
ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD
10
Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem


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Kanon
“Yes, Guildmaster.”
The cranky receptionist who’d shown us into the room reluctantly agreed to Yully’s request. She went to a desk quite far away from where we were seated and sat down there.


Ceruna
Henri
Henri actually looked cool for once as he proceeded, bathed in light. As for Ceruna, her dress shimmered with every step she took, thanks to the silk threads from Goldie and Silvie that'd been woven into her dress. She had a nearly solemn radiance.

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Chapter Ten

Part One

"Gramps, there are some adventurers up ahead. It looks like they came from the direction of Kukuri Village."

As soon as we had finished setting up camp the day before, I had immediately passed out and slept straight till morning. Everyone else had kept watch that night, so to make up for it, I was now taking the morning shift driving the carriage.

We had departed from the campsite and had about two to three more hours to go before we reached the village when I spotted a party of adventurers. They were coming our way from the direction of Kukuri Village.

"This is the first time we've seen any adventurers since we left Shellhide," Gramps mused.

"I know. Well, we made a promise to the margrave, so we should go ahead and talk to them."

I drove the carriage towards the group, and they seemed to notice us too. As we got closer, I could tell they looked cautious, but once they saw Thunderbolt, they stayed put. They probably thought that if they ran away from our carriage, we'd either catch up to them immediately or think they were suspicious. There were five adventurers, and they all looked younger than me. I figured they'd probably come to gather herbs in the Elder Forest.

I stopped the carriage a short distance away from them so I wouldn't spook them too much before calling out to them. "We've just come from Shellhide. Are you on your way home from Kukuri Village?" I asked.

"That's right," one of the adventurers answered.

"The margrave asked us to warn any adventurers taking on quests near Kukuri Village to be careful," I added.

The moment I mentioned the margrave's request, the adventurers grew even more cautious, most likely not believing it. But once Leon showed them the flag with the margrave's family crest on it, they decided to hear us out, although still doubtful.

I explained to them how reports of missing people near the village had increased lately. "...And so that's why you should steer clear of Kukuri Village as much as possible."

The adventurers all went pale and turned to each other, saying things like "I knew it!" and "That's why we felt that weird vibe."

"What do you mean?" I prodded.

"We were all raised in a village that neighbored a forest, just like Kukuri Village. We're novices, but since we know our way around forests, we were confident we could do it. We heard you could make a lot of money gathering the herbs from the Elder Forest, so we went there to give it a try, but the atmosphere around the place was so creepy we decided to turn back."

They then explained that they'd arrived at a spot near Kukuri Village in the middle of the night and had decided to take a break there before looking for herbs in the forest early the next morning. Shortly before dawn, they had set out for the Elder Forest to gather herbs as planned, but the atmosphere in the forest had been so different from any they'd ever been in before that they had decided to give up and turn back.

"I think that was a good judgment call," I said. "We ran into two groups of goblins and one group of orcs on the way here. That doesn't necessarily mean there're more monsters the way we came, but you should be careful on your way home."

The color drained from their faces when they heard my warning. It seemed they didn't have much confidence in combat, so they were most likely imagining what would happen to them if they were attacked.

Gramps told them about a safer route that he knew of, although it had been a long time since he'd taken it himself, so he advised them to be careful anyway. After that, the adventurers told us what Kukuri Village was like now. We parted ways after that—they wanted to put as much distance as they could between them and the village before nightfall, so they hurried off.

"Seems safe to say that there's definitely been a change in the Elder Forest," Gramps remarked.

I agreed. "Yeah. We only chatted with those adventurers for a

little bit, but they looked like they were pretty familiar with forests, so I think it's true that they felt a strange vibe there. Not to mention the fact that we ran into three groups of monsters on the way here."

At any rate, based on what we'd learned from that group, we decided to camp at the fortress outside of the village instead of in the village itself that night. The fortress was basically the remnants of the barricade we'd made when fighting off the zombies long ago. The walls were mostly in ruins, but the moat remained intact. Adventurers who visited the village often used it as a campsite.

"We're finally here," I said.

"So we are," Gramps answered.

We hadn't encountered any other adventurers or monsters on the way and safely arrived at Kukuri Village according to plan. Well, perhaps it would be more correct to say we'd arrived at the place that *used to be* Kukuri Village.

Most of the buildings I remembered from the village had been destroyed by the zombie attacks or by our own magic as we fought back. The church, which was made from stone, was the only building left standing. Half of its roof was missing, though, so it was too dangerous to go inside of it, let alone camp out there.

"Isn't that where my house used to be?" I asked. "Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha's house was next door. And the building where we used to gather for parties was over there."

So many memories came back to me, like Gramps's old house, the place where I first used magic, and so on. But the places I pointed out were now empty and barely recognizable with only columns, floorboards, or the remains of flowerbeds left behind.

"And this used to be my room..."

As I slowly looked around the devastatingly changed village, I reached the spot that used to be my house. I reflected on the past as I walked across the threshold where the front door of the house had been before going to what used to be my room.

"There's really nothing left..." I'd hung onto hope that some of my old things might've survived, but there was nothing here. "What are these charred pieces of wood? My bed, maybe? Then this must be

my chair and my desk...”

Even if some things had survived the fight against the zombies, adventurers who had visited the village later had probably taken away anything of value to sell.

“Tenma, shall we go see Celia’s and Ricardo’s graves now?” Gramps asked softly, interrupting my reveries.

“Sure.”

It was only the two of us and my followers here. The rest of our party had hung back at the fortress to prepare the campsite.

“They’re over that way. They’re resting alongside the other villagers who perished.”

We walked through the village for a bit until we reached the spot.

“Wait, aren’t Shiromaru’s parents buried near here too?” I asked.

This area was nothing but a burnt wasteland now, but I was sure that if we walked a bit farther, we’d reach the spot where I’d buried Shiromaru’s parents.

“Mm, that’s right. There used to be trees in this area, but your magic burnt them up and turned it into a plain. We chose this place to bury the victims since it was large enough.”

Gramps had been severely injured at the time and couldn’t even move, so the other surviving villagers had turned this place into a cemetery. Despite that, he had been able to visit the graves before leaving Kukuri Village with Uncle Mark’s help.

“Here it is. This stone marks Celia and Ricardo’s resting place.” Gramps stopped in front of a large rock that was about forty centimeters large. Mom’s and Dad’s names were carved on it.

“It’s been a long time, Mom and Dad.”

I put my hands together in prayer so I could tell them what had happened after the dragon zombie attack. When I was done with that, I pulled out the item I’d made for this occasion. It was a nice headstone with their names carved into it, along with the Otori surname.

“I’m sure they’re very happy,” Gramps said.

“I really hope so.”

After I was finished paying my respects at my parents’ grave, Gramps and I did the same at the graves of the rest of the villagers.

There were so many of them that Kriss and the others came looking for us while we were still cleaning up the cemetery. Once they saw what we were doing, they all joined in to help.

We finished cleaning and then went back to the camp at the fortress. Just as the adventurers we met had said, most of the walls had been destroyed by the battle and were in disrepair. The moat was mostly covered up by the collapsed walls and overgrown grass.

"Well, we set up camp while you two were gone," Kriss said. She'd chosen an area in the middle of the fortress that had probably been used by other adventurers. Other people had left behind the remains of a cooking stove and lean-tos to keep out the wind, so it hadn't required much work.

"Jeanne and Aura made dinner, so all that's left to do is to decide on the order of our lookout shifts," she said.

"Before we do that, I just want to say that I'd like to leave Kukuri Village tomorrow morning," I announced.

Our original plan had been to stay here for a few days. Gramps was surprised to hear me say otherwise.

"We don't know anything about the village anymore, but there's definitely something odd going on. There are more people going missing around here than usual, and the adventurers we met on the way mentioned the creepy atmosphere in the forest. Honestly, I'd like to turn back now, but we can't report anything to the guild until we stay at least one night and see if we can figure out what's going on."

Luckily, everyone here had their own spheres of influence. If any of us experienced anything and reported on it, the guild would most likely dispatch a team to investigate.

"That's a good point," Gramps said.

"If we go back and make the report now, the guild might not believe us. They might even think we're a bunch of cowards," I suggested.

Even if people had gone missing, the guild made a profit by sending adventurers out here. They were a business—it was highly unlikely they'd take our reports seriously unless we had concrete evidence or findings.

Leon chimed in. “I don’t mind,” he said. “I want to see what’s going on in Kukuri Village too.”

Gramps and Kriss both agreed with him, and after that, everyone else nodded. No one else besides me or Gramps had any special feelings about Kukuri Village anyway, so they had no reason to oppose cutting our stay short.

“Now, about the order of lookout shifts, the first group will be Kriss, Albert, and Cain. The second group will be Gramps, Leon, Amur, and Leni. The final group will be me, Jeanne, and Aura. Is that all right?” I asked.

For the first group, I knew that if Kriss were in charge, Albert and Cain would follow her orders. Gramps was the most seasoned adventurer here, so I didn’t have to worry about the second group. While I was a little nervous about putting Leon and Leni together in that group, I doubted there would be any problems as long as Gramps and Amur were with them. As for the final group, it might have seemed like Jeanne and Aura would just get in the way if something happened, but since I’d be there with my followers, our group actually had the highest combat ability.

Regarding the order, the second and third groups were interchangeable, but when I considered breakfast preparations and getting Thunderbolt ready, I thought my group should be last.

I explained my reasoning to everyone, and they agreed with it. However, I did let Gramps and Amur know my concerns regarding Leon and Leni, so they promised they’d keep an eye on the situation. The first group seemed to understand why I had put Kriss with Albert and Cain without me having to mention it.

We decided on which times we would change shifts and what to do in an emergency. Each group had a discussion among themselves, and then we had free time until dinner was ready. I didn’t want anyone going off by themselves due to the unpredictable nature of our situation, so I made a rule that everyone had to stay away from the Elder Forest.

◆◆◆

"Good night, Kriss," I said.

"Good night, Jeanne. Get a good night's sleep, and then I'll be looking forward to a yummy breakfast when we wake up!"

Kriss and her team were prepared to keep watch, so I climbed into the carriage where I and the other women would be sleeping. I slipped under the covers quietly, careful not to wake up Amur and Leni as they were already resting. Aura had come into the carriage shortly before I had, but she was already fast asleep too.

Come to think of it, Tenma fell asleep awfully early again today.

I had noticed him getting more and more restless the closer we got to the village. And if even I had picked up on it, then surely everyone else had noticed that he was acting different from usual too.

It's been a while since Tenma and I were on watch duty together. Aura and I will have to fight if something happens, but Rocket and the others will be there too. Plus, we can activate the golems and hurry to wake up everyone else before escaping into the carriage.

I lay down and closed my eyes, running through the checklist of everything I had to do during our lookout duty over and over again in my head.

"It's cold..."

I must've finally dozed off, but I awoke with a start, chilled to the bone. There was a jacket that'd been slung over a chair nearby, so I reached for it for warmth. Whatever was in its pockets rattled around when I put it on, but I was still half asleep, too groggy to bother taking it out.

"Water..." I suddenly felt thirsty, so I got out of bed in search of the pitcher of water that should've been on the table.

Amur and Leni were no longer in the carriage. Kriss was sleeping here in their place, so I knew it must've been time for the second group to be on watch.

"I wonder how much longer it is until my shift?" I wondered. If it wouldn't be that much longer, it might've been easier to just stay awake until then. I looked outside to see if it was still dark.

And that was when I saw Tenma walking unsteadily towards the

forest.

"Tenma...?" I said. "Why isn't anyone stopping him?!"

He was clearly acting strangely. I thought about chasing after him immediately, but I decided it would be best to wake Kriss up first. I shook her shoulders, but she didn't seem like she would come to. I smacked Aura's cheeks a few times too, but just like Kriss, she wouldn't wake up either.

"Why...?!"

The two of them weren't dead—they were breathing, but whatever was happening definitely wasn't normal.

"How's everyone else?" I wondered and rushed out of the carriage. I ran over to the group that was keeping watch, but they were all sitting down, fast asleep.

"Master Merlin! It's Tenma!" I'd thought that I could surely rely on Master Merlin, but when I shook him, he wouldn't wake up—just like Kriss and Aura.

Meanwhile, Tenma had gotten quite far away, and by the time I decided I had no other choice but to go after him myself, he'd already practically disappeared into the forest.

"I'm pretty sure he went this way..."

It wasn't long after I entered the forest that I totally lost sight of Tenma. When I had first started chasing after him, I'd thought that even though he was quite far ahead of me, he had seemed to be half asleep and unsteady on his feet, so surely I could catch up to him if I ran. But once I entered the forest, it was much harder to run than I'd expected, and since I wasn't familiar with these woods, I fell down several times.

"Tenma, where are you?" I called out.

Not only had I lost sight of him, but these woods were dark and creepy at night. I was terrified that a monster would attack me at any moment. But I couldn't just leave Tenma alone. And most of all, I had no idea how to get back anyway. All I could do was keep going the way I thought I'd seen Tenma go.

"Tenma...? Oh, there he is!"

As I continued to wander through the forest, I came to a small

clearing. I took in my surroundings and could see Tenma off in the distance. He'd reached the clearing at the same time I had, but since we were so far apart, that must've meant I'd gone in a slightly different direction while I had been chasing after him. The fact that I was able to find him at all meant I was really lucky—if I hadn't, I would've kept going in the wrong direction and gotten completely lost.

"Tenma, why are you... Eek!"

I began to run towards him to grab hold of him, but then I noticed he was pointing at something. I followed his gaze and saw a creepy monster wearing a robe with a hood pulled over its head.

It might've seemed odd for me to say it was a creepy monster, since it was so far away from me and its body was concealed by a robe, but there was no other way I could describe it. After all, the hand that reached towards Tenma was nothing but bones. And I don't mean that in a figurative way—I *literally* only saw bones.

Instinctively, I knew I couldn't let Tenma get close to that monster. I thought about using magic, but since I didn't have a lot of control over my spells, there was a good chance I would hit Tenma by mistake.

"What should I do...? Oh, I know!"

If I couldn't use magic, I thought I could use a rock, but I wasn't sure if I'd be able to throw one that far. As I waffled about it, I suddenly remembered the slingshot Tenma had given me. Lucky for me, that was what'd been in my jacket pocket when I'd put it on earlier—I had to pat myself on the back for that one.

