn’t seem like a noble...

Setting that aside, what concerned me were Tida and Luna. They seemed to already be aware of all this, and were listening calmly. Well—there was of course the possibility that Luna hadn't understood what any of that meant...

As I pondered such things while observing the two of them, they noticed I was watching them and made eye contact with me. Tida nodded slightly, but Luna gave me a slightly confused look, which confirmed my hunch.

"Anyway, that's why Zane wants your golems. Well—it's probably more for his precious Mizaria than for our safety, but that's the truth," the king teased.

Everyone turned to look at Zane, but he avoided our gazes. Still, I caught a glimpse of his face for a moment, and it was slightly red, so I thought the king was probably right.

"In that case, it makes sense that you'd bring it up. I agree; it's necessary for Princess Mizaria's sake. However, it would take time to make them from scratch, so how about if I modified some of the medium-sized golems I already have? Let's say...three for each person?"

My medium-sized golems were roughly the size of a person, and I intended to select the newest from among them. I couldn't bring them all out here, but I produced one from my bag as an example. However, at this, the king and the others looked slightly troubled.

"Tenma, how much would you sell this one for? With what you've shown us so far, it'll easily cost over a thousand gold coins."

Since one gold coin was equal to 10,000G, that would be over 10,000,000G, or more than a hundred million yen, for one. Thirty of them would sell for three billion yen, which was an incredible sum. I still had over a hundred of them in my bag, and if I got my hands on the materials, I could make replacements so I'd be filthy rich overnight! Well, not that I needed any more money...

"I can pay that, but it might be difficult... We could do one for each person, perhaps?" the king murmured.

"That won't be enough. I don't need one, though, so give mine to someone else," the archduke said.

"You're old and don't have much time left, anyway," Gramps quipped.

At this point, another cursing match began...which felt nostalgic, somehow.

“Okay, Tenma. I’ll take thirty of them for 300,000,000G. It will be difficult for us to pay all at once, though. Would you agree to three annual payments at 100,000,000G each, with an additional ten percent interest? If you have any other requests, we can try to accommodate them.”

In an attempt to ward off the looming chaos, Maria proposed a payment plan. I would have been fine selling them at a discount, but it was difficult to say this in the presence of people other than the royal family, so I was glad she’d made the suggestion. It was definitely too sweet of a deal, though.

“I’ve heard about the performance of your golems, so I think the price is extraordinarily reasonable. And you’ll only sell golems to us, right, Tenma?” Maria added with a smile, perhaps reading my thoughts. I nodded in agreement, and this time, she turned to the viscount and Albert and smiled again.

She said nothing else, but this gesture probably meant, “Don’t ask him to sell you golems as well.” After all, even if they weren’t enemies, it probably wasn’t appropriate for other nobles to possess the secret weapons of the royal family.

Viscount Mustang shrugged, then nodded in agreement, and the three young nobles did the same. Behind Maria, all the nobles suddenly sat up straight and neatly arranged themselves—with some exceptions.

“I believe we need a proper contract. Oh, it seems like Luna is falling asleep. Isabella, Tida, Luna—you all may go to bed now.”

“I apologize. Please excuse us.”

“Excush...” The rest of Luna’s mumbling was unintelligible.

The three of them left, and Cruyff immediately began drawing up the contract. The king and queen looked over it first before handing it to me and Gramps.

However, when I checked the contract, I noticed there was a blank space next to my conditions. I asked about it, and Cruyff offered me a pen.

“Please write down any other conditions you want, no matter how many,” the

queen offered generously. However, since she was watching me, I didn't have the guts to write down that much.

I pondered for a bit, then wrote the following:

The royal family will agree to provide assistance within their capabilities when I, or those close to me (mainly Jeanne and Aura), are involved in issues related to the nobles.

In the event that something happens to me, the royal family will take responsibility for the protection of Jeanne and Aura.

In the event that someone harms me and there is a justifiable reason for me to condemn them, you will treat me fairly regardless of that person's position.

Honestly, I didn't care if they rejected the third condition. But the first and second ones were reasonable, so I wanted them to accept those.

"Hm. What do you think, darling?" Maria said, showing the king the contract.

"It's not a problem."

So my conditions were accepted without any objections, and the king signed the contract. Caesar and the others read through the contract then, and chuckled when they saw the third condition.

"Does this mean we're not exempt from the contract either?" Prince Lyle asked as Zane held it up.

After all, if there was a so-called justifiable reason, my condition indicated that I should be treated fairly even if it was the king whom I condemned...although such a thing was, of course, impossible.

For example, if I were to kill the king, no matter how unjustly the king had treated me, I'd be punished for treason. In that case, whether my reason had been just would be decided by the king or the queen who'd signed this contract, so my sense of what was justified might not be accepted. Because of such reasons, it would be difficult to apply this condition to other high-ranking nobles. Therefore, to be more precise, there should have been a clause like

“However, this only applies to nobles who can be punished without issue at the king’s discretion.”

Knowing the king and the rest of the royal family, they might use this as a reason to replace the head of a rebellious noble family...

However, smart nobles and those who could read the room would likely anticipate the king’s thoughts, which meant they would probably hesitate to pick a fight with me. Really, though, I’d have appreciated it if they did. If I could control even just the lower-ranking nobles with this, it’d make things considerably easier in the future, mainly on my mental well-being. Ever since I’d come to the capital, I’d thought about causing a commotion with the nobles multiple times.

“That’s it for today. Come on, Tenma! Let’s go home and get some sleep!” Gramps said, once I’d put the contract in my bag. He stood up and stretched.

“Good idea.” I agreed with Gramps because I wanted to take it easy as well. I realized my voice sounded a lot more enthusiastic than before, but no one noticed, perhaps because there was someone even happier than I was in the room.

That person garnered the attention of everyone in the room until Aina dragged them outside. It seemed that the decision to switch to an all-night lecture had been made. *Good luck, Aura.*

“Tenma, you really saved us this time,” said the king. “It might be a bit hectic for a while, but we’ll announce this contract soon to shut them up, so just take it easy until then.”

I nodded in response and was about to leave the room when I heard two groans. The groans came from Jeanne and Amur, who couldn’t stand up properly as their legs had gone numb from how they’d been sitting on their knees this whole time.

I walked past them, wondering what to do.

“T-Tenma, help—”

“Tenma, carry me!” Amur interrupted Jeanne, trying to hug me again. But since her legs were still numb, she fell face-first onto the floor instead.

“Ah well... I’ll carry her. Tenma, you do something about Jeanne.” Blanca sighed at Amur’s ridiculous behavior and lifted her off the floor. He didn’t sling her over his shoulder or anything, but picked her up by the scruff of her neck like a kitten.

“Nyah!” Amur let out a short, meow-like scream and dangled in the air as Blanca carried her.

“Tenma, this is embarrassing...”

“Sorry, but there was no other way to carry you.”

“Ugh...”

Jeanne must really have been embarrassed, because she hid her face with both hands as I slowly transported her down the corridor.

“I feel sorry for her, but there’s nothing else to be done,” Gramps said.

“Indeed. The way the young lady is being carried is embarrassing, but Amur doesn’t mind at all...which just brings more attention to Jeanne’s embarrassment. It’s a vicious cycle,” Blanca replied.

“Zzzz...”

Amur had fallen asleep almost immediately, so Blanca was now carrying her like a piece of luggage.

“Well, don’t worry about it. It must feel good, though, right?”

“I-It does feel good...”

Jeanne blushed as she was swept through the air. She was being carried the way all women dream of (I think???), like she’d been swept off her feet...but I wasn’t doing the carrying. It was Rocket—he had grown about two meters in size, and was currently transporting her.

“Rocket, be careful not to drop her or bump her into anything.”



The reason Rocket was carrying her was that when I'd initially tried to carry her, her legs had been so numb that even the slightest jolt had put her on the verge of tears. So after careful consideration, I'd entrusted her transportation to Rocket, whose body would absorb most of the vibrations for her. And, as I'd expected, she seemed much more comfortable in his care.

He was holding her horizontally, making it look like he'd swept her off her feet. Not only that, but everyone who passed them in the hallways saw, which was the cause of much embarrassment for Jeanne. But she knew she couldn't complain too much because Rocket was doing her a favor, and since he was composed mostly of water, it basically felt like being carried by a walking waterbed. I'm sure it was more comfortable than anything I'd experienced in my previous life.

Actually, I'd already experienced the comfort of a special Rocket waterbed while camping or on hot nights, so I knew just how good it felt.

Cruyff led us to the entrance, and from there, we boarded our carriage to return home. Although Jeanne had somewhat recovered by the time we got in, her face remained red for a while.

"Are you sure it was a good idea to leave Aura behind, Tenma?" Namitaro, who'd slipped into my bag at some point, suddenly popped out and asked.

"Having time alone with her sister occasionally is important. Probably..."

"I can't help but feel a bit sorry for her." Gramps seemed to sympathize a bit, but I shook my head.

"Would you have had the guts to say that to Aina tonight?"

"Never. Even I was scared of her." Gramps sounded a bit creeped out, and I agreed. I'd rather have charged headfirst into a flock of wyverns than confront Aina when she was in lecture mode. Speaking of wyverns, I had a lot of meat. *I should make something yummy tonight...*

I noticed Jeanne and Namitaro nodding in agreement with Gramps. As for Jeanne, she looked more afraid than embarrassed at the moment. She should have been grateful to Aura, though, because she could very well have been sitting right next to her, still having her ear talked off.

We arrived home at last, and immediately crawled into our beds. However, Aura didn't return until two days later. When she did, her cheeks were sunken and she looked clearly fatigued. I asked her what had happened, and she said she had been forced to clean, do laundry, study etiquette, and practice combat by Aina from morning till night.

The formidable "Aina's Boot Camp"... Maybe it would become a trend in the capital in the future. Nah, that was unlikely. At any rate, it seemed like Aura would take several more days to recover...

Part Seven

“Good. Morn. Ing. Master. Tenma.”

I was awoken first thing in the morning by the sound of a flat, robotic voice, the owner of which was Aura. It had been a few days since she’d survived Aina’s relentless training.

At first, when she’d returned, she couldn’t even speak coherently and was always looking over her shoulder. She would freeze at the slightest noise, and all the color would drain from her face.

So even though her voice sounded robotic, it was a relief that she could speak at all at this point.

When Aura started to return to her old self a few days later, we finally got to hear the whole story. It turned out that Aina’s training had been even harsher than I’d expected.

After we had left the castle, Aina had given Aura a review of basic maid skills, followed by guidance. The next day had begun with chopping wood first thing in the morning, after which she’d had to haul the heavy wood to a woodpile. Aina had told her, “If you don’t use your whole body when you lift heavy things, you’ll only develop the muscles in your back, which will ruin your figure.” How much wood she’d had to chop seemed to depend on Aina’s mood; there’d been no rhyme or reason to it.

Anyway, she’d continued chopping wood until about midday, then she’d had a light lunch. After that, she’d mopped the hallway—but she’d been taken to a seldom-used hallway in the castle and told to polish it until it shone. The catch was she hadn’t been allowed to use a mop. Aina had periodically inspected it, and if there was any dirt left, she’d extend the mopping time. Apparently, Aura had actually finished mopping the hallway earlier than expected, but then Aina had just taken her to another hallway.

Finally, from dusk until late into the night, there’d been a one-on-one combat session with Aina. Towards the end, Kriss had joined, so they’d both sparred against Aura. After that, Aura had been allowed to sleep for a few hours before

being forced to go on a morning run and train with the knights.

The training had involved the first unit, the second unit, and the royal guard in that order, and had concluded around snack time. Then, at last, Aura had finally been released with these parting words from a smiling Aina: “I think I should start coming up with the schedule for our next training session, right?”

“Well, somehow you managed to survive.” Even with my enhanced abilities, I wouldn’t want to have gone through that training. I’d rather fight two or three earth dragons. And it wasn’t that I was physically incapable—I just felt it would do a number on my psyche.

“Yeah! They’re demons! Demons, I tell you! That’s why they’re both still single!” She must have been talking about Aina and Kriss. Thinking that was a dangerous thing to proclaim out loud, I placed some cookies in front of her.

Aura, in my past life there was a saying. “Speak of the devil, and he will appear.” But you probably won’t understand, even if I tell you that...

“That’s right. I swear, those two— Mmph!”

I shoved a cookie into Aura’s mouth to shut her up. Now that her mouth was completely stuffed full, she looked at me tearfully, but then in the next moment her face went pale and she shut up.

“Good afternoon, Tenma!”

“Hello, Master Tenma!”

Just as I expected, the devil—er, the two women in question showed up. Aura slowly turned around and glanced at the two of them. But it didn’t seem like Aina had heard her insults, because her expression was completely normal.

“Is something wrong, Aura?” Kriss looked puzzled by the fear on Aura’s face.

“Are you slacking off again, Aura?” Aina must’ve thought Aura looked afraid because she’d been caught slacking off, as there was a hint of anger in her voice.

“No—she’s taking a break right now. She was just telling me about the special training you prepared for her.”

I certainly couldn’t tell them Aura had been in the middle of complaining

about them. I didn't do this to defend Aura—I simply didn't want to be seen as siding with her. Nor did I want to get dragged off to boot camp for angering Aina and Kriss too. Aura seemed to misunderstand my intentions, however, and must have thought I was trying to protect her, because she was looking at me with sparkling eyes.

“I see. Well, I'm sure not even Aura would slack off in front of her master.”

I could tell how little trust Aina had in Aura. Aina was always so hard on her, perhaps because they were sisters.

“Speaking of the training, I was thinking of maybe making it a bit tougher next time. What are your thoughts on that matter, Master Tenma?”

Kriss withdrew, a tense look coming over her face at Aina's shocking statement. I probably had the same kind of expression myself. As for Aura, she looked like she had fallen into the depths of despair, and was frozen on the spot. I hoped she hadn't gone into shock.

“Actually, Aina...would you mind going a bit easier on her? I appreciate your enthusiasm, but making Aura completely useless for several days afterwards is a bit challenging for us, you know...”

I told her that Aura had mentioned she was having trouble with work because her muscles were so sore, and Aina looked apologetic.

“I'm sorry. I didn't consider that. I'll put more effort into posttraining care in the future.” She bowed her head, but I noticed she hadn't mentioned making the schedule easier. Aura hadn't picked up on that little tidbit, and quietly struck a little victory pose behind me.

“So, what brings the two of you here?”

Setting aside Aura for a moment, I wanted to know why they'd shown up out of the blue. It was pretty unusual for the two of them to come here. After all, Aina was the queen's personal maid and Kriss was a member of the king's royal guard. The two of them usually only came over if they were accompanying the king and queen.

Although Aina had lately also been serving as the unofficial head maid of this house, I occasionally worried about whether she had time to care for Queen

Maria.

“I had some free time for a change, so I just tagged along with Aina. Aura, can I get some tea and snacks?” Kriss flopped down lazily in a nearby chair. Although Kriss was quite popular with the younger knights (both men and women), they’d probably have been disappointed to see her like this.

“I’ll take some too, Aura.” Aina gave me a nod before gracefully taking a seat. Then, she pulled out three bags and placed them on the table, making a clinking noise. I guessed there were coins inside. “Master Tenma, these are the proceeds from the auction. The organizer mentioned you hadn’t come to pick them up yet, so I brought them here on their behalf. Go ahead and check the totals, please.”

I inspected the bags. Each one contained three hundred gold coins for a total of nine hundred gold coins—the equivalent of 9,000,000G.

“The final total was 10,000,000G, but they deducted a tenth for taxes, so this is your portion. Also, I went ahead and asked for small gold coins instead of large ones, thinking it would be more convenient. If you’d rather have large gold, you can exchange them without any fees.”

“Oh, right... I totally forgot I put anything up for auction, amid all the fuss about the earth dragon and the coup. Why didn’t the person in charge just bring it directly to the house?”

“Well, it’s not possible, for starters. His Majesty has expressly forbidden nobles and castle personnel from contacting you without prior acquaintance,” Kriss informed me as she nibbled on cookies. I hadn’t known that. So that was why when I’d visited the castle recently, only the knights I’d trained with before had approached me. Honestly, I’d initially thought it was because they felt I was getting too cozy with the king and the other members of the royal family.

As I casually stuffed the money into my bag, Kriss stared blankly at me, mouth full of cookies. I thought she muttered something like, “Maybe I should work for Tenma forever instead...” but I pretended not to hear anything. Aina elbowed her in the ribs (estimated power: strong) and then Kriss writhed in pain.

“By the way, what are your plans after this?” I asked.

“Nothing in particular. I thought I’d just laze around here, if that’s okay with you.”

“I don’t have any specific plans either, so I thought I’d observe Aura and Jeanne’s work.”

Kriss seemed to have become more uninhibited recently under a certain someone’s influence, and merely wanted to relax at my house. She’d already requested another round of tea and sweets from Aura.

Aina apparently intended to continue training Aura and Jeanne as usual, and stood up from her chair while shooting Kriss a disapproving look. Since she’d been doing the same thing every time she came over anyway, I just nodded and gave my permission for her to do so.

While Aura was on her way to get a refill for Kriss, she overheard Aina and nearly dropped her tray.

“I don’t mind, but some guests will be arriving for Gramps soon, so I’ll be going out. It shouldn’t be a problem, though.” As the guests in question were people I didn’t need to be particularly reserved around, I didn’t think they’d complain even if Kriss were lounging around here too. And since Gramps and Jeanne would be present, letting Kriss stay ought to be fine as well.

Once Aina heard my response, she pulled Aura out of the room. Kriss seemed curious about who the guests would be, but then she promptly started working on her tea and snack refills.

I chatted with her for about a half hour before Jeanne arrived with three guests in tow.

“Sorry for being late, Tenma.”

“Sorry for intruding...”

“Hey!”

The trio that had arrived were the young nobles, Albert, Cain, and Leon. They’d said they wanted me to accompany them somewhere today, so I’d been waiting for them.

“Well, then, shall we g— Sis?!” Leon entered the room, but stopped short

when he saw Kriss. Why was he calling her that?

I looked at the other two, and they seemed surprised as well, but not to Leon's extent. They seemed more like they were mildly shocked to run into someone they knew here.

"Good to see you again, Kriss," Albert said.

"Long time no see," Cain said, as the two of them bowed. Although the three of them outranked Kriss in terms of status and position, it seemed that she held the upper hand in terms of power dynamics.

"Oh? You guys are the guests? It really has been a while. I've heard some things about the three of you. Seems like you haven't changed much since our school days." Although Kriss was speaking in a cheerful tone, the three of them became increasingly meek. I thought I saw the color drain from their faces as well.

Shortly, Leon seemed to recover from his malfunction and pulled me to a corner of the room. "Hey, what is Sis doing here?" he asked. The other two seemed curious about what we were discussing, but they were engaged in conversation with Kriss, so they couldn't follow us.

"Is there a problem? She had a day off today. Besides, I've known Kriss for a while now."

We'd met a long time ago, when they'd been attacked by an orc king...five years ago by now? Even though there'd been a gap in between, our first meeting had made such an impression on me (thanks to the king) that it felt like we'd been close since then.

Come to think of it, she was probably the first woman I'd gotten to know outside the women from Kukuri Village. If she'd been the same age as me, that might have been the premise for a romance novel, but there was an eight-year gap between us, and we didn't have that kind of relationship. She was more like a friendly older acquaintance. And lately, she seemed to be getting a bit anxious about how her love life had dried up...

Not only that, but she only came to the house during her official duties for the king, when it was necessary to do so. But since Aina had started coming here,

she'd started visiting sometimes, even by herself. And since the atmosphere here was so relaxed, she'd gradually become less reserved. As proof of that, she was currently lounging around, demanding refills of tea and snacks.

Aina had warned her about this several times, but neither Gramps nor I really minded, so she'd become less insistent lately. After all, compared to the king (or Prince Lyle and Luna nowadays), she wasn't a bad guest.

As I explained that to Leon, his face tensed up. Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken about the king like that. I guess it was like I was divulging top secret information, or embarrassing tidbits, about members of the royal family.

"So? Where do you plan on taking me today?" I asked, after we returned to Albert and Cain.

Leon answered in an oddly delighted tone. "Oh, that's right! I forgot we were in such a hurry! Sorry, Sis, but I must be off!" He pushed at my back and tried to get us to leave the room. Albert and the others seemed relieved and began to follow us, but as it turned out, fate had other plans.

"Hmm, sounds suspicious. I should go too, to supervise...escort...no, as a guardian!" Kriss gulped down her remaining tea with a smile and rose from her chair.

"Ha ha ha, Sis... Listen, I know he's underage, but this is Tenma we're talking about. He doesn't need a guardian."

Upon hearing this, Leon laughed and patted my shoulder. That made me feel a bit irritated, but once I saw the patronizing looks Kriss, Albert, and Cain gave him, the irritation subsided a bit.

"Well, putting this idiot aside, none of you have any objections, right?"

"That's right!" Albert and Cain answered in unison, which put a satisfied smile on Kriss's face. I was honestly curious about why they showed such deference to her. Anyway, since Leon had been outvoted now, he reluctantly nodded.

"So? Where are you planning to go? You're not thinking of sneaking into the pleasure district at this hour, are you?" Kriss looked at the three of them coldly.

"No, it's nothing like that! I just wanted to show Tenma the academy!"

“Yeah, the academy asked us to drop by, so it seemed like a good opportunity.”

“Yeah, Sis. We’d never go anywhere shady like that! Besides, none of the shops in the pleasure district are even open at this time. If anyone went, it’d be at night.” Leon laughed out loud, completely oblivious that he was digging his own grave. The other two immediately distanced themselves from him to make it clear they weren’t involved with what he was talking about.

“Well, the three of you are already adults, so it’s not my place to say anything...but I’ll report this to Queen Maria, just in case. It’ll be a problem if something happens to Tenma, after all.”

Kriss’s response made Albert and Cain look like they’d just received a death sentence, but Leon was still oblivious and hadn’t caught on.

“Shall we go, then? Hey, come to think of it, isn’t the academy on vacation right now? Why go there today?”

“Well, according to the headmaster, today is a school day for all the students besides those in the elementary section.”

“It’s only students from the capital and nearby areas, so there won’t be too many people there.”

“Oh, I see. That’s why you’re so excited, Leon. You probably want to show off that Tenma and your family are on good terms. You want to impress the kids and then have them tell their parents,” Kriss observed.

Leon turned away and started whistling. I was surprised that, even in this world, people used such tactics, although in my previous life only characters from manga and anime did such exaggerated things.

“What a clumsy attempt at deflection. Whatever—it’s not my place to intervene. Just be careful not to attract Queen Maria’s attention by overdoing it.” After Kriss delivered this stern warning, she walked towards the foyer.

Leon, relieved at having escaped a hiding, still seemed oblivious to just how terrifying the queen, aka the final boss, was. I decided not to tell him because it would be more entertaining that way.

Kriss made her way towards the carriage the three guys had arrived in. The problem was that it could only hold four people. Kriss, me, Albert, and Cain boarded in that order, then Cain shut the door on his way in.

“Huh?” Leon stared at the closed door, confused. Since they hadn’t planned on Kriss coming along, they’d thought a four-person carriage was just right, but now that we had an extra guest, Leon had been left out. “Sis, what about me?”

“There’s space over there. Share it with him. Or run alongside us as we go. Oh—or you could ride up on the roof! Which option would you prefer?” Kriss gestured towards the driver’s seat. There was room for one person beside him, if they squeezed tight. She also said he could sit on the step used to climb into the carriage if he wanted.

“All right. I’ll go ahead and ride up front.” In the end, Leon chose to sit with the driver. This carriage seemed to belong to Duke Sanga, and Leon was familiar with the driver, so he didn’t mind.

The academy was located quite close to the castle, and appeared to be even sturdier and more spacious than the castle itself. According to Kriss, the academy had four sections, ranging from elementary to high school. Each section had its own extracurricular classes, and the buildings were designed to be used as fortresses in case of emergency, which explained their size and sturdiness.

By the way, the four sections were lower elementary (seven-to-nine-year-olds), upper elementary (ten-to-twelve-year-olds), junior high (ages thirteen to fifteen) and senior high school, which was for sixteen-to-eighteen-year-olds. It seemed fairly equivalent to elementary school, divided into lower and upper grades, middle school, and high school in my previous life. It was state-operated, meaning it was a national school.

There were no restrictions on enrollment regarding commoners or nobles, but the tuition was high. Therefore, over seventy percent of the entrants were nobles. However, to address the disadvantages that commoners had in that regard, there was a recommendation system specifically for commoners which gave exemptions for the tuition. Nearly twenty percent of students were commoners who had been accepted through the recommendation system.

There were also noble recommendations, but those made up less than ten percent of the school's population.

There didn't seem to be any limit on the number of recommendations, but the system was only available for those entering the junior and senior high schools. Furthermore, it was important to note that the exemption only applied to tuition fees. Other expenses, such as textbooks and equipment, weren't included in the cost. As a result, every year, there were some students who had to decline enrollment because of their inability to cover other fees like equipment and board.

But if a student graduated from the senior high with excellent grades, they had a good chance of becoming a high earner, even if they were a commoner. That was why there were some parents who willingly went into debt to enroll their children. Unfortunately, fewer than half of those students managed to graduate, though...

Boys would strive to be employed by noble classmates of the same age, while girls would try to become their mistresses or concubines, which complicated matters. Albert and the others seemed to have experienced that, having actually recruited several promising classmates themselves. By the way, Kriss had been more popular among the girls than the boys, and had had a rather romance-free school life.

Leon leaked all that information to me, which prompted a scolding from Kriss on the way out of the carriage.

"See—I was like the idol of the academy. Because of that, the boys didn't dare hit on me. Plus, I was invited to join the royal guard *before* I even graduated," she said. Apparently, she was the daughter of a baronet, but was estranged from her family as they'd plotted to gain influence through her. And now that she had received a higher status equivalent to that of a barony due to being a member of the royal guard, her family could no longer exert influence over her.

We made our way to the headmaster's office while we chatted about these things. And every time we passed older female students, they cheered. I thought about half of the cheers were for Kriss, forty percent were for the trio, and the remaining ten were for me.

With each burst of cheers, Kriss moved closer to me. I assumed she was just following the queen's orders to not let any female students approach me. As a man I was a little disappointed, but I suppose it couldn't be helped.

"What's with the strange look on your face, Tenma? Oh—are you wondering why those three are so popular?" Kriss seemed to misunderstand the expression on my face—I didn't think it was strange at all that the trio were popular.

After all, Albert resembled his father and was a handsome young man, and the other two were also above average in looks. But the most notable thing was their titles, of course. They were in line to be the next duke, marquis, and margrave. That would draw people to them, regardless of their looks.

However, Kriss seemed to have a different perspective on things. "They're pretty much idols behind the scenes for those in certain circles. Oh—but the ones cheering for me and you are probably decent, Tenma. However, in your case, people know you by name, but your face isn't widely known yet. By the time we get back, there might be a crowd of girls waiting for you. If that happens, we can offer these three as a living sacrifice and make our escape." She said this in a completely casual tone of voice. And what did "idols behind the scenes" even mean? Not only that, but she talked about the three future nobles like they were just her lackeys, which sent a chill down my spine.

The trio must've overheard, because they all suddenly looked dejected. Just then, they accidentally almost ran into a group of elementary school girls. Thankfully, they avoided them at the last minute and no one got hurt.

"Hey, you three! Be careful! You need to watch where you're going. I'm sorry, are you okay?" Kriss scolded the trio and apologized to the girls, but then she seemed to notice something. "Huh...?" I peeked around her to see what was going on.

"Huh? Kriss? And Tenma too! What are you doing here?" The girl in the center of the group that they'd almost run into was Luna.

"Luna? I came to visit the academy."

The trio were about to apologize, but then once they realized who it was, they immediately knelt down and bowed their heads. Kriss also lowered her head,

and placed her right hand against her chest. Now the only ones standing normally were the three other girls with Luna, and me.