"Let's goooo!"

I loaded some tiny stones into my slingshot, drew the band as far back as I could, and let the stones fly towards the monster. My aim was spot-on, because the rocks headed straight for the monster!

But only at first, however.

All of a sudden, the rocks changed course, and they ended up hitting the tree branch above the monster. Then, they changed paths again and hit Tenma. The monster must've realized something was flying towards it, and once it spotted me, it knew I was the culprit.

It then thrust its bony hand towards me instead. I could tell it

was trying to use some sort of magic spell against me, but I couldn't move. I was frozen because everything was happening so quickly, but more than that, I couldn't move because I had seen its face. And the monster's face was exactly what I'd imagined it to be—not human, but a human skull.

The monster took another step towards me as I stood rooted to the spot, but in the next moment, it was blown backward by magic. And there was only one person who could've cast the spell...

"Jeanne, are you all right?!"

It was Tenma.

◆◆◆

I'm dreaming, aren't I?

I'd experienced lucid dreams several times before, but this was the first one that made me feel both nostalgic and sad at the same time. The dreamscape that stretched out before me was the Kukuri Village I remembered from my childhood.

There's no one around...

Sadly, I couldn't see a single other person in my dream.

If I'm dreaming, can't I at least enjoy it?

In the dream, I was walking towards my house from outside of the village. After some time, I arrived at my childhood home—the very one I had lived in with my welcoming mom and dad, which had stood until the zombies had attacked the village.

But before I could relish in the nostalgia of it all, I pushed the door open and went inside. I didn't go to my room—instead, I cut through the house and exited through the back door.

Huh? Did the doors in our house always open inward? Actually, was there even a back door in this spot at all?

Since I was dreaming, the details of the house differed from the facts in my memories, but for some reason, those differences really nagged at me. I didn't have time to dwell on it much longer before my body began walking forward, and I entered the forest.

This brings back so many memories... This is where I set the traps for the mountain quails. Dad got mad at me when he got

tripped up by them.

I made my way through the brush and continued deeper into the forest as I remembered that.

I've walked for so long...but where am I going?

It wasn't unusual to do mysterious things in dreams, but I thought it was strange that all I was doing was walking. It felt like I was heading somewhere in particular, but I couldn't remember anything of note in this direction. The Elder Forest just kept continuing on before me.

I've come out into a clearing... Hm? Something's over there.

I walked and walked and walked through the forest until I finally came upon a small clearing. This was the first place in my dream I didn't recognize from real life.

As I stepped into the area, there was something in front of me, beckoning me and calling me.

Who is that...?

The figure calling me was concealed under a long, hooded robe. Since I couldn't see their face, I didn't know who it was. They were slightly taller than me, and I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman under that robe.

Whoever it is, they're creepy. I know I should be cautious of them, but for some reason, I just keep heading towards them.

If this were reality, I would've put distance between the two of us and used Identify instead of going closer. But since I was dreaming, I didn't do that. Instead, I approached the suspicious hooded figure.

Once they realized I was indeed coming closer, they stopped beckoning to me and instead reached their hand out in my direction.

Do they want me to take their hand?

I *should've* been able to see their hand, but for some reason, I couldn't. I couldn't tell whether it was thin or muscular, or a man's or a woman's. All I could discern was that it was shaped like a human hand.

Only a few more meters... Just a few steps farther, and I'd be able to grab onto the hand...

But then, out of nowhere, something hit me square in the forehead, forcing my gaze away from the hooded figure.

“Oww...”

I reflexively brought my hand to my forehead, where a jolt of pain raced through me. I felt something wet there and realized it was blood. The moment I felt the blood and the pain, I understood that everything I’d thought had been a dream until now had actually been real.

“I was sleepwalking?” I said. “Huh?!”

Once I understood my situation, I turned my gaze forward, and the figure who had called me became clear.

It was a skeleton. The hand that reached for me—and the face that peeked out from beneath the hood—was made only of bones, much like the anatomical models I’d seen before. Perhaps there was some flesh remaining beneath the being’s robes, but it couldn’t have been much. The figure standing in front of me was not an ordinary human skeleton, though—it was a monster.

And that monster was now facing away from me with its hand outstretched, about to use magic.

“What...? Jeanne’s here too?! No, I won’t let you!” I cried out.

The monster was looking at Jeanne and seemed to be intent on getting her out of the way. And Jeanne was frozen to the spot, overwhelmed by the monster’s creepy aura.

If I didn’t do something fast, this monster would kill her. I immediately cast the Wind spell Air Ball, releasing it towards the monster. It shot out quickly and knocked the monster back before it could attack Jeanne.

“Jeanne, are you all right?!” I yelled.

I prioritized confirming her safety over casting another spell at the monster. Once I reached her, I pushed her behind me, putting myself in between her and her attacker.

I was incredibly lucky that I’d been able to save her. The monster had begun casting its spell sooner than I had, but my spell had reached the monster first only because I’d cast one that emphasized speed while the monster had been planning to use a spell that required a great deal of mana—and would’ve been enough to kill Jeanne. I’d only managed to save her by two or three seconds at the most.

"What in the world is going on?" I asked.

"I knew you weren't being yourself!" she said. Her explanation came out in a rush—she told me how she had seen me stumbling through the campsite heading towards the forest, and how she hadn't been able to wake up anyone else.

"This definitely isn't normal. And I know what's causing all of it," I said, directing my gaze at the monster who slowly rose to its feet. Its robe was now tattered, and I could see glimpses of its bony figure peeking through the holes.

"Its body is nothing but bones too," I said. "This would've been easier if it were just a skeleton...but if it has enough mana to trap both me and Gramps on top of the fact that my spell just now barely affected it, that must mean...that thing is a lich!"

In my previous life, liches had been considered the strongest undead monsters when compared to others like zombies or skeletons. That seemed to be accurate in this world as well.

However, unlike the programmed enemies in video games, this was actually real life, and the strength of real monsters varied from one to the next—just like the lich that stood in front of me. Monsters that sprang from corpses, like liches, had power levels that were heavily influenced by the strength and condition of their original body. So even if you were facing a lich, it could be anywhere from weak to exceptionally strong depending on what it had come from.

Well, one couldn't turn into a lich without having a certain level of base strength, so they were still far more dangerous than lower-level monsters like zombies or skeletons on average. However, even zombies or skeletons could vary in strength depending on their materials.

But unfortunately for me, the lich in front of me was one of the strongest ones—a top-tier lich, even.

"Jeanne! Don't leave my side!"

"Got it!"

I reached into my magic bag and pulled out my favorite sword and ten golem cores. I ordered three of the golems to flank us and sent the remaining seven forward, towards the lich. However, three of them ended up directly in front of the monster and were

destroyed by its magic in an instant.

"What kind of spell was that?!" I cried.

I'd been using Identify on the lich for a while, but I hadn't been able to get a read on its stats. And I had no idea what kind of spell it had just used to blow away the golems either.

"You last four golems, surround it on both sides!"

Two pairs of golems positioned themselves on either side of the lich, leaving the area between me and the lich clear.

"Throw anything at it! Rocks, dirt, whatever! Just keep at it!" After I gave the golems that order, I quickly cast one Air Ball after another. The lich tried to use some kind of magic to counter my spells, but the stones and clumps of dirt being hurled at it from both sides made it impossible for the being to maintain its footing.

"So physical attacks work better than magic... If that's the case, then I'll have to push through with this!"

To continue my attack on the lich, I switched from my Wind magic spell Air Ball to my Earth magic spell Earth Ball. The lich seemed to be losing its composure more easily now that I had switched spells. It was focusing on staying upright rather than counterattacking.

"Just a little more!"

The moment I was certain that victory was within my grasp, the lich's eyes gleamed ominously. And the next, my golems who'd been throwing projectiles at him stood frozen in place.

"Did he take them out...?"

"Tenma! Behind you!"

"What?"

Based on how they'd stopped, I'd assumed that these golems had been somehow destroyed by the same spell that took out the first three. But I'd been so distracted by that sight that I hadn't realized what was happening behind me. But Jeanne had noticed something and had called out to me right away.

That was when I realized what was going on. I quickly scooped Jeanne up and leaped away from our position. Barely a second later, three giant fists slammed down onto the spot where we'd been standing only a moment ago.

"It's taken control of my golems?!" I cried.

Those three fists belonged to the golems who had been guarding us from behind. Meanwhile, the two pairs of golems who had been throwing stones at the lich abruptly turned around and started walking away.

"Tenma, how is something like that even possible?!" Jeanne asked.

"I have no idea. I certainly can't do it, and I've never heard of anything like this happening before."

It might've been possible for the lich to take control of the golems if it had directly touched them, but it obviously hadn't been able to lay a hand on the ones behind us. The being might have somehow made contact with the ones on either side of it without me noticing if it had perhaps extended part of its body like Rocket could...but I had no idea how it had managed to control those three behind me.

I'm guessing it had something to do with the way its eyes glowed. But at any rate, I can't use golems against it anymore.

There was no way to stop it right now, even if I were to figure out how it had pulled it off. Fortunately, if this power of the lich's were effective on me or Jeanne, it would've used it on us already. Since neither of us had been controlled like the golems, it was safe to assume it only affected creatures who were without their own will —or if it *could* use it on something with a will of its own, the effect was much weaker.

But since I still didn't understand how it had controlled me earlier and had made everyone except Jeanne fall asleep, I couldn't afford to take chances.

I destroyed the golems that were heading towards us. And with no golems left on our side, I faced off against the lich.

The battle quickly became a stalemate, with neither side being able to finish it. Honestly, I could've grabbed Jeanne and taken this opportunity to escape, but if I didn't defeat the lich, there was a possibility that Gramps and the others wouldn't wake up. I had to keep fighting. Escape was only an option to consider as a very last resort if I had no other choice.

"Damn! This thing is tougher than it looks!"

After I decided I had to fight, I launched dozens of spells against the lich. The first one I tried was Light magic, which was said to be effective against undead creatures. However, it barely had any effect—the lich seemed to have an extremely high resistance to it. I thought I'd try Fire magic instead since it also worked great against the undead, but then I decided that using that kind of magic here in the forest would be too risky.

I kept attacking the lich, pivoting to Earth magic. Since it seemed to have high physical and magical resistance, it wasn't taking much damage. But despite its high levels of resistance, its movements were sluggish, and I was slowly starting to gain the upper hand. Of course, I still had to cover Jeanne, so any mistake on my part could turn the tables in an instant.

I kept firing off a barrage of Earth magic, and a few of the spells hit the lich. It staggered backward more strongly than it had at any point before.

"Got you! Earth Lance!"

I took my chance and cast Earth Lance, a spell that was much larger than Earth Ball. It resembled a spear, and I aimed it directly at the lich's torso. The Earth Lance pierced its body, and the tip stuck out from its back as it was blasted backward.

"Did I finally kill it? Huh...?"

Monsters almost always had a magical core located near their chest—where their heart would be. The magical core was one of the things that made a monster a monster, and while breaking or damaging it didn't always lead to a monster's death—sometimes it took a fatal blow from the broken fragments or the shock of the destruction—undead monsters were different. Losing its magical core was usually the end of an undead creature. It was thought that the core acted as a substitute for the heart, but the exact reason was unclear.

With that in mind, I had crushed almost its entire torso—including the magical core—with my Earth Lance. Somehow, the lich showed no signs of suffering while it casually tried to pull the lance out of its chest.

"Damn it," I said. "Jeanne, duck!"

"Huh?"

I was distracted by the scene before me, and when I realized the lich was about to attack, it was too late. It had cleverly pretended to have trouble pulling the Earth Lance from its chest while it had actually been preparing to cast a magic spell.

Jeanne was confused for a moment but instinctively followed my command. She dropped to the ground while she covered her head.

The lich cast an Earth magic spell that resembled a spear, much like my own Earth Lance. While the lance was smaller in size than mine...there were more than ten of them.

"Earth Wall! Earth Wall!" I cried out.

I quickly responded to the incoming Earth spears by creating two Earth Walls. Most of the spears shattered or were deflected by the walls, but I hadn't cast the spells fast enough to block the first spear. I had to cut that one down with my sword.

"Arghh!"

"Tenma!"

A shock wave hit me from the side, sending me flying through the air. The lich had moved behind one of my Earth Walls and hid there as it had launched a spell similar to Earth Ball from that direction.

The compressed ball of dirt hit my left side with tremendous speed. The bones in my arm shattered, and I felt several of my ribs break. Luckily, they hadn't pierced my lungs or heart—while I needed treatment soon, it wouldn't be fatal.

Earlier, the lich hadn't been that fast, but now it was moving differently and not sluggishly like before. That shift in speed had made me let down my guard and had caused my major injury.

If the lich were still holding on to a secret weapon, it would be too dangerous for me to hold back now and preserve my energy for later. It seemed like my best chance to survive would be to use all my strength right here and now to defeat the lich.

"Jeanne, come here!" I called out.

"O-Okay!"

I then hurled the *kogarasumaru* towards the lich's skull. The lich was more panicked than I had seen it act so far, and it crossed its arms to defend itself against the incoming projectile. Although the

kogarasumaru didn't penetrate its skull, it got caught between the bones of the lich's crossed arms and restricted its movement.

"I knew it. *That's* where you're hiding it."

If the lich's magic core wasn't in its chest, it had to be inside its skull. Hiding the core there would be safer than trying to protect it with its bare, fragile ribs, but I'd never heard of a creature moving its core before. If that were the case, then this lich was more formidable than I'd imagined.

"W-Wait, Tenma!"

"Be quiet! Hold on tight to me and put your face against my chest!"

I pulled Jeanne close, and although she seemed startled by my firm command, she obeyed.

Now, I could unleash *my* secret weapon.

"Tempest!"

A powerful whirlwind began to grow stronger and stronger, and the lich, trapped by the *kogarasumaru*, was swallowed up by the storm as it desperately tried to stay low to the ground to resist being blown away.

"Tempest F2!"

I increased my spell's power, and the lich collapsed onto the ground. It frantically gripped at nearby stones with its immobile arms to keep it from being carried away. Rocks and wooden debris flew through the air, getting caught up in the storm.