Her friends seemed puzzled as to why I wasn't bowing, but Luna didn't say anything, so they stayed quiet.

"Hmm, I see. Those three are Lord Albert, Lord Cain, and...Lord Lenon? Please raise your heads. You avoided us just in time, so none of us were hurt."

The three of them rose and apologized again—however, two of the three were slightly trembling as they suppressed laughter, along with Kriss.

"Luna. It's not Lenon. It's Leon," I corrected. The moment I said that, the three who had been suppressing their giggles burst out laughing.

"Huh? Really? I'm sorry!" Luna quickly apologized and bowed her head. Leon didn't seem particularly angry about her getting his name wrong, but he did look a little bothered by it.

This concerned Luna and she looked even more apologetic. "I just haven't met Lord Leon that many times before..." she said.

That made sense to everyone but me and Leon. I asked Kriss what she meant, and her answer surprised me.

"Leon doesn't come to the inner parts of the castle very often. Although those three will inherit their fathers' titles, their current status is only 'heir apparent'...but in fact the three of them currently have no titles at all, so they can't go deeper into the castle that easily. Though there are exceptions, like the party the other day. As for Albert and Cain, Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons often come to the capital, so those two have had plenty of opportunities to meet Princess Luna. On the other hand, Margrave Haust rarely leaves his territory, so he comes to the royal castle less often. I think it's been about three years since the last time he came," Kriss explained in detail.

As I contemplated her answer, a sudden question arose in my mind.

"Wait—so even the future heirs can't easily meet with the royal family? So isn't it a bit weird that commoners like me and Gramps have almost free rein in the castle? We show up pretty often for not-so-important reasons. Killing time, butchering a dragon, creating new pastries, et cetera..."

Luna gave me a puzzled look. “But we come to your house to visit and Grandfather and Uncle just walk in. Also, even Dad and Grandmother say to get along with Tenma. So I don’t think it’s a problem!”

I supposed she was right. Her grandparents, in particular, were often found relaxing in our living room. Just as I was coming to terms with that thought, Kriss suddenly whispered in my ear, sounding exasperated, “No, normally, this wouldn’t happen. But these are unusual circumstances because they have political implications. I think the main reason is that you’re the son of His Majesty and Her Majesty’s late friends.”

That was indeed the case—and while the king and queen were friendly with me, it was easy to forget that in this world, my showing up at the castle would be like an ordinary person casually showing up to hang out with the Emperor of Japan. Normally, even approaching them in such a manner would be grounds for detainment or even execution.

I now realized how fortunate I was. Considering the king and queen were so accommodating, a bit of political manipulation wasn’t that much of an issue. At most, it was a deterrent towards other factions to show them that I was leaning towards siding with the royalists. And I’d warned them that if they pushed too hard, I’d just leave for another country, but thanks to the queen’s support, I wasn’t too worried about that eventuality.

By the way, although I didn’t think it would happen, if they ever said, “We want you to help us because we’re under attack from an enemy country!” I wouldn’t have minded. However, if the request was instead, “We’re declaring war on another country. Go and fight for us!” now that would be out of the question. At that point, I’d probably just choose to live in seclusion somewhere, or leave the country entirely.

“Well, if the king and queen say it’s fine, there’s probably nothing to worry about.”

“That’s right.”

“They come to my house and eat and drink there whenever they feel like it, after all.”

“That’s true.”

“Luna even sneaks my snacks without asking.”

“That’s ri— Huh?!”

Luna fell for my leading statements. Ha ha ha. She was the second person to fall for this tactic. Ha ha ha. I was talking about the day she’d gotten caught swiping snacks and had to confess in front of Aina, whose punishment had been quite intense.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell Princess Isabella or Queen Maria...as long as you promise to be a good girl,” I said.

Luna nodded repeatedly. She reminded me of Aura in a way, in terms of mental age and because of her lively personality. Though the comparison had a negative connotation for Aura, of course.

Anyway, Luna would probably behave herself for the time being since she’d gotten that lecture. Since she was still young, she’d probably go back to being naughty again at some point, and it was a shame I couldn’t say she’d behave from now on instead.

“Are you going home now, Luna?” I asked, looking at the girls behind her. She shook her head. Apparently, she had to wait for Tida, so she’d just come to see off her friends. She’d intended to walk a bit farther with them, but instead she now apologized, parting ways with them here. It seemed like she meant to follow us.

“Bye! I’ll come play with you soon!” Luna waved to the girls, then moved to the front as if she were going to lead the way. “Okay, then. Shall we go?” Leon seemed a bit dejected at the sight, probably because her presence meant Tida would also join us soon, and Leon’s little scheme would be exposed. He might have been worried that this would leave a bad impression on the royal family.

I honestly didn’t think the king and queen would mind that much, though. After all, my having a close relationship with Margrave Haust, an important royalist family, was beneficial for them too.

I thought about saying so, but Cain suddenly turned around and shushed me with a wink. I had a feeling he thought things would be more entertaining this way, and I agreed, so I silently gave him a thumbs-up in agreement.

“Hey, hey, Leon. Stop being so slow. We need to hurry to the headmaster’s office. Princess Luna, do you mind if we go there before heading over to Tida’s classroom?”

“O-Of course not.” Luna was desperately trying to play innocent in front of the trio. They’d probably noticed it was all an act, but were too polite to point it out.

The headmaster’s office was on the fifth floor, at the top of the central building, and climbing the stairs was a bit of a challenge, so I used Levitation magic halfway to make things easier on myself. Luna scolded me when she spotted me at the top of the stairs, though.

Apparently, the method I’d used was only permitted for nonstudents except in special cases. If someone had spotted Luna with me, they might have thought she was a participant and she would’ve gotten in trouble with the academy. There were various punishments, but in this case it would be a fairly light one. Even so, if they kept it up they’d receive more severe punishments or even expulsion, so one had to be careful.

Obviously, they couldn’t allow outside guests to go up the stairs, and so guests were asked to stand on an enchanted board, and a teacher who could use Levitation magic would bring them up. However, people like me, who could use Levitation and Flying magic, were given special permission to do so inside the building.

Even among the teachers, only about fourteen or fifteen of them (that is to say, ten percent of the staff) could use Levitation magic, and only four or five students were capable of it.

By the way, the total number of students in the entire school was around one thousand, with each class having around forty students. The upper and lower elementary school each had four classes, the junior high had eight, and the high school had ten.

Classes in the upper and lower elementary school were mostly assigned randomly, but starting in junior high, students were placed in classes based on ability, ranked with letters depending on their grades. Classes included practical skills as well, and the top students in each area were selected, so even a

meathead with 1 Wisdom and 10 Strength could make it into the A class.

Now that I'd received a crash course in the composition of the academy, it was finally time to meet the headmaster.

Upon reaching the headmaster's office, Albert, Leon, and Cain announced their presence, then obtained permission for me, Kriss, and Luna to enter.

Once we were allowed inside, we were directed to sit across from the headmaster. He was a man in his sixties who was an alum of this academy. He had become a teacher right after graduating, and now, with over forty years of working at the academy, he was considered its living encyclopedia.

He was originally the third son of a certain marquis, but since his mother was a commoner, it had been decided that he would be sent away from the marquis's family once he was an adult. That'd led him to have many opportunities to make friends with commoners. His ability to understand both nobles and commoners had made him very popular with both students and teachers when working at the academy.

Thanks to that, he'd risen steadily through the ranks and become the headmaster just before he'd turned fifty. His appointment had been approved without any problems, partly due to recommendations from the prime minister at the time, the crown prince (now the king), and many other nobles who'd also been his students.

The headmaster had a stern look on his face as he faced us, which seemed to make everyone in the room except for me quite nervous. But once he began talking, two of the most anxious people realized the reason he was upset had nothing to do with them, and were relieved. Instead, he wanted to discuss the "wretched girls who fainted at the party at the castle."

These ladies had several things in common. They were close in age, they went to the same school, and their attention was focused on Albert and the others. As a result, there were suggestions of a connection between these ladies and the three nobles.

At first, the headmaster had tried to be vague when conveying this information to the ladies' parents, but since they hadn't understood his hints, he'd had to spell out the girls' sexual proclivities to them.

The parents had been left dumbfounded, and some even harbored anger towards the trio. Nevertheless, the headmaster had asserted that the blame lay entirely with the young ladies, presenting the incident as an unfortunate accident they'd caused. He'd also subtly threatened the parents that if any harm befell the trio due to this matter, he would have to disclose all relevant information to the royal family and those involved in the investigation. That was why, to err on the side of caution and make the trio aware of what was happening, he had summoned them to the academy.

The other reason they'd been summoned was because, from the outside looking in, it would appear like the headmaster had called them there to give them a warning, which might cool the parents' ire.

Now that he was done with his explanation, the headmaster told me he wanted me to transfer into the academy. The student body was primarily composed of nobles, some of whom displayed condescending attitudes towards commoners. From their perspective, being born noble meant being chosen, and that those who were beneath them in status had to serve them. Although not everyone subscribed to those beliefs, quite a few noble students did.

As such, he wanted to admit me to the academy, since I'd gained fame through my own abilities without being of noble birth. He wanted me to serve as an example to both inspire commoner students and to teach noble students that one's level of talent has nothing to do with their status. And even if noble students entertained harmful thoughts or actions on the matter, my presence would deter them from acting upon such thoughts, and given the royal family's support of me, they couldn't throw their weight around either. It seemed like the perfect solution.

Since this request was coming from the headmaster, he told me my tuition would be covered, and that I would receive financial support for housing and supplies, as well as additional compensation. However, no matter how I looked at it, it seemed like it would be a hassle, so I immediately declined.

The headmaster seemed genuinely disappointed, but it appeared to have been a shot in the dark on his part anyway, so he gracefully accepted my refusal.

After we were done speaking to the headmaster, we went to pick up Tida. Luna showed us the way as we hurried to where they were supposed to meet—a classroom on the third floor of the upper elementary school building, some distance from the central building. The lower elementary school building was adjacent to it, and together they occupied an area that was probably equivalent to a small high school. Even so, it was said to be less than half the size of the middle and high school sections.

As we walked through the elementary school building, we passed smiling teachers from time to time, indicating that the news had already spread.

It seemed that the students weren't aware, however, or perhaps it was just unusual for outsiders to be present, because they kept stopping and staring at us. Although they refrained from coming up to us, there were a few kids who seemed to be Luna's friends who did come over, their eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Word of what was going on spread from there, and just before we reached Tida's class, we were on the verge of being completely surrounded. Thankfully, the commotion caught the attention of the teachers, who managed to disperse the crowd.

"Brother! Sorry I kept you waiting," Luna said.

"Yeah, what took you so long? Huh? Tenma?" Tida had been talking to some classmates, but turned when he heard Luna's voice before noticing me behind her. Then he saw Kriss, Albert, and the others, and exchanged a brief greeting with them, after which I explained the situation.

Luna asked if she could come along, and Tida said it was all right. He said it would take a while, though, and told Kriss she could go wait by the carriage—but she decided to come along anyway.

"Let's go, then. There's not much point in seeing the elementary and middle schools, but we can tour the high school and then the academy facilities," Leon said. He had initially been apprehensive that Tida might object, but now he took the lead with newfound enthusiasm. Apparently, he'd felt reassured when he hadn't sensed any negativity from Tida and Luna. Tida thought I'd come here accompanying Albert and the others, so he didn't seem to mind that Leon was

leading the way. Luna, however, expressed a bit of dissatisfaction when she heard that she wouldn't be guiding us through the areas she normally spent time in. But of course, Leon was oblivious to her feelings, and quickly led us out of the elementary school building.

"First, let's head to the cafeteria over there. I'd like to show you the student dorms too, but outsiders are strictly prohibited from entering those. The cafeteria is on the back side of the central building where the headmaster's office is."

The cafeteria was a two-story building located behind the main building. The lower floor had a store and a lounge.

The student dorms were, as he'd said, prohibited to outsiders, and comprised a two-story building behind the central building with an entrance and lounge in the middle. One wing served as the boys' dorms and the other served as the girls' dorms, with the dining hall and bathrooms on the second floor.

Kriss began to grin at Leon as he started talking about the bathrooms, and I wondered what that was about, but then Leon suddenly changed the subject. I decided to save that little bit of entertainment for later, because I knew she'd share the details with me even if I didn't ask.

The cafeteria was quite spacious, holding up to six hundred people at once. But there were one hundred seats for elementary and middle school, and then two hundred each for each of the high school divisions. By the way, even if seats for other departments were available, sitting in them without permission was considered a breach of etiquette and would lead to punishment.

"The food here is good, and it's quite affordable. As far as school facilities go, it's open pretty late, so even students and teachers who don't live in the dorms often have dinner there. They serve set meals, and the menu changes from day to day."

The most common meal was two pieces of bread, some soup, and a main dish. It would occasionally come with a salad. That cost 50G, which made it popular with students and teachers alike.

"You can also buy bread from the store downstairs or make your own food. You can bring in food from outside too, but the only way to do that is to go

early in the morning. Most of the people who use the cafeteria are commoner students who commute from home.”

By “go early in the morning,” Cain was referring to the fact that entering and leaving the academy grounds was prohibited outside of the designated arrival and departure times. So the only other option was to ask a friend to buy things for you.

Since it was a school holiday today, the cafeteria was closed, so we decided to purchase some food from the store. There was hard black bread, unsweetened jam, jerky, and chicken and fish in oil. Since it was a holiday, they were only selling nonperishables.

I ordered jam, canned chicken, and fish. Surprisingly, they were pretty good.

There were two types of jam: apple and citrus. They used minimal sugar, letting the natural sweetness and acidity of the fruits shine through. The canned chicken was almost like an ajillo, and the aroma of garlic and spices in the diced chicken made my mouth water.

The fish wasn’t as good as the chicken, but salty and still pretty tasty overall. They were some kind of sardines.

We were still hungry even after eating, though, so I decided to pull out some food from my bag as well.

Afterwards, with our bellies full, we set our sights on the second floor. Cain was so cheerful it was almost sickening. He was humming and even looked like he was on the verge of skipping. I glanced over at Albert, wondering if he knew what was up, but he looked just as clueless as the rest of us.

“Why are you in such a good mood, Cain?” Leon wasn’t a man known for his subtlety.

Cain merely chuckled, offering no other reply than “Heh heh!”

Baffled by his demeanor, we all stared at Cain. But just then, I heard footsteps echoing from somewhere. They were barely audible, but it sounded like they were rushing towards us.

I turned towards the source of the sound and recognized who it was. By that

time, however, she was about five meters away.

“Yaaaaaaaaaah!” She leaped at us with all her might, but I flung her away without breaking stride to maintain her momentum. She spun in midair before landing gracefully. “Found you, Tenma!”

It was Amur. Her sudden appearance left everyone in astonishment—except for Kriss, who was the only one who moved. She stepped in front of Tida and Luna and drew her sword to protect them, but once she realized who it was she quietly sheathed her sword again.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I came with everyone. They’ll be here soon.”

We didn’t know who she meant by “everyone,” so we all turned to look in the direction she’d indicated. And then I heard voices calling Amur’s name, voices that were very familiar.

“There she is!”

“Primera, Amur’s over there!”

“There, it’s her! Wait... Tenma’s here too?!”

“What?! He is?!”

Emerging from around the corner were the energetic triplets Lily, Milly, and Nelly, along with a very tired-looking Primera.

“Fancy meeting you in a place like this,” I called out to the four of them as I restrained Amur, who was attempting to hug me.

“Hey, just so you know, Primera got permission to visit and invited us to come! By the way, she invited Amur too, but the moment she passed through the gate...she went, ‘I sense something!’ and then started running! And then...”

“Stop it! If all three of you speak at once, no one can understand anything!”

They did always speak in perfect sync, so I caught the gist of it. But I needed to put a pause on the conversation and regain some composure. Once I did, I asked the question that was probably on everyone’s mind.

“So? Why are you here?”

“Brother! You’re here too? Everyone’s here! Oh, and Prince Tida and Princess Luna!” Primera exclaimed. Primera was so distracted by the triplets that she’d only just now noticed the others. She hurriedly knelt down to pay her respects.

“Oh, um. We don’t do that kind of thing at the academy, so please stand up,” Tida said.

“That’s right. This is the academy, and therefore you’re senior to us here, Lady Primera!” Luna said, with unusual elegance. She seemed to be getting better at being able to wear a mask in public. I couldn’t help but remember the first time I’d met Aura. Her facade had been impressive too...although it hadn’t lasted long.

As I was lost in such thoughts, Primera began explaining the situation. It turned out she was going to have to return to Gunjo City soon. The triplets had been allowed to accompany the knights on their travels in exchange for helping with various tasks, and so they all needed to return together.

They’d wanted to visit the academy since it was on holiday today. They’d gone by Gramps’s house, hoping to invite me along, but since I wasn’t there, they’d invited Amur, who had also come to the mansion only to find me absent. Once Amur had come through the gate of the academy, though, she’d “sensed something” (me) and dashed off, which had led to our current situation.

As I listened to Primera, I was quite busy dealing with the four of them. I noticed Leon casting me a somewhat resentful look, which Cain then began teasing him about.

“All right, all right. Let’s quiet down, everyone. There are other students around, and we don’t want to create a disturbance,” Kriss said, clapping her hands.

“That’s right, let’s listen to Kriss. Anyway, shall we get back to the tour? Let’s head up to the second floor.”

Cain was still in high spirits, and took charge as he began walking towards the stairs. Everyone trailed along behind him.

“Hey, Albert. Why is Cain so pumped?”

“Don’t ask me,” Albert replied indifferently. If those two didn’t know what

was going on, then the others probably wouldn't have a clue either. Or so I thought, but...

"Wait, isn't Cain's little brother a student at the academy? Maybe he's looking forward to seeing him," Primera timidly piped up. However, both Albert and Leon immediately denied it.

"I doubt that."

"Yeah, their relationship isn't bad, but it's not exactly good either. Cain was pretty upset about what his brother did. So I don't think that's it," Leon said, looking at me.

"Oh, that? I don't really care anymore. It's over and done with." He was, of course, referring to the dispute with Gary back in Sagan.

"Wait a minute. What if Cain is going to tease Gary because of Tenma?" Albert suggested, to which we all said in unison...

"That could be it!"

Luna seemed oblivious to what was happening, but Tida seemed to not want to believe it. Slowly, though, they were starting to understand Cain's true nature.

I wondered if Duke Sammons knew about all this. Or maybe he did know, and just didn't care? Well, there were some pretty weird nobles out there, but they still managed to govern their territories properly. So maybe it wasn't such a big deal after all.

Meanwhile, Cain was walking around like a character from a musical or something. I quietly tucked away the questions about him that had arisen in my mind.

"Oh! Brother, it's... Huh?!"

"Hey, good to see you! Oh, by the way, this is my new friend. We're pretty close now."

Gary, the second son of Duke Sammons, recoiled, making a noise like he'd just been caught in some kind of trap on a battlefield. On the other hand, Cain beamed as he patted my shoulder. I stood between the two of them, and the

moment our eyes met, Gary screamed, “Why is this happening?!”

As it turned out, this entire fiasco had begun about ten minutes ago.

After we’d arrived at the high school, we’d proceeded to the staff room to inform the teachers of our visit. The head of the high school had greeted us. He was familiar with the five graduates in our group. He also knew about Gary, Cain’s brother, and had politely provided information on his whereabouts.

Cain had been eager to see his brother, but the dean had said, “Take it easy on him, now...” Still, it seemed he knew Cain’s personality well, and had understood that any attempts to stop him would be futile. At the time, he’d tossed a subtle glance over at Kriss, who’d just shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

We’d followed Cain and made our way to the training grounds where Gary was supposed to be. That was where Cain had spotted Gary, and had promptly thrown his arm around my shoulders to drag me along with him.

Now, back to our story...

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—!”

“Huh? What am I doing here, you ask? I came to the academy for a visit. I’m a graduate, after all. It’s only natural that I’d want to come back and visit sometimes!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—!”

“Why is Tenma with me, you wonder? Well, my family and friends caused him some trouble, so I brought him along as an apology.”

Cain accurately deciphered Gary’s incomprehensible babbling, and replied to him with great amusement. There were several classmates training nearby, but since Cain was the heir to an upper-class noble family and surrounded by equally or even more famous individuals, nobody dared to inquire about Gary’s behavior despite their curiosity.

“It was quite a hassle, you know. Not only did you treat Tenma with disrespect, but you also committed some unspeakable acts. He saved you twice, yet you never apologized or even expressed any gratitude. So I ended up doing

so in your place. Not only that, but once Father told me you behaved disrespectfully towards Master Merlin, I was absolutely astonished!”

The students who’d overheard what Cain was saying stared at Gary in disbelief. Apparently, they were shocked that anyone would disrespect the sage Merlin. Some of the students knew about me, but since Gramps was way more famous, this behavior was more shocking to them. The color drained from Gary’s face as the students around him whispered, “What? Seriously? Is he an idiot?” or “I can’t believe he disrespected the sage like that...”

Gary trembled as people began whispering about him, and retorted, “I didn’t know he was the sage! I’d never seen him before! How could anyone recognize him if they’d only heard about him in books?!”

“But you were still disrespectful to him *after* he helped you! Regardless of nobility, it’s common decency, don’t you think? And even though your own father bowed his head to him, if you, as his son, maintain such an attitude, it’s like dragging your own father’s good name through the mud! And not just your father’s name either, but your entire family’s!”

Cain cornered Gary with these relentless statements, and the students nearby who’d overheard agreed, chiming in to condemn Gary. “Yes, it’s rude not to express gratitude in such a situation, regardless of whether he’s the sage or not!” It seemed Gary’s reputation was rapidly plummeting.

With Cain berating him along with the other students joining in, things were looking dire for Gary. Feeling sorry for him, I was about to throw him a lifeline, but then someone unexpected stepped in.

“Cain, that’s enough. We don’t know what the sage thinks about the situation, but if something truly unacceptable happened, wouldn’t he have at least filed a complaint with the marquis’s family, or with the royal family through Tenma?”

It was Leon. He looked at me, seeking agreement. When I nodded, he concluded, “To say anything more would be disrespectful to Tenma.”

And with just that, he put an end to the situation. I couldn’t help but wonder why he was acting like an actual noble all of a sudden, because I’d never seen him do so before. Everyone around us looked just as shocked.

Surprised by Leon's response, Cain seemed reluctant to agree, so they stared at each other for a while. At last, though, Cain relented. "All right, maybe I went too far. Sorry, Tenma. And thanks, Leon."

However, seeing as he hadn't addressed Gary with his apology, it was clear that he wasn't entirely convinced.

"Sorry for all the commotion! It was wrong of Gary to disrupt your training too." Albert apologized to the other students, then began pushing Cain towards the exit. Cain, surprisingly obedient all of a sudden, went along with Albert—but just as they were about to leave, he turned around again to face Gary.

"Sorry for getting so heated. But if you do anything else to tarnish our family name, I'll make you pay for it on our father's behalf." His usual demeanor belied this sudden display of ruthlessness. At these words, Gary slumped to the ground as if all his strength had left him, and frantically nodded. Other students also collapsed, intimidated by Cain's manner.

"Sorry again for the disturbance. I guess I was more upset than I thought. Well, shall we go? There are still plenty more places to explore."

Cain began to walk again, and seemed to be back to his normal, cheerful self. However, Amur, the triplets, and even Luna seemed frightened by him so they stayed behind me, keeping their distance.

"Cain, can I give you a bit of advice? Don't you think you should be a bit kinder?"

"I thought I was kind enough." Cain gave Leon a confused look.

"No. That wasn't kind by any stretch of the imagination. And being that hard on him might cause him to rebel," Kriss pointed out.

"Ha ha ha, no need to worry about that. He doesn't have the guts for that. Well...he might be tempted to, but if he does, I'll take responsibility for it and take care of things."

Even Kriss was taken aback by Cain's nonchalant reply. Honestly, I felt the same way.

Cain chuckled at my reaction. "Tenma, despite how I may seem, I *am* the

future marquis, after all. As the head of House Sammons, I'll have to protect many subordinates, noble families under my banner, and the citizens of my territory. So I have to eliminate anything that poses a threat to them—even if it's my own brother...or myself." Although he was smiling, his eyes were not—they exuded a sort of regal authority. What he said seemed to resonate with the other heirs, and they listened earnestly and attentively. Tida in particular seemed to be deep in thought as he listened to Cain's words with a serious look on his face.

After that, the mood in the air was heavy, but then Luna suddenly spoke up.

"But if you die, isn't it all pointless?"

Although she probably hadn't thought deeply about what she was saying, Cain's eyes widened in surprise, and then...

"Pfft! Ha ha ha! You're absolutely right! It's all meaningless if we die! So you should always keep people alive and make use of them, so long as they're valuable!"

I wasn't sure what he found so amusing. He must have misunderstood Luna's statement, because he casually added something that sounded quite ominous. "All right, I've decided! I'm going to consult with my father tonight!" Apparently he'd come up with some kind of idea, and was now in high spirits again. The somber mood from earlier was now gone.

There was a new cause for concern, but no one dared to bring it up. Hopefully, whatever it was wouldn't pose a threat to us, but at any rate, it was wiser not to pry into the unknown.

At the very least, Cain seemed like his usual self as he guided us around various parts of the academy. However, I didn't remember much of it, as the incident at the training grounds had left quite the impression on me.

The same seemed to be true of the four girls Primera had brought here. Partway through, the triplets grew bored and started wandering around on their own, having to be retrieved each time by Primera. Amur, on the other hand, skillfully paddled an imaginary canoe as we walked.

"Well, we've gone through the major parts of the high school now. What do

you think?”

Back at the cafeteria, we sat at a table by the window. We were taking a break and enjoying afternoon tea—provided by myself, of course.

I had Kriss to my right, Amur to my left, and next to her sat the dejected triplets. Leon was across from me, with Cain to his right, Albert to his left, and Primera beside him. As for Luna and Tida, they’d reluctantly left to go home.

“Umm, it wasn’t as impressive as I thought it would be. Especially the level of the classes,” I answered truthfully.

In the course of our exploring, we’d observed combat, magic, history, and arithmetic classes.

Most of the students in the combat classes were less skilled than the triplets, and even the best student was only slightly better than them. In a real combat situation, they’d definitely have lost to the triplets—as it seemed to me like the students had only memorized techniques, without having much actual battle experience.

Magical study was divided into classes on theory and application. However, the content was even less challenging than what I’d learned from Mom and Gramps when I was three. Moreover, the students seemed more interested in flashy magic, neglecting the basics just as they did in combat class.

Now, I wasn’t very well-versed in history, so I wasn’t confident in that area. Still, the questions were easy enough that even I could answer them, which surprised me. The content also seemed to be quite biased—meaning it favored accounts that were charitable towards nobles—so I felt it would be better if they introduced more neutral and culturally informed viewpoints.

Finally, there was arithmetic, although I had a hard time even calling it that. They focused more on addition and subtraction, with multiplication and division being less frequent. There were few word problems, and the class format mainly involved solving calculations given by the teacher.

There were several other classes we weren’t allowed to observe, but the ones we could were pretty disappointing.

“That’s a bit harsh. Most of the students in those classes are among the lower

ranks, you know,” Kriss said.

“Yeah. After all, the whole academy can’t be at your level, Tenma.” Leon also defended the academy.

“Leon was a regular in the remedial classes. Not the real academic ones,” Kriss said casually.

After that, the two of them started arguing, so Kriss promptly ushered them to the end of the table while Albert sat across from me.

“Basically, most of the students in the classes we observed today were those lacking credits or who are on the verge of dropping out, so this isn’t exactly a good baseline. After all, students with excellent grades wouldn’t bother attending remedial classes during vacation. Still, the difference compared to you is like night and day.”

Albert explained that the remedial classes were for students with lower grades, to which end the content had been significantly simplified. The regular classes were much more challenging.