It was growing close to the point where I could envelop the lich with the debris like I had with the dragon zombie, but both Jeanne and I were nearing our limits. Since we were at the epicenter of the Tempest, there was no danger of being hit by stones or wood, but the change in air pressure was making my injured left side throb with pain. The impact here wasn't as strong as on the edges of the storm, but if I let my guard down, we could be blown away.

"Hang on just a little longer, Jeanne! Tempest F3!"

I increased the power to the level I'd used against the dragon zombie during the attack on Kukuri Village, and the lich's body finally began to lift off the ground. My magical abilities had increased since the first time I had used Tempest, and since the lich was much

smaller than that dragon zombie, I was surprised it had managed to hold out for this long.

But what was even more astonishing was that despite being caught in the storm and being pummeled by rocks and trees, the lich was still maintaining its shape. It seemed that it was a creature far beyond what I'd imagined—possibly even matching the dragon zombie.

"T-Tenma... I can't...anymore..." Jeanne had reached her limit before the lich.

"Jeanne, when I give you the signal, I want you to cover your ears, close your eyes, open your mouth, and stay low," I told her.

Jeanne nodded, looking pale.

"Three, two, one... Now!"

I waited for the perfect moment and gave the signal. Jeanne followed my instructions and dropped to the ground. I surrounded her with a barrier and then took aim at the falling lich, who was now high in the air.

"Fall... Takemikazuchi!" I yelled.



I had cast my ultimate spell.

Takemikazuchi was a spell named after the god of thunder and swords. Its power surpassed even that of Tempest. If cast perfectly, it could destroy a dragon zombie in one strike.

However, it required a lot of preparation, and if the conditions weren't right, its power wouldn't manifest. In order to cast the spell, there had to be clouds in the sky that could then be charged with magic to become electrified.

I used the clouds that Tempest had brought me to create a change in air pressure and then combined them with my magic to fulfill the requirements needed to cast my ultimate spell.

That left me with just one last problem—I had to actually hit the lich with it.

Takemikazuchi was an original spell of mine, so I could control it to some extent. But since it was a Lightning-based spell, there was a risk that it could strike something higher in the air than my target. That was why I had to wait for the lich to be sent up high by Tempest.

I released Takemikazuchi, and just as I had planned, it shot down from directly above the lich. At the moment of impact, there was a blinding flash of light, and shock waves erupted from the lich, spreading outward. Even though I'd closed my eyes and shielded them with my hand, my vision went white, and I had trouble focusing my eyes even after the flash had subsided. I quickly used healing magic on my eyes, and once my vision returned, I saw the lich's battered body falling to the ground after Takemikazuchi had struck it.

The lich slammed into the ground with such force that its bones from its chest down had shattered, but everything above that—including the skull with its core—remained in place. Its arms were still crossed in front of its chest like a statue.

"Damn it!"

Even though I felt like I was on the verge of losing consciousness, I gritted my teeth and tried to assess the lich's condition. It showed no signs of movement, but it could've been trying to trick me. I stepped a little closer, picked up a stone, and

decided to throw it at the lich. However, I was so unsteady that I lost my balance and almost fell.

"Be careful!"

Jeanne had caught me just in time. She wasn't in the greatest condition either due to the shock of Takemikazuchi, though, so we both ended up falling on our backsides.

But even in this vulnerable state, the lich didn't show any signs of movement—maybe it really was dead.

Just to make sure, I asked Jeanne to use her slingshot on it. She agreed and missed a few times before finally landing a shot on its skull. Since it had panicked about blows to the head before, it would show a response to a hit there now if it were still alive; however, the skull just rolled backward. And then, as if on cue, its remaining bones crumbled away like sand.

"It's over, I guess..."

"Looks like it..."

Just as I was convinced the lich was dead, I heard a voice calling my name from far off in the distance.

I looked in its direction and saw Gramps flying through the air with Solomon at his side. Amur was coming our way on the ground, riding Shiromaru. They were all shouting loudly, but I could only make out my and Jeanne's names. As soon as I recognized them, everything went dark, and I lost consciousness.

Part Two

"Ugh..."

"Tenma, you're awake!"

The first thing I saw when I regained consciousness was Gramps's face right in front of me. He was patting my face all over.

"Hey, that tickles, Gramps!" I complained.

"Deal with it!" he retorted. "Well, it doesn't seem like you have any serious injuries, not as far as I can tell." Gramps then finished checking my condition and helped me sit up in the bed.

I thought I could do it without help, but I was still very weak from my battle against the lich.

"Hey, what happened to the lich?!" I asked. I remembered seeing the lich's body shattering into pieces, but since I hadn't checked it out up close, I was starting to worry it had been a trick to make me drop my guard.

"Once Jeanne explained what happened, I investigated the lich's remains. I think it's safe to say that it's dead. It won't move again in that body, at least. But..." Gramps hesitated, and I waited for him to continue. "I couldn't find its core, however."

That meant there was still a possibility that the lich hadn't been entirely defeated.

"I didn't see it, but I think it's highly likely it couldn't withstand your magic and shattered, just like its bones," Gramps continued. "That spell you used... What did you call it?"

"Takemikazuchi."

"Yes, that Takemikazuchi is an extraordinary spell like Tempest and Earthquake. It's as powerful as a natural disaster. I wouldn't be surprised if the blow shattered the lich's core along with its bones."

Takemikazuchi was capable of incredible, instantaneous power, far exceeding that of the other two spells. It wouldn't be surprising if the lich's magical core had been obliterated without a trace after taking the brunt of it. But I still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right here.

"Since there's no way to confirm it, there's no point in thinking about it too much. You need to rest for now," Gramps insisted.

And with that, he left the carriage.

I looked around and realized I was the only one inside.

"I'm so tired..."

Now that Gramps was gone, I felt exhausted again and collapsed back on the bed.

Did I really defeat the lich?

I'd successfully struck it with the most powerful spell I was capable of using, and with an almost perfect hit too. Even so, the fact that no one had found its magic core really bothered me. One reason for that was probably because it had been my first time ever facing a lich, and it had turned out to be much stronger than I'd expected.

There are so many things I could be thinking about right now, but like Gramps said, I should focus on resting for now.

If the lich had survived like I feared and did come back for revenge, the only one capable of dealing with it would be Gramps. That made me very nervous. It wasn't that Gramps and the others were weak, but since the lich's magic (and traps, for that matter) were still unknown, that made it very frightening—especially since it had put everyone besides Jeanne into a deep sleep.

It's tough, but all I can do at the moment is rest.

I'd never felt so useless before, unable to count myself among the fighters at the same time as I worried when the next attack might come. But despite the turmoil inside my mind, my body was so exhausted that I fell asleep without realizing it.

"Yaaaah!"

A sudden, strange cry echoed throughout the carriage, waking me up. I turned my head to find the source of the voice. It was Aura, sitting on the floor with a stunned look on her face. She froze, staring at me as our eyes met. Jeanne was next to her, looking up at the sky.

"Are you all right?"

"Aura, are you sure your head is all right?"

It seemed like they'd come to check on me. Jeanne was holding a

bucket of water and a washcloth. I was just thankful Aura wasn't the one holding it.

"How much time has passed?" I asked.

"It's been three or four hours since you fought the lich."

"It's only been that long? But it seems so bright outside."

Light streamed into the carriage through the curtains, so I had assumed the sun had risen, but it turned out I was wrong. According to Jeanne, they'd increased the number of torches—not to reduce the risk of being discovered by the enemy, but to make it easier to spot the enemy first. We'd abandoned the fort due to the danger of the lich having set traps there in advance and had moved to another location.

"According to Master Merlin, we're about ten kilometers away from that fort now."

It was all hands on deck for the lookout mission, and most of the golems I had entrusted to Rocket were also standing guard. Jeanne said the two of them were just coming in to check on me during one of their breaks, but Aura had made another one of her blunders.

"Has anything strange happened?" I asked.

"No. Sometimes wolves come near, but the golems scare them off just by approaching. There haven't been any major issues so far."

Everyone seemed to be more tired than usual from having to stay on such high alert, but their spirits seemed high. Gramps, in particular, had been down about not sensing the lich beforehand despite his reputation as a sage. Since I had regained consciousness, he'd become frighteningly focused. He was currently standing by the golems, actively keeping watch.

However, he was so focused that his eyes were bloodshot, and he had been mistaken for a monster three times already by Leon, Kriss, and Amur. They hadn't attacked him, but he still looked pretty menacing.

"The sun will rise in a few hours, so we'll fortify our position here and move towards our next destination once it gets bright outside."

That location was Russell City, the closest city to Kukuri Village. People there would probably still remember Gramps, and they were familiar with the incident that happened at Kukuri Village too. We

were going to report the lich's existence, the battle, and the possibility that it was still alive.

We'd originally been planning on going to Russell City anyway—we were just a few days ahead of schedule.

"I should be able to do at least the bare minimum, so let me know if anything happens," I said.

"Got it," Jeanne said, and she put the towel and bucket in front of me. Despite her words, her tone made it seem like she'd only come get me if it were an emergency.

Once Jeanne stepped away, I spoke again. "Aura?"

"Yes?"

I told her to call me if anything happened—seriously. She seemed confused by the order, but I threatened her a bit, saying I was her master and I'd report her to Aina if she didn't obey. Granted, I'd like to think that she wasn't so oblivious that she would ignore a looming danger, but it was just a precautionary measure since I wasn't at full strength.

"Were you two talking about something?" Jeanne asked.

"Huh? Well, I..."

"I asked Aura to calm Gramps down."

Jeanne had come back in because she was suspicious of Aura's behavior, so I told her the first excuse I came up with.

"Yeah, right," she said immediately, not buying it.

"Maybe if she does something dumb like usual, Gramps will snap out of it out of sheer exasperation," I offered.

Jeanne thought about this for a moment, pondering the idea.

"I don't do stuff like that!" Aura objected, but Jeanne glanced at her and let out a sigh.

I felt a little bad taking advantage of everyone's opinion of Aura. Well, talking about her acting "dumb like usual" was a bit harsh, but the truth was that she often did silly things and got scolded by Aina. It wasn't a stretch to say she had a bit of a reputation for being clumsy.

"Well, if Master Merlin comes to his senses because of one of her blunders, we won't have to struggle so much. Want to give it a try, Aura?"

"Give it a try?" she said. "I can't make mistakes on command, you know!"

As I watched their antics, Kriss quietly opened the door and grabbed both of them by the scruff.

"Jeanne, Aura. What are you two doing?" she asked.

Amur stood behind Kriss, looking displeased. "Are you slacking off?"

"Well, um, Aura just..."

"I didn't do it!"

Jeanne sold out Aura, but it would take a lot more than a few words to fool Kriss. She tightened her grip on the two girls' necks, and it looked even more painful than before.

"Jeanne, at this point, it's normal for Aura to mess up," Amur said.

"Amur's right! And it's your job as her partner to cover for her. And why are you causing a commotion too?" Kriss asked Jeanne.

Kriss and Amur both looked exasperated and dragged the two of them outside.

"Ah!"

I thought the two of them were gone, but then Amur came back. I wondered if she was up to something mischievous, but since she had matured considerably under Leni's tutelage, I figured she must've had a good reason.

"Here, Tenma." She pulled something that looked like a long, black stick from her bag.

"*Kogarasumaru*?"

When I took a closer look, I saw it was my sword—*kogarasumaru*—which had pierced the lich before I had used Takemikazuchi against it.

"Yep. I recovered it."

It was covered in soot from the direct hit the lich had taken. I was shocked that the blade was intact, but the hilt and guard had been completely destroyed.

"Thank you..." I began and reached out to take the sword, but Amur yanked it away just before I could take hold of it. "Huh? Amur?"

"Tenma, promise me you'll put it back in your bag right away."

"What?"

"I know you," she said. "You'll probably start polishing and fixing the sword right away, and that'll only delay your recovery."

She was right. If I'd just taken the sword without any warning, I probably would've started cleaning it right away.

Amur was truly concerned for me—I was embarrassed that I'd even assumed that she had come back here to ask me for a favor or something.

"You're right," I said. "Sorry, but can you give it to Gramps or Rocket instead?"

"Sure. That's probably for the best."

Amur nodded and put the *kogarasumaru* into her bag after hearing my words.

"Also, tell everyone to take sufficient breaks and give them these too. Jeanne or Aura should have the tea, so ask them to prepare some for you."

I handed Amur some snacks I always kept in my bag. I thought maybe something sweet might calm Gramps down a little.

"Got it. Can I eat one first?" she asked.

I nodded, and Amur tossed a cookie into her mouth before taking the rest of the snacks and going outside.

I heard a bright voice from outside after Amur left. I hoped that I'd been right and he was calming down a bit.

The next time I woke up, I saw Amur sitting on my bed. She was the first to notice I was awake.

"Oh, Tenma! You're awake!"

"How are you feeling?" Kriss asked.

I could feel the carriage shaking a lot, so I figured we were traveling at a pretty high speed.

"Not completely healed, but a lot better than I did before."

I swung my arms around a few times, testing them out. I still had some residual fatigue and sluggishness, but I felt better than I had when I'd first gone to sleep.

"Just don't push yourself. Although I'm the last person who

should say that, considering I fell into the lich's trap..." Kriss seemed to be upset that she hadn't been more helpful, just like Gramps.

"That lich wasn't your average monster," I told her. "Everyone's fine, so there's no need to be upset about it."

I tried to get out of bed, but Kriss suddenly grabbed my shoulder, pushing me back. But when she realized I had to go to the bathroom, she let go of me.

"Watch out!"

However, when I stood up to go use the bathroom, the carriage shook violently, and I lost my balance. As I started to fall, Kriss and Amur both caught me, supporting me under each arm.

"Tenma, you're not ready for that yet. Let me help you," Kriss said, offering her shoulder to support me as we headed to the bathroom. Amur was on the other side of me, doing the same thing.

I stubbornly resisted at first because it was embarrassing, but I couldn't fight back against the two of them in my current state. We gradually neared the bathroom door. It wasn't like they were going to stay with me while I used it, but at my age, it was tough having two women take care of me like this.

"Kriss, Amur, I'll handle it from here. I feel terrible for Tenma."

The commotion had woken up Cain, and he offered to step in. Even though I still needed help, it was more reassuring to have a man assist me than two young ladies.

"Please, Cain."

"Yeah, yeah. Leave it to me."