This was to prevent otherwise talented students—essentially, the muscleheads—from simply dropping out. Incidentally, when Leon had been a student, he’d excelled in combat but had ranked lower in academics. Still, he’d managed to make it into Class A, which had made him stand out.

“There’s another reason Leon stood out, though,” said Kriss with a mischievous smile. She seemed eager to share that reason too.

“Wait a minute!” Albert leaned forward to cover Kriss’s mouth, but she deftly dodged his hand and pulled away.

“Actually, Tenma, back in the day those three were so afraid of women that there were rumors that they were all lovers. And since they’re heirs of a high-ranking noble family, that made them stand out even more. They even had a secret fan club.” Kriss smiled with amusement, but Albert had a glum expression on his face. The other two were still arguing. Primera smiled wryly, seemingly having heard this story before.

“And there’s more to that story. Leon wanted to prove that they weren’t lovers, so he started going around talking to girls, but not a single one

responded. That was because their fan club had threatened everyone behind the scenes.”

Albert was acting as though he hadn’t been involved, but his hand trembled as he held on to his cup of tea. I felt that there must have been something more to it. Meanwhile, the other two at the end of the table were pulling on each other’s cheeks like children.

“Wait, there’s more! Leon was so desperate, he tried to invade the women’s bathroom in a last-ditch effort to convince everyone he was interested in women! But I immediately kicked him and knocked him unconscious! Oh, and this was before he took off his clothes, so I didn’t see him naked or anything. If I *had*, he might not be alive to tell the story anymore.”

“That’s enough, Kriss... After all, he’s the next margrave...” Albert tried to stop Kriss, but she didn’t relent.

“Why are you so protective of him? You got blamed for it and punished with him too! Oopsie, I didn’t mean to spill the beans!”

“You did that on purpose!” Albert shouted. His voice echoed through the cafeteria, and the two who were still bickering finally noticed what was going on. They froze, still pulling each other’s cheeks, which looked quite hilarious.

“Kriss, these three are all heirs of high-ranking nobles. Are you sure it’s a good idea to tease them so much?”

Under normal circumstances, this kind of behavior could lead to charges of defamation, or worse. I was concerned, but Kriss seemed unfazed. The other three quietly averted their gazes.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyone involved in the matter at the time knows about it, and it’s something you can easily find out with a bit of digging. Besides, that’s not the worst thing these three have done. Anyway, I was the one who got in the most trouble! The headmaster would say, ‘Aren’t these three your responsibility?’ If it wasn’t for me, they—well, mainly Leon—might’ve been expelled!”

I wasn’t sure what else they’d gotten up to, but it did sound like the trio had been a total pain during their school days, and they seemed to hold Kriss in high

regard. Perhaps reading my thoughts, Albert and Cain began hastily making excuses.

“Wait a minute! Don’t look at us like that! We were just dragged into Leon’s mess!”

“Yeah, we’re the victims here! The real problem is Leon! We’ve always been treated unfairly!”

They were both quick to throw Leon under the bus, and frantically tried to explain themselves. Leon attempted to retort, but Cain covered his mouth and Albert promptly shut down any other attempts to speak. Then they began revealing the story of how they’d gotten caught up with Leon. However, they didn’t seem to realize that this sort of constant physical contact with Leon had contributed to the formation of their boys’ love fan club.

“S-So, how about we wrap things up soon?” Primera timidly asked, once the banter between the three of them began to cool off. Although there was still some time before sunset, it was getting late.

“I think so. Should we start heading back?” Kriss agreed, stretching. “Ahh, it’s just been a while since I had so much fun teasing these three!” She looked quite happy. On the contrary, the trio looked fatigued, but they didn’t complain. It really seemed like the hierarchy that had been established in their school days was still intact.

“I’m hungry, Tenma,” said Amur, suddenly speaking up. She’d been napping for most of the commotion, but whenever Cain came near, she would immediately open her eyes and stay close to me. It seemed she had developed quite an aversion to him today.

“Well, it was more fun than I thought it would be.”

“I wouldn’t think of enrolling here to study, though.”

“Yeah—it’s a waste of money,”

The triplets commented. They seemed to have enjoyed themselves to some extent, but couldn’t see themselves enrolling here. I agreed with them; from the perspective of an adventurer who was already making a decent living, paying to study here would only reduce the hours we could work, and just

didn't make much sense. Most other adventurers would probably have agreed.

After we left the cafeteria, we said our goodbyes to the headmaster and headed to Gramps's mansion. Everyone came with me; it seemed like they were all eager to eat dinner at my place.

Aina seemed to somehow have anticipated a crowd, because there was a large dinner prepared. Although she'd already returned to the castle, she'd left notes behind detailing the special training assigned to Jeanne and Aura, which they had been busy with. Then, regarding dinner, she'd said, "I made a bit extra because I thought there would be a lot of guests. Please make sure to properly store any leftovers."

However, although Aina had made a lot, she hadn't expected Primera and the girls to be joining us, so I began to prepare a variety of pasta with sauces that were easy to make. After that, we decided to take a bath before the meal.

Bathing could be done easily with magic, so I quickly got everything ready and called everyone. It turned out everyone wanted to try the bath, so despite some of them hoping for a coed bathing experience, I had rebuilt our home bathroom, and it was now divided into separate male and female sections.

Not only that, but each bath had options like an open-air bath, hot bath, showers, a sauna, a cold water bath, and deep submerging pools. There was a bath specifically for Shiromaru and my followers as well. Honestly, our bathrooms were more impressive than the one in the castle, and the king had even asked me to build one there.

However, due to the lack of a suitable location and the use of various magical tools, it would have been difficult for anyone other than me to maintain them, so he'd reluctantly given up on the idea. However, he had started visiting us for our baths more frequently.

The mood was quite lively when everyone was finished with their baths. This time, without Aina to get in the way, Leon, Cain, and the triplets—well, *especially* Leon—went a little wild.

In addition, Aura, who was finally free of Aina, was even more excited than usual.

But no one was as excited as Namitaro, who was thrilled to have this many ladies in the house. “Finally, my era has come!” he shouted. I wanted to think it was just his imagination running wild...but knowing him, anything was possible.

Sadly, due to her schedule as a knight in the king’s guard, Kriss had to leave right after the bath. I was worried that Kriss’s departure might prompt the king and others to show up, so I sent a letter and a bribe (shampoo and conditioner) along with her to Queen Maria, asking her to take care of the king and the others for me.

Now, I could hopefully prevent them from barging in. Well, I wouldn’t have particularly minded if they’d come, but I knew it would ruin the mood for the others. Thus, the party continued late into the night without issues.

Everyone mentioned having plans the next day, so they refrained from drinking too much. However, at one point Primera did accidentally drink very strong alcohol straight and ended up getting falling-down drunk, causing a commotion and temporarily halting the festivities.



However, since she'd only consumed a small amount and I'd immediately treated her with water-based magic to dilute the alcohol in her system, she didn't get alcohol poisoning.

The culprit (or should I say *koi-lprit*?) was Namitaro. He'd been so overly excited that he'd jokingly poured alcohol into Primera's glass, leading to the mishap. According to Namitaro, he said, "I thought she'd notice it by the smell or taste. I never expected her to down it all in one gulp."

Albert protested, so Namitaro was found guilty. He was rolled up into a bamboo mat and suspended from the ceiling. However, he remained calm and even tried to do a comedy act, saying things like "And now for my next trick, I shall turn myself into a sushi roll!" After that, I used Stun magic to forcibly put him to sleep.

Just then, an insensitive man commented, "You better be careful getting drunk like that, because someone might take you home with them someday!" This caused both the male and female attendees to glare at him with disapproval. That incident was a bit awkward, but all in all, everyone enjoyed the party, then went their separate ways.

Albert took the triplets and the drunk Primera back to their inn, while Cain and Leon went home. Amur had intended to stay overnight, but reluctantly returned to the inn after a nice bop to the head from her guardian Blanca, who'd come to pick her up.

I also returned to my room, but I made sure to collect Namitaro first to take him outside to sleep.

Late that night, Marquis Carlos von Sammons returned to his residence, a grand mansion nestled in the darkness. This wasn't his primary residence, and he only spent about three or four months there a year. Nevertheless, the estate was meticulously maintained in his absence, due to his sons who occupied the mansion while he was gone.

Unlike their father, the sons rarely returned to the family home in the Sammons domain. The second son in particular resided in the dormitory at the academy, and only visited the mansion occasionally.

Therefore, it was the oldest son who was most frequently present here. As the heir apparent, he had chosen to remain in the capital even after graduating from the academy, engaging in studies befitting a noble. Some might have viewed it as a sort of hostage situation, but the Sammons family was highly trusted by the royal family, so they didn't have any problems with him returning to the family estate. However, he remained in the capital all the same, to ward off speculation from other nobles.

Fortunately, he had some close friends his own age who also lived in the capital, so he didn't mind. Not only that, but it seemed like returning home would be painful for him—plus it was a headache for Carlos.

This son in question, Cain von Sammons, was there awaiting Carlos's return. The second son, on the other hand, was absent. This didn't concern Carlos, since that son tended to stay away when Cain was present due to an inferiority complex. That was easier for Carlos, anyway, because then he didn't have to worry that the boy would rebel against Cain and do something unnecessary.

Upon his father's arrival, Cain had said he had something important to discuss, so the two of them moved to Carlos's study where they could speak without the fear of nosy servants.

"What was the matter you wished to discuss, Cain?"

"I saw Gary at the academy today, and it got me thinking. We should either expel Gary from our family or immediately decide on an engagement for him. Also, I want to start looking for my own fiancée."

"What's brought this on? The last time I brought up marriage, you weren't enthusiastic at all." Carlos was surprised. Cain was twenty-two, and it was rare for a noble heir apparent to be single at his age. It wasn't unusual for a second or third son, but under normal circumstances, the eldest son would typically be at least engaged by now.

But Cain had a somewhat childish demeanor and preferred to spend time with his friends than tackle romance, so he'd come up with various excuses for postponing the matter.

Since he was a future marquis, he could find a suitable fiancée in a day if they really tried. Carlos had just been thinking he couldn't entertain Cain's whims for

much longer, and had been planning on finding him a fiancée soon. He had anticipated some pushback, so he couldn't help but wonder if there was some ulterior motive behind Cain's sudden willingness to get married.

"Don't look so concerned. I just realized I need to make the most of my position. Also, Gary can still be useful to us."

Carlos was surprised. Since when was Cain so serious? He was so often engaged in foolishness with his friends. However, although he could be silly, Carlos still believed in his potential to be a good marquis. And right now, he was showing more growth than Carlos had ever imagined.

If Cain was just trying to take advantage of Gary, Carlos might have suspected they'd argued, but Cain's willingness to consider his own future showed he was trying to make the most of his position as a noble.

Carlos found Cain quite dependable. If something were to happen to him in the near future, the Sammons family would still thrive under Cain's rule. However, that hopefully wouldn't happen for at least a few more years.

"I understand your reasoning. Let's start looking for candidates tomorrow. Do you have any preferences?"

Cain thought for a moment before answering. "Someone who would benefit our family. Second, the person shouldn't be foolish. Their relatives shouldn't be foolish either. Those are just my own personal preferences, but I can be flexible."

Carlos already had some candidates in mind. "Understood. I'll keep that in mind. What about Gary? What do you want to do with him?" As the head of house, this would normally have been Carlos's responsibility, and there was no need for him to receive input from others. But all the same, he'd decided to ask for Cain's opinion.

"I don't think we need to consider social standing for Gary's fiancée. The first priority is to find someone who will benefit our family. We could even marry into a merchant's family. After all, he's a noble. So even if he marries into a commoner family, our family's influence can let him retain his title. Besides, I can keep an eye on him that way. It's better not to send him into a powerful family because he'd just get manipulated."

Carlos frowned. After all, Gary had a criminal record. Not only had he picked a fight which could've severely damaged their family name, but he could even have turned the entire city against them.

"That's a good point. We can't afford to let him harbor ambitions. We have a good reputation with the royal family, and we're respected by influential nobles, which some might find displeasing. And Gary is very easy to manipulate. We should deal with that first."

Cain nodded, as if there was nothing more annoying than a useless and stupid relative.

"As for your fiancée, there's one candidate I have in mind..."

"It can't be Lady Primera," Cain interrupted his father. "First of all, Duke Sanga would never let her go. He dotes on her the most out of all of his children, and there are men more suitable for her than me. Besides, it won't sit well with the royal family."

Carlos was surprised. He hadn't expected Cain's answer to include the royal family's opinion.

"I think it would be most convenient for the royal family for Primera to marry Tenma. If Tenma marries her, either he would have to become a noble, or Primera would become a commoner. And since we know Duke Sanga won't allow the latter, the royal family would naturally consider giving Tenma a title. Even if he rejects it, if he wants to marry Primera, he would eventually relent. And if his parents were both former nobles, I can't imagine there'd be any issues, especially considering his track record. He'd at least be a count, or maybe a baron. It's only a matter of time." Cain paused and glanced at his father, but Carlos had no objections, gesturing for him to go on.

"After they make Tenma a count, they'll probably marry Princess Luna off to him as well. In this case, the princess would have a higher status, but the royal family would probably treat both of them as equal and legitimate wives, considering Duke Sanga's status. I doubt Tenma would reject Princess Luna, and the same goes for Primera. I don't see an issue there. Regarding children, they would probably designate Primera's children as the formal heirs for his house and establish a new house for Princess Luna's children. Perhaps a grand duchy

or a defunct house of the royal family, which would resolve any problems regarding inheritance. As an added bonus, they could make Jeanne, Tenma's maid, his concubine...which might prompt a few neutral nobles to switch sides and align with the royalists. Of course, this is all just speculation, and I won't claim it's what will happen, but considering His Majesty's position, it wouldn't be unusual if he'd contemplated something along those lines. Besides, if we were to propose to Primera and have the proposal rejected by the duke, it could damage our reputation and lead to strained relations. All that to say, we should drop the idea of me marrying Primera. It's too risky."

Carlos couldn't just laugh this off. If Cain turned out to be right, it wouldn't just strain relationships with Duke Sanga, but also tarnish their reputation with the royal family. His house maintained close relationships with both parties, after all. Why hadn't he thought of this himself?

"It seems you won't see the Sammons and Sanga families joined together in this generation," Cain said playfully.

It frustrated Carlos a bit, knowing his son had outmaneuvered him. However, as they continued their discussion, Carlos truly enjoyed spending this time with his son. The night was filled with surprises, joy, and opportunities alike.

Part Eight

Two days after we toured the school, Primera and the others left the royal capital. Since she led the fourth order of the Gunjo City knights, who were predominately made up of nobles, their departure was quite a grand affair.

It wasn't an official event organized by the royal family, but a gathering thought up by those who'd decided on their own to turn it into an event. Still, with over a hundred nobles gathering, it was only natural to assume that some unsavory characters would show their faces. Therefore, the royal family ordered for guards to be stationed around the nobles, which created a tense atmosphere.

But thanks to those precautions, about a dozen or so individuals who attempted theft or kidnapping were arrested. Unfortunately, they couldn't prevent every crime from happening, and a few nobles and many more commoners fell victim to the criminals. Thankfully, however, the crimes were all minor.

Of course, the criminals tried their luck with us too. But we fought them off, and there were no casualties.

By my side were Gramps, my followers, Aina, Namitaro, Duke Sanga and Albert, Marquis Sammons and Cain, Leon and Kriss, and even Blanca and Amur. So, as you can imagine, we looked pretty conspicuous. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have attended such an event, but I hadn't been able to say no since it was a send-off for Primera and the triplets, and therefore I had to put up with curious stares from the rubbernecks.

The triplets had schemed to stay in the royal capital, but to no avail—since they were here to accompany the knights, Primera had managed to convince them to go back home.

Afterwards, when all was said and done, I murmured to myself, "They're really gone, huh?"

"What's wrong, Tenma? You miss them that much?" Namitaro teased me. However, I found myself nodding earnestly.

My honest reply surprised everyone around me (although after the initial shock had worn off, Duke Sanga and Albert quietly celebrated my reaction). I quickly began to explain in order to clear up any potential misunderstandings, as Amur was pinching my arm. I could have ignored it if it had been a light pinch, but since she was a beastfolk girl, she had considerably more strength than the average person, and it was causing me unbearable pain.

“At the end of the day, I’ve known the triplets for a really long time now, and Primera and I have gone through a lot together too. They’re some of the only true friends I have.” I spoke with a sense of nostalgia as I peeled Amur off of me. It was sad to admit, but true. I had few friends. Although Namitaro had technically been my very first friend, the triplets had been my first friends outside of my followers, followed by Primera.

When I said that, Kriss pouted and pointed at me as if to say, *Hey, what about me?*

“Kriss, you always left me behind to play with Shiromaru,” I pointed out. At these words, she quickly turned away.

Aina even chuckled mockingly at Kriss, and within a few moments we had completely defeated her—she was speechless.

“Well, let’s head back now,” Gramps said, and everyone began to move at once.

But a few moments later, Amur tugged at my sleeve. “Tenma, I have a favor to ask. Can you fix this?” She took out the magical item she’d worn during the tournament—the Bandit King’s armor. Well, it looked more like a full bodysuit made out of fur, but she referred to it as armor.

When she unfolded it, I could see that Jin’s attack had ripped it from under the chin all the way down to the right leg, and that someone had clumsily, yet carefully tried to sew it back together.

“Do you think it can be fixed?” she asked hopefully.

I tried to use “Identify” on the armor, but just like before, the ability was blocked. Apart from the crude sewing job, though, it seemed fine.

“Watch... See?” She took the armor from me and put it on. There was a

zipper-like fastener in the front, but because it was torn down the middle and had clumsy stitching, it kept snagging along the way and took a long time to put on. Once she'd managed to pull up the zipper, the armor inflated as if it were filled with air, and once again, she looked like the Bandit King I had originally encountered.

This surprised everyone, but as soon as she moved a little, the air began leaking out, and eventually she was just kind of dragging the armor around like a deflated robe. Everyone looked dumbfounded by the strange sight.

Blanca told us that this armor had been passed down to Amur by her great-grandfather, who'd passed away when she was young. Amur had loved her great-grandfather, and as such, wanted to fix the armor no matter what.

Originally, it'd had the effect of boosting abilities needed for hunting, and when it had been adapted to fit Amur, magical energy had filled the gaps in the armor. That was why using it made her temporarily appear much larger.

“Oh—like a mascot costume! Like Funassyi! Or the Mobile Trace System from *Mobile Fighter G Gundam*!”

Everyone apart from me was completely baffled by Namitaro's interjection. But since it was pretty common for him to say incomprehensible things, they quickly lost interest. On the other hand, since I understood his references, I was desperately holding back laughter. After all, I loved both of the characters he'd mentioned.

I took the armor from Amur, and told her that I didn't know how to repair it and might not be able to at all, but that I would try. And since Amur didn't have any other options, she agreed.

“Hey, Tenma? Actually, I want you to make something for me too.” Just as I was trying to leave again, Namitaro stopped me. I thought that surely whatever he wanted could wait until we'd gotten back to the house, but since it went along with Amur's request, he wanted to tell me now.

“See how my hands are? If I have a knife and fork, I can eat most things, but it's still pretty inconvenient. I can't even peel an orange! So I want you to make something like Giganto's hands for me, but human-sized ones.”

Hmm, it was true that it would be quite difficult to peel an orange with fins, but...why was he using a knife and fork in the first place?

“Oh! My hands are like Doraemon’s hands!” he quickly clarified. Now it made sense why he could use knives and forks at all.

“I can do that for you, but not for combat use. If you want to use them for combat, that will take a while to make.”

“That’s okay! Actually, if I use them for combat, I think it might actually make me more vulnerable. All I need is for them to be reasonably sturdy and not prone to rust.”

In that case, it would be pretty similar to making a golem, so it wouldn’t take much time. I decided to accept Namitaro’s request. For now, though, since Amur had asked first, I decided to prioritize her request.

I worked on the repairs for a few days, but...

“Is this impossible?”

...I almost gave up on the first attempt. The fur was too rough, and regular needles couldn’t even pierce it—instead, they ended up bent. Who knows how many needles I’d ended up sacrificing for the cause. I consulted Kelly, and she provided me with the special needles she used for leather armor. However, the price for these needles started at 100G each...

In other words, each needle cost ten thousand yen! I used Identify on one and found out it was made from mythrill, which meant the high price was due to the rarity of the material used to create it, as well as the costly process itself. By the way, the needles didn’t have a hole for threading them like ordinary needles—they were more like fishing hooks.

So, I eagerly tried working on the armor in Kelly’s workshop with my new needles, only for the tips of these needles to bend too. I was shocked, and so were Kelly’s employees.

“Wow—this is the first time I’ve ever seen fur that mythrill needles can’t pierce!” she said.

In the end, I had to sew the armor with orichalcum needles, which were

typically used for dragon skins (and priced at 1,000G each). Later on, when Amur showed me the needles she'd used to try to patch the armor, they were indeed made of orichalcum. That information would have been useful from the start, but she'd forgotten to tell me, which led to quite the scolding from Blanca. It wasn't a huge deal since Kelly could straighten out bent needles, but still.

Now that the needle issue was resolved, my next challenge was the actual stitching. Amur had tried and failed with a regular stitching method, so I had to come up with a different approach. I tried overlapping and weaving the stitches to get the fabric to stay together better, but this method made the fur about four times thicker than usual, which made each individual stitch take forever. Not only that, but the fur was shorter in the places where it overlapped. This was rather ugly, and prevented the zipper from closing properly.

"I guess I should just admit that I can't do it..."

Amur seemed to have realized it was a lost cause, but she was way more disappointed than I thought she'd be, since it was the first time she'd asked me for anything, yet it had come to naught. By the way, I'd already finished Namitaro's request, as I'd been working on it on the side while trying to repair the Bandit King's armor. If Namitaro approved the design, all that was left were the final adjustments and checks to make sure the hands functioned. It had actually been much easier than I'd expected, probably because I'd already made something similar in the past.

The most time-consuming part had been gathering the materials, and even that only consisted of me asking Kelly for help.

Namitaro's human-sized Giganto hands were made from mythril, magic iron, and magic stones. I'd crushed the magic stones and mixed them with the magic iron to create the main structure, then added a thin coating of mythril. I'd left about a ten-centimeter margin of magic iron exposed at the base of the arms to enhance magical conductivity.

They resembled mannequin arms and had a total length of about one and a half meters, with a diameter of fifteen centimeters. The joints were also based on a mannequin's, and were quite flexible. However, I'd made sure that they

couldn't bend in the opposite direction excessively, just like human joints.

The arms were hollow on the inside, and I'd threaded thin mythrill wires through the hollow space, which mimicked nerves and allowed for intricate movements. Due to the complexity of the controls, it wasn't suitable for the general public, but Namitaro could master it. By the way, it had only taken me two days to complete.

"It's done, Namitaro," I called out to him as he basked in the sun in the yard. Today's weather was perfect for sunbathing, with warm, gentle sunlight. Shiromaru and Solomon were next to him.

"What? You're done already? That was fast!"

"Graaar!"

"Squee!"

Namitaro began scuttling towards me, and then a beat later, I heard Shiromaru and Solomon cry out.

After an unfortunate experience on a sunny day when he had nearly turned into a mummy (dried fish), Namitaro had learned his lesson, and now only sunbathed in a special wooden bucket filled with water. However, when he'd started to move, he'd tipped over the bucket and soaked both Shiromaru and Solomon.

They scratched and bit him in protest, but Namitaro didn't seem to mind. They weren't seriously attacking him, anyway, plus Namitaro's scales were just as strong as an earth dragon's, or maybe even stronger.

"Hey, you two—that smarts! Now, let's see how it feels." Despite being bitten around his waist and neck, Namitaro looked relaxed as he leaned towards me. I handed him the arms, and he swung them around lightly to check the weight.

"It's lighter than I thought they would be. So, how do I use them?"

"Send magical energy from the base upwards, and it'll move. It might be challenging to move it at first, but with practice, you should be able to manipulate it like a human hand. Also, take this. Think of it like a reference book."

I handed him a book on summoning, written by Marquis Sammons. Namitaro took the book and turned the pages with his fin. Although he had to lie down to read it, this was the best he could do, since he couldn't hold it out in front of him yet.

"Interesting—but why do I need to learn summoning magic?" He looked puzzled after having flipped through a few pages.

I had several reasons for giving him the book, but there was one main reason. "With this, you can temporarily have four arms like my Giganto. It'll be more difficult to operate, but having your hands free can be very convenient."

Actually, when I'd first started using Giganto, I'd been using a combination of Time-Space magic and summoning magic without even knowing it.

This was a method I'd devised—I connected the bag containing Giganto to a designated location using Time-Space magic. Then, I summoned Giganto with Time-Space magic to make use of it. But once I'd read Marquis Sammons's book, I'd realized that I was actually using a method quite similar to summoning magic.

In other words, summoning magic was an application of Time-Space magic. And if Namitaro wanted to learn the method I used, there was no better reference book than this.

I'd briefly considered writing down my own method in a book, but I relied so much on intuition that it was difficult for me to put things into words. Plus, I had a feeling that my method had been influenced by Creation Magic (that is, magic that takes things you imagine and materializes them), so in the end I'd given up on the idea.

"I don't know if I can learn Time-Space magic, but I'll give it a try!" Namitaro said, but personally, I thought he had already learned Time-Space magic. After all, he already possessed a Conceal skill of level 10, so there was no doubt that he had other various hidden abilities.

But unless he decided to tell me himself, there was no need to point this out, as the knowledge meant little to me. Not only that, but I didn't want to slip up and damage my relationship with Namitaro.

“Well, do your best. It’s definitely worth learning, and since you’ll probably live for another few thousand years, you’ve got plenty of time.”

That might have been the best way I could put it. Despite his fishy appearance, we were both from Earth. So in a way, he was my number one friend—though it made me pretty sad to admit that my first real friend wasn’t human, and a carp at that...

“Yeah—I’ll give it a try! Besides, it might be surprisingly easy once I give it a shot!” Namitaro responded, seemingly aware that I had an inkling of what was going on. He must have been prepping a story for how he would take to it so easily.

“Well, for starters, I’ll hold them with my pectoral fins and move them around. Wait, if this is done, that must mean that you finished Miss Tiger’s request too! How’d it turn out?” he asked, casually changing the subject.

I mentioned I wasn’t done with Amur’s request yet, and he gave me a stern look and stood up straight.

“In that case, you should’ve at least given her a heads-up before making mine! It’s too late now, but we should head over there right away!” he lectured, then urged me to go to the inn where Amur and the others were staying, literally smacking me on the backside the whole way there. Shiromaru and Solomon followed along. I thought Rocket had decided to stay behind, but then belatedly noticed he’d ended up riding on Shiromaru’s back.

Amur and the others were staying at a simple yet high-quality inn for adventurers in the capital. The inn was popular because it wasn’t too expensive for the quality. By the way, it was managed by Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha.

“Welcome! Sorry if you’re looking to stay, but we’re fully booked... Oh, it’s you, Tenma! What brings you here?”

“Hello, Uncle Mark. I came here to see Amur and Blanca.”

Uncle Mark was at the reception desk. It was Aunt Martha who had established this inn, and she employed lots of people from Kukuri Village as staff members, so there was always a friendly face at the reception desk when I

came to visit.

Since it was impossible to hire everyone, she'd adopted a rotation system, giving her employees more days off and also allowing them to earn extra income by working as adventurers on the side.

I'd also recently employed Aunt Martha to look after Jubei and the other buffalo, in exchange for their milk. Essentially, although Aunt Martha wasn't living a life of luxury, she made a decent living here.

There were a few other inns run by people from Kukuri Village, and it seemed like they all helped each other out in various ways.

"All right. There are rules, though, so I'll have to escort you to the room."

This was a security measure that almost every inn had.