Since I had clearly asked Cain for help, Kriss and Amur stepped aside and returned to their seats. I couldn't see Amur's face at the moment, but Kriss looked slightly disappointed.

"Tenma, the danger to your chastity has passed," Cain said in a low voice as he closed the bathroom door behind us.

I had actually been thinking the same thing, but I was sure he only said that because he was genuinely worried...or at least I hoped so. I could only give him a sheepish smile in return.

"You should probably clean yourself up while you're in here, Tenma," Cain said after I finished going to the bathroom.

He brought me a bucket full of warm water and a washcloth. I sat

on the chair next to the tub and wiped myself down like he'd suggested.

"Listen, Tenma... I have a feeling that Kukuri Village and the surrounding areas are going to be sealed off for being dangerous," he began. "There will be an investigation, and the area will probably be reopened if they find there's no danger, but since the Elder Forest still hasn't been fully explored, there's no telling when that ban will be lifted."

He'd said "probably," but I figured he'd been talking about it with Albert and Leon—the latter of whom was the future margrave of this territory—so it had most likely already been decided.

"And about the lich, I think there will be a gag order imposed. If people find out that the winner of the martial arts tournament barely survived a face-off with it and we don't even know if this monster is living or dead... Well, we just can't let that information get out to the public."

He went on to say the details would only be shared with the king, top military officials, and a small portion of the highest-ranked aristocrats. Any other nobles or related people would most likely find out at the kingdom's convenience.

"So please, don't spread the information about this carelessly."

While Cain had phrased it in the form of a request, I knew it was actually an order.

"I'll follow whatever the king and the margrave want. I realize that if this information gets out, people will flee from the margrave's territory, or at least from the towns and villages near Kukuri Village," I said.

There were some parts of this I didn't agree with, but I didn't want the people residing in the margrave's territory to panic if they heard rumors.

Cain's expression softened once I had agreed. "I'll tell Leon. He was having a hard time figuring out how to ask you this."

Since Leon hadn't been able to come up with the right way to bring it up, he'd put it off and was now driving the carriage with Gramps.

Cain continued. "Master Merlin, Jeanne, and Amur all said it

should be up to you to decide. Kriss said it was the king's decision, so Leon was really stressed out trying to figure out what to do. But if you agree, then everyone will be on the same side, which will make things a little easier on Leon."

Normally, Cain teased Leon and always gave him trouble. He must've been pretty worried about him to be acting this seriously.

Albert knocked on the door. "Cain, Tenma? Are you done yet? I need to use the bathroom."

"Sorry. I was washing up, so I took longer than I intended." I quickly changed clothes and opened the door, where Albert was waiting for us.

"Apologies. I didn't mean to rush you."

After we left the bathroom so Albert could use it, Cain helped me back to bed, where Jeanne and the others were waiting nearby.

"Tenma, do you want some rice porridge?" Jeanne asked.

She had made some for me, but I didn't have an appetite, so I just asked for some water before I sat down in bed.

"Sure, I'll get you some water... But are you okay?"

"I guess so," I said.

The moment I sat down in bed, Rocket and the others clambered on top of me. Rocket stretched out his feelers and started rubbing my shoulders and back like he was giving me a massage. Shiromaru and Solomon both rested their chins on my thighs, one on either leg. Even though they were wearing collars to make them smaller, having both of them near me at the same time made things feel pretty cramped. Still, neither seemed willing to yield, and they stubbornly forced themselves into their positions.

"Those three are really worried about you. Where are Goldie and Silvie?"

"Hiding in my bag like always, in their own little world. They probably don't even know anything about the lich or that I collapsed."

It wasn't that they were being coldhearted or anything—they really just hadn't noticed. After all, the two of them had barely left my bag in the three years since I'd tamed them. And even when they did, they mostly just roamed around Gramps's house. There

was no way they'd just wander around the campsite. I wasn't taking their behavior personally.

"I'm glad they're so diligent when it comes to their work, though," Cain said, joining in on the conversation.

The reason he was so enthusiastic about that was simple—the more thread they produced, the higher his chances were of getting some. Goldie and Silvie's thread was in high demand, and any surplus I had went to my close friends. Cain was currently next in line. For the record, I had no idea how the waiting list was arranged. Queen Maria was in charge of it, so no one complained, no matter how long they had to wait.

"Even when they don't do their best work, their thread is still considered top-tier by normal standards. Do you want some of that lower-quality thread instead?" I offered.

The thread the spiders could produce wasn't all of the same quality all the time. There were three tiers—the highest quality, which could practically be considered a national treasure; medium quality, which was still regarded as top-tier by normal standards; and the lowest quality. And even their lowest quality thread would *still* be considered high-grade by most standards. They produced that lower-quality thread in greater quantities, and I currently had enough in stock to give some to Cain. However...

"No, thanks," he said. "If I settle for anything less, I'll lose my place in line for the good stuff."

Cain had a point. Even their medium-quality thread would fetch a high price on the market, and Queen Maria might decide that thread was thread and bump Cain down to the bottom of the list if he accepted my offer.

"Yeah, I guess it's safer to just stick to the plan," I said.

Cain and I laughed, and then I noticed the carriage slowing down.

"Hey! We're almost to Russell City!" Leon called back to us.

I opened the window, looked outside, and was greeted by a familiar cityscape.

It had been six years since I had last visited Russell City. I'd come to ask for assistance with the dragon zombie incident. I'd rushed

straight to the guild, filed a request for help, and left immediately. Because of all that had been going on at that time, this would really be my first proper visit here with all the formalities.

"Not that I'll be doing much of anything until I recover a bit..." I said.

For now, I decided to spend the day resting at the inn.

"I just wanted to relax alone in my room..." I grumbled.

"Well, I can't help it. It's only natural for the guild to want a firsthand report from the person who was there," Kriss said.

I'd left the guild report up to Leon, Albert, and Cain, with Kriss acting as their escort, since I hadn't been feeling up to it. However, the guildmaster had insisted on hearing from me directly in order to classify the situation as an emergency and had summoned me specifically.

"Listen, I appreciate the wheelchair and all, but this thing is killing me..." I complained.

The guild had gone to the trouble of arranging a wheelchair transport for me since I had said I was unwell. But unlike the ones from my previous world, these didn't have rubber wheels or any kind of shock-absorbing system in place. Even though I'd lined the seat and backrest with monster pelts from my bag, they barely helped.

"This way, please."

After I explained my business at the reception desk, I was promptly escorted to the guildmaster's office. For whatever reason, the receptionist had been visibly irritated the entire time she was talking to me. The moment we had made eye contact when I entered the guild, she had given me a disdainful look. I had no idea why. There had been no other desks free, though, so I had no choice but to approach her despite her reproachful attitude.

"Guildmaster, you have a guest."

"Thanks for your efforts. Please, come in."

"Nice to see you again, Yully," Gramps said.

The man Gramps had called Yully smiled warmly and shook his hand, then held out his hand to me.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” I said.

“Yes—about six years, I suppose?”

The last time I’d seen Yully Finland Forester had been six years ago when the horde of zombies, led by the dragon zombie, had attacked Kukuri Village. I’d flown to Russell City and barged into the guild, desperate for help, and had negotiated with him.

“We were able to dispatch the rescue party to Kukuri Village, but the sheer number of zombies caused some of the adventurers to panic. Thankfully, most of the zombies were just aimlessly wandering around, so no one was gravely injured. However, once word spread about the dragon zombie, people started to flee.”

Most of the adventurers who’d tried to escape had come to their senses thanks to their companions calling them out. A few had still run off and had to be disciplined later.

“Guildmaster, Tenma’s not feeling well. Can we wrap this up quickly?” Leon asked.

“My apologies, Lord Leon. At your insistence, let’s get straight to the point. Kanon, I’d like you to stay and take notes.”

“Yes, Guildmaster.”

The cranky receptionist who’d shown us into the room reluctantly agreed to Yully’s request. She went to a desk quite far away from where we were seated and sat down there. Her attitude seemed to irritate Albert and Cain, but Leon didn’t say anything, so they kept quiet.

Yully frowned slightly at the receptionist’s behavior but seemed to decide that getting the information about the lich was more important. He ignored her and continued.

“I see... So basically, you believe you dealt a significant blow to the lich, but you’re unsure whether it was completely defeated. There may still be allies or minions of the lich at large. Did I understand that correctly, Tenma and Master Merlin?” Yully asked.

Among the liches the guild had confirmed so far, there had been some that were referred to as “kings of the undead.” They could also control other undead monsters as their minions. Based on that information, we had reported that this lich might possibly have

minions out there somewhere.

"This certainly isn't information we want to make public..." Yully mused.

His concern was valid. In the areas near the borders of Margrave Haust's domain, the first thing people thought of when they heard about monsters controlling the undead was the dragon zombie attack on Kukuri Village. Even after the dragon zombie's defeat, the announcement to the public had led to significant unrest, and many residents had left Russell City.

"Yes, regarding that... I think we shouldn't hide it," Leon said firmly despite Yully's hesitation.

He explained that even if they held back information while dispatching investigation teams, the news might leak anyway. And if that happened, that would damage Margrave Haust's credibility even more than if we were to disclose it ourselves. Leon believed it would be better for the margrave to formally announce that a lich had appeared.

This approach was the complete opposite of what Cain had anticipated and asked me to agree to. However, Leon argued that even if some residents left the territory as a result, it would be a lot better than losing both the residents *and* the territory's reputation if the information got out later. In my opinion, this was a calculated decision to minimize the potential damage.

Of course, a letter would still need to be sent to the margrave, and he'd be making the final decision. There was still a chance he'd side with Cain's suggestion.

"I think we should follow Leon's suggestion when we consider the future implications," Gramps said.

"True," I said, agreeing. "Being upfront about the danger could make things easier down the road. Leon, you can use my name to back you up if the time comes."

If we let the public know about the lich, it would be more beneficial for the margrave to say, "Tenma defeated the lich, but there's a small possibility it escaped and is still alive."

"So if you're seeking the margrave's permission, does that mean you'll be staying in Russell City until you receive a reply?" Yully

asked.

"I guess that's what will have to happen," Gramps agreed.

Now, if Russell City had a courier like Ted, he could make the round trip to and from Shellhide in just a few days. But for a regular courier who traveled via horse, it would take twice as long. That meant we were going to be stuck in Russell City for two weeks.

"I just hope it doesn't snow..." I muttered.

"True," Gramps nodded.

And so we found ourselves settling in for an unplanned extended stay in Russell City.

Part Three

"Why me?"

The day after our meeting with Yully, the rather rude receptionist from the guild kept muttering things like that under her breath as she showed us around the city. Yully had assigned her to be both our liaison and caretaker during our stay here.

"Are you sure you don't know anything about this woman?" Cain asked quietly as he pushed my wheelchair.

I truly had no clue who she was.

Yesterday, both Cain and Albert had been irritated with her attitude during our discussion with Yully. She'd apologized to them while I wasn't around, and they'd accepted it, but they still hadn't managed to figure out *why* she'd been so rude in the first place. The only thing we *did* know was that her displeasure seemed to be solely directed at me—when I wasn't around, she was a normal, cheerful, accommodating receptionist with a good reputation among the adventurers.

"Cain, it pains me to say this, but you know I'm the type of person who keeps my relationships with strangers to the bare minimum. I don't even recall ever seeing a half-elven woman in my life, let alone speaking to one," I said.

Albert nodded. "Yeah. I know you're not Leon who just goes around flirting with girls all the time. Still, that's nothing for Tenma to be proud of."

"Well, that's true," I agreed.

"Maybe Tenma tried flirting with her, but she rejected him? That would explain why she hates him," Leon suggested teasingly.

"No way. Maybe if it were you, Leon, but I doubt Tenma would make that kind of mistake," Albert countered calmly. "It's more likely he did something unknowingly, and she's holding a grudge against him for it."

Kriss had been off gathering information, but she came back in time to hear our conversation. She casually joined in. "I agree with

Albert. Maybe she's jealous of Tenma's success since he's younger than her, or maybe he completed a quest she failed or wanted to take. Some people hold grudges for silly things like that. But judging by her usual reputation, it's hard to believe that's the case."

While we were all chatting, Gramps was walking around the city reminiscing and had wandered off at some point. The women besides Kriss were browsing through the shops and stalls, but they were clearly still eavesdropping on our conversation. When the topic turned towards Leon hitting on girls, three of them shot sharp looks at me, with Leni being the exception.

"Hm? Oh, Kanon's waiting for us."

Kanon had stopped and stood a short distance ahead of us when she noticed we'd fallen behind. The men started to comment on it.

"Hey, Tenma... Is it just me, or is she trembling?"

"Looks like it."

"Maybe Leon's vulgarity scared her off."

"Hey!"

"I doubt she's the type to be scared off by something like that."

Kanon muttered under her breath as we approached her, and her murmurs grew louder as we got close. "He says he doesn't remember... And after what he did to me..."

She hadn't noticed us yet, but we could hear what she was saying.

"Tenma, what did you do to her...?" Leon asked.

"I didn't do anything!" I blurted out loudly in denial, reacting to Leon's accusatory tone.

Apparently, that was all it took to trigger Kanon.

"You 'didn't do anything'?!" she yelled. "You claim not to remember after *everything* you put me through?! You've got to be kidding meeee!!!"

"Stop!"

Kanon lunged towards me, but Amur tackled her just in time, sending both of them tumbling to the ground.



The two of them had crashed into a stall selling fruits and vegetables.

"Phew. Great job, me!" Amur got up, congratulating herself with a wide grin and a thumbs-up.

I thought fondly about how I hadn't seen that side of Amur in a while and wondered what Leni thought about it, but surprisingly, she gave her a thumbs-up as well with a similarly pleased smile.

"My apologies, shopkeeper. They're here with me. I'll pay for your damages, including compensation for the goods on display. And here's a bit extra for the trouble," Albert said, stepping forward to handle the situation.

He showed the shopkeeper Duke Sanga's and Margrave Haust's crests. The shopkeeper's angered expression turned into shock, and he nodded.

Amur slung the unconscious Kanon over her shoulder and called out to me. "Tenma, I've defeated the scoundrel. Now, bring out Shiromaru!"

"Um, thanks, Amur. Shiromaru, you can come out now. Ah! Sorry, Solomon, but you have to stay."

"Woof!"

Solomon had begun to follow Shiromaru out of the dimension bag, but I decided to make him stay in there. I had no idea how the townspeople would react if a dragon were to suddenly appear in the middle of Russell City. Some people had already screamed when Shiromaru appeared, but once I'd assured everyone that they were safe and that he was my follower, the situation hadn't escalated any further.

"Lie down, Shiromaru!" Amur commanded, and Shiromaru obeyed. Amur then began to tie Kanon securely to his back with a rope to prevent her from falling off.

"Let's head to the guild, Tenma."

I agreed. "Yeah, that's a good idea. We need to hear what Yully has to say."

We needed to talk to Kanon's boss, the guildmaster, to figure out why Kanon had gone berserk. Everyone nodded at my suggestion, so we began making our way towards the guild. We completely

forgot about Gramps, though—I only remembered about him the moment we walked into the building.

"Oh, well."

Even if things had changed over time, he was familiar enough with the city that he could probably find his way back to the inn. If not, he could just ask someone for directions and come straight to the guild instead. It wasn't worth worrying about.

"Is something wrong, Tenma?" Cain asked as he pushed my wheelchair. I shook my head and said it was nothing before we headed to the desk to ask for Yully.

Kanon was still tied to Shiromaru's back, and the receptionist was visibly shocked. At the same time, I heard staff and adventurers nearby muttering, "I knew it..." Somehow, they had anticipated that putting Kanon and me together would lead to trouble.

"All right, Yully. Will you tell us whatever it is you've been hiding?" I said.

"Ha ha...ha..."

The moment we entered his office, I looked Yully straight in the eye and demanded an explanation.

I had to look up at him slightly from my wheelchair since he was seated. The three noble idiots stood behind me, with Kriss standing next to them. For some reason, Amur was holding a bird feather as she stood behind Kanon, who was still tied to Shiromaru's back.

"What's with this receptionist's attitude towards Tenma, Guildmaster?" Leon asked. "Russell City's guild and the entire city itself owe Tenma a huge debt of gratitude. I don't want to have to resort to this, but if things continue as they are, I may have to use my authority to ensure the entire guild faces the appropriate consequences." He had spoken sternly, showing a rare side of himself. He really did seem prepared to hold the entire guild accountable.

But that was no surprise, given that this was a matter of a guild staff member mistreating and potentially endangering an adventurer who had just defeated (or at least fought off) a dangerous monster lurking in the territory after completing a personal quest for

Margrave Haust. If word of that spread, it could damage the economic recovery of the territory.

"All right, I'll explain. This might take a while, though..." Yully began, and he then told us why Kanon had such an extreme aversion to me.

In the end, it turned out to be nothing more than a grudge on her part. Honestly, I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for her.

Everyone's comments kind of blended together for me.

"I had no idea you two had such a connection in the past, Tenma..."

"I can understand why she'd be upset if you don't even remember what happened... Still, that's no excuse for her behavior."

"But it was Solomon who did it and not Tenma, right? It's not like he can remember something he didn't even do."

"Yeah. It's her fault for not leaving a strong enough impression on Tenma for him to even remember her!" Kriss said.

"Kriss is right. This isn't Tenma's fault."

"I agree. I feel bad for what happened to her, but blaming Tenma for it isn't fair."

Jeanne and Aura didn't comment on the matter, but in general, the ladies had harsher opinions, while the men seemed more sympathetic.

"Come to think of it, I do have some vague memories of this... What was her team's name again?" I asked.

"Lohengrin."

I then heard someone mutter from behind me. "If you remember it now, how do you not know the name of the team?" they said before being silenced by both sides.

I ignored the commotion and continued my conversation with Yully.

"Kanon was the archer for Lohengrin in the first martial arts tournament Tenma competed in. They faced Oracion in the finals and suffered a crushing defeat," he explained.

I could now remember going up against Kanon and her team in that event during my first tournament. From what I recalled, Solomon had grabbed her leg, flown up into the air with her, and

then dropped her from above. The traumatic loss had left her unable to perform well against dragon-type monsters or flying monsters for some time. Although she had mostly recovered now, her party had disbanded during her time of struggle, and Yully had then recruited her to work at the guild.

"All of the members of Lohengrin, including Kanon, lost to Tenma in the individual qualifiers too."

Apparently, each of them had entered the individual competition, and three of them, including Kanon, had ended up in my group. They had been thrilled at their luck and thought at least one or two of them would end up advancing, but I had dashed their hopes and knocked Kanon out of the ring with my magic. The rest had also been eliminated during the qualifiers.

"They swore to get revenge in the next tournament, but none of them qualified for the individual or team events, so they couldn't even share the same stage as Tenma. And to make matters worse, Lohengrin disbanded shortly after that, so Kanon never had a chance to take you on again," Yully explained.

"Hmph!" Amur said.

Apparently, the reason the party had broken up was because of their shared obsession with defeating me. It had caused constant strife between them and had caused an explosion after their second tournament loss. Within a month of that, the party had dissolved.

"Well, it's not like that's Tenma's fault," Leon said.

"Mm." Yully nodded in agreement.

"Yep, that's definitely a grudge," I said.

"Well..."

Yully told us that Kanon was actually his niece and that even hearing my name or any word that sounded like "Tenma" in daily conversation was enough to throw her emotions into complete chaos. She wanted to overcome her struggles, so Yully had thought my visit to Russell City was a good opportunity to work on that. That was why he had assigned Kanon as our guild representative, hoping that interacting with me might help. But it had clearly backfired.

"Hmph!"

"Amur, will you quit making weird noises already?" Kriss scolded

Amur, who had been making odd sounds throughout this entire conversation.

"Tenma, Kanon's just pretending to be asleep."

At that, everyone turned to look at Kanon. The girl remained completely still, in the same position as when she was brought in here.

"Huh? She's still unconscious, isn't she?"

"If she's still unconscious, that'd mean that something was really wrong. So I'll check. With this!" Amur held up the bird feather she'd been holding. "Cootchie-cootchie-coo!"

Amur began to mercilessly tickle the soles of Kanon's feet. And a few seconds later...

"Eeeeek!"

Kanon couldn't keep up the charade anymore, but Amur didn't stop. She continued to tickle Kanon relentlessly.

"Ahh, stop! Eeek, wait!"

Kanon's shrill protests began to sound increasingly...well, inappropriate.

"Hey, Amur? Isn't it about time you let her go?" Leon said. He was blushing more deeply than all of us.

"Hm? I dunno..." Meanwhile, Amur pretended to think about it while still tickling Kanon.

"I-I'm sorry! I'll apologize, so please, stop!"

Things had gone too far, so I had to intervene. "That's enough, Amur."

"Fine. If you say so, Tenma." With that, Amur finally stopped tickling her.

But then...

"Oof!"

Shiromaru, irritated by all the wriggling on his back, shook himself violently to throw Kanon off. But since she was securely tied down, she didn't budge—instead, her feet swung up and smacked Amur right in the face.

"Argh!"

Clearly considering retaliation, Amur grabbed a second feather. Luckily, Leni stepped in before she could act and untied Kanon from

Shiromaru. Now free, Shiromaru shook his fur vigorously and bolted back into the dimension bag where Rocket and the others were waiting.

"Kanon, when you said you'd apologize, you meant for your attitude towards Tenma, right?" Yully asked.

Kanon knelt on the ground and bowed her head while everyone watched. "Yes. The reason I acted like that was because of resentment. I promise I'll do better from now on..."

"I think that apology is a bit too light... Even if no harm came of it, holding enough of a grudge to the point of attempted violence isn't usually something that can be erased by a simple 'I'm sorry,'" Albert said.

Cain and Kriss nodded in agreement. The three of them were well-versed in noble affairs, so they found it difficult to take Kanon at her word. Leon, on the other hand, didn't seem to grasp the nuances of such matters—probably because he hadn't given them much thought before. That had probably caused Albert and Cain trouble in the past.

"That's why she's apologizing in front of you three. If Kanon goes against her word, she will take responsibility by becoming Tenma's slave," Yully declared.

Since Kanon had now apologized right in front of Albert, Cain, and Leon, that seemed to mean that if she were to make the same mistake again, she would have personally insulted the three nobles. That'd be why she'd have no choice but to suffer the punishment of becoming a slave.

"Still, being a slave wouldn't mean much if Tenma was her owner," Albert said.

Cain pointed at Jeanne and Aura. "Yeah, look at those two. Tenma treats his slaves way too well."

Two of them nodded in agreement.

"If her punishment is to become a slave, then we can introduce you to a trustworthy slave trader," Albert said. "But who knows what would happen beyond that."

Cain agreed. "Right. And she's pretty, so I think a buyer would show up right away. There's no guarantee how that buyer would

treat her, though.”

It felt like Albert and Cain had just said something very dark. So much of the color had drained from Kanon’s face as she listened to their conversation that it was making me concerned. Behind her, Jeanne and Aura seemed to have realized the future they might’ve faced if not for me, and their faces looked pale as well.

Yully was speechless. He must have noticed that he’d gotten carried away in front of the nobles.

Kriss and the other ladies also seemed to have decided that Yully’s remarks were problematic, so they just watched over the scene as it unfolded.

And as for me, the topic of conversation was how I treated the slaves I owned, so it felt a bit awkward for me to say anything either.

“Don’t you think that was going a bit too far?” Leon asked.

As the guildmaster’s office filled with tension, Leon, in his usual oblivious manner, stepped in between Yully and the two nobles.

“Well, if she apologized with us as witnesses but still intended to harm Tenma beyond that, then I think an appropriate punishment would be necessary. But selling her to a slave trader is going overboard, don’t you think? For example, she could be entrusted to my mother instead and undergo education and training to work for our knights.”

“Well, if Leon is going to take responsibility as the future margrave, then I guess we don’t need to say anything else,” Albert said.

Cain agreed.

The two of them backed down so quickly I wondered what in the world they had even been trying to say before.

“Well, if something happens, then it’s reassuring to know that Lord Leon will take responsibility for Kanon’s well-being,” Yully said, his tone now light and carefree. He was clearly grateful the tension had lifted from the room.

Despite my doubts regarding the nobles’ odd behavior, the conversation ended there, and we left the guild.

On the way back home...

"Leon, things got awkward all because you didn't intervene in the conversation earlier!" Albert accused.

"Yeah!" Cain said. "I wanted you to just be your usual oblivious self, not wait to read the room until it was nearly too late!"

Leon protested. "Hey, wait a second!"

"Leon's so useless. Let's leave him behind and head back to the inn," Cain said. He started pushing my wheelchair back towards the inn, leaving Leon behind looking dumbfounded.

"What in the world is going on?"

The moment we entered our room at the inn, Leon charged at Albert and Cain like he was going to grab them by their collars.

"Leon, who held the most power in that situation?"

"Huh?" Leon replied. "Well, Tenma, right?"

Albert and Cain both feigned falling on the ground like a slapstick comedy sketch.

"No, Leon," Kriss said with exasperation. "Power in this situation means *authority.* You're the next margrave of Haust, which includes Russell City, right?"

"Oh... I get it. Wait... So what?" Leon said.

Kriss sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

"In that situation, if Cain and I, nobles from *other* territories, started blaming the guildmaster, and then Leon, the next margrave, had confidently intervened, then Kanon would feel indebted to you and stop holding a grudge against Tenma!"

"Yeah, we even pretended to be the bad guys to set up a good moment for you to step in, Leon! And then the whole thing went in a weird direction. We almost ended up being the *real* bad guys!"

Apparently, Yully had quickly figured out Albert and Cain's intentions and had played along with them. That had been why things had gotten settled so quickly once Leon had joined in on the conversation. It all made sense to me now. Incidentally, Kriss and Leni had also figured out that the two of them had been plotting something as well.

"You would've ended up looking like the hero, Leon. You could've even gotten Kanon!" Cain teased.

"Kanon... She's really beautiful, but..." Leon trailed off. It seemed

like something was bothering him.

"What's wrong? Is it her temper, since she tried to attack Tenma?" Kriss asked.

"No. I know she's not like that normally, so I don't think her personality is the issue."

"Then is it her status?" asked Cain. "Just look at Lady Edelia! That shouldn't be a huge problem."

"Cain, I'm *not* going to choose my wife based on her status."

"Then what is it? Age? That's probably what's bothering you. Even though she's half-elven, she's still an elf, so she'll have a longer lifespan than yours. But that's just how interspecies relationships go, you know? Some people even say that appearance and whether you can have children together are more important than someone's actual age, so you shouldn't worry about that too much," Albert said.

"I don't really care about age either," Leon said.

"Then what is it, already?" I asked.

Leon's face looked completely serious. "Her chest is...very small. Everything else about her is great compared to anyone else I've met, but..." He sounded genuinely disappointed.

"Welp, good work today, everyone! You're free until dinnertime!" Cain said.

"Yeah. Leon's so useless, so let's just leave him alone. We can decide what we'll have for dinner once everyone gets back."

"Absolutely. Let's leave useless Leon behind and go look for souvenirs," Kriss said.

"Hey, can I come with you?" Aura asked nervously. "Useless Lord Leon's scary gaze is a bit too much..."

"If Aura's going, I should go too. I'm not really interested in staying here alone," Jeanne said.

"I... I think I'll be fine, but Leon's such a jerk that I kinda wanna get out of here too," Amur said.

"I'll go as well. It would be kind of awkward to stay here without Amur, don't you think?" Leni said.

At Cain's signal, everyone started to move, ignoring Leon. The women kept their distance and shot Leon looks of disgust as they quickly scurried out of the room.

Gramps came back just as the women were leaving. Their attitudes didn't escape his notice. "Kriss and the others seemed a bit off. Did something happen?"

"Well, actually, Leon..." I then explained Leon's mistake to Gramps.

He nodded. "I see. Here's my advice. Tenma, Albert, Cain—make sure you never say anything to make it seem like you're on Leon's side. Because if you do, people will think you're just like him."

"Yes, sir!" we all responded loudly to Gramps's sage advice.

"Huh?"

"And Leon?" Gramps said, addressing him directly.

"Y-Yes?!"

"Sometimes in life, knowing when to give up is key. Hang in there."

"But I don't want to give up!" he protested.

Gramps had the most life experience out of all of us, and he seemed to think that Leon was a lost cause. Leon, however, was desperate for advice. He clung to Gramps's waist.