The inn was a three-story building. On the first floor, there was a dining room and four staff rooms, and the second and third floors had twelve guest rooms each. The rooms were a bit small for one or two people, but they were kept clean and it cost 500G for one person per night, which included two meals a day. That was about two-thirds of the average lodging price in the capital. If it was a two-person room, you got a discounted rate of 400G per person. You could rent a two-person room by yourself for 600G, and there were extended stay plans available as well.

"Here we are. Blanca, you have a guest," said Uncle Mark, as he knocked on the door of their room. Blanca, who had already sensed someone approaching, came out right away. "Well then," Uncle Mark went on, eyes going wide, "I'll be heading back now." He said this calmly, but I could tell by his expression that he was startled by Blanca's appearance, and that his heart was probably pounding.

"I had a feeling it was you, Tenma," said Blanca. "The little miss here was acting restless. What's up? Is the item she requested comp—"

Before he could even finish his sentence, Amur pushed him aside. "Tenma, is it done?!" Her eyes were shining brightly.

With a sense of guilt, I told her it was impossible. She hugged the Bandit King's armor to her chest and sadly lowered her eyes. "It can't be fixed at all?"

“Not with my skills, unfortunately. I asked Kelly, but she said she couldn’t do it either. She said that if we reused the material, we could turn it into another piece of armor, though.”

Amur looked up and shoved the armor back into my arms. “In that case, remake it. It’s better than leaving it like this. Grampy Kei would be happy with that!”

Blanca told me that Grampy Kei had been Amur’s great-grandfather, and the first Bandit King.

“Seriously? Aina said he lived over a hundred years ago! Just how old was this Grampy Kei?!”

“As far as I know, he was roughly around 120 when he died, but I’m not certain,” Blanca answered, stroking his chin thoughtfully. He said it was fine to mention that the Bandit King was Amur’s relative, but probably best not to spread his real name too widely. Apparently, Grampy Kei had never been thrilled with the idea of being famous, so he’d concealed his identity by wearing the Bandit King’s armor. A few days before his death, he’d jokingly said, “Those are my last wishes!” or something like that. The cause of death was probably old age. When Amur’s father had gone in to check on him, he was just found peacefully sleeping in bed. And since no one remembered him being sick, they’d chalked it up to old age.

“He just kept growing older and stronger. After all, he was over a hundred years old when he bested both me and Amur’s father. He wasn’t just strong—he was also a very skilled fighter.”

“Only Mom could beat Grampy Kei,” Amur revealed, interrupting Blanca’s story. So in other words, Grampy Kei was stronger than Blanca, but Amur’s mother was the strongest of all. Just how strong was she, anyway...? “By the way, Blanca can’t beat his wife either,” Amur added.

Hmm, it seemed there was another formidable opponent at the level of the Bandit King. Blanca turned away, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

“Setting that matter aside... What kind of armor do you think you can make, Tenma?” Blanca asked, referring to the Bandit King’s armor.

I thought for a moment and told him I could make a hooded cape, gloves, gauntlets, shin guards, a chest plate, and pants.

There wouldn't have been enough material for an ordinary-sized person, but Amur was petite, so I thought I could do all that if I got creative with the material. The only problem would be cutting the leather.

"Hmm, then go ahead. But can you make it a bit larger and give me room to grow? I should have a growth spurt soon, so I should get taller and my chest should grow bigger...hopefully."

Amur was around that age, so she was right—I should make it a bit bigger. In that case, I could use belts and straps to make it adjustable. That way, even if she didn't end up growing much, she could wear clothes underneath to pad it.

"All right. I can make it easier for you to adjust the size," I said, and Amur seemed content with that.

Then, for some reason, she casually began to take off her clothes right in front of me, but Blanca and I quickly stopped her. She gave us a curious look and said, "How can you measure my size over my clothes?"

Fortunately, I persuaded her to let Kelly do it, since I'd planned to consult with her about the armor anyway. By this time, she had a goose egg on top of her head like something out of a manga, courtesy of Blanca.

"If you're free, I was thinking of going to Kelly's place now. What do you say?" I asked Amur, who was rubbing her head in pain. She immediately nodded and went back inside to get ready. Blanca said he would come along as well.

"Okay, I'll wait downstairs in the dining room, so just come down whenever you're ready," I said, and then went downstairs.

This inn was rather unusual by the standards of this world: outside guests weren't allowed in the dining room. So, Namitaro and the others were the only nonpaying guests here. We had of course gotten special permission from Aunt Martha and Uncle Mark to use the dining room whenever we pleased.

It was difficult for the two of them to keep up with the demand of outside customers because of the number of employees at this inn. And since they worked on a rotating basis, the menu was ever-changing. This meant that the

inn pretty much broke even.

The basic profit of an inn comes from lodging fees and bar sales. To run a bar, obviously, you need to buy the alcohol and other ingredients. If this had been a normal town, the villagers would probably have opened a bar, but since we were in the capital, there was too much competition. It was a tough business for newcomers to break into. Plus, smaller inns inevitably fell short in various aspects, and they couldn't compete with long-established businesses who had built up relationships with suppliers. So it had been a conscious choice for them to just run this place as an inn, without including a bar.

But that business model wasn't without its uncertainties. So, in order to make themselves stand apart from other inns, they'd decided to reduce the lodging fees and not open the dining room to outsiders.

This strategy attracted customers who preferred a quieter inn, those looking for more affordable accommodations, and those with other special circumstances. That was why the inn was so popular. Then, other savvy businesspeople had noticed the inn's success and opened up restaurants and bars nearby to capitalize on the customers' business. This created a beneficial situation for everyone involved, and only added to the inn's popularity.

Well, enough about that. Unfortunately, in the present, a certain someone had been completely destroying this quiet dining room.

"Tenma, I'm sorry... But you'll need to pay for this." Uncle Mark placed a hand on my shoulder as he told me to take responsibility for the mess that had unfolded in front of us.

"This is surprisingly difficult, Tenma!"

I watched as Namitaro continued practicing with the arms I'd given him, diligently working on his exercises. The table in front of him was piled full of crushed vegetables and fruit. Apparently, he'd decided to practice using his arms now on ingredients from the inn...and had failed quite spectacularly.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Mark..." I handed him a gold coin to pay for the fruit and vegetables, then summoned Giganto to lift Namitaro up into the air. "What do you have to say for yourself, Namitaro?"

“Eek! Tenma, you pervert!”

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. I used Giganto to slam Namitaro onto the floor several times, froze him with Ice magic, then tossed him into my bag. Then, when I finally came back to my senses...

“Tenma. You'll be paying to repair the floors too.” A vein bulged in Uncle Mark's forehead as he demanded repayment. He told me it would cost one large gold coin to repair the floor (10,000G), so I handed over five extra gold coins as compensation for having inconvenienced him.

I could have repaired the floor with my magic had it been made of stone or dirt, but as it was made of wooden boards, the only option was to replace what had been damaged. I had often doled out this punishment to Namitaro at home, so I vowed to be more aware of my surroundings before summoning Giganto from now on...

“Hmm, I see. No wonder it was so noisy downstairs.”

I explained what had happened to Amur and Blanca on the way to Kelly's workshop. They'd come down just as we were being kicked out of the dining room, so they hadn't seen the whole thing.

“Namitaro's in the bag, but...is he alive?” Amur asked with concern. But there was no need to worry about him. After all, we could hear a small voice coming from the bag. It was saying, “Let me out! It's cold! Hurry up and let me out!”

Amur wasn't worried anymore once she realized she could hear him. If he was speaking, that meant that at least the ice that covered his head had melted. For all I knew, the ice might have completely melted by now—maybe he was just being dramatic. Interacting with him would only egg him on, so I decided leaving him alone was best. And before we knew it, we'd arrived at the workshop.

“Okay, we're here. Hey, Kelly.” There were a few customers, but employees were already attending to them, and Kelly was leaning over the counter looking bored.

“Hmm... Oh, it's you, Tenma. What's up?”

“You don’t look very enthusiastic, Kelly.”

Kelly listlessly turned her face towards me, still sprawled over the counter.

Shiromaru and Solomon didn’t like the narrow front area of the shop, so they’d gone into the workshop in the back on their own, but no one seemed to care. In fact, the female dwarves in the back room started preparing snacks for them.

“Well, there’s been a lot of really stupid customers lately, and I’m getting sick of dealing with them. I’m even thinking of moving my shop because of it.”

According to her, the stupid customers demanded things like “Give me better weapons!” or “Make me an original weapon!” or “Make me weapons with special effects!” And whenever Kelly *did* recommend a weapon that suited their needs, they’d get angry and say, “You’re just a woman, what do you know?!”

It was only natural Kelly was losing motivation.

“Who would make weapons that their wielders can’t even handle?! Honestly!” she said indignantly, and the customers around her nodded in agreement. These people seemed to be loyal customers of hers who were concerned about her being abused by stupid customers.

“Okay. I’ll take this and this. Kelly, just don’t worry about those idiots.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Yeah, if you let the idiots win, we’ll be in trouble too! We’ll help in any way we can, so don’t hesitate to ask!”

The customers left the workshop with parting words of encouragement to Kelly. The last customer flipped the sign hanging on the door from “Open” to “Closed,” but none of the employees bothered to turn it back around. Instead, they just locked the door and decided to take a break.

Apparently, everyone was worried about Kelly. Luckily, I’d come at just the right time so she could vent her frustrations to me.

“That sounds tough, Kelly. But why are there so many stupid customers all of a sudden?” I asked. Her eyes glinted as she looked at me.

“The cause...is you! *You’re* the cause, Tenma!” Kelly grabbed me by the collar

and started shaking me back and forth. But I had no idea what she was talking about, and tried to stop her. Since she was a dwarf, she was incredibly strong, and she was also very agitated, so it was a lot tougher than I thought. Eventually, Amur and Blanca had to intervene, and they finally got Kelly to calm down.

“Sorry, Tenma... I’m just taking my frustrations out on you. But you are part of the problem.”

According to Kelly, rumors had spread that the weapons I’d used when I’d won the tournament and slain the earth dragon had been made by her. From that, some people had gotten the wrong idea and thought that Kelly’s weapons were responsible for the feats I’d pulled off, so they’d begun demanding similar weapons from her and causing a commotion.

“People are obsessed with weapons. And if you can handle them, you’re first-rate. But if you can’t, then you’re just a first-rate clown,” Blanca commented.

“Exactly! If they just want the same weapons, I’ll gladly provide them, but if they can’t handle them and end up dead, I’ll be the one who gets blamed, since I made the weapons! I can’t stand it!”

Blanca’s comment had only managed to rile Kelly up again. Although this might not have been a significant issue for a regular arms dealer, it was a huge deal for Kelly, since she was known for crafting custom weapons.

Ultimately, the responsibility lay with the person who’d ordered the weapon, but people weren’t always logical about things. Some might end up blaming the weapons, and if her fellow blacksmiths or complete strangers believed those stories, it would damage her reputation. Even if they didn’t believe such rumors wholesale, people generally try to avoid shops they’re not too sure about.

It wouldn’t pose much of a threat to someone who ran a large-scale smithy, but it was a matter of life or death for Kelly. And if people didn’t understand and continued to blame her, even someone as tough as her might end up down in the dumps.

“So I just don’t want to do anything for a while...” she groaned. Her intense emotional fluctuations were quite concerning, and I began to feel anxious as I wondered about how to help.

Amur wanted to have armor made using the Bandit King's armor as a basis, but repairing it was beyond my capabilities. That was why I'd wanted to ask for Kelly's help, but there was no way that Kelly could contribute in her current state.

"By the way, sorry it took so long to ask, but what brings you here?"

Though the question had come a little late, I gave her an honest answer. And then...

"Ohh?" When I mentioned Amur's armor, Kelly's eyes regained their spark. I kept explaining, and very slowly, life returned to her face. The employees who were hiding in the shadows near the door silently celebrated at the sight.

"That's quite an interesting project, but I'm not sure the existing materials will be enough to work with... Oh! You're going to use all that too?!"

Then, when I informed her about the materials I planned to use, her excitement suddenly skyrocketed. She quickly began sketching a design out on a piece of paper.

"This is wonderful! This job is worth hundreds of requests! Tenma, bring the materials to the workshop now! And somebody go to the warehouse and find some suitable ornaments! If you can't find anything good, go buy some!"

I'd only planned on coming here to consult with her, but now it seemed like she wanted to make the whole thing. Since she was the professional here and I'd only provided the ideas, I probably should've just let her do it all. Still, I was a bit hesitant to turn the entire project over to her.

"There, it's done! I added some of my own improvements based on your ideas, Tenma!"

"I would've expected nothing less."

"Wow!"

"Oooh!"

Everyone crowded around to look at Kelly's design, and we all exclaimed in admiration.

"The only question is if the little lady here will like it. What do you think?"

Personally, I think it's the best work I've ever done."

"It's awesome! Please make this!" Amur also seemed to be caught up in the excitement—she bowed, giving her approval.

"Then let's get started right away! Hee hee hee. My arms are tingling!" Kelly seemed to be back to her usual self as she headed towards the workshop, licking her lips. And of course, I followed, since she was dragging me along behind her.

"I'll have it completed in a few days, so look forward to it, Amur!"

"Um, Blanca? Sorry about this, but can you pass a message to Gramps and tell him I won't be back for a while?" I said, as I was being dragged off by Kelly.

Blanca raised a hand in response, then began negotiating with the nearby female dwarves.

Three rather sleepless days later, Amur's new armor stood before us. It wasn't completely done, since the final adjustments still needed to be made. But both Kelly and I couldn't stop grinning at our craftsmanship. My leather armor was placed next to it, but being quite plain, it was pretty dull in comparison.

"It's done... I did a great job, if I do say so myself! This was the perfect outlet to vent all my pent-up frustration! I'm glad I was able to finish yours in my spare time too, Tenma! Couldn't have asked for more!"

"Don't make me sound like an afterthought... Although I get what you mean," I said. The leather armor didn't look very different from the one I'd used before. We'd taken apart the old one to use it as a pattern, and had just made what was essentially a copy, since I had liked it so much.

It wasn't entirely identical, of course, because I'd contributed some new ideas to the design, and the quality of the materials was significantly higher—it had been somewhat challenging to make. But since Kelly had already known what it would look like, she didn't think it was as exciting as Amur's armor.

By the way, we'd used the earth dragon's skin, and the lining was made from the elastic part of the wyvern variant's skin. That was the main difference in this

new set of armor. The other differences included changing metal parts to cords or belts, as the earth dragon's and wyvern's skins were sturdier and didn't need such fastenings. Cords and belts were also easier to maintain and replace than metal parts.

"Well, you know what I mean. We pretty much just made you another set of the same armor. I can't help myself."

Amur's armor was almost completely original, and even I thought it was more exciting than mine, so it was understandable why Kelly was so crazy about it. I wanted to go tell Amur about it right away, but as it was very early in the morning, I decided to work on making adjustments to my own armor instead.

"Speaking of adjustments, I tried it on a bunch as we were making it, so there isn't much left to do. It's still a bit stiff, but it'll soften up as I use it more."

In the end, the adjustments only took about ten minutes, and all I did was shorten the belts and cords. Even that required the use of an orichalcum chisel, though, which just went to show how tough the earth dragon's materials were.

By the time Amur and Blanca arrived, we'd already finished cleaning up, taken our morning baths, and eaten breakfast. We wrote some things down for future reference and noted points for improvement. Once we reached a stopping point, one of the employees went to fetch Amur and Blanca.

"Oooh!" Amur immediately started freaking out once she saw the armor. Blanca held her from behind by the collar so she didn't start jumping around.

"Settle down. We still have to make some adjustments. First, try it on."

Kelly took Amur, who was still being restrained by Blanca, to the back of the workshop. Several female dwarves followed behind them.

"Does it look good?" Amur asked us how it looked, and we gave her our honest impressions.

"Even better than I expected."

"It fits you perfectly."

The armor consisted of a hooded cloak, a chest plate, a waist wrap, gauntlets, and shin guards. All the armor surfaces were made with the pattern from the

Bandit King's armor, which was a tiger-stripe pattern that covered almost the entire body. It was perfect for Amur, who was a tiger beastfolk girl.

Although the tiger stripes would've looked good on Blanca as well, the reason he said it was perfect for her was because of the cloak—we'd used the head of the Bandit King's armor, which resembled a wrestler's mask, for it. Since the armor's head was larger than Amur's, we'd had to stuff it with padding to fit her. We'd adjusted the size so that the upper jaw of the head aligned with her forehead, allowing it to serve as a helmet without obscuring her vision. The hood was also detachable, so she could use it as a regular cloak when she didn't need the hood.

We'd used the wyvern variant's skin for the lining of each piece of equipment, making it much sturdier and more durable than regular metal armor. The waist wrap was a belt made from the skin of the earth dragon, and when the whole suit was worn, the fur covered most of her body.

"How does it feel?" I asked Amur, who was spinning around.

She struck a pose like Kamen Rider and said, "I'm super satisfied!" She liked it so much, she kept on the armor even after we were done with the adjustments.



“Oh! Here, Tenma.” Suddenly remembering something, she approached me and took out a bag from her backpack, which she then handed over to me. I opened it up and saw that it was filled with gold coins. I counted them and came up with a total of two hundred gold coins, or 2,000,000G.

“This is way too much, Amur. Most of the materials were from the Bandit King’s armor, and even if you add up the cost of the wyvern and earth dragon materials, plus labor, it’s probably only about half of this.” I checked with Kelly just to be sure, and she said the market price would have been around 600,000G (300,000G for the materials and 300,000G for labor).

“Don’t worry. Consider it a token of my thanks! Plus, I earned this money thanks to you, Tenma.” She told me she’d made this money by betting on me during the team tournament. At first, she’d bet small sums, but as I kept winning, she kept increasing her bets until she had won a considerable fortune. “So this is just a refund for you!”

Although I wasn’t sure “refund” was the right word, I decided not to point it out. I tried to accept it at the market price instead, but she just wouldn’t back down, and then a sort of reversal of the normal flow of events occurred, where the buyer raised her price and the seller tried lowering it.

In the end, Kelly said, “It’s nice that you rate us so highly, but it goes against a blacksmith’s pride to sell something for more than I think it’s worth.”

Blanca added, “If you keep being too stubborn, Tenma won’t like you anymore,” and gave her a good bonk on the head.

And so the matter was settled, but Amur refused to go below 1,000,000G, so I ended up agreeing to that price.

Kelly added, “I would’ve accepted such a high price if you were an idiot who didn’t understand its value, though!”

If a stupid customer insisted on making a bad deal, that would have been one thing, but if word got out that Kelly had taken too much money from a customer like Amur, she might lose the trust of her fellow blacksmiths. But when it came to idiots, she said she’d just warn them once and would take no further responsibility.

At any rate, we accepted the payment and I split the money with Kelly, including the extra 300,000G. She'd done most of the labor and I'd only supported her, plus I owed her for my armor too.

"Well, I kind of feel bad for being paid even more after such a fun job," Kelly said, casually tossing the payment into her safe, seemingly in high spirits. It seemed hard to imagine she'd been depressed just a few days ago, because her skin looked oddly radiant and she was giving off a certain kind of sex appeal. But the effect was quickly ruined when she sat cross-legged with a big mug of ale in her hand.

Putting that aside, the other employees began drinking too, and the shop began an unplanned three-day closure. Since we were already here, we poured ourselves some ale and joined in the festivities. Just as we had finished another round of toasts, an unexpected guest arrived at the smithy.

The intruder tried to force his way in when he saw there were people inside, but since the door was locked, he started slamming his body into it instead. He yelped and grabbed his sore, red forehead, then barked some orders to his thug bodyguards, who smashed the door open.

"First you reject my request, and now you're sitting around having a drinking party?!"

"Huh?!"

The debris from the door rained down upon Blanca, who made a startled noise. And the moment Kelly saw the intruder's face, her mood took a rapid downturn.

The man and his thugs were suddenly frozen by their intimidating presence.

"You're the owner of a popular up-and-coming business, yet you can't read the sign that says 'Closed' on the front door?" Kelly bellowed. "Even the neighborhood kids can read it! Hey! Somebody call the guards! Tell them an armed robber has appeared and they should get over here immediately!"

"My fist will take care of 'em first!" Fueled by alcohol, Blanca began walking towards the intruder, who immediately realized Blanca was no ordinary opponent and called for more of his thugs who were waiting outside.

It was Blanca versus five thugs. There was no question who would win—the resolution was obvious before the betting even started.

“Eeeek!”

“That’s all ya got?!”

One by one, the thugs rushed into the smithy towards Blanca. But all it took was Blanca bodychecking the first one to send all five of them flying back outside together. He’d said his fists would take care of them, but he didn’t even get the chance to use them, and looked pretty upset about that. But once we saw the five thugs crying as they sailed out the door, everyone inside the smithy burst out laughing and gave Blanca a round of applause.

Now that the intruder’s thugs had been so easily defeated, he stood frozen in place, with his eyes wide and his jaw hanging open.

“So? What’re we gonna do with this guy?” A group of female dwarves armed with weapons surrounded him.

Finally coming to his senses, the intruder tried to push them aside to escape, but they kicked him away, and he was sent rolling towards Kelly. He tried to crawl off, but Kelly stepped on his back and rendered him motionless.

“We’re done tying up the thugs outside!”

Some of the other dwarves had quickly tied up the thugs outside, and a crowd was now gathered outside of the workshop.

“Get your feet off me! Who do you think you are?!” The intruder, whom Kelly was still standing on, continued to yell and scream, but Kelly ignored him. Eventually, his shouts escalated to insults, then threats, and Amur was unable to bear the noise any longer.

“You’re annoying! Shut up!” she said, and landed a kick to his temple, immediately silencing him like his batteries had been taken out.

I knew that killing an intruder would become a pain later, so I briefly examined him and found he was only unconscious due to a mild concussion. We tied him up, and left him outside with his five thugs. We’d made sure to tie their hands and feet together, gag them, and string them together to make sure they

couldn't escape. It would be impossible for them to flee unless someone came by and helped them.

We kept an eye on the thugs while we waited for the guards, and once they arrived, Kelly explained the situation. Blanca and I had already hidden in the back of the workshop because we didn't feel like dealing with the guards, and they hadn't noticed us yet either.

When the guards first showed up, they listened to Kelly's story looking stone-faced, but once they saw the pile of people outside, they seemed visibly shaken. At that point, the intruder came to, and then they were suddenly only interested in his side of the story. Just as I was thinking that something seemed fishy, they cut the intruder's restraints and started to arrest Kelly.

"They're in cahoots!" Blanca and I were about to rush out together to stop the guards from arresting Kelly, but something whizzed out in front of us before we could.

"Amur Kick!"

"Bwaaaah!"

The flying object was Amur herself, who executed a flying kick on the guards before they could bring Kelly in. The guard who took the brunt of it was sent flying through the air, spinning several times before rolling across the ground.

"Whoa, he took that right to the face. Think he's still alive?" I asked.

"Don't know. Anyway, can you cast some healing magic on him? I'll go stop the little lady."

Amur had taken action, humiliating the guards in front of us and the growing crowd. Unless we straightened out the situation immediately, Amur would be seen as a criminal for assaulting guards. Hopefully we could reduce her charges later based on the fact that these guards were crooked, but right now, we needed to make sure none of them died.

"He seems fine... There might be some lingering effects, though."

"All right. We're done."

I rolled the guard, who had been near death, back onto the ground, and

moved on to the next patient.

The other guards had simpler injuries, like fractures and bruises. But in order to prevent them from moving once they regained consciousness, I intentionally set their bones out of whack and dislocated their joints during treatment. Now, they would find it really hard to move.

“Argh... Ugh... Ow...”

“This is what happens when you drink and cause trouble! You really need to think about your behavior!”

Amur’s recklessness was largely due to having consumed the dwarves’ cherished liquor (which was so pure it was flammable). And seeing Kelly in danger had led Amur to try and protect her benefactor.

“Hey!” I caught the intruder trying to escape and restrained him. “Where do you think you’re going?!” Now it was time to find out what had been behind this commotion in the first place.

Part Nine

“And that’s how the commotion happened, huh?”

Jean, one of the royal guards, happened to be passing by and caught wind of the disturbance, so he’d stopped to take statements. He looked particularly peeved as he drummed his fingers on the table. That was because today had been a rare day off for him, and he’d intended on devoting the day to family, only to end up dealing with this incident.

His expression was so menacing that any passersby not in the know might have taken him for a bandit, and it grew increasingly severe as he listened to my account of the story. But fortunately, his anger wasn’t directed at me, Amur, or the others. It was aimed at the guards who had sided with the intruders and tried to arrest Kelly instead.

“I want you to know that you and Blanca won’t be faulted in any way for this incident, Tenma. However, although Amur’s reaction was a bit excessive, under the circumstances I believe we can call for leniency. Amur, you should be prepared to spend around two days in jail. These guys are official guards of the kingdom, after all. Now, the real issue lies with them... From what I hear, there’s a strong possibility they’ve been accepting bribes for quite some time now. Ugh, I have a headache...”

Since he was a member of the royal guard, he normally wouldn’t have been involved in such matters. But it couldn’t be helped, since he’d been passing by, and I had been a part of the incident. Out of all of us present, he had the most authority.

Apparently, all incidents involving me were automatically reported to the royal guard now. And since Jean was already present, he’d drawn the short straw. *And*, since he was the deputy commander of the royal guard, there was just no getting out of this one. At this point, all he could do was apologize to his family.

The reason this commotion fell under the royal guards’ jurisdiction was because they were considered the most elite members of the king’s army.

Furthermore, the head of the royal guard—a member of the royal family—was a friend of mine, and I had many other acquaintances in the unit. It seemed safer to have someone familiar handle the matter rather than leaving things in the hands of some regular guards. On the other hand, it made me feel as though I was being treated like some kind of dangerous individual, but I decided not to dwell on that too much. At the end of the day, it was reassuring to have an acquaintance of mine handle things, rather than a stranger.

“*Siiigh*... You can go home now, Tenma. Now I’m going to have to search his residence...”

It was good I caught the last thing he muttered under his breath, as it sounded quite intriguing.

“Can I come along for that, Jean?”

“Absolutely not,” Jean said. Then he paused, and reconsidered. “Wait a minute...” He went over to consult a nearby guard, had him fetch some paper, then started writing something down.

“All right, Tenma. I need your signature here.” He handed me a document that said “Issue of Formal Request” at the top. It read: “A formal request for your assistance during the search of the residence of George Highland, representative of the Highland Trading Company.” George Highland was the name of the main intruder who had started this whole mess.

Jean explained that the Highland Trading Company, which was based in the capital, was a moderate-sized trading company. A few years ago, it had been a small business. Of course, it wasn’t unusual for a company to grow over the years under the leadership of a savvy owner or due to upward trends in the economy, but this company didn’t seem to fit either category. Instead, it was known for its aggressive tactics, and there was a constant stream of dark rumors surrounding its rise in success.

Guards almost never needed to request the assistance of adventurers for a regular residence search. But in cases like this one, where the situation was unpredictable, they sometimes needed outside support. According to Jean, “You’re more than capable, and since you were directly involved in the incident, you’re the perfect candidate for the job.”

The compensation included a basic fee of 10,000G, with additional rewards based on performance.

Jean mentioned needing a few more reliable adventurers, so I suggested Blanca and the Dawnswords, and the royal guard immediately issued requests to them. Well—as Blanca was just in the other room giving his statement to another guard, they obtained his approval in less than a minute. As for the Dawnswords, I mentioned the inn where they were staying, and a young member of the royal guard hurried off to deliver the request.

“It’s early afternoon now, but I’d like to go before it gets dark.”

Jean went to go fetch the Dawnswords, and also sent a messenger to the castle to obtain permission to conduct the search. It seemed like he was making decisions at his own discretion by hiring us, but they’d had their eyes on the Highland Trading Company for a while, and he’d already been instructed to take them out if he had the chance. That was why he didn’t need prior permission. Besides, since he was the deputy commander of the royal guard, he had the authority to carry out such operations independently anyway.