"Let go of me! There are some things I can't do! If I had the ability to fix relationships like magic, I'd be married by now!" Gramps shot back.

"B-But..."

I wondered if Gramps had ever wanted to get married in the first place, but as I watched him struggle to escape Leon's grip, I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him.

"All right, all right. I'll think about it, but you need to let go of me!"

"Really?!"

Leon won the battle of persistence and immediately let go. He sat up straight in front of Gramps as he waited for his advice.

"Hrm... Leon, you must not speak until spoken to. And when someone addresses you, answer with only simple words such as yes or no," Gramp said.

"Thank you very much!"

Is that it? I thought, but then Leon groveled before Gramps, letting his forehead touch the floor.

"Well, Leon's okay with it, so I guess it's not my place to say anything," I said.

"Tenma, you mean it's not *our* place to say anything," Albert said.

"Master Merlin's advice might have some effect, but with Leon, it usually just leads him down the wrong path anyway," Cain agreed.

They had known Leon for years, ever since they had been children. Since I hadn't known him for that long, all I could do was nod.

"By the way... Tenma, you were really blushing a lot there. That was unusual."

"Come to think of it, he was. I've never seen him be so embarrassed when it comes to women before."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

I tried to play dumb, but while I might've been able to fool Leon, I couldn't fool these two.

"True. Kanon *is* really sexy, but Tenma never gets as embarrassed as Leon does. Did something change?"

"Yeah, Tenma's always been surrounded by beautiful women, but there's never been any rumors about him being interested in them. It's not like he's a complete idiot or some shriveled-up old man."

I was starting to feel cornered as the two of them talked about me.

Gramps then joined in. "What are you two talking about?"

Leon was trying hard to follow his advice and keep his mouth shut from behind Gramps.

"Actually, while you were gone, Master Merlin..."

Cain knew my movements were limited because of the wheelchair, so he quickly started telling Gramps about the changes he'd noticed in me at the guild.

"Tenma's reacting to women now? Hmm. As his grandfather, I'm not sure whether I should be happy or worried... Tenma?"

After Gramps had heard what Cain had to say, he started to tease me, but then he got serious instead. He started to examine me from all angles.

"Your appearance hasn't changed, so maybe it's something

internal... Or maybe you're just returning to normal..." he muttered to himself, deep in thought. "Albert, Cain, Leon? I need to have an important conversation with Tenma. Make sure no one comes to this floor, and tell the staff to inform us immediately when Kriss and the others return. Lock the door just in case."

"Should we leave?"

"No, I want to hear your opinions too," he said. "So come back here once you're done."

"All right. We'll go do that now."

"Yes, sir!"

The three of them quickly got to work and followed Gramps's instructions. Leon was still following Gramps's advice from earlier.

From the odd but serious expression on Gramps's face, I thought he was going to say something very important, but he didn't at all.

"Now, what concerns me is the change inside Tenma," he began. "Specifically, his growing interest in women."

"Master Merlin, based on what we've seen, I agree there's been a change... But don't you think this is a pretty normal development, based on his age?" Albert asked.

"Tenma? Women? Like? Normal?"

Leon blurted out something that sounded worse than it was, but Cain quickly poked him to make him quiet.

"Shut up, Leon!"

"True, it's normal for his age, but the change has been so sudden," Gramps said. "I'm honestly wondering if maybe something was off before. My long-held suspicions are growing stronger..."

"Suspicion? Tenma? Before? Normal?"

"Leon, don't say another word!"

Leon seemed like he had been trying to say something like *Tenma's always been strange!* but Albert had given him a light smack.

"Now, when we lived in Kukuri Village, there weren't any young women. You were still a small child then, so I never paid it any mind. But after we began living together in the capital, there were always beautiful young women around, and you still never reacted. That's

when I began to have an inkling."

I started to say that there were a few times when I had reacted to women in the capital, but they completely ignored me.

"I've been wondering if perhaps Tenma suffered from some sort of trauma or maybe got cursed in some way during the dragon zombie incident at Kukuri Village."

According to Gramps, he'd come up with this theory because I'd witnessed the dragon zombie kill Mom and Dad. Perhaps I had unconsciously developed a fear of losing my family and, therefore, feared creating a *new* family. Or, it was possible that I'd been cursed during my battle with the dragon zombie, which had caused a diminished interest in women.

"I get the family trauma part, but does a curse like that even exist?" I asked.

"When it comes to curses, many of them are based on folklore and not fully understood. I'm really just calling it something *like* a curse," Gramps said. "After all, if fighting with the dragon zombie caused you to lose your vitality, what else could you call it but a curse? Also, it had always been difficult for the people of Kukuri Village to have children, even long before you were born. Perhaps that was due to the dragon zombie's influence too, and the villagers had unknowingly had their vitality drained. If that had been the case, it wouldn't be too outlandish to think Tenma could've been affected in a similar way."

Gramps's reasoning made sense. If the dragon zombie had carried some kind of "virus" that drained one's vitality, it wasn't out of the question that I could have been infected during our fight.

"If the dragon zombie was the cause, then why is Tenma only starting to return to normal now?"

"Well, it's possible that the dragon zombie's influence is only decreasing now. But I think the more likely explanation is that it has something to do with the lich Tenma fought and the fact that Jeanne was there with him at the time. The lich was a similar being to the dragon zombie, and perhaps defeating it had weakened the curse. Or, it could be that Tenma was mentally pushed to the edge, and being in that state was what had affected the curse instead. At the

same time, him feeling a need to protect Jeanne might've helped him return to normal. You know, when creatures are pushed into a critical situation, their instincts to reproduce kick in, and they become more fertile," Gramps explained.

"Are you saying the lich helped restore Tenma's vitality?"

"Lich. Great. Job."

"Leon... Please don't say that in front of the others."

Hearing all this talk about vitality made me feel like I was being reduced to nothing but a bundle of sexual desire. I really wished they'd stop. Leon didn't seem to understand the full conversation, but the other three were seriously discussing it.

"Anyway, it's normal for humans to have sexual desires as long as they don't run rampant," Gramps said. "But it's better for the women not to find out about this. Jeanne and Aura are Tenma's slaves and maids, so if something happened there, it wouldn't be an issue. Amur and Kriss need to be careful, however. Amur has been behaving better lately, but she's still a viscount's daughter. Rushing into a relationship would be a bad idea. As for Kriss, it wouldn't be a good idea for many reasons. If she finds out about Tenma's situation, she might try using her charms on him..."

"Oh..."

Leon's one-word replies continued. "Kriss. Thirsty. Men."

I could easily imagine how Amur and Kriss might react. However, now that Leon was following Gramps's advice so strictly, he was even worse than before.

"This is Tenma we're talking about, so I don't think he'll let his sexual desires get out of control, even if they return to appropriate levels... We probably don't need to worry too much."

"Right. Tenma's Tenma, after all."

"None of the girls around him are people he can't handle."

"Go. Tenma."

"Is it over yet?"

By this point, they were just teasing me. I busied myself with eating snacks with Rocket and watching the four of them perform their little comedy skit. Even though I was telling myself that they were doing it on purpose to get on my nerves, there were moments

that made me frustrated. I ended up eating too many snacks.

When it was time for dinner that evening, Kriss and the others still hadn't returned to the inn, so we just ate separately. However, I was secretly relieved to be free of being teased about such a weird topic all night.

Part Four

"Tenma, Uncle—er, the guildmaster says you're free to do whatever you want here."

"Thanks, Kanon."

A few days later, Kanon took us to the blacksmith forge that was attached to the guild. I was going to clean the charred *kogarasumaru* today.

Kanon seemed to have felt a bit better since she'd vented her anger directly at me. Her attitude had softened slightly. Since it had happened outside and there had been a lot of witnesses, she was making an effort to be friendlier to show that she had apologized.

"By the way, Tenma, um... Where's Lord Leon?"

Kanon had fallen for Leon after all—just as Albert, Cain, and Yully had originally planned. Despite their claims that he had intervened too late, Leon must've looked like a prince in her eyes when he'd protected her.

"I think he's wandering around the city right now. He said he wanted to check out the market before we left," I said.

"Excuse me," she said. "I have some urgent business to attend to."

Suddenly, Kanon rushed out of the forge. Well, she'd said herself she wouldn't be much help when it came to smithing, so it wasn't a big deal to me that she wasn't around. But I wondered if it was really all right for a guild employee to just leave without explaining anything to the people she was supposed to be chaperoning...

"Hm? Where did Kanon go, Tenma?"

Yully arrived just after Kanon left, and he looked quite conflicted after I explained what had happened. I supposed it was because he wanted to support his niece's feelings, but at the same time, he was her boss. He'd have to scold her for leaving work and her customers unattended.

"What's wrong?" Gramps asked.

"Did something happen?" Kriss peeked in too.

They had both crowded into the entrance so I couldn't see anyone else, but I figured Amur and Jeanne were behind them as well.

When everyone heard that Kanon had gone after Leon, they all nodded with satisfaction. It was obvious that she had feelings for him. The only person who didn't seem to realize it was Leon himself.

Leon had gone to do some research in the markets in Russell City, and Albert and Cain had gone with him as usual. But for Kanon, walking around with Leon meant she had to be around the other two nobles, and she wasn't very fond of them.

"But Leon is always with Albert and Cain... Hang in there, Kanon."

Kriss didn't seem too thrilled about the possibility of yet another one of her underclassmen having a potential romantic interest, so she quickly shifted the topic to today's plans.

"Well, putting that matter aside, what are we doing today?" she asked.

I'd already mentioned our schedule during breakfast, but Kriss had pretended to come early to pick me up just so she could eat breakfast with us and had been too distracted by Kanon's attempt to get Leon's attention to listen to me.

"I'm going to clean my sword that got scorched during the battle with the lich and do some simple adjustments, so there's not much to do here. Why don't you all go kill some time shopping?" I suggested.

Although I was feeling a lot better, I still wasn't back to my full strength. I was planning to just clean the soot off my sword from my wheelchair and check it for any damage. I was also going to see if I could fit it into one of the spare hilts I had on hand. It wasn't like I'd be doing any actual smithing today. The only reason I was here using the guild's forge was because it was a place I could freely use and make a mess with the soot, thanks to Leon and Yully's permission.

Kriss seemed to think my work wouldn't take long. "Hm, well, everyone here seems to want to wait until you're done, so I'll wait too."

"I guess it's fine if everyone's okay with that, but I don't want to

hear any complaining. Especially from you, Kriss," I said.

"I won't complain!"

She seemed like she would forget why she'd chosen to stay, but she just grumbled as she pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Well then, I'm going to get to work. If you need anything, just ask...one of the staff members or something." Yully had been about to tell us to ask Kanon since that was her job, but she wasn't here right now.

After he left, I took out the tools I needed and laid them out on the table so I could get to work.

"Good thing there's still some baking soda left over from when we made soap. First, I'll wet it and sprinkle this on, and then..."

I sprinkled baking soda onto the dampened *kogarasumaru* and wiped it down with a cloth. The baking soda gradually turned black.

"Hm? That's odd."

As I polished my sword, I started to feel like something was strange. I didn't notice it at first, but when I unfolded the cloth, I realized what was happening.

"The soot's not coming off?"

I had expected the baking soda to turn completely black, but it wasn't as dark as I'd expected. I washed the sword in water to remove the baking soda and started over.

"It's still black... Wait, the soot is gone. Has this *kogarasumaru* just gotten darker?"

I wiped the blade repeatedly with a white cloth, but no more soot came off. I wasn't sure why my sword had gotten darker, but I guessed it had something to do with the direct hit it'd taken from Takemikazuchi.

"I'll have to ask Master Gantz or Kelly about it."

Now that I had made that decision, I tried attaching a hilt to the blade so I could do a test swing. Something unexpected happened there too.

First of all, even though I was using a hilt the same size and shape as the one I had used before, it didn't fit. There was a small gap between the handle and the blade, making it wobbly. This made sense if Takemikazuchi had worn down the tang—the part that

would fit into a handle—and had caused it to shrink. It was unsafe to swing a wobbly sword, though, so I couldn't use the *kogarasumaru* until I made a new handle that fit.

As for the test cut, I thought the sharpness might've significantly deteriorated, but it hadn't. Sure, it wasn't as sharp as when Master Gantz or Kelly had sharpened it, but it was still fine for everyday use. Considering that I'd fought a wyvern swarm and a lich, I was a bit surprised it was still good enough for normal use—especially since it'd taken that direct hit from Takemikazuchi.

"Anyway, it looks like there's not much more I can do right now... I'll just use my adamantine sword or my short sword until I can fix the *kogarasumaru.*"

I had initially thought I'd just use it even though it wasn't that sharp, but ultimately, I decided to simply stick with the adamantine sword or the short sword I had made from Valley Wind's remains. Those could be my main weapons until I could get the *kogarasumaru* repaired.

"Well, now I have some extra time. What should I do...?"

I'd thought that this would take about two hours, but it had actually only taken about thirty minutes. I asked everyone their opinions.

"Food!" Amur shouted.

"Shopping!" Jeanne and Aura suggested in unison.

"Find Leon and Kanon!" Kriss proposed.

As for Kriss's suggestion, I knew it wasn't because she had business with them. She just wanted to be nosy and interfere there, so no one took her seriously.

"How about we just go around the city and drop by any shops that catch our eye?" I said.

Ultimately, we decided to just wander around together, as usual. Even Gramps, who often went off on his own, would join us since we were going to have lunch too.

"The city feels busier today," I said.

"You're right," Gramps agreed.

After wandering around for a while, I could clearly feel that there

was more activity in the city now than there had been the day before.

"Maybe there's some kind of event going on?" Kriss said.

"What if it's a matchmaking event, Kriss? Would you join in?" Amur teased.

"There's no way that's what it is! Tch!" Kriss tried to land a punch on Amur, but she dodged it.

"What if it's more like a festival?"

"The guild members didn't say anything about that..."

Jeanne and Aura ignored them as usual and scanned their surroundings for interesting vendors.

"Maybe the commotion is because Lord Leon is out doing an inspection?" Leni suggested. "Since Lord Albert and Lord Cain are here too, it's no surprise that the city's bustling. Those three attract a lot of attention."

We all agreed with her and were about to continue our walk when we noticed someone running towards us. We stopped cautiously but quickly relaxed when we saw that they were a guild staff member.