“Hey, Tenma. Things are getting a little complicated. I thought it would be a good opportunity to make some pocket money, but the little miss here seems to be sulking as she can’t participate.”

Blanca appeared behind me, smiling cheerfully, as we began moving to another room to discuss things. Before he came to see me, he’d gone to visit Amur and talked to her about the search. Once she’d heard what was going on, she’d told her guard she wanted to participate, but the request had been denied, and now she was sulking in bed.

It was no wonder, though—currently, Amur was a suspect related to the incident. But since the guards she’d attacked had clearly been engaging in suspicious behaviors, she was confined to a room in the knights’ headquarters instead of the underground dungeon to wait for the connection between the Highland Trading Company and the guards in question to be confirmed. She had promised not to escape or resist, and given the circumstances, it was obvious she could not be allowed to participate in the search.

“It’s better for Amur to remain detained by the knights. We can’t let her out

right now.”

“True.”

We exchanged glances and took our seats, then the strategy meeting began. The plan was nothing out of the ordinary. We would be divided into three teams: search, encircle, and skirmish. The search team would investigate the area, the encirclement team would prevent anyone from escaping, and the skirmish team would focus on capturing or neutralizing anyone who tried.

The search team was led by Kriss, and consisted of fifteen members selected from the royal guard and the knights.

The encirclement team was composed of a hundred members selected from the same pool, with Edgar as their leader.

The skirmish team comprised fifteen members selected from the same pool, with Jean as their leader.

The Highland Trading Company was a three-story building located a short distance away from the main street. It stood apart from the surrounding structures, on a square plot of land surrounded by roads.

The plan was for the search team to rush in the front as a unit, while the encirclement team was divided into groups of five and placed all around the building. Meanwhile, the skirmish team was split into three groups of three members each from the royal guard, with a total of seven other groups made up of the Dawnswords and me and Blanca. We were to wait around the building and monitor the entrances and exits.

There were four exits. First, there was a main entrance at the front of the shop. It was the largest, and that was how the search team would enter. We thought that, by using that entrance to go inside, it would prevent too many people from trying to escape. Two groups from the skirmish team, including Jean, were assigned to this entrance.

Next, there was a large entrance used for transporting goods. Since there was also a high possibility of escape through this entrance, a slightly larger group, including the Dawnswords and the royal guard members, was assigned here.

Then, there was the back door in the kitchen. This passageway was the narrowest, which meant we could place a smaller group here. We assigned two groups of royal guards there, with one positioned a little farther away, ready to support the delivery entrance if necessary.

Finally, my group was to guard the rooftop entrance. Honestly, the chances of someone coming out this way were low, but it provided a good vantage point, making it the perfect spot for both me and Blanca, since we were both so agile. I could transport Blanca to the roof using Flying magic, and if something bad happened on the ground, we could just quickly jump back down.

The other members of my group were my three servants—er, I mean followers—Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon. Namitaro said—and I quote—that he wasn't comfortable with the terrain, and so chose not to participate, which was rather unusual for him. He explained, "If I start rampaging in a crowded area, who knows how many buildings I might destroy?" And so, honestly, I was a bit relieved. After all, I'd be the one paying for the damages if anything happened.

"Oh! They've gone in. Solomon, stand by in the air. Rocket, set the traps at the entrance. Blanca, Shiromaru, be ready to descend at any moment."

As I monitored the other teams from the rooftop, I saw Kriss leading her team into the building, per Jean's instructions. I instructed everyone to wait, anticipating that the enemies might start moving immediately. At first, I'd thought about assigning this role to Blanca, since he was older than me, but he'd told me he'd rather just wreak havoc, so I'd taken up the mantle of team leader.

As soon as we took our positions, I saw someone fleeing through the delivery entrance, and a skirmish with the Dawnswords began. Shortly after, I heard some loud noises coming from the back door.

"Blanca, go support the team at the back door! Shiromaru, stick to the delivery entrance! The resistance is fiercer than we thought. I think we can handle it, but if we let it continue, we might incur casualties."

"Got it!"

"Wuff!"

There was a bit of a melee in both areas now, which meant there was a risk of my magic harming allies. As such, I decided to direct Blanca and the others to head down to support other teams much earlier than I had planned. Without a moment's hesitation, the two ferocious beasts dashed down the wall towards the battlefield below.

After this flashy entrance, those who had been fleeing were startled and stopped in their tracks. The skirmish team seized this opportunity and defeated the enemies without letting them escape. They managed to apprehend everyone in a matter of minutes.

"I think a battle has started inside the building. Oh! Rocket, looks like we've got company!"

I expanded the field of Detection to examine the situation inside the building. There was definitely a fight downstairs, and I could hear angry voices all the way from the rooftop. Among the group that was fighting Kriss's team, there were five people moving in our direction.

Just then, I heard a clattering noise from the staircase leading up to the roof. It sounded like someone was running up the stairs, the metallic sound of their weapons or armor resounding with each step. They were probably trying to aid the fight outside, but the possibility that someone might actually be waiting up on the rooftop hadn't occurred to them.

"There are enemies outside! Let's shoot them from above!"

The five individuals kicked the door open, bursting out onto the rooftop without any hesitation. But the moment they set foot outside, they ran into a well-laid trap. Since their focus had only been on fighting, leading them to leap headfirst into the situation, they were easily neutralized.

In fact, when I'd learned that five people were coming up to the rooftop, I'd spread water around the entrance to create large puddles. Then, once they stepped into these puddles, I cast the Lightning-type magic spell Stun and electrocuted them all, leaving them incapacitated.

"They won't be able to move for a while, but I'll have the golems keep an eye on them, just in case. Solomon, go ahead and take a break. Rocket, come with me."

Downstairs, Kriss and her team were struggling with the enemies, who had taken up a defensive position on the stairs, making it challenging for Kriss's team to advance. However, if I launched an attack from above them, they'd be pincered, and I'd be able to turn the tables on them. But I needed to approach them without being noticed, otherwise they might barricade themselves in a room and make apprehending them more difficult.

"Rocket, I'm going to charge through the middle and cause chaos. Make sure you take down any of them that I miss."

I didn't have time to plan anything too elaborate, so I went with an effective, straightforward approach—brute force, basically.

"Charge!" I drew a wooden sword from my bag and flew down the stairs. There were eight enemies total, and they were all pretty skilled. They were standing their ground on the second-story landing, using the advantage of their higher elevation against Kriss's team.

Unfortunately for them, they weren't paying attention to what was behind them, and there was no indication that they had noticed me approaching. Even if they had, they probably wouldn't have changed their plans.

"Watch out behind you! Ha ha, made ya look!"

I dove into the group of eight and knocked the first person down with a body slam. I swung my wooden sword and took down two more, one on each side. At last, the remaining five noticed me, but I swiftly kicked the two in front before they could react. Unfortunately, two knights were caught up in the fall from the stairs, but Kriss's team quickly caught them.

There were three enemies left now. One attempted to face off against me, while the other two sprinted back up the stairs.

"They're coming towards you, Rocket!" I called out. At that point, Rocket turned into his Emperor form and absorbed the two fleeing individuals, rendering them immobile.

"Only one left!"

The last enemy standing in my way seemed astonished by the sight of their fleeing comrades being so easily neutralized. I swung my sword at his exposed

jaw, and the man crumpled to the ground, motionless.

I called out to Kriss as she approached. “Kriss, we’re done here!” She made a face at me, but I couldn’t blame her—I had kinda taken the spotlight away from her. Since it was Kriss, though, she was probably more concerned about the potential teasing she would get from Jean rather than the fact that I’d stolen her glory.

“Thanks to you and your team distracting them, we were able to take them down without incurring any casualties,” I said. It seemed she caught on to what I was implying, for she gave me a huge smile.

“Exactly as planned!”

I wasn’t sure that had been part of any plan, but I went along with it anyway.

“Now, let’s get to work! We’ll split into groups of three and start investigating. Be careful, though, as others might be lying in wait. Can someone please carry these guys outside first, though?” Kriss clapped her hands and barked out orders, and the knights leaped into action. They were certainly skilled, so it was no wonder that they had been chosen for this job.

“Now, Tenma. Which part of the building do you think is most suspicious?” Kriss asked, crossing her arms.

“The whole thing, I guess? Good luck!” I said cheerfully, before trying to leave. Clearly, she wanted me to participate in the search, but if we accidentally stumbled onto sensitive documents related to the nobles, it would end up being a huge hassle.



“Just for a little while, okay? Just come with me!” Kriss pleaded, clasping her hands together and bowing. If anyone had witnessed a man addressing a woman in this way, they’d have thought he had ulterior motives. Well, I suppose these days the reverse was also true.

“Fine, but only for a little while. I’ll check the first floor and warehouse, but that’s it!”

I thought that if I casually looked around the warehouse, I might stumble across something suspicious, and agreed to accompany her, which she seemed satisfied with.

On the way towards the warehouse, I quickly found something suspicious—a staircase leading to the basement.

I’d picked up a potion from a shelf, and in the process of doing so, accidentally knocked down something else that appeared to be a paperweight. It had made a weird sound when it hit the ground, so I investigated and discovered an entrance to the basement. There was a magic barrier set up there, which was why it hadn’t shown up when I’d used Detection earlier.

“I knew you’d do it, Tenma! Great job!” Kriss immediately tried to rush downstairs, but I told her she should report to Jean first and get his instructions. We shouldn’t go ahead without permission, but most of all, when I used Detection a second time, I sensed ten people underground, and the results were alarming.

Class: Elf

Title: Slave

Condition: Weakened

They were all different ages, but all of them were elves. I immediately got a headache as I knew this was going to be a huge pain. Not because there were no elf slaves in this country, but because they’d been hidden underground.

In my past life, elves were often depicted as proud, good at magic, fond of forests, and basically similar to humans or other humanoids. This was true in

this world as well. Occasionally, some stories portrayed them as disliking other classes, but I'd never witnessed such a thing in this world. In fact, elves were generally considered pretty friendly. Of course, they'd pull no punches if you destroyed or damaged the forests. But then again, anyone would react that way if someone destroyed their home, so everyone recognized that it was normal behavior.

Even elves could become slaves if they committed crimes or incurred debts in society. Since elves tended to prefer a simple life living in harmony in beautiful forests and quiet places, many of those who were slaves had engaged in debauchery and led depraved lives.

Elven slaves were popular in the market, and fetched high prices. Their owners usually imposed strict restrictions on their behavior, even to the point of house arrest. So it was rare to see elves walking freely around town. And since they were expensive, it wasn't uncommon for them to be enslaved through illegal means, mainly through kidnapping.

Taking all of this into consideration, I had a feeling the slaves in the basement were illegal slaves who had been kidnapped. After all, selling slaves outside of designated areas without permission was strictly prohibited. Even if it were a "transfer" instead of a sale, it would have to go through a slave merchant, a government office, or a guild.

"So you found a basement, huh?" Having received the news, Jean had come over to where we were. After he heard the full report, he began preparing to infiltrate the place. However, I intervened and put a stop to that.

"Jean, if you go in with a lot of people and we walk into an ambush, there's a greater risk of sustaining significant injuries. I think it would be better if Rocket checked out the situation first."

"That's fine, but will he be okay alone?"

Apparently, Jean wasn't aware of Rocket's true power. I gave him a look and said, "If Rocket were to seriously attempt an assassination, not even Gramps would be able to win against him." And it was true. After all, in Gramps's case, he believed that neither I nor Rocket would ever harm him, so he was always defenseless in front of us. If either of us ever attacked him, it would be like

taking candy from a baby. Obviously, neither of us would ever dream of doing such a thing, though.

The knights around us seemed skeptical. However, both Jean and Kriss reacted like what I'd said had jogged their memories, and their faces twitched.

"All right—I'll leave it to you, then. Don't push yourself too much!"

"Okay. Did you hear that, Rocket? I'm counting on you. If anything happens, let us know immediately."

Rocket nodded and then bounced once, gracefully descending the stairs.

I'd stated those orders in front of everyone for the benefit of those around me, as I'd already given him instructions in advance. Once he reached the elves, he was to return immediately. The reason I'd sent him down there was so I could conceal the fact that I was using Detection.

The basement occupied almost the same area as the rest of the building, and had only one floor. There were four cells and three rooms, indicating that the Highland Trading Company was quite invested in slave trading.

Rocket returned about five minutes later. "Welcome back, Rocket. Mm-hmm. Okay." I pretended to listen to his report and then told Jean about the slaves in the basement. "Jean, Kriss. Rocket seems to have found something very significant."

"What?! We need to go rescue them right away!"

"Please wait a moment, Jean."

Jean immediately tried to rush into the basement, but I stopped him once again. The knights looked uncomfortable—I ignored them. "According to Rocket, most of the slaves are women and some are barely clothed. What would they think if a bunch of murderous men came rushing in? I think it would be a good idea if Kriss and the female members of the Dawnswords went in first, gave them fresh clothes, and calmed them down, before proceeding with the rescue."

"That makes sense. I agree with your suggestion, Tenma." Since Kriss was the only woman currently among us, her approval of the plan led to the men

complying without any further objections. And since Jean was married, he didn't object either.

"Go get some clothing right away. Gather all the clothes you can find! And someone go fetch the female members of the Dawnswords!" At Jean's words, the knights began rummaging through all the drawers. We weren't sure what size the slaves might be, so they were just randomly collecting clothes. It kind of looked like they were robbing the place.

At this point, I suggested that I should go check out the supplies in different sections of the store. "Since they're a trading company, I'm sure they have some quality items stocked."

As I thought about how to set about preparing a meal for the weakened elves, I searched through the food and medicine shelves. I figured the elves probably weren't in too much danger as they had probably been about to be sold, but it was hard to guess without seeing them in person.

I decided to gather ingredients to make a nourishing soup that would be easy on their stomachs and aid digestion. However, if their conditions were too severe, even serving them a regular old soup wouldn't be advisable without having a doctor examine them first.

I gathered medicinal herbs that could detoxify and heal wounds, dried mushrooms that had high nutritional value, and rice. I couldn't find rice in the store, so I just used some cooked rice I had stored in my bag. The idea was to make "Seven Herb Porridge/Broth." Seven Herb Porridge could invigorate a weakened stomach, and broth was often served in hospitals. So I thought if I made the dish with medicinal herbs, it would be really effective.

"I'll start by turning the mushrooms into powder, then add them to a pot of water. Add chopped medicinal herbs, a pinch of salt, and strain it a few times, add rice, stir, and then simmer! Let's see how it tastes... Hmm, slightly bitter?"

While I was cleaning up, Kriss and the others went down into the basement. I heard voices from below as I finished adding rice to the pot and stirring it. Then Jean and the others went downstairs too.

The broth was nice and thick, so I stirred it some more and let it cool. Soon, Kriss guided the first elf out of the basement. The elf was a woman, and

although she looked a bit worn out, she was just as beautiful as people imagine elves to be. One by one, the rest of the slaves emerged, and they were all very beautiful. It was easy to see why they were so highly sought after by slave traders.

If we could get statements from the elves, I had a feeling George Highland and a significant portion of his employees would likely end up as criminals, since they had been in possession of illegal slaves.

“I have a gentle and nutritious broth for you. Please try it. Then I’ll treat you to help you recover both physically and mentally.” After all, their recovery was my immediate concern.

“Bitter!”

“It’s not bad, but it’s not very flavorful.”

“There’s a peculiar smell too. I’m not a fan.”

Those complaints didn’t come from the elves, but from Kriss, Mennas, and Leena, who were helping themselves to the leftovers. But then I muttered something under my breath about the potential beauty benefits, and they began scarfing it down.

The elves seemed to like the dish well enough. Since they lived in the forest, the bitterness of the medicinal herbs didn’t seem to bother them much.

Jean and the others pretended not to notice the three women helping themselves to the broth. He was already overwhelmed dealing with this new crisis, so he didn’t have the energy to deal with them too.

“Thanks for your hard work!”

“Hey! They’re eating something good!”

Galatt and Jin walked in and peered into the pot, but it was already empty. They seemed resentful that they hadn’t gotten to try any, but the three women just ignored them and returned their empty bowls to me.

“Tenma, it was so bitter. Are you sure there are beauty benefits to eating it?”

“Maybe, Kriss. It’s easy to digest, and the fiber from the mushrooms should improve your bowel movements, which could indirectly benefit your skin. It’s

more of a potential benefit than a guarantee. Don't get your hopes up too much."

In the case of these three, it was unlikely that they suffered from skin problems due to constipation...

The three of them looked so disappointed by my explanation. The men, on the other hand, were giving them strange looks. It seemed like, even in this world, men didn't understand the lengths women would go to for beauty. I didn't really understand it myself.

I handed the bowls and the pots to Rocket, who absorbed them, cleaned them, then returned them to me. Since slimes were professionals at "melting" things, they could easily remove surface dirt with a little bit of training. Of course, a final rinse with water was necessary, but even then, it significantly reduced the effort of doing the dishes.

Jin and the others said, "Hey, what about our food?" I couldn't say no to them, so I dug out whatever random leftovers I could find in my bag and handed them over, and they immediately went to town. It seemed like Shiromaru wanted to beg for food as well, but he seemed scared by the elves, and was waiting outside instead. I went over to him, put him in the dimension bag, and fed him in there. Solomon joined him.

Both of them seemed really hungry, as they devoured everything I brought out. But they spit out the vegetables, so I'd have a lot of leftover veggies for a while.

For myself, I grilled up some leftover meat and made a sandwich with veggies and bread.

"Hey, Tenma!" Jean called me over. Jin and the others were with him too. The operation had been deemed a success, and we would get our compensation at a later date.

But since my contributions had been substantial compared to that of the others, they would include rewards for Rocket and my other followers to balance things out. Apparently, if they didn't do this, the financial department would complain, not to mention the king.

I wasn't personally worried about the details, so I just said I would leave it to him and decided to go home. I didn't want to get caught up in the matter of the elven slaves.

"That was a pretty lucrative job. Our opponents weren't even that strong," Jin commented, seemingly satisfied. He was already dreaming up ways to spend his reward. "Hey, Tenma. How long do you plan on staying in the capital?"

"We were actually thinking about returning to Sagan soon," Mennas went on. "Do you want to come with us?"

"Yeah, we'll take care of everything else if you handle the meals," Leena added.

Come to think of it, I'd stayed in the capital much longer than I'd originally planned. Since Gramps's mansion was here, I could technically move my base to the capital. But I hadn't finished conquering the dungeon in Sagan yet, and I really wanted to do that. Besides, I needed to secure food for Jubei and the others.

I told them as much, and Jin and the others said they planned on staying in the capital for ten more days. They wanted me to let them know once I'd decided on my future plans. I had to return to Sagan for other reasons, including checking on my base, so it was just easier for us to go together.

I agreed to let them know, then said goodbye to the Dawnswords. Next, Blanca said he was going to visit Amur and asked if I wanted to come. I told him what I was thinking.

"Sagan, huh?" he said. "It's a famous dungeon city. Is it interesting?"

"It was my first dungeon, so I can't compare it to others. But I thought it was pretty interesting. The pay is good too."

"Hm, I see. Well, now that the tournament is over, I have to get back to the Southern Autonomous Region at least once before I go anywhere else. My wife is waiting for me."

We chatted as we headed to the place where Amur was being held, but there we found...

“Oh! Welcome back!”

“Welcome back, Tenma.”

Luna was having a meal with Amur. I wondered why she was here.

“Hey, is it over, then?” said Prince Lyle, approaching me from behind.

Apparently, Luna had become friends with Amur after encountering her a few times at my place. I asked why she’d come, and she said, “Because I was worried,” but then Lyle interjected, “Because it seemed interesting.” Luna seemed sympathetic, but Lyle was his usual nosy self.

“Now that Tenma’s here, let’s hurry back!” Prince Lyle said, and swung the door open. Luna and Amur quickly finished their meal and prepared to leave too.

“Can I take Amur with me?”

“Sure. You have to pay a fine, but considering the circumstances, it’s hard to say the knights weren’t at fault in this case. That lessens Amur’s crimes... Well, I *made* them reduce her crimes, I should say. I’ve already paid the penalty, so she’s free to go. By the way, this wasn’t just my decision, but the royal family’s. It wouldn’t look good for the royal family to detain the runner-up of the tournament over such a trivial matter. Plus, they’re going to add an amount to your compensation that’s greater than the penalty.”

And with that, we all went outside. Blanca was pleased, because he’d thought Amur wouldn’t be released from detainment until tomorrow or the day after.

Rejoicing in her newfound freedom, Amur tried to follow me for some reason. But Blanca insisted that he had to talk to her about the incident and their future plans, so he dragged her back to the inn.

“Tenma, would you mind coming to the castle with me?” Lyle said. “The queen wants to see you. Probably about the golems.”

This was great timing, as I’d already finished making the requested golems.

“Sure.” I nodded and followed Lyle into the carriage. We chatted along the way. Luna kept insisting on seeing the golems first, and then Lyle started pestering me too. But I told them that if the queen found out she hadn’t been

the first to see them, they'd get in trouble, which finally managed to shut them up.

Part Ten

“My apologies for calling you here so suddenly.”

As soon as I arrived at the castle, Prince Lyle and Princess Luna led me to a room where Queen Maria was waiting for me. The king and the others must’ve had work to attend to, because the only ones present were the queen, Princess Isabella, Prince Lyle, Princess Luna, and me. Tida was busy with responsibilities he’d recently been given, so he was also absent. The job he’d been assigned involved the protection and breeding of animals near the capital, with the ultimate goal of designating half of an area which had previously been a zone where hunting was permitted to be an area of conservation. He was working hard on creating the regulations associated with such a move.

“I hope I’m not imposing, but would you mind showing me what you’ve created so far?” the queen asked.

I nodded at her request, and moved to summon the golems. By the way, there were no royal guards present in the room, which just went to show how much trust they placed in me. I took a ring, a bracelet, and a necklace from my bag, and infused mana into them before setting them on the floor. The items were absorbed into the floor, and then three golems emerged.

Each golem was of a different type: Defense, Attack, and Speed. The Defense- and Attack-type golems were just improved versions of golems I’d used before, and they also looked similar. However, the Speed type was new, and was wildly different from the other two.

“Those two don’t seem very different from what you showed us before,” the queen mused.

“The only difference I can see is whether they have swords in both hands or are carrying a shield, don’t you think?” Princess Isabella said.

However, since Prince Lyle was the minister of military affairs, he was able to pick up on the finer details.

“The Defense golem looks like a ‘moving wall.’ It’s broader, which allows for shields to be equipped on both hands and on its shoulders simultaneously. The

shields can also double as bludgeoning weapons. But since the golem is so heavy, it can't move quickly. The Attack golem now has sharper shoulders, elbows, fingers, knees, and toes. The sides of its arms are sharper too, so even without hands, it can probably inflict significant damage just by swinging its arms. If the Defense golem is a heavily armored warrior with a shield, the Attack golem is a skilled swordsman capable of handling melee combat. But as for the Speed golem..."

Just as I expected of someone with Prince Lyle's military experience, he seemed to have grasped the general features of both the Defense and Attack golems just by looking at them. However, since the Speed golem was so different from the others, he had trouble figuring it out.

The Speed golem had a very slim and humanoid appearance. Its height was 170 centimeters, but the span of its outstretched arms was greater than two meters. Its face was featureless. It moved awkwardly like a mannequin, and the four of them tensed up at the sight of it. I'd made the thing, and even I might get startled and flee if I ran into this golem at night. But that had been part of my intention when I'd designed it.

"Despite its appearance, this one has the most formidable performance. Its distinctive features mean not only can it move like a human, but it can also move on all fours like a beast. And because of that, it's more agile and can move more lightly than a typical bipedal golem. And its featureless face is meant to intimidate its enemies."

I'd made this golem to look like a monkey. In case of an emergency where the target it was protecting needed to be evacuated, I'd modeled it after a parent monkey carrying its offspring while fleeing. That was how I'd created this kind of awkward and creepy golem. Well—it was awkward because I wasn't exactly the most *artistic* person in the world, but that was neither here nor there.

"I see. So the Speed golem isn't just good for fighting enemies, but can also transport targets in case of emergencies. What material did you use to make it—mythril?"

I nodded in response to Lyle's words. I'd wanted to use a lightweight and durable material, and mythril was the first thing that had come to mind. I'd

referred back to the arms I'd made for Namitaro, and enclosed a magic iron core with mythrill to create the Speed golem. Since it was so slender, I'd been concerned about its durability. Using mythrill as opposed to magic iron significantly enhanced both that and its agility.

Prince Lyle looked impressed as I explained, and a strange feeling came over me. Although his usual antics made it easy to forget, moments like this reminded me that he was in fact the minister of military affairs.

"Can we see a performance test of this one, Tenma?" Prince Lyle's eyes sparkled like a kid who'd just gotten his hands on a new toy as he eagerly reached out to touch the Speed golem. And beside him was a real kid, brimming with curiosity. A few moments ago, she'd been looking at the Speed golem with a hint of fear, but now that she had gotten used to it, she was becoming more interested.

"I can, but not here," I said. Prince Lyle and Luna pouted in disappointment and complained. However, Queen Maria cleared her throat and silenced them. Originally, I'd created this golem as a secret weapon in case the royal family ever got attacked, so I couldn't let just anyone see it. I didn't want to use it here or even in the training facilities within the castle, where others could possibly see it.

The two of them remained silent for a while, but then a bright smile suddenly came over Luna's face. "Grandmother! What about the throne room? It's spacious and sturdy!"

"Oh, that's a good idea! And it's the most private room in the castle. Your Majesty, if that's all right with you, we'll step outside for a bit." Prince Lyle agreed with Luna's suggestion, and the two of them started walking without even waiting for the queen's permission.

Queen Maria sighed, probably because she knew even if she tried to stop them now, they'd just try to do it elsewhere without her knowledge, so she gave her permission. The two of them stood enthusiastically in front of the golems—but there was one problem.

"How are we supposed to transport them?" Prince Lyle asked.

Queen Maria sighed, and Princess Isabella had a slightly exasperated smile on

her face.

“Well, right now, they won’t follow anyone’s commands but mine. But I can register Prince Lyle and Princess Luna.”

If I ordered the golems to return to their original forms, they would revert back to jewelry. But since we were going to take them out of this room, I needed to register those two as their masters so no one else could use them. Eventually, I planned on registering the other members of the royal family as secondary masters. By the way, since I was the golems’ creator, only I was able to perform the registration. This was to prevent them from ever being stolen and misused.

The registration process involved infusing my mana into the golem, then attaching the blood of its intended master to its core, then activating it with its new master’s mana. Anyone could be registered as a master by repeating this process. However, priority was given based on the order of registration. As an example, let’s say the first and second masters gave the golem conflicting commands. In that case, the first master’s command would take precedence, and the second master’s would be ignored. Additionally, right now they were obeying my commands, but I was going to remove that feature entirely. It was still necessary for maintenance right now, though.

Once I’d explained the registration procedure, I returned the golems to their original forms and infused mana into them. Now all that was left was for one of the two of them to provide their blood and initiate the registration. I handed them a knife, but Luna hesitated.

Prince Lyle took the knife, pressed the blade to his own finger to draw blood, pressed that to the core, then activated the golem. Obviously he wasn’t afraid of cutting his own finger, but the knife had made a deeper cut than he’d expected, so I had to treat him.

“All right, let’s go!”

“See you later!”

The friendly way they both exited the room made it clear they were related.

“So, Tenma, since you’re still here, does that mean you have something to

discuss with me?”

Once the two of them had left, Queen Maria sat up straighter and directed this question at me. Apparently, she had figured out there was a reason I hadn't accompanied the two of them out of the room.

“Shall I excuse myself, then?” Princess Isabella asked considerately. She started to rise from her chair, but I told her it was okay for her to stay. I thought it would look suspicious if Queen Maria and I were alone together in a closed-off room. I didn't want anyone from the reformist faction to get any strange ideas.

“Well, there are those who love to find fault with anything, so it might be better for you to stay here, Isabella. Surely it's nothing you mind her hearing about? For example, talk of your potential marriage?”