"I can't believe this activity is all Gramps's fault," I said.

"I think it's actually Tenma's fault," he replied.

"Or a little bit of both," Kriss said.

"Well, it's kinda Kriss's fault too," Amur said.

"By that logic, it's also your fault, Amur," added Leni.

The guild staff member had said that *we* were the cause of the commotion. Apparently, the fact that so many athletes from the martial arts tournament had gathered here at once was causing quite a stir. The reason no one had directly approached us was because they felt indebted to me and Gramps due to what had happened in Kukuri Village. Also, there was an urban legend going around that if you somehow earned my disapproval, you'd mysteriously disappear.

"Hm. Well, I guess that when you tell a lie, it's more effective when you mix in a bit of the truth," Gramps said.

"It's not just a little. *Half* of that is the truth!" Amur said.

"No, not even half of it's true," I said.

I automatically replied to Amur's joke, and for some reason, she looked very happy about it.

Even though we'd been in the city for a few days, there hadn't been a commotion until now. That was apparently because of Shiromaru and Solomon. Amur had taken Shiromaru out the other day to transport Kanon, but witnesses had only caught a glimpse of him then and wondered if he'd been the real thing. However, we had been hosting petting sessions with Solomon in one of the guild's back rooms under the guise of "rehabilitation" for Kanon. Yully had actually been the one who'd jokingly called them "rehabilitation sessions." At any rate, word had spread throughout town like wildfire, causing a commotion.

Originally, the event was meant to just be for Kanon, but Yully had said, "As her uncle and the guildmaster, I must ensure this is a safe event!" That was how the guild staff had ended up participating, and how Shiromaru had been added to the mix.

The event was short, but apparently, the guild staff were very satisfied. Yully gave two portions of boar meat to Shiromaru and Solomon as a reward.

"But at least half of this is Yully and the guild's fault, right?" I asked.

"That's true. The event was held in a restricted area where only guild staff could enter, so unless Yully or one of the staff leaked it, news shouldn't have gotten out."

A staff member who'd been listening to Gramps and me began sweating profusely and bowed his head.

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about it. While the staff shares some responsibility, in the end, it's all Yully's fault. The person in charge is there for situations like this. Anyway, Tenma, I'm off to go tease Yully now," Gramps said and led the staff member back to the guild.

When I asked him about lunch, he said, "I'm going to make Yully prepare something for me, so you all enjoy yourselves."

The moment Gramps had said it was all Yully's fault, the guild staff member had looked relieved.

"All right, then. Let's leave Gramps and Yully alone and continue

our walk around the city. Rocket, the wheelchair. Oh, right, that's not possible... Shiromaru, could you pull it, maybe?"

Gramps had been the one pushing my wheelchair, so I was about to ask Rocket to handle it, but I realized he wasn't capable of doing that. That was why I turned to Shiromaru, thinking he could pull it like a dogsled.

"You don't need to ask Shiromaru. I can do it for you," Kriss said.

"No, I'll do it!"

It seemed like Kriss had thought I'd been joking when I'd asked Shiromaru. She laughed while trying to push my wheelchair, but Amur quickly challenged her.

"No. The reason I was going to ask Shiromaru was partly to introduce him to the people of Russell City, and also so I could move around on my own," I explained.

Wheelchairs here weren't as advanced as those from my previous world, but the design wasn't too different. I could still move it by myself. It was just incredibly tiring.

"Don't be so formal," Kriss said.

"If you don't want to do it, I will!" Amur reached for my wheelchair before Kriss, but I reflexively moved myself forward in my wheelchair to dodge her.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"It was too sudden," I said.

Then, Amur immediately declared, "I'm going to push you now!" and I braced myself for the inevitable, but...

Cain appeared from a side street. "Oh, there you are! I'm going to borrow Tenma for a while!" He then started pushing my wheelchair.

"Thief!" Amur screeched at Cain.

"You shouldn't say things like that out loud, especially in a market!" Cain said and kept walking without stopping.

"Hey! Just how far do you plan on going?" Kriss complained in a sharp tone. She was clearly exasperated from being dragged around without explanation by Cain, who was recklessly sprinting everywhere.

"It's just a little farther... Oh, I see it! Over there!" he said.

“Wait! Don’t just— Aah! Nngh...”

Cain came to an abrupt stop and Kriss couldn’t react in time, so she nearly fell flat on her face. Amur saved her at the last minute, but the way she suddenly grabbed Kriss’s waist tightly looked a bit painful. Still, it was probably better than crashing face-first into the ground.

“What’s going on here? Albert? Why are you hiding out in a place like this?” I asked.

“Tenma, you’re here! Can you do something about that? Listen, I’m *begging* you to do something about it!”

Albert pointed, and I followed his gaze to see Leon with Kanon standing cozied up to him. They were casually window-shopping.

“Damn it! Are we too late?” Kriss said.

“What’s the problem? It looks like they’re getting along just fine,” I said.

Albert and Cain shook their heads in unison, ignoring Kriss’s frustrated response. I looked more closely at Leon and Kanon and finally realized what was off.

“Leon seems pretty cold. I can’t help but feel sorry for Kanon.”

Kanon was chatting animatedly, but Leon was only giving her short replies. His attention was elsewhere, and he kept glancing around him.

“Is he looking for Albert and Cain?” I asked.

“Maybe, but I’m not about to get involved in it and be kicked by a horse.”

“Not to mention that I’d rather not have a woman hold a grudge against me.”

Despite their attempts to sound cool, the truth was obvious—the two men were afraid of Kanon. I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed either. In fact, the women in our group had picked up on it even quicker. Kriss and Amur had already been suspicious of the two, and they took this as an opportunity to start interrogating them. It took only seconds for the two men to confess.

“When Kanon joined us, she looked at us like she had already decided to kill us,” they told us.

“Looks like Leon will just have to deal with this himself. It’s

infuriating, but it’s obvious what Kanon will do next at this rate. I hope he dies.”



Kriss wasn't exactly trying to hide her true feelings, and although what she'd just said was quite harsh, everyone present nodded in agreement.

Considering Kanon's temper and how openly hostile she'd been towards me, it wasn't hard to imagine her becoming a total nutjob or even a *yandere.* Although Cain might find that situation amusing, the reality was that if Kanon really did go down that path, both Albert and Cain could wind up being collateral damage. That meant they had no choice but to take the matter seriously.

However, any solution to this would require Leon's cooperation—nothing would work without that.

Since there were no good ideas on the horizon, Kriss eventually said, "What if we just got Leon drunk and tossed him into bed with her?"

However, if we did something like that, then we'd be opening ourselves up to equal treatment in retaliation, and no one wanted that. Her suggestion was met with unanimous, resounding rejections from me, Albert, and Cain.

"No way!"

"Let's just say we've lost track of Leon and leave them alone. Whether their relationship progresses or not will be up to Kanon."

Albert and Cain agreed right away. "Sounds good!"

The two of them quickly pushed my wheelchair away from the scene, being careful not to let Leon notice. Although it felt kind of lazy on our part to just ignore the situation, we just left it at that since we didn't have any better ideas.

After we had put some distance between ourselves and Leon, Albert and Cain began to casually discuss what we'd do next.

"All right, let's get something to eat."

"We know a good place."

We decided to eat at a spot they had been to and liked from their previous visits to Russell City. I figured it was highly likely Leon knew the place too, but when I asked them about that, they assured me it had private rooms available for an additional fee—they were usually used by nobles who wanted to be discreet. The staff was well-

trained and wouldn't disclose information, even if someone like Leon asked them.

"Plus, the place has multiple entrances and exits. We shouldn't run into anyone unless we're incredibly unlucky. It's probably the most secure place in Russell City," Albert said.

It was still possible that someone could stake out all the entrances to track who was coming and going, but since our main concerns were Leon and Kanon, I didn't think we needed to worry that much.

"The food is just as good as what you'd get in the capital," Kriss said.

"It was yummy!" Amur said.

"The flavors are different from what we have in the SAR. And Lady Amur, mind your tone," Leni said, correcting Amur.

Amur looked a little sheepish and corrected herself. "Er, I mean, it was *quite* yummy."

"It was good, but..."

"Master Tenma's cooking is still better!" Aura said.

"Well, his cooking *is* royally approved!"

"And it's unique too. The food here is good, but you could get the same kind of food pretty much anywhere."

"Maybe that's true, but I thought the meal was fantastic," I said. "The chefs here definitely have better technique, since it's their main occupation. Oh, wait a minute. Leon's nearby."

As we left the restaurant, chatting about the meal, I suddenly sensed a familiar presence. Silence immediately fell over our group, and I gestured to a nearby alleyway for all of us to hide.

"He's really here..."

"Since they just came out of that alley, that means they were probably at the same restaurant as us," Albert said.

According to Albert, one of the restaurant's exits led to the small alley from which Leon and Kanon had emerged. And judging from Leon's satisfied expression, Albert thought they must've eaten there as well.

"Are they heading to the central plaza? If they are, why don't we

return to the guild instead? We might run into them again somewhere if we go out shopping," I suggested.

"Good idea. We're staying in Russell City for a few more days anyway, so there will be plenty of time to shop later. Besides, if we bump into them by chance, I might get the impulse to do something to Leon," Kriss said.

Jeanne and Aura had been eager to continue shopping, but they suddenly shrank back and hid behind me like they were terrified of Kriss.

"We can head to the guild, but what exactly are we going to do there?" Albert asked.

"I was thinking it's about time I started some proper rehab," I said. "Today's as good a time to start as any."

Since my condition had pretty much stabilized, I needed to start exercising again before my muscles deteriorated any further.

"Looks like everyone agrees. Let's start heading back."

And with that, Cain pushed my wheelchair forward at a brisk pace. I told him that there was no need to rush since Leon and Kanon were headed in the opposite direction, but Cain insisted that Leon's instincts might kick in and bring him back our way. Everyone unconsciously walked faster as a result.

"So what exactly are you going to do for rehab?"

"Do you want to spar? Leave it to me!" Amur exclaimed.

"No way. Sparring isn't going to happen during the first stage of rehab," Cain said.

"Of course it won't. You should start with stretches, yeah?" Kriss said.

Amur's enthusiasm was quickly dashed by Cain. I had thought Kriss would suggest the same thing as Amur did, but she seemed to understand the purpose of rehab better than Amur. It was probably because of her experience in the royal guard.

"Are you thinking something rude about me?" Kriss's instincts led her to glare at me, but I managed to deny everything quickly enough to avoid any trouble. Albert, Cain, and Amur shook their heads and thankfully escaped Kriss's line of sight and criticism.

"I'll focus on flexibility and testing how much I can walk today. Albert and Cain, I'll need your help for that," I said, making sure to ask them before Kriss or Amur could volunteer. Since stretching often required being in close contact, it would be awkward to ask either of the women.

Albert and Cain realized what I was thinking. They quickly removed their jackets and rolled up their sleeves. Meanwhile, Kriss held Amur back by the scruff of her neck, realizing there was nothing they could do.

"Sorry, Amur. But this type of thing is easier with just the guys," Cain said.

"All right, Tenma. We don't know how flexible you normally are, so you'll need to give us clear instructions," Albert said.

I explained what I needed them to do and then began doing some stretching exercises. I was surprised to discover that my body felt much stiffer than I'd expected. Sure, I'd been resting, but I thought I'd moved around enough to avoid it being this tough...

"Why don't we take a break, Tenma?"

"Good idea. Looks like we've drawn a crowd, anyway."

As I struggled through the stretches, a crowd of adventurers from Russell City had gathered to watch. We were using the guild's training facility, so they had every right to be here, but it wasn't very pleasant to be gawked at while I was clearly struggling.

When Albert noticed a good stopping point, he suggested we take a break. Most of the rubberneckers left once we paused, but a few lingered around, pretending to train or whispering to each other in groups as they kept an eye on us.

"Those guys standing around over there are giving me the creeps," Kriss said.

"Yeah. It's been a while since I've seen anyone being so obvious. They probably think they can handle Tenma in his current state."

"Well, I'm only operating at less than a tenth of my usual capacity right now," I admitted.

Judging by the onlookers' behavior, they were likely plotting to take me down to make a name for themselves.

“Aren’t they even considering the possibility that Tenma won’t take them on in the first place?”

“Or the fact that losing to him in this state would be utterly humiliating? Personally, I wouldn’t even try it, even if I had to fight Leon and Cain at the same time.” Albert said.

“That’s because we know Tenma well. I wouldn’t chance it either. He’s still got magic on his side, after all,” Kriss said.

“And Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon!”

“Not to mention the golems!” Leni pointed out.

“Tenma, should we take out the scorpion golems? They’d make a good deterrent,” Jeanne asked hopefully.

“Want me to get out the second one?”

Jeanne and Aura seemed to have gotten used to dealing with situations like this and were already preparing to deploy the scorpion-shaped golem. While it might’ve been overkill, I considered the fact that it wouldn’t hurt to crush opportunists outright—they were trying to gang up on someone who was in a weakened state, after all. But then again, a quick magical takedown might’ve been more efficient.

But before I could decide how to deal with them...

“Grrr...” Shiromaru leaped out of my bag and transformed into his full-sized form. He growled menacingly at the group of rubberneckers.

“Oh, they’re running away!”

“Tenma, are we going to get into trouble for this? They technically didn’t do anything yet.”

“All Shiromaru did was growl. They got scared and ran on their own. That’s what we’ll say if anyone asks,” I said.

It was a bit of a stretch, but since Shiromaru hadn’t actually attacked anyone, I figured the guild staff would understand. And if not, well, maybe we’d have to host another petting event.

“Shiromaru showed up at the perfect time, though. Rocket, were you responsible for that?” I asked.

I turned to praise Shiromaru and saw him wagging his tail as he accepted a treat from Rocket.

“He was probably trying to prevent those guys from ending up

out of commission permanently," Kriss said.

"You're amazing, Rocket! Great job!"

"Tenma's always so ruthless with his enemies," Albert said.

"True, but he spoils his allies in return. There were times when I was accompanying Leon as his escort, and I couldn't help but feel relieved that I wasn't attacked on sight."

The conversation naturally shifted from everyone praising Rocket to them telling stories about me. Kriss even brought up some exaggerated tales from when we had first met.

I ignored Kriss and continued with my walking exercises with Albert and Cain's assistance.