Apparently, the queen also knew what I wanted to talk to her about. At least I could get straight to the point, though.

“Yes, exactly. Aina told me that I'd need your permission to get married, and that it somehow involves my mother. Is that true?”

Queen Maria didn't even blink. “Yes, that's right.” She was so matter-of-fact about it that it surprised me. Even Princess Isabella looked like she was learning of this for the first time, and seemed shocked.

“Well, half of that is true.”

“What do you mean, ‘half’?”

There seemed to be more to Queen Maria's answer. I braced myself to hear the rest.

“First of all, the reason you can't marry anyone unless I approve of it is mainly a measure against the nobles. And this isn't just limited to you, but it's also to make sure you don't fall for a woman who might be out to take advantage of you. I'm sure there aren't that many women out there who would try to get close to you, since they'd be noticed by the royal family. And if there were, then that person is either someone very important or a huge idiot. So if there's someone you really want to be with, I won't complain.”

In other words, she wouldn't complain, but she would definitely give me a piece of her mind about whoever it was. I wasn't sure how far she'd go, but at least I knew she had no intention of forcing me to marry anyone.

"Now, about the matter of Celia's letter... Here, read it."

Queen Maria rummaged through her bag and handed me an envelope. It was quite faded, but it had obviously been kept with great care, because there were no signs of dirt or tears.

"I'll take a look." I took the letter out of the envelope carefully so as not to tear it. As I read it, a nostalgic feeling washed over me. I used Identify just to be sure, but it was indeed my mother's letter.

The letter started with a greeting, followed by some casual talk of everyday matters. My mother spoke of my well-being, and then how her own health had been lately. Towards the end, she mentioned that if anything should happen to her, she hoped Queen Maria would become my guardian. She stated she wouldn't be able to rest if I were left in the hands of my father or grandfather. She said this in a half-joking manner, but seemed to be genuinely concerned about leaving my education solely in the hands of my male relatives. That was what I read between the lines.

"This sounds like my mother... And it doesn't seem like she trusted my father or Gramps too much."

"Well, although those two were top-notch adventurers, I can't say the same about them when it comes to education. That's why Celia wrote to me, asking to be your guardian. She wanted you to be protected from any harm. Of course, even Celia didn't anticipate you growing to be so powerful you could fight an entire kingdom."

I was about to refute her there, but after I considered it, I realized she wasn't wrong. I had a force behind me (Rocket, Shiromaru, Solomon, Namitaro, numerous golems, and Gramps) that, when combined, could be quite formidable. If the king and queen hadn't been close friends with my mother, I might've found myself in a pretty precarious situation.

As we continued our conversation, she told me that in the current situation, I was perceived as a target the royal family had their eyes on, and the queen was

perceived to be my temporary guardian at my parents' request. If someone were to ignore this and try to get me on their side politically, it would be the same as challenging the royal family, which would put that person in a very unfavorable position. In a way, my mother had been right to think that the best way to ensure my safety was to have Queen Maria become my guardian.

"So, don't worry too much about what Aina said. If it still bothers you, just think of it as a contract. It makes sense that you're more loyal to the royal family, since I'm your guardian. And in turn, you can leverage the power of having our support. Our relationship is mutually beneficial, isn't it? Anyway, enough about such trivial matters. If you do ever think you want to get married, please introduce her to me first. Or I can even find a suitable partner for you, if you'd like. Luna won't do, for several reasons...but how do you feel about Duke Sanga's daughter, Primera? I think you'd be able to marry her right away."

She must really trust me, because she was saying some pretty bold things. Of course, I didn't want to betray the queen's trust, but I really wished she would think more carefully about how she phrased certain things. If someone else were to overhear this conversation, both of our reputations might be damaged.

Not only that, but I was a bit dismayed that the queen sounded like the nosy neighborhood gossip, having labeled such an important matter as "trivial." She even seemed like she was enjoying herself. I couldn't firmly say so, but when I subtly glanced at Princess Isabella for help, she seemed amused by the situation, so I could only think she was on the enemy's side.

Without anyone to help me, I tried to think about how I could navigate this situation on my own. Just then, there was a loud noise that echoed from the floor below, accompanied by a strong vibration. The entire castle descended into chaos. Knights and servants were thrown into a panic, thinking it was some kind of accident or an attack.

However, the three of us quickly understood the source of the commotion, and grimaced simultaneously. Though I have to admit that half of me was overjoyed at being able to escape this conversation...

"Shall we go, Tenma? Would you mind acting as our guard? I'm sure there won't be any danger, but we need a guard in order to get there."

“I’m counting on you too, Tenma.”

“Sure. Besides, I might bear a tiny bit of responsibility for this incident, so I don’t mind at all...” I summoned Rocket and Shiromaru to give the impression of being a proper guard, positioning them behind Queen Maria and Princess Isabella. Solomon waited in my bag because the hallway was too narrow for him to fly in.

All of us approached the throne room, where the commotion had come from. However, there were knights gathered in front of the door, which wouldn’t open. Several of them were pushing and pulling, but it was no use.

“Everyone, step back!” Queen Maria said, and the knights all moved at once, bowing with respect.

“What was that noise just now?” The king appeared a few moments later, and there was a bit of confusion in front of the door. But as soon as he looked around and spotted me, he sighed, seeming to understand what had happened. “All knights and servants return to your posts, except for the king’s guard and Tenma. The Minister of Military Affairs was probably just conducting some experiment. I apologize for the disturbance.”

At the king’s apology, the knights and servants hastily bowed and moved away from the door. The king waited until they’d moved back, and assigned additional guards to secure our surroundings. Then he turned towards me.

“Since you’re here with Maria, I assume that means Lyle used a golem inside the throne room?” The king already seemed to know what was going on, but checked with us anyway. I nodded and explained what had happened. But since Princess Isabella didn’t seem aware of the conversation I’d had with the queen way before this, I glossed over some of the details regarding the bodyguarding aspect of the golems, just in case.

“What in the world? The golems are supposed to be our secret weapon, but they went and did something so conspicuous with them? Who on earth do my son and granddaughter take after, anyway?” The king lamented about the two of them, but it seemed all of us felt the same way.

They take after you...

“Your Majesty, are you saying those two resemble me? Well, then do accept my apologies,” Queen Maria apologized coldly, bowing her head, while I suppressed the impulse to voice what everyone was thinking.

The king realized his slip of the tongue, and all the color drained from his face. He began to say something, but the queen ignored him and turned to me.

“Tenma, it seems my two look-alikes are causing trouble. Would you go do something about it?” she said, both requesting my assistance and making a jab at the king at the same time.

The door remained firmly closed, and despite Jean and the others trying to force it open, it seemed like a golem was blocking it from the inside, and it wouldn’t budge. Applying any more force might have caused the door to break before it opened. Jean didn’t want to destroy the door to the throne room, so it seemed he had no other options.

“I think I can probably do something. But do I have permission to restrain Prince Lyle and Princess Luna? Of course, I won’t actually do anything that would hurt them.”

Before the king could respond, Queen Maria piped up. “I don’t mind, as long as you don’t cause serious injuries. I can overlook minor ones. I’ll take full responsibility, since I’m the cause of all of this.” Evidently, this sarcasm was directed at the king. She sounded genuinely angry, and that was reasonable, considering it had been pretty bold for the king to compare the two troublemakers to the queen in front of all those people. I felt he should probably apologize at some point, or the queen would probably stay angry for a while.

“Thanks for your permission. Rocket, help me capture those two.” I summoned Rocket and explained things to him briefly, then stood in front of the door with him. “It’ll only be a split second, so make sure to get the timing right, Rocket. Golem! Open the door!” I shouted through the door, commanding the golem to act. For a brief moment, the force holding the door closed began to ease up, and I seized the opportunity to pull the door slightly open. But then, apparently following an order from Prince Lyle, the golem began to pull again, and the gap closed almost immediately. Nevertheless, that

split-second gap was enough for Rocket to slip through into the throne room.

I guessed that this lapse had occurred because the golem had hesitated about whose commands to prioritize, since I was its first master in its temporary registration, and Prince Lyle was second, even though he was technically its first real master. But ultimately, since mine was only provisional, the golem had recognized Prince Lyle's command as taking priority and closed the door immediately afterwards. But if this plan hadn't worked, Rocket might've had to take a slightly longer route into the room.

Although the golems had basic learning abilities, this method probably wouldn't work again in the future. But I had bet everything that it would just be a onetime occurrence, so I didn't foresee it being a problem.

After we'd waited for a while in front of the door, we began to hear noises coming from inside, which soon quieted down. I issued the command again for the golem to open the door, and this time, it immediately swung open.

"It's open. Please go inside." I pulled the door fully open and stepped aside to allow the queen to enter.

"Lyle! Luna! Oh? They're not here." The queen looked baffled when she couldn't find the culprits anywhere in the throne room. Then she looked around and saw Rocket, who approached the queen, opened his mouth, and spat out the two culprits.

"Oof!"

"Yuck!"

"Eek! Rocket, you startled me!"

The two troublemakers landed on the floor and rolled over and over to end up lying pitifully at the queen's feet. Queen Maria let out an adorable squeal of surprise, then scolded Rocket to hide her embarrassment. Rocket bounced up and down to apologize, then returned to me.

"Good job, Rocket. By the way, it seems that when the master is out of range of the golem, its commands are reset. Maybe that's because the golem can no longer sense its master?"

I had asked Rocket to capture Lyle and Luna and take them inside his body. When Lyle had moved outside the golem's range of ability to sense him, the golem had then prioritized my command. If Lyle had told the golem to *keep* holding the door, we might've been in trouble, but apparently he'd only given a single, simple command, along the lines of "Hold the door." In light of that, I felt like I might need to make some adjustments in this area...

As I was thinking about that, the royal family surrounded Lyle and Luna. It looked like the two of them were about to receive a scolding.

"Queen Maria, now's not the time to redo the golem's settings. I'll take my leave for now. I'll bring the golems with me to check for damage, make any necessary adjustments, and then I'll bring them back later."

Since the scolding seemed likely to take a while, I decided to head out first. It might be past midnight before I could leave if I waited for her lecture to be done first.

She gave me an apologetic look, perhaps sensing what I was thinking. "I'm sorry, Tenma. These fools have caused you trouble yet again. Tida, please see Tenma off. And if your work is done, you're free to go afterwards. Isabella, take Luna to your room. I'll leave her in your care."

"Yes, Mother. Luna. Let's go."

"All right..." Princess Isabella took Luna's hand and left the room. Luna's head was bowed the whole time, and Tida and I silently watched them walk away.

"Let's go, Tenma."

"Okay. Well, if you'll excuse me, everyone." I bid farewell to the royals surrounding Lyle. They all looked my way and waved goodbye, then quickly turned their attention back to Lyle.

I couldn't see what was happening, but it was probably similar to what happens when a naughty kid is scolded by their parents. The difference was, in this case, the ones doing the scolding were the highest authorities in the land, and the one being scolded was of a similar authority. Well—in Prince Lyle's case, he held so much power in this kingdom that there were few who could truly oppose him. But that only made this incident worse, since it involved him

playing around with what should have been considered classified secrets.

“Do you think you’ll scold Luna like that in the future? Since you’re her only sibling, it seems like it’ll be tough doing that alone.”

“Ha ha ha. Oof, please don’t say that, Tenma. Just thinking about it gives me a headache. Want me to call you the next time I need to scold her? You can help.”

“No thanks.”

We were assuming Luna would cause trouble again, but thinking back on her prior behavior, and seeing how someone with a similar personality always got in trouble, it was an understandable assumption to make. But why did Tida want me to be involved? I was just a commoner. Well, at this point, since I was interacting with the current and future kings so often, I had to admit that I wasn’t just an ordinary commoner anymore. But that was all the more reason to not get involved in such troublesome matters.

As we talked, we exited the castle. A carriage waited there to take me home. Tida told me the queen had arranged for it. Although it was a kind gesture, I wondered when she had made those arrangements. She had been with me the whole time I’d been at the castle, so she must have prepared it in advance.

I asked Tida to thank her for me and then boarded the carriage—but then something popped into my head. “Oh! I almost forgot, but I’m planning on leaving the capital for a while. Let the royal family know, okay? See ya!”

“Hm? Okay... Wait, what? Tenma!!!”

I’d said these words just as the carriage started moving, and at first Tida seemed to not understand what I’d said. By the time it hit him, the carriage had started picking up speed, and he could only stand there in astonishment. If it were Luna or Lyle, they’d probably have run after me shouting and tried to stop the carriage. But I figured the royal family would summon me to the castle tomorrow or show up at my house to discuss it anyway, so I could just tell them all the details then.

Even if the royal family accepted it, though, the real problem was Gramps. He probably wouldn’t object, but I felt he would most likely want to come with me.

I'd never adventured with Gramps before, and although it'd probably be fun, at this point it seemed like it might be a bit awkward for me to travel with a guardian. At any rate, we would need to discuss it tonight.

As I rode in the carriage, I began to devise several plans for whatever the direction that conversation might take.

"Hrm, I see. Well, we must get ready at once!"

That night, when I told Gramps about my plans to leave the royal capital, he was eager to come along. He immediately started preparing, wasting no time. Those preparations involved stuffing whatever seemed necessary for the trip into his fairly large magic and dimension bags.

"We should get ready too! C'mon, Jeanne!" Aura was enthusiastic too, and rushed to her room. I had a feeling she was probably just happy to get away from Aina. I thought Jeanne would follow Aura, but for some reason, she came over to me.

"Do you really think Aina will let Aura go, Tenma?" she asked.

Although the question might have sounded rude towards Aina, she did treat Aura like prey, so I understood why Jeanne had asked.

"Hm, I doubt it. Even if Aura decides to come with me without telling Aina, I have a feeling Aina will follow us too."

"Yeah..."

Aina didn't think Aura or Jeanne had sufficient skills as maids, and was personally taking the time to teach them. So it didn't seem like she would want their training to be interrupted. At the very least, Aina would keep Aura close so she could continue training her. And in that case, Jeanne probably wouldn't want to come along, so the chances were decent that both would be staying behind in the capital. After all, someone had to stay and manage Gramps's mansion.

"You don't need to get ready yet, Jeanne. I'll give you a bag when you need it, and you can just throw whatever you need into it."

“Okay, I’ll let her know.” Jeanne started to rush off after Aura, but I stopped her.

“You don’t need to tell her yet. It’ll be more interesting if we tell her right before we leave.”

Jeanne gave me a puzzled look, but didn’t object. I’d been observing Aina teasing Aura a lot lately, and because of that, I’d started to want to tease her myself. I asked Jeanne if she felt the same way, and she said calmly, “Slaves cannot defy their masters,” but her lips were trembling. Yeah—we were on the same page. Lately, Jeanne had grown more comfortable with me, making our relationship a lot smoother than it had been when we’d first met.

“Jeanne! Hurry up and get ready!”

“Coming!” As Aura called to her and beckoned her over, completely oblivious, Jeanne had to suppress her laughter.

“So the key is to build her up before I let her take a fall...”

“The key to what now?”

Namitaro, who had appeared out of nowhere, used his prosthetic hands to interject. Just as you’d expect from a koi who hailed from Kansai, he loved his little jokes.

“You’re pretty naughty today, Tenma! You know what they say—you’re only mean to the ones you like... I’m sorry! Forgive me, please!”

He started saying stupid things, so I rose from my chair to stop him. But for some reason he immediately flopped over, showing his belly like a dog and apologizing. He didn’t actually seem very remorseful, though.

“Well, enough with the jokes. I heard from Grandpa Merlin that you’re leaving the capital. I’m not sure what to do, though. Sagan doesn’t have any rivers nearby, does it?”

I recalled the geography of the area, as well as the lake inside the dungeon, but there were no rivers in or near the town. When I told him as much, he said, “In that case, I’ll go on a little journey myself. It’s been a long time since I saw Hii-chan, anyway.”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, just a friend,” he said, and left it at that. He’d told me about a small bird named “Chii-chan” before, so maybe it was something like that. Or maybe it was some kind of mythological creature...

It gave me a slightly bad feeling, but since he wasn’t more forthcoming, I decided not to ask.

“All right. Just be careful. I’ll make sure the golems guarding the mansion don’t attack you, so feel free to come home whenever you want.”

“Thanks, Tenma. I do have one favor to ask before you go, though. Can you make me a huge batch of sweet potato paste? I’ll give you the ingredients.”

Namitaro really seemed to love that sweet potato paste, because he requested a truly unfathomable amount of it. Since I had made the recipe in the past and the ingredients were easy to obtain, it would be simple to make a huge batch. It wasn’t difficult to do, and thanks to the magic bag, I could take my time over a few days to work on it. I agreed, and Namitaro seemed thrilled, saying, “I’ll buy the ingredients at the market tomorrow morning, so I’ll go to sleep early!” before heading for the pond outside.

Thus, everyone began preparing for what would come in their own ways. Since I had already packed everything I needed, I didn’t have much to do, so my preparations just involved making Namitaro’s sweet potato paste, dealing with the royal family, and deciding what to do with Jubei and his family. Speaking of Jubei, I remembered that the other white buffalo was still in my bag, completely untouched. I’d forgotten about it, what with all the commotion, but now that I was thinking about it, I figured I should probably offer one to the royal family. Tida seemed to be looking forward to it too.

I quickly checked around the house to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything, then went to bed early. I expected an early messenger from the royal family, or maybe even the royal family themselves to show up, so I wanted to make sure I got as much sleep as possible. Dealing with that family was rather tiring, after all.

I thought about the future as I climbed into bed. A pleasant sense of drowsiness came over me, and I fell asleep easily.

Part Eleven

“Tenma, are you ready? We’re leaving soon!”

Early the next morning, a loud voice echoed throughout the house. Fortunately, everyone was already awake, so no one had to be rudely awakened. Still, it would’ve been nice if they had kept quiet during breakfast.

Just as I thought, the owner of the loud voice was Lyle, and behind him were Kriss and Aina.

“Queen Maria was worried. She wondered if she’d said something to upset you last night, since you’d suddenly blurted out something so important just as you were leaving the castle,” Kriss explained.

“I assured her that wasn’t the case, but she’s very concerned. Could you come with me and explain things to her? Master Merlin, we request your presence as well. You too, Aura and Jeanne,” Aina said.

Not only had she requested my and Gramps’s presence, but she wanted the two girls to come along. They could hardly refuse.

“All right. Wait here and I’ll get ready.”

“Right!” Lyle responded enthusiastically.

I returned to my room, grabbed a bag with clothes in it, and picked out the outfit the queen had given me before. I hadn’t had many occasions to wear it, but I figured that this would be fitting, since I’d be seeing her at the castle. I quickly got dressed and went back downstairs.

“All right! Let’s go!” Seeming anxious, Lyle grabbed me by the hand to pull me towards the carriage. Aina took the driver’s seat, and next to her was Aura, who didn’t look very pleased. Gramps, Lyle, Jeanne, and I were inside the carriage. Kriss rode separately on horseback. There were knights stationed ahead of the carriage to signal to all that Prince Lyle’s carriage was approaching. If someone deliberately ignored that warning and blocked our way, they would be punished severely. There were exceptions, of course, like carriages carrying doctors or emergency patients.

The whole thing reminded me of the processions of feudal lords I'd read about in my previous life.

We arrived at the castle quicker than usual, thanks to our escorts. Cruyff was waiting for us at the entrance. We got out of the carriage, and he immediately brought us to a room where the king and others were waiting. However, Aina took Aura and Jeanne elsewhere.

As soon as we entered the room, the king spoke. "I'm sorry for calling you here so suddenly, Tenma. But when Tida told us that you were going to leave the capital in a few days, we were surprised." The entire royal family, including the king, was present, all of them sitting on sofas. There were two empty spots, which were probably where Gramps and I were supposed to sit. Once Gramps noticed that, he went and sat down without asking for permission, then asked the king for some tea. Without thinking, the king got to his feet, walked over to the cart with the tea on it, and poured Gramps a cup.

"Sorry, but why'd you call us here today?" Gramps waited until the king had sat back down after serving him his tea before asking this question. There was such a stern look on his face, you'd have thought he was speaking to an enemy.

"I'll explain," Queen Maria said, taking over for the king, who seemed too intimidated by Gramps to talk. "Yesterday, Tida was in a panic after seeing Tenma off. I asked him why, and he told me you were leaving the capital. It seemed sudden, so we thought we'd done something to upset Tenma. Normally, we'd have come to visit you, but we couldn't very well all go barging in, so we decided to summon you here. However, it seems that our worries might have been misplaced," she went on, with conviction. The king, who had been looking at her in surprise, seemed even more surprised by this proclamation.

I wasn't sure why he looked so surprised, though, since he knew I wasn't leaving because anyone had upset me.

Later on, I asked him about it. It turned out it was because I'd said I was going to leave so suddenly, and Gramps had looked so stern when he'd entered the room that he'd thought the royal family had done something wrong without intending to. The queen, on the other hand, had realized it was a

misunderstanding so quickly because I'd shown up wearing the clothes she'd given me. She thought it was unlikely that I'd be enough of a jerk to wear clothes she'd gifted me if I was angry with them.

I was a bit offended by the implication that I was a jerk at all, but part of that accusation also hit home, so I decided not to call attention to it.

After that, I explained what I'd done and returned the golems to them, confirming they could be activated without any issues. Once that was finished, we moved on to the meal that I'd been meaning to present to the royal family. Unsurprisingly, the two troublemakers tried to decline, but after a glare from the queen, they relented. Even the king remained quiet, which was only natural, considering the power dynamics between the two of them.

The menu consisted entirely of dishes made from the white buffalo. There was thinly sliced meat boiled in broth and wrapped with vegetables, steak tartare, roast beef, meatloaf, and regular steak.

The steak tartare, roast beef, and meatloaf were dishes I'd taught the chefs, having only conveyed the instructions verbally when I'd handed over the meat. However, as these were the royal family's chefs, they had executed the menu perfectly.

Since there were so many dishes, I thought it might be a bit too much for the ladies, but that wasn't the case. Even the queen showed quite an appetite, probably because of all the stress she'd recently been under...

"The white buffalo is quite delicious. Tenma—it seems even better than that time I had it before. Did you do something special to it?" asked the king, as he took a bite of the steak. The queen and Prince Caesar nodded in agreement.

However, Prince Lyle and Princess Luna, who apparently hadn't noticed any difference, looked confused.

"If it tastes better, that's probably due to aging. I've never tried doing it before, so I'm glad it turned out well," I said.

"Aging? That usually refers to alcohol... Is it the same process?" said the king. At this point, I realized that aging meat wasn't common in this world, and maybe even unheard of.

“Yes, it’s basically the same thing. If you carefully store the meat in a cool, dark place and prevent it from freezing, it deepens the flavor.”

I’d tried an aging method I’d heard about from my previous life. I’d been a little worried about the result since my knowledge of the process was a bit fuzzy, but it seemed to have worked out well.

I’d created shelves inside a dimension bag to age the meat that I had precooled with Ice and Snow magic before wrapping it in a clean cloth. I’d stored it for about ten days, keeping the temperature stable by placing ice in the corner. There didn’t seem to be any issues with doing it this way, but if there had been, I probably could’ve used disinfecting magic to sterilize things.

Even though the meat had undergone an experimental process, the fact that the king and the others didn’t raise any objections showed how much they trusted me. Well—I’d tested it with Gramps earlier, and then gotten permission from Cruyff and Aina beforehand. They were probably enjoying the same dishes in another room right about now, along with Jeanne.

I wondered if the people in this world had stronger stomachs and intestines than people in my previous life. Maybe they weren’t concerned about slightly spoiled meat. Not only that, but since magic could be used for healing in case of an emergency, it didn’t seem like it would be a problem.

“That’s all it takes for meat to become this delicious? I’ll have to try it myself sometime,” the king said, and Queen Maria, Prince Lyle, and Luna (who still wasn’t able to tell the difference) all agreed.

“By the way, after you age the meat, it’s best to trim off the surface before you cook it. Since this was my first attempt at aging, I cut off more than usual just to be safe. And after being cooked, it ended up being about forty percent smaller in total.” I told them this just in case, but I had sterilized the meat with magic before it was cooked, so it wasn’t inedible. Plus, I had fed the scraps to my followers.

“I think it’s a waste to cut off that much. Who cares if aging it improves the taste a little? You should save as much as you can to eat.”

“Don’t just throw it away!”

The first ones to object were Lyle and Luna, who seemed not to care much about the difference in taste. They preferred quantity to quality, and losing forty percent of the meat was not acceptable to them.

“Yes—even if most of it is covered by taxes from the people, it’s not a good idea to throw away edible food.” The queen seemed to be opposed as well and looked a little disappointed as she expressed her opinion.

“I think there’s some room for such a process, though. For example, we can serve it when we entertain guests from other countries,” the king said.

“That’s right. If we can make effective use of the discarded portion or eliminate it altogether, we’ll be able to eat delicious meat more frequently, if not every day. The chefs will enjoy cooking more too,” Prince Caesar pointed out.

“And this meat would be especially appreciated when entertaining guests who can’t eat much,” Prince Zane said.

Zane was probably thinking about Princess Mizaria, who hadn’t yet fully recovered and was currently recuperating at home.

After that, there was an incident where the king and Prince Caesar got to talking during the meal, and before they knew it, their food had disappeared. The culprits were Queen Maria and Luna, and it made the two of them rather depressed, but in the end they agreed to experiment with the aging of meat.

“So, when are you leaving, Tenma? If you haven’t decided yet, please let us know before you do. Promise me that!” Queen Maria reminded me. I nodded. It seemed like I might be in trouble if I forgot, so I took out a mental notepad and wrote it in big red letters so I wouldn’t, along with the note, *If you don’t want to end up like the king, don’t forget!*

By the way, Gramps was barely able to stop the archduke, who was sitting next to him, from getting into another argument with him over the meal. Although he looked tired, he was also rubbing his belly with satisfaction.

After we finished eating, we enjoyed some tea. At this point, the king suddenly remembered something and spoke up. “Oh, I forgot to mention! Tenma, come to the castle again tomorrow. No—the day after tomorrow! And

make sure to come in formal wear!”

When he spoke like this, it usually meant something important was going to happen, so I was immediately on guard.

“Oh, there’s no need to be so cautious. I’ve just been forgetting to officially reward you for all that you’ve done for us, so we thought we should do it before you leave the castle.”

“I appreciate that, but there’s no need.” I immediately declined the king’s offer. The king seemed surprised by my rejection. I realized I’d been a bit rude, and started to regret how I’d responded. But just as the king was about to push back, the queen, who was sitting next to him, burst into laughter.

“Honestly, darling, obviously Tenma will say no if you word it like that! He always says he doesn’t want things like territories or noble titles. That must have been how he interpreted your offer of a reward.”

“Hrm...” The king scratched his cheek with embarrassment at the lecture from his wife.

“I’m sorry for refusing without hearing the whole story. If it’s not a territory or title, then what is it?” I’d naturally assumed that’s what it would be, but if not, maybe it was gold, silver, or some other kind of treasure? Honestly, I’d have preferred rare metals like solanite more than those things, but...

“Well, your reward is your family name and crest!”

I was honestly kind of shocked. Not about the family name, but the crest. While a family name could be given to adventurers who racked up enough achievements to catch the attention of nobles or to distinguish powerful merchants from one another (names which were sometimes bought from nobles themselves), and it wasn’t uncommon for people to come up with family names on their own, it was highly unusual for the royal family to give you one.

But the family crest was a different matter entirely. Unlike the family name, you couldn’t just make one up because it would be stored in the castle’s records. Those with family crests were usually influential nobles, long-standing nobles (as low-ranking or newer nobles didn’t have one), people who’d made significant contributions to the kingdom, or those who had achieved some

extraordinary feat. But most of the time, when you received a family crest, you usually received a noble title at the same time. So it was safe to say that it was nearly unheard of for a commoner to have one. Those who did were either people who didn't want to become nobles, or were descendants of fallen nobles.

"I know you don't want a noble title, so please accept at least this much. It's a request from the king." The fact that he was using his own title to get me to agree meant he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

It would be clear to everyone that the royal family had bestowed a reward upon me, and since I didn't necessarily have a problem with that, I couldn't refuse. If I accepted, I could show everyone I had a good relationship with the royal family, and if I didn't, then everyone around me would just think I was an idiot for disrespecting the royal family, which would ruin my reputation. However, whether I accepted this or not would have no effect on the reputation of the royal family.

"That's a pretty unscrupulous move."

"Sometimes I have to act like a king, you know," the king said with a triumphant expression. He'd won this time.

"All right, I'll graciously accept the reward."

"That's the spirit!"

I knelt down and bowed, and the king dramatically puffed out his chest and nodded. But since I felt a little frustrated at having been manipulated, I decided to get even.

"This isn't a formal gesture of gratitude for the reward, but I'd like to present dessert—a flan—after the meal. I'll have Cruyff taste it to make sure it's safe for the king to consume, just in case."

"Hey—"

"I'll take it!"

Before the king could say anything, Cruyff, who had appeared out of nowhere behind me, extended his hand. Though I was startled by his sudden appearance,

I handed the flan over to him as if nothing unusual had happened.

“I hope you all enjoy it.”

“Thanks, Tenma!”

“But Tenma, my flan—”

“Thank you, Tenma.”

Ignoring the king’s words, I passed the flan out to everyone except him. And once it had made the rounds, the flan was all but gone.

“Now, let’s see... Ugh, this is no good! Surely it will be poisonous to His Majesty! I’ll take responsibility and dispose of it at once!”

“C-Cruiyff?! Wait, how can it be poisoned?! Give it back! My flaaaaan!”

“Thank you, Tenma!”

“Oohhh no...”

The king tried to snatch the flan back from Cruiyff, but Cruiyff skillfully avoided the king’s hand and swiftly, yet elegantly, gobbled up the rest of the dessert. The moment the treat was gone, the king dramatically collapsed to his knees in tears.

“Darling! How unsightly!” the queen exclaimed.

“Well, if you don’t want yours, I’ll take it,” the king said, turning to the queen. “Ahhh!”

The moment the queen realized the king had set his sights on her flan, she quickly and elegantly gobbled up her share as well. Everyone realized they were in danger of being the king’s next target, so they all ate their flan as elegantly and quickly as they could, with the exception of two people who weren’t very elegant at all.

Just as the king thought all the desserts were gone and he was about to sit back down wearily, he noticed there was still one person who hadn’t touched theirs.

“Zane! If you don’t want it, I’ll take it!”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. But I’m going to take this home to my wife. She was

looking forward to this dinner party, but since she wasn't feeling well, she had to stay home. I thought I'd at least let her enjoy this dessert..." Zane explained, pretending to wipe his eyes. "But if Your Majesty still wishes to have it, then I'll gladly give it to you. I'm sure my wife wouldn't mind, if that's what would make you happy," he said, very theatrically. At this, everyone turned to look at the king.

Of course, we were all just teasing the king, but Luna, who didn't quite understand the situation, offered her own dish which had a bit of remaining flan to the king. "Grandfather! You can eat mine—just let poor sick Auntie have her flan!" Tears welled up in her eyes.

On the other hand, if Luna was only acting, she might be quite a problem in the future.

The king gave up—mainly due to Queen Maria's cold gaze—and obediently sat back down in his chair.

"Now, setting that aside... Tenma, about the family crest. We're making a special exception and allowing you to use a dragon on yours. Normally, only families with close ties to the royal family are permitted to use the dragon as a symbol, but since you've defeated two dragons and even tamed one, we would like to make a special exception. Anyway, there have been examples of such exceptions in the past, so it's not unheard of. You can decide on the design yourself and submit it to the royal family. As long as you don't use our crest, which is of a dragon and a lion, I don't expect there will be any problems getting it approved."

This explanation was pretty vague, but I figured it would be a problem if the design of my crest overlapped with another noble's, particularly if they were a powerful individual. It might be difficult to find a motif to go along with a dragon, but various other animals and patterns represented nobility. If they were even a bit similar, I'd have to come up with explanations of how they were actually different, or else just come up with something completely original that had no similarities to any other noble's crest. It sounded like a huge hassle.

"That sounds troublesome... How about I use a dragon, a wolf, and a slime? Those three represent me best right now."

Since the more I thought about it, the more of a pain it sounded like, I decided to have a dragon for Solomon, a wolf for Shiromaru, and a slime for Rocket. Although other nobles might have a wolf on their crest, there was no way any of them had a wolf *and* a slime. And anyone who knew me would immediately recognize that crest as being mine. Even if there were other nobles who used wolves, I'd just tell them I had a wolf for a follower, so I didn't expect any issues.

"That was a quick decision. Very well, then. There are a few crests using wolves, but none along with dragons, and certainly none with slimes in their family crest. I doubt there will be any complaints. Now, all that's left to do is design it. Any ideas?" The king sounded amused, apparently fully recovered from the shock of the flan incident. The queen and the others looked equally interested.

By the way, the dragon that would be on my crest had the same shape as the one in the royal family's crest, and I couldn't change that.

"Let's see—how about putting the dragon in the upper right corner, the wolf diagonally down in the lower left, and then the slime is a circle that encompasses both of them. A smaller circle in the center between the dragon and the wolf can be the nucleus of the slime. How does that sound?"

I roughly sketched my design on paper without putting too much thought into it. But actually, I thought it had turned out quite good. I decided to stick with this design even if everyone thought it was weird.

"I think it's good! Everyone will know it's your crest!" Luna, ever the Solomon enthusiast, was the first to approve, then everyone else followed suit. The main reason was just as she said—it would be an easy crest to recognize. Apparently, when creating a new family crest, that was the most important element. So what I'd come up with had turned out to be ideal.

"It's a good design that doesn't overlap with anyone else's, so it should be fine. If you like the idea, we'll prepare several crests using that design for you to choose from."

There was a special department in the castle that just dealt with family crests, and creating crests was one of their duties. I could either choose to make it on

my own or have them do it. But if I had them take care of it, I wouldn't have to worry about it overlapping with some other noble's crest.

The people who made their own tended to be perfectionists, and some even got so carried away that they forgot the official details of their own crests, which ended up requiring multiple visits to the castle for confirmation. Because of this, lower-ranking nobles, commoners, and others who had complicated and time-consuming processes getting approved for a crest in the first place usually just opted for simple crests, like a circle with a cross inside it, or an X inside a circle, or something along those lines.

"I'll leave it to them."

Since I had no artistic talent anyway, I was glad they would be able to take care of it for me.

"Dragons and wolves are one thing, but I'm sure the staff will be quite surprised when they hear about the slime. Still, I don't think anyone will make fun of it once they hear who it belongs to."

People who were only familiar with regular slimes would probably be surprised. After all, apart from a few exceptions, they were generally considered the weakest monsters.

"Actually, I looked into it a bit, and surprisingly, in terms of the percentages of different types of slimes, there are fewer weak slimes than you'd think," Tida suddenly piped up. We all waited for him to continue, but he seemed a bit embarrassed to be the focus of everyone's attention, and took some time to organize his thoughts first.

"Slimes can be broadly classified into three types: ordinary slimes, those with special abilities, and those who can use magic. Ordinary slimes are the common ones, and they come in a variety of colors. Slimes with special abilities include poisonous ones, or those which can produce strong acids inside their bodies. Slimes that can use magic are just as the name suggests. The most common special ability is poison, ranging from an ordinary poison to those that can inflict bleeding, paralysis, and hallucinations. Then, there are composite poisons with several effects. Some say that there may be slimes that possess every kind of poison in the world. There are slimes with single magic attributes as well as

those with multiple.”

According to Tida, there were various subtypes and variants in each category. In other words, slimes were very diverse monsters. In that case, Rocket would be a variant slime with magical abilities, or maybe a slime variant with multiple special abilities.

“That’s interesting, Tida. Sounds like you’ve been studying quite a bit. Definitely a difference from two generations ago...” Gramps, the king’s former tutor, teased.

“He’s like the queen—good at studying,” the king said, apparently having properly reflected on his past behavior.

The queen seemed satisfied with that answer, and nodded. Meanwhile, Tida looked pleased, having received a compliment from his grandparents.

“Will I also have to come up with my family name?”

“No—I’ve decided on it already, and will bestow it upon you. I apologize, but since it’s a family name given directly to you by the king, you can’t change it if you dislike it unless there’s some kind of compelling reason. You don’t have to use it if you don’t want to, though.”

I’d figured as much. It would have been disrespectful to the king if I were to change something he’d given me just because I didn’t like it. Plus, since the queen was overseeing the process, I doubted she’d have approved of something I wouldn’t like. There was still a slight possibility our tastes might not be the same, though.

My heart pounded in my chest, and then...

“Tenma, the family name I will give you is Otori. From now on, you can call yourself Tenma Otori. As I mentioned before, you don’t have to use it if you don’t like it.”

Huh?! What a coincidence! Hearing my last name from my previous life for the first time in fifteen years filled me with incredible nostalgia.

“I gratefully accept the family name. Please allow me to engrave it upon my parents’ graves, along with my family crest.”

Since the name Otori had been given to me personally and would be fine for my future spouse and children to use, I wondered if it would be a little strange to use it for my parents, and decided to ask for permission first.

“Of course. In fact, I’ll be angry if you don’t,” the king said.

“That’s right. It’s the family name we gave you, so you can do whatever you like. I’m sure Ricardo and Celia will be pleased,” the queen agreed.

“Can I also call myself Otori?” Gramps asked hesitantly.

“Of course, Gramps,” I said, and he looked very happy at that.

“By the way, Tenma, the family name ‘Otori’ is very close to mine—Audry—so there might be people who make unnecessary inquiries. I’ll be sure to be of help in times like those,” the archduke said. Gramps immediately gave him a wary look.

“Just what are you planning?!”

“I’m not planning anything! But I am responsible for giving the family name too, so if you need anything, I’m just telling you to ask for help!”

The two of them always bickered, but as Gramps had said, it seemed certain that Ernest was up to something. I didn’t think he was saying this out of the goodness of his heart—let’s just keep it at that.

“It sounds suspicious, no matter how you look at it!”

“What?!”

As usual, I ignored them, and looked around the rest of the room. I noticed that the king’s face was slightly drawn. It twitched a little when he noticed me staring at him.

“Well, it’s nothing to worry too much about. We’re just trying to let the other nobles know that there’s a connection between you and the royal family. If any idiots bother you, just tell us and we’ll take care of it.” Prince Lyle nonchalantly spilled the beans, leaving both the king and the queen looking surprised. “This is nothing new, right? As long as Tenma is involved with us, both parties benefit. Trying to hide it just complicates things,” he clarified.

The king and queen were still a bit embarrassed, but then both bowed their

heads and offered apologies.

“Certainly, that’s true. Sorry about that, Tenma.”

“Yes. Saying you’re basically like my son at the same time as trying to use you unilaterally wasn’t the right thing to do. I apologize, Tenma.”

Then, the king suggested abandoning the idea of the family name and crest if I was too offended.

“No, I accept your apologies and I understand your reasoning. Honestly, it’s not like anything’s going to change from before, and I’m grateful for the family name. So please go ahead as planned.”

And with that, I decided to accept the Otori name. It was true that the gods had originally reincarnated me as Tenma Otori, but I’d never had a need for a family name in Kukuri Village, and even after I’d become an adventurer I was always just Tenma. To be honest, I’d pretty much forgotten about that half of my name. I didn’t have a particularly strong attachment to it, but if I could use it for my parents and grandfather too, then I would gladly accept it.

Right now, the only connections I had to my parents were the name and the fact that people knew they’d adopted me. Maybe I wouldn’t have thought about it if I’d been their biological child, but since I was adopted, once everyone who’d ever known I was their son was gone, I’d be nothing more than a stranger to my parents.

That was why I wanted to carve the name “Otori” into their graves. I wanted anyone who saw it to know that they were my parents. The reason was completely selfish, but I really wanted this new bond between me, Dad, and Mom.

“Now, what should I do the day after tomorrow?”

“Well, at first I thought of having you come to receive the family name and crest as your reward, and we’d record it in the official castle documents at that time, but since you designed the crest so quickly, I’d like to formally announce it in front of the vassals. We might be a bit tight on time, but I’ll send the design down to the department immediately and ask them to have several options ready by tomorrow at noon. If you find a design you like, you can officially

accept it, and we'll finalize things. There's no need to compromise if you don't see one you like, though. We can delay the announcement, or you can just receive the family name first."

The king explained that it was crucial to make a formal announcement. It was one thing to record it in documents, but it was quite another to make an announcement in front of the vassals. By doing things publicly, the nobles in the castle, who were mainly royalists, would become more clearly associated with me. Queen Maria's comment about "using me unilaterally" seemed to refer to this aspect of the plan.

I thought it was a bit late to worry about such things—I was more bothered about the person who'd proudly come to my house in a horse-drawn carriage and then made himself at home in my living room. I reported that to the king and queen, and then we began making plans for the day after tomorrow.

The ones who would be busiest were the people in the family crest management department, who the king himself visited to give instructions. Since the orders had come from His Majesty, and there was very little time, a dozen staff members were instructed to carry out the work. The only thing that helped the situation was that I'd already made the decisions about the design, and just left the process of actually making it up to them.

Part Twelve

“This is the family crest I’d like to go with.”

First thing the next morning, they showed me the different family crest designs. I picked the one I liked the most, then handed it to the man in front of me. He was a staff member from the family crest department, and was a noble. There were dark circles under his eyes—apparently, he’d worked through the night, as his clothes were wrinkled, and he almost looked like he was ill.

“Thank you for your decision.” He bowed his head, then carefully put the design I’d chosen into a bag, crossed out the ones I hadn’t selected, then crumpled up the pieces of paper. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He bowed again, then rushed back into the carriage that waited outside Gramps’s mansion to hurry back to the castle. He still had a lot of work to do.

“Which crest did you pick, Tenma?” Namitaro poked his head out from the pond in the backyard, then approached me with curiosity.

I took out the copy of the crest I had just chosen. Namitaro took the paper from me with his prosthetic hands and held it in front of his face.

“Ooh, not bad, not bad! Pretty cool! Rocket looks a little different from how you described last night, though.”

Yesterday, the design I’d come up with had said Rocket should be depicted as a perfect circle, but this one had him as a rounded triangle shape, like an onigiri.

According to the man who’d brought the sample, depicting him as a perfect circle wouldn’t allow Shiromaru and Solomon to fit inside without distorting their shapes. As such, they’d opted to make Rocket a rounded triangle instead.

Just in case, I checked the version he’d brought that kept Rocket as a perfect circle, and it was true that Shiromaru’s shape looked a bit odd, and much smaller than Solomon’s. With the onigiri shape, Shiromaru could be drawn sitting down, and fit inside it perfectly.

“It’s true that this one looks better. By the way, why aren’t I in any of these? Can’t you do something about that?”

“Well, you’re not technically my follower since I didn’t tame you, Namitaro. So I can’t put you in the crest.”

Namitaro’s eyes widened (although they were already pretty big and round), and he started trembling.

“Wh-Why not?!” he screamed.

In fact, he was so loud that Gramps came running out of the mansion, but Namitaro ignored him and started rolling around in the yard and wreaking havoc all over the place.

“Tenma, you jerk! You’re cruel, I tell ya—*cruel*! You use me and use me and use me some more, and then when you’re done with me, you just toss me aside like trash! You’re a demon! A right demon!” He screamed all sorts of insults at me and was causing such chaos that even passersby wondered what in the world was going on and tried to peek through the gates. About half of them, upon seeing who was causing the havoc, muttered “Oh, it’s just him again” and dispersed. The only ones left lingering by the gate were those who enjoyed watching Namitaro’s antics. Those were probably the same kind of people who would enjoy watching funny animal videos in my previous world.

“All right, all right. Well, there’s no time to put you in my official crest at this point, but I’ll make a crest to use for my own purposes and include you in that one.”

He was making such a fuss that I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind, and at once, Namitaro froze.

“You promise? I’m gonna hold you to that! If you’re lying, I’ll never forgive you! If you’re lying, I’ll stick a needle in your eye!!!” he said sternly. At this rate, I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be a fish or a comedian. If he really wanted to be a fish, I was sure he’d be quite delicious depending on how he was cooked, but if it was the latter, then I wished he’d refrain.

“Let’s pinky swear! Come on, come on! Cross your heart and hope to die, stick a needle in your eye! There—it’s a promise!”

Namitaro forcibly made me pinky swear with his prosthetic pinky, vigorously shook it up and down, and began singing that childish chant. It hurt so bad

you'd have thought this was his first pinky swear in centuries.

Once we were finished, he produced a piece of cloth and ink from out of nowhere, wrote "Victory" on it, and started crawling around the garden at breakneck speed.



Gramps and the others were stunned by Namitaro's behavior, but once they realized this was about the family crest, they came over to look at it with curiosity.

"Hey, this looks pretty good!"

"It really does! This design is perfect for you, Tenma!"

"I'm so proud to be your maid, Master Tenma! By the way, where are you going to put Namitaro?"

I wasn't really sure why Aura was so proud, but either way, she asked the question that was on my mind. Where *would* I put Namitaro, anyway...?

I glanced over at Namitaro as he raced around the yard. At some point, Shiromaru and Solomon had begun to chase him. They had mistaken his antics for a game of chase, with the cloth Namitaro had written on being the target.

"Hm? What?" They all glanced over at me.

Just then, I felt someone tugging at my shirt. I turned and saw Rocket had his feelers extended. He was stretching out his body, trying to look at the family crest. Normally, he'd just have made his body bigger, but since Gramps and the others were also crowded around me, he didn't have the room to do so.

"Oh, I guess you're curious about the crest since you're on it too, huh, Rocket? Sorry I didn't realize earlier." I apologized to Rocket, and leaned over to show him the crest. Rocket bounced once as if to say he didn't mind, then examined the crest.

"This outline is you, Rocket." I explained the meaning of the crest, and he traced the outline with his feelers before transforming himself into the rounded triangle shape the crest depicted.

We all thought it was pretty heartwarming to see him like that, but apparently Shiromaru and Solomon thought he was up to something fun, because they stopped chasing Namitaro and charged at us. The two of them looked at the crest, then all three of my followers exchanged glances.

"Ooh, your followers are recreating the family crest! Or should I say, *followers'* crest?" Just as Gramps had said, the three of them were trying to

recreate the crest.

Shiromaru turned his head to the right and sat down, then lifted his head as if he were howling. Solomon faced Shiromaru and hovered in the air diagonally to the upper right, flapping his wings. Then Rocket took on his emperor form behind them, but in that rounded triangle shape.

“You guys look amazing!” I praised them, and they all had proud expressions on their faces (although Rocket just had a proud aura).

“Stop right there!”

Then the heartwarming scene was interrupted by a big fish who didn’t know how to read the room. He skidded around me like he was drifting on a racetrack, then stopped below Solomon. Apparently that’s where he wanted to be placed.

“I’m right here! This is my spot! Well...more like it’s the only place I even fit, but still!” he declared forcefully. That bit at the end was a hundred percent pure Namitaro.

For the time being, I roughly sketched the positions of Rocket and the others on a piece of paper I had, then added Namitaro’s profile (or at least an attempt at it) there. My lack of artistic talent depressed me, but I just told myself it was okay because it was a rough draft.

I put my poorly drawn sketch in my bag so no one would see it, then checked my schedule for today. The most important thing I had planned was checking my family crest, and that was over with, so now I had nothing else to do even though it was still before noon.

“Well, since I don’t have anything else to do, I might as well make Namitaro’s sweet potato paste.”

I’d steamed a bunch of sweet potatoes in my free time, and I wanted to at least finish making them into paste today, so with Namitaro watching me expectantly, I headed to the kitchen, making a list in my head of everything I’d need as I went.

A few hours later...

“Sorry, Namitaro. I messed up. Well, to be more exact, I made something a bit different from sweet potato paste.”

Since I’d had such a huge volume of ingredients, I’d been trying to figure out how to reduce how hard the result was, so I’d tried mixing in a bit of rice flour with the steamed sweet potatoes. The finished sweet potato paste had a chewy texture that was more like a kind of sweet potato jelly than a paste, though it was pretty delicious.

“Wh-Why...?” Namitaro looked like he was in even deeper despair than before. He slowly put a piece of it in his mouth, but... “What in the world?! This is delicious! I’ll take this!” A smile suddenly came across his face. Apparently, as long as it had sweet potatoes in it, he didn’t care whether it was paste or a jelly.

“Well, it tastes pretty much the same, so don’t worry about it. Plus, I’m going to eat it in the water anyway, and since this won’t fall apart as easily, it’ll be easier to eat than the paste.” Namitaro handed some money over to me to pay for it.

“You don’t have to pay me. I didn’t make what I promised you in the end, plus you provided all the ingredients. Just consider this payment for helping me during the tournament.” After he tried to give me the money several times, I declined, and he reluctantly put it back in his pocket, which—come to think of it—was strange since he was a fish, but then I discovered he kept a magic bag between his pectoral fins. He probably had others tucked away in different places too.

Suddenly, Namitaro started peeling off one of his scales and hurled it at me like a throwing star. “There, now it’s done! Tenma, take this!”

It wasn’t flying that fast, so I was able to catch it easily. “What in the world are you doing?” I asked.

Namitaro had thrown a scale at me that was the size of my palm, shaped like a kite, with a gap in it as if two scales of the same size had been layered on top of each other, with a hole at the top.

“It’s one of my special scales! If you infuse it with mana and blow on it three times like a flute, I’ll be able to hear it... Probably, anyway. It has a range of about half the size of this continent!”

“‘Special scales’...?! Aren’t you just a carp?! And what do you mean three times...?” I stopped myself there. There were just too many jokes to make about this Namitaro-scale flute. I didn’t even want to know what would happen if you only blew on it once or twice.

“Oh, by the way—I’ll hear it even if you only blow on it once or twice, so don’t worry!”

Despite feeling highly annoyed, I resisted the urge to unleash an attack spell on him as he gave me a thumbs-up with his artificial hand.

“Well, it does seem useful, so I’ll keep it safe,” I said, and stowed it in my bag, where it would probably stay until the day I felt the need to use it.

“Yeah, make sure to take really good care of it!”

After that exchange, nothing else of note happened that day.

The next day, I got dressed in formal clothes as the king had requested, and Cruyff took me to the castle. I had to get there early because a meeting to discuss the finer details of the ceremony was scheduled. It was about seven in the morning. Since I hadn’t even had time to eat breakfast before I left, my stomach’s internal clock was about to make some noise.

“Well then, Master Tenma, please wait in this room. I’ll prepare you something light to eat before the meeting.”

I had some food in my bag, but it seemed more polite to eat whatever they were going to make for me. Cruyff said they’d work on it immediately, so it would probably be here soon.

I was hungry and also pretty sleepy since I’d woken up early for the meeting, so I decided to wander around the room. Just as I approached the window, I heard the sound of metal clanging from outside. I opened up the window and looked out.

It was coming from a spot a short distance away from the courtyard, and I recognized the ones responsible for the noise. I strained my ears and managed to make out the words, “You’re pretty good, Aina. That was a clever attack.”

“Thank you for your compliment. While we’re at it, mind if I hit you, Captain?”

What a rare combination. Well, to be more precise—this was the first time I’d ever seen them alone together, because all the other times I’d seen them, they were accompanied by others.

It looked like they were sparring—Aina was swinging her halberd with considerable speed and force. Dean was only using a one-handed sword, yet continuously parried her attacks. And judging by the expression on his face, he was doing so with ease.

“Curious about those two, Master Tenma?”

“Waaah!”

All of a sudden, there was a whisper in my ear, and I jumped away, making a weird noise. The source of the voice was Cruyff, of course, and he was holding a tray with sandwiches and drinks in both hands. It was a mystery how he always managed to open the door and sneak up on me so silently, even with his hands full.

“What’s the matter? I just opened the door and came up to you like I have at any other time,” he said nonchalantly. If he were actually an assassin, he would’ve been able to kill me several times by now. A chill ran down my spine as that occurred to me.

“I have no intention of causing you harm, Master Tenma. Anyway, regarding those two, they often train out there when their schedules line up. Dean actually invited Aina to join the king’s guard, and although she declined, he still keeps an eye on her. Aina also serves as Queen Maria’s bodyguard, so she makes sure not to neglect her training,” he casually explained, while also reading my mind.

He really was an excellent butler. Lately, he’d been using that excellence to tease me, which was rather annoying. Actually, on second thought, he’d been doing that from the moment we’d met.

“Hm, is that so...? Anyway, Aina’s surprisingly strong. We’ve done a few quests together before, but she was clearly hiding her true skills. I bet she could’ve made it pretty far if she’d participated in this year’s tournament, don’t

you think?”

“Yes, I think she could’ve made it to the finals, depending on who she was up against in the preliminaries. Of course, she wouldn’t have won since you participated, but depending on the matchups she could’ve made it quite far indeed.”

As Cruyff and I chatted, I continued watching the two of them spar while I munched on the sandwiches he’d brought.

“That’s enough for today.”

“I surrender...”

Dean forcefully slammed Aina’s halberd into the ground, and rather roughly pointed his sword at her neck. She panted as she surrendered, but as for Dean, he was only slightly out of breath.

Afterwards, he seemed to be giving her some kind of advice, demonstrating what he meant as he spoke. She nodded, and occasionally mimicked his movements. Was her face red simply because she was out of breath, or was it...?

“Both of them are skilled, but Dean is definitely superior. Aina’s doing her best, but the difference in their fundamental strength is just too great.”

Cruyff sounded sincere in his praise of Dean. At this point, Dean suddenly noticed he was being watched and turned his gaze to us, raising his hand a little almost as though he were shy, although I didn’t think he could hear us.

I nodded in acknowledgment, then closed the window.

“It’s rather unusual to see Dean looking embarrassed.” Cruyff seemed even happier than before as he observed Dean and Aina.

By the way, it seemed Aina hadn’t noticed us at all, because she remained intently focused on Dean.

“Now, setting those two aside, regarding today’s schedule...”

After Cruyff went over the schedule with me, I proceeded to my meeting with the king and queen. Then, it was time for the real thing, and...

“That went more quickly than I thought. I didn’t expect it to be over so soon.”

It was less than thirty minutes from the time I’d entered the throne room to the time our meeting was over.

The members of the royal family and key ministers had entered the throne room, then I’d gone inside too. I’d waited in my designated spot, then the king and queen had entered. The king had explained my achievements, (saving him when I’d been a child, rescuing Tida and Luna, preventing a coup, etc.), announced my reward which I then received, and that was it. Then I left.

Honestly, I didn’t understand why there had been a need for our meeting beforehand either, when I’d hardly even spoken in it.

After I’d left, I was led back to the room I had been brought to initially, and waited there for the king and the others to arrive.

“Sorry for making you wait.” The king and queen arrived, looking exasperated, about an hour after I’d left the throne room.

“There was a delay because some of the reformists were making a fuss. Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons are still in there, trying to calm them down,” the king said.

“From the reformists’ perspective, they think that the deciding factor behind your reward could be your suppression of the misconduct of their faction members, which is truly absurd. They want to acknowledge you and won’t oppose your receiving the reward, though. So they’re claiming not to be criminals and praising your actions, yet at the same time, they don’t want to bring attention to the fact that you’re being rewarded for it. Honestly, I wish they’d show some maturity.”

Both the king and Maria seemed displeased that their actions had been criticized. It was rare to see both of them irritated at the same time.

“Now, now, please calm down. It’s obvious that they’re just being petty. There’s no point in getting angry over it.” Cruyff tried to soothe them, while insulting the reformists at the same time. Thankfully, this worked, and they both gradually regained their composure.

“Well, it certainly can’t be helped. Besides, not all the reformists were against

it,” the king said, nodding several times as if trying to convince himself.

Queen Maria nodded too, but she seemed less convinced.

“By the way, Tenma, have you decided when you’ll leave the capital?” she said, suddenly changing the topic.

“I’ll figure that out once I speak to the Dawnswords, but it’ll probably be within the next ten days. By the way, I have a favor to ask...”

I decided to consult with them about something I’d been thinking about for a while. Both of them, but especially the queen, leaned forward and listened to my request, then readily agreed.

“It’s about time for me to go back home. I need to discuss my future plans with Gramps and the others.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize how much time had passed.” Queen Maria had been complaining while picking through the sweets before her, but now she exclaimed in surprise and put her cup back down on the table.

The king seemed fatigued from listening to her, and had dozed off. She abruptly elbowed him, and he jumped up, startled.

“Oof!”

She’d delivered this blow in a practiced manner, ensuring he wasn’t injured—it inflicted just the right amount of damage. “Darling! Tenma’s going home, so the least you can do is pull yourself together! At the very least, wipe the drool off your mouth.”

The king hastily wiped his mouth with his sleeve, though there wasn’t any drool there to begin with. The queen was just pranking him.

“Well, indeed. You’ve been a great help in many ways. I can’t say this in public, of course, but I think of you as a son, Tenma, and not just because you’re Ricardo’s son. You’ve done so much for us. If anything ever happens in the future, don’t hesitate to rely on the royal family,” the king said fondly, as he gazed at me.

“Wake up already, dear! Tenma’s not leaving the capital right now. Do you plan on saying the same speech when you have to say goodbye to him later?”

the queen pointed out bluntly. I'd been wondering the same thing, actually.

"Your Majesty... It's quite obvious that you were asleep." Cruyff delivered the finishing blow, and with that, the king's HP dropped to zero.

"Well, putting that aside, there are many things you must be careful of, Tenma. You're in a different position than you were in just a few months ago. There might be those who are planning to target you the moment you leave, so if you sense anything strange at all, even in the middle of the night, let us know, and we'll deal with it immediately," Maria said, as we left the room.

The king's footsteps were heavy, and he kept lingering behind us. We had to stop several times for him to catch up before we finally reached the entrance. His face was still red even when we said goodbye, so it seemed like he would remain in that state for a while.

After that, I went to visit Jin and the others instead of heading home, so I could discuss plans for the day of our departure. We decided to leave the capital in five days' time. Jin said they could leave the next day, but I had a feeling if we left that abruptly, we'd incur the queen's wrath, and I hinted at that to them. I left out *who* and *what* they would say, but Leena was surprisingly perceptive and guessed right away. Well—actually it seemed she'd intended it as a joke, and was flustered when I told her she was right.

Once we returned to the mansion, there was another commotion to deal with.

"It's not faaaaaair!" Aura's voice echoed throughout the mansion on the morning of our departure.

Only Gramps and I were leaving the capital, and I was leaving the mansion in the hands of Jeanne and Aura. But the real source of Aura's displeasure was probably the fact that Aina was the acting manager of the household.

"There's nothing you can do about it!"

"Argh..."

Aina's temple twitched as she used a stranglehold on Aura, who clung to the staircase.

“Master Tenma, His Majesty will be here soon. It would be too conspicuous at the gates of the capital, so it’s better for us to say our goodbyes here, where it won’t stand out so much.”

Aina calmly tied Aura’s hands and legs up and gagged her, then brought her back to consciousness. Aura seemed confused as she woke up, but the moment she saw her sister’s face, she remembered everything and desperately tried to escape again. It was futile, of course, and Aina caught her immediately.

“Aura, this is all for your own good! I promised Queen Maria that I would train you into a first-class maid while Master Tenma is away from the capital, impossible as it might sound. If I fail, both of us could be executed for treason! So there’s only one way to avoid that—become a competent maid!” Aina held Aura’s face with both hands, announcing a bunch of absurd things from as close to Aura as she could get.

Under normal circumstances, Aura would probably have realized she was lying, but since she was confused and Aina was surprisingly good at acting, she misunderstood and thought she really was in danger of becoming a traitor.

“Ughh...”

“You understand now, right? Good.”

Aura was now half crying and resembled a red-faced baby, but Aina had a gentle smile on her face that I rarely saw, and was patting Aura’s head kindly. Brainwashing complete!

“Oh, it seems His Majesty is here just in time,” Aina murmured. Soon, a carriage trundled through the gates, arriving in front of the mansion, where it came to a stop. The front door opened, and Luna bounded in first.

“Tenma! Where’s Solomon? There he is! Solomon!”

“Squee!”

Luna immediately found Solomon and charged towards him. However, he was startled by Luna and flew out the window to escape her just before she caught him.

“Wait, Solomon! Hiyaah!” Chasing after Solomon, Luna tried to jump out the

window, but Aina caught her by the back of the shirt so she was suspended in midair.

“Princess Luna, it’s quite improper to go jumping through windows.”

Aina wasn’t holding Luna by the collar, so she wasn’t in danger of strangling her, but Luna had still come to quite a sudden stop, and she coughed. Then Aina carried Luna over to Queen Maria like a mother cat carrying its kitten.

“Well done, Aina. Please, Isabella, if you would.”

“Yes, Mother.”

As usual, Luna received quite the scolding. I couldn’t help but feel a little sentimental that I wouldn’t get to see a scene like this for a while... But when I thought about it calmly, I realized there wasn’t actually anything to be sentimental about.

“Setting that aside... Tenma, take this!”

After the king glanced at Luna, who was currently being lectured by Princess Isabella, he handed me a small box from his pocket. There was a piece of palm-sized orichalcum inside, embossed with the Otori family crest. Of course, this one didn’t have Namitaro on it.

“On the back, there is a statement vouching for the Otori family, with my name and the royal family crest. If you show this, no noble will bother you except under extraordinary circumstances.”

Although the Otori family didn’t have political power, this would make it look like we’d been lent some kind of authority by the royal family. In other words, I’d obtained Mito Komon’s intro—a proof of my identity. Though some might have called it acting on borrowed authority, I suppose...

“Thanks. I’ll make sure to use it effectively, and I swear on the graves of my mother and father that I won’t misuse it.”

Since the royal family didn’t seem to worship any particular god, I decided to swear on my beloved parents, whom I knew they cherished. Upon hearing those words, the king and Gramps smiled, while Queen Maria nodded, looking slightly teary-eyed.

After I chatted with the king, I spoke to the queen, then bid farewell to Prince Caesar and the others.

Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella expressed their gratitude to me for looking after their children (especially Luna). Prince Zane once again thanked me for treating Princess Mizaria. By the way, Mizaria wasn't present. She'd wanted to come, but traveling in a carriage was still rough for her, and they didn't want to risk her condition worsening. At Queen Maria's discretion, the princess had stayed at home.

Prince Lyle and Archduke Ernest said they'd take me somewhere nice when I came back to the capital—their treat. For some reason, Queen Maria misunderstood that to mean some kind of adult shop, and kept persistently questioning them about it.

But they'd only meant that they'd take me somewhere that served delicious food and drinks.

After that, I talked with Tida and Luna, but Luna seemed somewhat distracted. I called Solomon over for her and Luna ran towards him, expressing her gratitude.

"Sorry, Tenma," Tida seemed genuinely apologetic as he watched his sister's antics. The king and the others were chatting with Gramps, and sighed at Luna's behavior. Queen Maria and Princess Isabella in particular seemed to be deep in discussion regarding Luna's future education. By the way, Luna was once again on the verge of having Solomon run away from her, but she succeeded in petting him by using her secret weapon—snacks—along with a bonus Shiromaru to lure Solomon in.

After we'd said our goodbyes, we moved outside and started talking with the members of the royal guard who were waiting for us. It felt like Dean was trying to break my bones when we shook hands.

Jean said, "Next time you visit, I'll invite you to my house. But don't even think about marrying my daughter!" with a serious face.

Kriss murmured, "She's only six..."

There wasn't much to talk to Sigurd about, since we didn't have anything in

common. The only other one I could have a decent conversation with was Edgar.

The royal family stayed at the mansion until the last minute. We exchanged our farewells once again, and then they returned to the royal castle.

Gramps and I were planning to head to the gates of the capital, where we were planning on meeting the Dawnswords. But first, I checked one more time that I hadn't left anything in my room, then headed to the backyard to check on Jubei and his family. I couldn't bring them along, so they would stay here. Aunt Martha and the people from Kukuri Village had been entrusted with their care. I'd also asked Aina, Jeanne, and Aura, but since the three of them had many other tasks to take care of, they'd just be stepping in to support the aunties when needed.

The three white buffalo were eating grass as usual, but once Tama saw me, she charged towards me. It wasn't because she didn't like me—that was how she showed her affection. But I was the only one she did this to...

After I dodged her tackles a few more times, she rubbed her head against me. I petted her, checked her food and water, and then Gramps called out, saying that he was ready to go.

There, I found not just Gramps, but Jeanne, Aura, Aina, and surprisingly Tida, Luna, Kriss, and Edgar, who I'd thought had already gone back to the castle.

I knew that Jeanne and the others would accompany us to the gates, but Tida and the others had said they wouldn't. I asked him about the sudden change of plans, and he said that the queen had told him just before they'd left. Kriss and Edgar were to be their bodyguards. Apparently, this was to show everyone that I was on good terms with Tida and Luna, but I just wished they'd told me in advance. Well—there was no use in complaining, and it wasn't a big deal anyway, so I didn't say anything.

We all decided to ride in my carriage to simplify things for the time being and to make it easier on the guards. Luna and Kriss had suggested this, and looked pleased that their suggestions had been accepted. In contrast, Shiromaru and Solomon looked confused. They were currently being firmly embraced by Luna and Kriss, which effectively paralyzed them.

Tida was usually the levelheaded one, but now he just had a resigned expression on his face, and since Edgar was riding his horse outside, there was no one to stop the girls. I deliberately turned a blind eye to the situation because I didn't want to cause any more trouble than it was worth.

When we arrived at our meeting place, a small crowd had already gathered. They were mainly people from Kukuri Village, and the rest were Duke Sanga, Marquis Sammons, some other royalists including Viscount Mustang, and some neutral nobles we'd met during the coup incident. Everyone had heard the royal family would be coming to Gramps's mansion, so they'd come here instead to see us off, not wanting to get in the royal family's way.

We exited the carriage and started talking to everyone, but as soon as we stepped out, I felt a sharp gaze from behind me. Gramps and the others noticed too, but we all ignored it, which just made the culprit grow more impatient.

"Hey, can't somebody help me outta here?" The voice belonged to Namitaro, who was riding on the roof of the carriage. His body had dried up and he was now stuck. In fact, he'd been stuck there for several hours, since before the royal family had even arrived.

"Water Ball!" I made everyone step back, then fired three shots of water at Namitaro. Now refreshed, he managed to slide down from the roof on his own. He stretched and then joined the conversation as if nothing had happened.

Namitaro would travel with us until a certain point, then part ways with us at a river. He was going to travel downstream to the sea, where he intended to visit a friend.

Jin and the others hadn't arrived yet, so we continued our farewells for a while. Some villagers, including Aunt Martha, wanted to come with us, but Uncle Mark and some others strongly advised against it. They couldn't just abandon their current lives, and everyone agreed when Uncle Mark said they'd just get in our way. However, they made us promise we'd send letters to update them on what was going on and our whereabouts every few months, no matter how busy we were.

As for the nobles—mainly Albert, Leon, and Cain—they were excited to come visit us in Sagan. Although they were their family's heirs, they weren't fully

engaged in their duties yet, so they had more free time compared to the others. Viscount Mustang seemed to get along quite well with Gramps, and looked quite animated after our chat. We greeted the other neutral nobles politely, but that was it. They had promised to keep an eye on Jeanne and Aura while they stayed in the capital.

Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons were also deep in conversation with Gramps. But they kept stealing glances my way, so I thought they must be up to something.

The Dawnswords still weren't there. It was almost time for us to go when a carriage finally arrived, bringing them...and two other people.

"Sorry we kept you waiting. You can direct your complaints to these two," Jin said, pointing at Blanca and Amur. Blanca gave me an apologetic look as he tried to catch Amur, who'd attempted to hug me the moment she'd gotten out of the carriage. She flailed her arms and legs, held up by her collar and suspended in midair.

I asked Jin for an explanation. Apparently, right before they'd left the inn, Amur had caught them in the act, and then one thing had led to another. Amur had been lying in wait since yesterday, watching Jin and others, apparently in the belief that it would be easier to persuade them rather than me. And according to her, the mission had been a success.

I confirmed with Blanca, but in any case, they'd have to go back to the Southern Autonomous Region soon. Sagan was on the way there, so it was fine if they took a short detour. The real problem was bypassing it, as Blanca thought Amur might double back to try to see me. They planned on staying in Sagan for about ten days.

Just as things were getting lively, the time to go had arrived. I had only stayed in the capital for three months, yet it had probably been the most intense time of my life. I'd met the royal family, reunited with the people of Kukuri Village, reunited with Gramps, met the young nobles, and met Blanca and Amur. I'd gotten to know several trustworthy neutral nobles as well.

It was sad to say goodbye to all these people, but it wouldn't be forever. We would meet again someday.

“Let’s get going, Tenma,” Jin said.

I boarded the carriage and held Valley Wind’s reins. Gramps sat beside me and nodded, saying he was ready to leave anytime.

The Dawnswords, plus Blanca and Amur, got in their carriage and waited for us to set off.

“We’ll come back and see you again, everyone!” I said, and with that our carriages started moving. The distance between us and everyone else began to grow.

Everyone was smiling and waving. Even though this was the second time I’d been seen off like this, farewells still felt sad to me. Of course, I could come back anytime, but reuniting with the people from Kukuri Village had made me nostalgic for my childhood.

As I was lost in those sentimental thoughts, I noticed a commotion behind me. I turned around to see what was happening.

“Nooo, don’t leave me behind! Not with my sister! Aarghh!”

Aina had been snapped out of her brainwashing and was desperately chasing after the carriage. However, she was caught by Aina and Jeanne ten meters before she reached us, and once again firmly choked out by her sister.

Aina noticed my gaze as she lifted Aura onto her back like luggage, and bowed to me. Jeanne was walking next to her, looking very embarrassed.

At this point, I was used to these sorts of farewells, but, well...things were complicated when Aura was involved. Hopefully, she’d be a little more mature the next time we met.

And sadly, that was my last impression as we left the capital behind...

Extra Chapter

School Day Memories

“Hey, why do you think I’m not having any luck with girls?”

One day after school, the three of us were sitting in the cafeteria as usual, killing time while waiting for our turn in the bath, when suddenly Leon piped up with that question.

“Probably your face.”

“Maybe your personality?”

Cain and I answered at once, but of course we didn’t really mean any of that. Cain said Leon’s face was the problem, but although everyone had their own idea of beauty, Leon was more handsome than most. And though he was pretty dumb, he didn’t have a bad personality. He was surprisingly caring, and admired by all the athletic underclassmen. He *was* kind of a pervert, though...

“Gah! Hey, just because you two are *a little* smarter than me doesn’t mean you have to be jerks about it!”

“Well, I don’t know about your face, but we’re not just *a little* smarter than you—we’re a *lot* smarter than you.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to judge you by your looks because everyone has their own preferences, but there is a pretty huge gap in our levels of intelligence. Our test scores make that obvious.”

We couldn’t beat him in classes which required physical prowess, like martial arts and PE, but for as long as we could remember, he’d never gotten a higher grade than us in academic courses. It wasn’t even close.

“Are you sure? Well, if the two of you are smarter than me but you can’t get any girls either, then I guess I’ll *never* get a girl.”

Once again, Leon just started blabbering nonsense.

“Hey, lately I’ve been approached multiple times about engagements. I’m sure I’ll have an arranged marriage with one of them soon.”

“Bwah?!” Leon sputtered.

“Wow, congratulations,” said Cain. “You know, some people say that marriage is the moment when your life ends.”

I couldn't blame Leon for his lame reaction, but I'd expected more from Cain. It wasn't like my engagement was already decided, though.

Several families had approached us this time, but most of the girls had made it clear they were just after my title, so I'd turned them down. The one I was interested in didn't seem that way at all, so I'd decided to go ahead and meet her in person. However, Dad had warned me beforehand, "Brace yourself, because she's quite an eccentric girl."

Personally, I thought nobles became more and more eccentric the higher their social rank was, so I didn't really think I needed to prepare myself to that extent.

"Well, we're at that age. It's only natural for discussions of matchmaking to come up. Speaking of which, not to boast or anything, but I *am* very popular with the ladies. I've received letters from girls many times," Cain said.

"Bwah?!" Once again, Leon reacted by making a weird noise.

For a moment, I wondered if he'd broken down from shock, but then again, it was pretty common for Leon to make weird noises and act strangely.

"Oh! And I have received letters asking about Leon."

"Really?!" Leon sounded very pleased about Cain's statement—he seemed really happy that girls were discussing him. However, I'd heard about similar things before, and it wasn't like what Leon was imagining. I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him.

"The main question I usually get is 'Does Leon prefer to *give* or *receive*?'"

"'Give'? 'Receive'? I don't get what they're asking. Do they mean in battle? In that case, I definitely like to give them all I've got! Defense doesn't suit me!" Leon answered loudly. I heard some nearby students—mainly girls—hiss, "I knew it!" or "Aww, I thought he'd be the other way!"

I didn't want to be lumped in with him, so I decided to move away from them, and selected an empty seat two seats over. It was at times like these when I was reminded how troublesome Leon was.

"What's wrong, Albert?"

Not understanding what was going on, Leon even followed me. The girls who'd been excitedly watching Cain and Leon were now probably fantasizing about me and Leon.

"Hey, Albert, I keep hearing people say, 'He switched!' and 'Noble sandwich!' and 'He's a total aggressor!' What does that all mean?"

Cain came clean with Leon in order to mess with him, but then Leon just loudly denied it, saying, "I'm not into that at all!" When the girls heard this, there were some disappointed sighs, but then some declared, "I'll never believe it!"

To make matters worse, Leon's classmates, who knew that he wasn't into guys, also started causing a commotion, calling him a liar. That just got the girls excited again, and they said things like, "See, I knew it!"

That was the start of the worst nightmare of my life.

"If you keep bothering me about it, why don't I prove it right now?!" Leon declared to the noisy girls, before rushing out of the cafeteria.

"How is he going to prove that?"

"I don't know. You know how unpredictable he is. Maybe he went out to pick up girls or something?"

"I can see that!" Cain and I laughed, but suddenly we heard a commotion coming from the floor above. I had a bad feeling about that...

"You pervert!" There was a loud noise, and an angry shout echoed throughout the building. Cain and I immediately thought Leon must have done something and felt the urge to run away. But given the circumstances, if we were to run away now, we might be considered accomplices. We stayed put and earnestly prayed to the gods.

"Please don't let it be Leon, please don't let it be Leon..."

"This idiot and those two who are always with him! Get out here!"

Sadly, our prayers were in vain, and a female student stormed into the cafeteria, dragging Leon behind her.

That person was Kriss, a student one year older than us, who had reportedly

already been approached to join the king's guard.

"I knew it... Well, let's just go for now so we can prove that we weren't involved."

If we couldn't clear up the misunderstanding with Kriss, our lives could be in danger. That wasn't a joke—if things went wrong, a report could be sent to my father through the academy, which could lead to him disinheriting me and a life of house arrest in some remote corner of the estate.

We braced ourselves as we stepped forward towards Kriss. *Wait—Leon's not dead, right?* Even among the older students, Leon was considered one of the best martial artists, but right now he looked limp as a rag.

After this incident, we managed to clear up Kriss's misunderstanding. However, Leon (and occasionally Cain and I) continued to cause trouble. And every time, Kriss, who had been appointed our minder after this incident, just came down harder and harder on us. That continued even after we graduated from the academy, and she drilled it into our heads to never defy her.

Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 6 / End

Afterword

Hello everyone! This is the author, Kenichi. Thank you so much for picking up and reading *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 6*. Every time another volume is published, I find myself growing unnecessarily nervous.

It's been two years since we released the first volume. At the time that one was released, we didn't include a number in the title, and I worried about not being able to release a second volume. But thanks to all of you readers, the volume was reprinted just a few days after its release, and then about a month later, I got a message from my editor saying that we'd get a second volume! I remember feeling so relieved.

Now, as for this sixth volume, it covers the events from the end of the martial arts tournament to when Tenma leaves the capital. Familiar characters from Tenma's past, including Blanca and Amur, whom he fought during the tournament, join the story and make themselves comfortable in it.

It starts with a typical adventurer scene, with Tenma and his buddies on a hunting trip, but then he soon encounters an earth dragon, which kicks off various incidents across the rest of the book. Tenma's "slow isekai life" is pretty short-lived in this volume.

Although this isn't necessarily related, I asked Nem to focus the illustrations on the charming aspects of the female characters, though the last one ended up just being Namitaro. By the way, I think Amur's pose was really cute. Well, I like all the illustrations of the female characters. They're all cute!

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the publishing of this book. Nem, thanks again for the wonderful illustrations. I'd also like to thank Gao Works, the designer, everyone at the publishing company, and my editor.

Thank you very much!

- Kenichi



Tenma

Kelly

ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD



Cain

Leon

Albert

Bonus Short Story

The School Revolution Begins with Brown Bread!

“Princess Luna, here are the things you asked for. Are you sure this is what you wanted?”

“Yes! This is just what I wanted. Thanks, Jean. Is this enough money?”

I was heading to the library to do some research when I spotted Jean giving Luna something in a deserted hallway. It seemed like she was trying to give him money as payment, but he wouldn't accept it because she was trying to give him way too many gold coins.

Then I saw Luna hastily put whatever she'd received from Jean away in a magic bag, so I decided to confront her about it.

“Luna? What did you just hide?”

This was just a precautionary measure, though, since I figured Jean probably wouldn't have bought her anything that was illegal.

“Brother?! It's nothing, really!” Her reaction was clearly suspicious, so I decided to ask Jean directly.

“Prince Tida, it really isn't anything bad... Well, I suppose I can't say that... At any rate, it's nothing dangerous or illegal,” Jean said. Then he took out another object that resembled what he'd given her. It was dark brown and round.

“What is this? Brown bread?”

“That's right. Along with the same jam and pickles that are sold at the school store.”

According to Jean, when Tenma had come to tour the school the other day, the only thing he hadn't bought from the school store was brown bread. Afterwards, Luna had become interested in it and asked Jean to buy something similar. She'd also asked for jam and other items because she wanted to know

how they would taste with the brown bread.

“Now that you mention it, you don’t live in the castle, Jean.”

Most of the time, only single people were asked to become part of the king’s guard, but Jean had been married before he’d joined, so he’d been given special permission to live outside the castle with his family.

“Well, it’s still quite close to the castle. That was why Princess Luna asked me to buy these just before I went home. By the way, I did inform His Majesty about this, and I have already tested them for poison.”

He said the last sentence quietly, so Luna wouldn’t hear. Luna had wanted to keep it a secret from Grandfather, so she must have asked Jean personally. But since Grandfather was Jean’s boss, he had to report to His Majesty anyway.

“Well, I’ll excuse myself now. Go ahead and have some if you’d like, Prince Tida. I bought some for myself too because it made me feel a little nostalgic, but I ended up getting too much.”

I didn’t hesitate to accept, and offered to pay, but he declined. “It was my fault for buying too much,” he said. But since it was as though Luna was also paying, I couldn’t just take it from him for free, so I convinced him to accept. In the end, he did so before returning to his duties.

“I’m hungry, so I was about to eat anyway. Come along and you can have some tea too, Luna.”

“Okay.”

She seemed to want to eat in secret, so I decided we should try it in my room for now. Just as Jean was leaving, he’d said, “Make sure you have something to drink if you try to eat brown bread,” so on my way to my room, I asked the maid to bring some tea.

“This isn’t...bad, but...”

“My jaw is tired...”

As soon as the maid had brought us the tea, I’d bitten into the brown bread, but it was so hard that it was difficult to sink my teeth into, and it was also

difficult to swallow.

“This must be what Jean meant when he said to make sure we have something to drink on hand...”

I had heard that brown bread was cheap and would keep for a long time, so adventurers used it as emergency food, but I’d never thought it would be this hard to eat.

“Soaking it in oil makes it a little softer, but it doesn’t work with the jam.”

“I prefer sweeter jam...”

Nobles generally ate sugary jam, so of course the kind we usually used was as well. But now Luna was eating unsweetened jam mixed with the sugar we’d used for our tea.

“Tida, Luna... It’s not very good, is it?”

“Grandfather!”

Just as we had finished tasting everything, our grandfather came into the room. He sat down next to Luna and dipped a piece of the brown bread into the tea, then ate it with a nostalgic look on his face.

“This is how we usually ate brown bread—by soaking it in tea or soup. But of course, that still doesn’t mean it tastes like the same soft bread we usually eat.”

“How do you know how to eat brown bread, Grandfather?”

“Well, a long time ago, I traveled with Cruyff, Dean, and Tenma’s parents, who took great care of me.”

As he tasted the brown bread, he looked like he was remembering the past. For me and Luna, it was just a hard lump of bread that was difficult to eat, but for Grandfather, it was a nostalgic “taste of his youth.”

“But this doesn’t taste very good, Grandfather. Why do they sell it at school?”

“Because it’s cheap. Not everyone at school has the money to always eat at the cafeteria. Also, since it lasts longer, it means you won’t waste as much food.”

It was true that some commoners attended our school, and they bought their

lunch at the school store instead of the cafeteria. From a school management perspective, it made sense that the less food they wasted, the better.

“But if the food is gross, why would you even want to study after eating it?”

It was true that there was a difference, generally speaking, between the grades of nobles and those of commoners, as well as differences in other aspects. Luna wondered out loud if this was due to a difference in diet.

“Hrm...”

Grandfather pondered Luna’s theory, and just then, the door opened again.

“Father, why don’t you see if you can make the meals at school better, to support the commoners?”

“That’s a great idea, Luna. I can’t believe you came up with such a wonderful idea.”

Father and Mother had both come in, followed by Grandmother and Aina. I had a feeling the maid who’d brought in the tea had talked to Aina, who’d then reported back to my grandmother and our parents.

“Hmm—it’s certainly worth it!” Grandfather said. Luna’s theory had the potential to change the future of the school.

“By the way, Luna, I think your idea is very kind...but if your theory is that eating better food motivates you to study more, since you’re afforded the best food out of any child in the kingdom, that must mean you’re very excited to study!”

“Huh?”

Grandmother gave Aina a look, and before I knew it, Aina had walked towards Luna and grabbed her by one arm while Mother grabbed her by the other.

“Let’s go. Princess Isabella and I will guide you in your studies today.”

“I’m full... I guess I’ll have to study some other time...”

“Luna. Let the nutrition you just supplied to your body seep into your brain.”

“Nooooooooo!”

And so they took Luna away. I could hear her screams echoing from the

hallway.

“Well, she walked right into that one.”

“Right. Well, let’s leave Luna to them; I’m sure she’ll be fine. Maybe...”

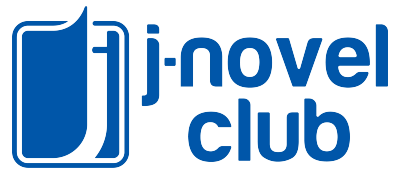
After that, Grandfather and Father talked for a while before leaving. I was told to compile a list of things I thought could be improved at the school, the reasons for wanting to do so, and any other ideas I had. They asked me to bring the list to them the next day.

“Hm, I have until tomorrow...”

I knew that it made sense for me to be involved in the improvement of the school, and I knew that I would have to start thinking about such things as a member of the royal family, but...

“There’s so much I have to do, I don’t think I’ll get enough sleep tonight.”

And for a moment, I held a grudge against Luna for having opened her mouth in the first place.



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 6

by Kenichi

Translated by Andria McKnight Edited by Momo

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