Just then, Leon's stupidly loud voice echoed from the entrance. Kanon was standing next to him, looking very displeased.

"Hey! So this is where you were!" Leon yelled. "There's a big commotion at the reception desk. Someone says you sicced Shiromaru on them!"

"Tch. So they came back after all..." Kriss muttered. And the moment she laid eyes on the two of them, she visibly turned to the dark side. "You two could've taken a bit more time shopping together, you know."

"Exactly. Why not take this opportunity to explore the city? You can see sides of it you wouldn't be able to with us."

"But it feels like something's missing when you two aren't around." However, Leon's dangerous remark prompted Albert and Cain to slowly back away and put distance between them.

"Hey, Cain. Don't use me as a shield!" I protested.

"Sorry, Tenma. But since you're not a target here, just bear it for a moment. For my sake!"

Cain used me as a shield as he retreated, looking unusually serious.

Meanwhile, Albert had a look on his face that said, *Good idea!* But since there was no more room behind me, he tried to cower behind Kriss instead.

"I'm not big enough for you to hide behind!" Kriss snapped, kicking him away. She and Albert both seemed to be in a state of mild panic.

Kanon stood beside Leon, clutching his sleeve as she glared at Albert and Cain. Despite the fact that they were practically making skin-to-skin contact, Leon didn't seem to care one bit that a woman was holding on to him like that.

And unfortunately, seeing the two of them in that state only made Kriss sink deeper into the dark side.

"They should just drop dead..."

A few days had passed since Kriss's descent into darkness. My rehab had progressed smoothly, and I'd recovered enough stamina to manage daily life without much difficulty. However, the more my recovery advanced, the more unstable Kriss's emotional state became. And the reason was Kanon.

It wasn't because of Kanon's interest in Leon. Instead, the problem was that after seeing the casual interactions between Kriss and Leon, Kanon had arrived at two possible conclusions—either that Kriss was interested in Leon, or that Leon was interested in Kriss.

And that had led to Kanon suddenly trying to compete with Kriss at every single opportunity. Sometimes, she would flaunt her closeness with Leon and touch him or fuss over him, which only plunged Kriss deeper into the darkness.

The other women in the group tried to explain the nature of Kriss and Leon's relationship to Kanon, but so far, it'd had no effect.

"Gramps, Kriss is having a pretty rough time. Oh yeah, and Leon and Kanon are a mess too," I said.

"Those two are just an afterthought to you, hm? Well, it can't be helped," he said.

"I'm sorry about Kanon..." Yully said.

In my opinion, Kriss was the victim, Kanon the perpetrator, and Leon the original villain behind the whole situation. Still, I could understand why Kanon might misunderstand, given Kriss's usual behavior. So while I couldn't entirely blame Kanon, it was clear that Leon was the root of the problem.

That was why I didn't think Yully needed to worry so much—ultimately, it was all Leon's fault.

"So what should we do about this?" Gramps asked.

"Why don't we just leave Leon behind?" I suggested. "Yully, as long as he's here when the margrave's reply arrives, that's all that matters, right?"

"That's correct. Since Tenma already gave me his account, all that's left is to follow the margrave's instructions. Still, if Kanon's behavior ruins the relationship that we've worked so hard to repair, I'll be forced to deal with her harshly because of my position as guildmaster. Not to mention, I'm not sure how my health would hold up..." Yully clutched his stomach as he spoke.

If Yully's health took a turn for the worse because of strained relations with me, the public would most likely turn on Kanon. She might even face expulsion from the margravate.

Expulsion may sound extreme, but the margravate had already suffered economic repercussions once before due to a falling-out between us. It wouldn't be a surprise if the government officials were to overreact.

"So basically, the quickest solution would be for us—well, Kriss specifically—to leave Russell City. Should we just move on without Leon? We can leave him a note detailing our plans so he can just catch up later," I said.

It seemed inevitable that Leon would have to take one for the team so we could prioritize everyone else's happiness.

None of this would've happened in the first place had he handled things properly from the beginning...

"What about Leon's happiness?" Gramps asked.

"If it comes down to choosing Leon or everyone else, and factoring in Kriss's mood and Yully's stomach, I think I'd sacrifice Leon," I said.

"You're really trying to sound noble here, but in reality, you're just dumping everything on Leon, aren't you?" Gramps said.

"Well, it *is* his fault. And I'm not about to take responsibility for his mess."

"Meddling in other people's love lives is always a hassle. This does seem like the best option."

Coming to that conclusion, we decided to inform the rest of the group of the plan—minus Leon, of course. Albert and Cain kept an

eye on Leon and Kanon while the other women were with Kriss.

Albert or Cain would find an opportunity to explain Kriss and Leon's relationship to Kanon while the women would take Kriss sightseeing and shopping around the city to try and stabilize her mood. The men split the expenses for Kriss's outings, apparently in an effort to make up for the trouble they had caused for the women since they had to take care of her.

Of course, it seemed like the women were also enjoying themselves under the guise of cheering up Kriss. Meanwhile, the men—except for Leon, of course—unanimously decided to secretly bill the expenses to the margrave's household later, meaning that Leon would ultimately end up footing the bill.

After all, since we all believed none of this would be happening if Leon had just acted appropriately, this punishment seemed entirely fair.

"That's right! What a good idea!" Kriss agreed.

I left Albert and Cain with Gramps and used Detection to find the ladies. Then, I explained the situation to them. Kriss quickly agreed—almost overwhelmingly so. As expected, it seemed like she had no qualms about sacrificing Leon because she was so stressed out about Kanon. She showed no signs of remembering the time she had tried to interfere with Leon possibly getting a lover either.

"Leon will probably complain about this, but if I tell him we received an urgent message from Primera in Gunjo City, I think that'll be enough to satisfy him. We're headed there next, anyway. The only problem will be if we get a response from the margrave before we leave. If that happens, our plan will be ruined," I said.

"Then let's just leave tonight!" Kriss suggested.

"There's no way we can, Kriss," Amur said.

I agreed. "Amur's right. We also need time to explain you and Leon to Kanon, so we could only depart tomorrow morning at the very earliest."

Once Kriss had heard that, she said, "Just leave Kanon and Leon out of this!"

However, I thought it would be better in the long run to explain

everything clearly. That was something Gramps and Yully had decided during their discussion.

"The men—except for Leon, of course—will explain everything to Kanon and make her accept it, even if we have to force the issue. And if that doesn't work, we might just have to never see Kanon again. That might be the best for both parties."

The women looked surprised, or perhaps even frightened, when they heard me say that. It seemed there was some kind of misunderstanding, so I gave them more details, which led to them agreeing.

When I'd said we might have to never see Kanon again, what I had meant was that we would just have to do whatever it took to keep her away from us and Leon. I hadn't meant that we would kill her. Depending on the situation, I might even have to ask the king for help keeping her away.

Personally, I didn't care who Leon dated, but I also couldn't say there wouldn't be any problems if it was Kanon. Kriss was just jealous right now because she thought she might have feelings for Leon, but if Kanon were to get married to Leon, becoming the future margrave's wife, and her jealousy were to grow worse, she might start directing suspicion at women who were friendly with Leon.

And if she suspected a powerless commoner, it ultimately wouldn't really matter—as much as I hated to say that. But if she were to feel threatened by someone who couldn't be ignored, like a fellow noble, it could lead to a conflict between factions. It could even cause a dispute on a national level.

It might've seemed like I was overthinking this, but the margravate's geographical location meant it played a key role in preventing invasions from neighboring nations. Any troubles within the family or with other nobles could become a huge problem. That was why I thought I might have to advise the king to take action in the worst-case scenario.

"It's normal to dance and chat with other people at parties, right? Regardless of whether they're nobles or not. Someone who would get jealous enough to resort to physical violence isn't the right person to become a noble's wife," I said.

Kriss thought about it for a moment and then nodded in agreement. As a member of the royal guard and a noble herself, she was probably weighing the possibility of creating national chaos against her own desire to get away from Kanon as soon as possible.

"I get what you're saying, Tenma. But I won't get involved in this, and I don't have any obligation to do so either. So please inform her of that by tomorrow morning, and leave me out of it," Kriss said. She was adamant that she wouldn't get involved with Kanon and subtly set a deadline for me. That meant we would be leaving Russell City the next morning.

Judging by her attitude, it seemed like if we couldn't persuade Kanon here, Kriss and Leon's relationship might be ruined. And if that happened, Albert, Cain, and I would have a lot of trouble dealing with the situation since they were both friends of ours. Leon would need to be convinced, and since it might not be effective if it were to come from me, Albert, and Cain, I decided to have Gramps do it. Leon typically listened to his advice more easily.

After I thought about the women, I decided to leave it to Leni to support Kriss. "Leni, could you take everyone out to eat something nice? I'll give you some money."

Kriss and Amur both protested.

First, to Kriss, I said, "This is for your comfort, and Leni is good with finances, so I'm leaving her in charge of the money." Then I asked Amur, "Can you manage money better than Leni?"

Amur certainly couldn't say yes, so that shut both of them up. One of them seemed to be in a better mood than the other—probably because of my flattery—but the other was grumpy after having been defeated by logic.

"Are there any good restaurants around here?" Leni asked, and Amur immediately started giving her opinions.

I won't have to worry about her, I guess.

"Well then, I'll join the others over there. Don't stay out too late," I said.

Since Kriss had confirmed we would leave the next morning, our next order of business was setting Kanon straight. I parted ways with the ladies and headed towards Albert and Cain, who I figured

were probably talking to Gramps.

"I guess that's the best option, huh?" Cain said.

"I don't like using Primera as an excuse, but we can't afford to stay here in Russell City. Things will get even more complicated if Kriss's bad mood gets worse too," Albert said.

"All right. We'll tell Kanon tonight and aim to leave by noon tomorrow. By the way, have you noticed any change since you explained Kriss's relationship with Leon to her?" I asked.

Both of them shook their heads. While Kanon had apparently given some sort of response to indicate she understood, it hadn't seemed like she actually believed it.

"Well, if that's the case, we don't have much time. We might have to take a more forceful approach to correct her behavior," I said.

Albert and Cain nodded in agreement as I glanced at Kanon—she was still trying to flirt despite Gramps being right there. Incidentally, Kanon's flirtatiousness seemed to have little effect on Leon.

"Our general plan is to have Yully call Kanon into the guildmaster's office. There, Albert, Cain, Yully, and I will persuade her—lecture her, really. Meanwhile, Gramps will discuss things with Leon, and the women can try to cheer Kriss up. I think that should work."

"That sounds good, but the reason Master Merlin is in charge of Leon is because he'll listen to him more than us, right? I actually think you should go over there too, Tenma," suggested Cain.

Albert agreed with him. "Honestly, I'd rather leave Kanon to me and Cain."

"Since I'm the one who brought it up, I'll stick with it until the end," I said.

However...

"This is a noble's duty, after all," Cain insisted.

"Right. Kanon seems to underestimate nobles, and if Tenma is there, that might complicate things. I really think you should go be with Leon this time," Albert said.

The two of them seemed pretty upset with Kanon since she hadn't listened to their advice. But on the other hand...

"Speaking of underestimating people, I think I've been pretty dismissive of you two as well... What about that?"

When I said that, both of them gave me slightly exasperated, troubled looks.

"We trust you way more than Kanon, and you're more important to us too!" they said in unison.

The two of them then explained further.

"Tenma, you're a high-profile person. Your contributions to the kingdom, along with your military strength that easily surpasses most nobles', puts you in a completely different category from Kanon. You may still technically be a commoner, but you're way more valuable."

"Don't get me wrong—we may not have the same status, but the three of us can mess around all we like with our friends and we won't say anything as long as it doesn't go too far. But that only applies to *friends*, and Kanon doesn't fit in that category."

Ultimately, they considered Jeanne, Aura, and Amur "friends" (putting Amur aside, how Jeanne and Aura felt about it would be another story). As for Leni, it was a bit ambiguous whether they considered her to be a friend or not, but since she was always polite and treated them with respect, she didn't upset them much.

"If that's the case, I'll leave it to you...but don't go too far," I warned.

"It's fine, it's fine. We're used to this kind of thing," Cain said.

"We won't go as far as you would, Tenma," Albert replied.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked Albert.

"Think about Regir in Gunjo City and Baronet Podro il Chloride in the royal capital, for example. I'd say 'going too far' fits you perfectly, Tenma."

I flinched a bit hearing those familiar names, but I quickly retorted, "They were hostile to me first! I only drove them off!"

"Normally, a commoner wouldn't try to drive off a noble and directly influence the downfall of their family. Even if they wanted to, they'd just give the information to a noble who was their enemy and nothing more," Cain replied.

Albert nodded seriously behind Cain, agreeing with him.

"If you're going to put it like that, I'll leave it to you two," I said, relenting. "I'll focus on keeping Gramps and Leon in check."

"Tenma... Really, don't overdo it, okay?"

"Well, it's Leon, so it'd take a lot to ruin him. After all, he's the heir to the margravate. Just make sure he comes back in one piece."

I tried to silently leave and join up with Gramps, thinking it was better not to react to them, but before I knew it, my body had moved. I had Albert's head tucked under my arm and was grabbing Cain by the back of his collar with my other hand.

"I-If you can move that fast, we don't have to worry about the journey ahead... I'm sorry! Please forgive me!"

"I-I surrender! Argh, it looks like your strength's come back... *Cough...*"

Cain wasn't in much pain since he'd just gotten grabbed by the collar, but Albert was struggling in the headlock.

"Unconscious behaviors are terrifying..."

"To think you could restrain two men without even realizing it is pretty scary..."

"That's only *if* it was unconscious."

Of course it hadn't been unconscious like Albert had said, but I didn't feel the need to correct them. I just smiled at them without saying anything else instead. Both of them looked a bit tense, but they quickly headed off towards the guildmaster's office to discuss things with Yully.

"There you are, Leon," I said. "Tonight, it's just me, you, and Gramps for dinner. Everyone else has got other plans. Got it? Also, there's something important we need to discuss, so sorry, Kanon, but you can't join us."

I had used Detection to find Leon and quickly got to the point. Kanon was lurking around him as usual, so I told her she had to go away in a firm tone of voice. I might've been a bit too harsh because she looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end, she just nodded without saying a word.

That night, Gramps brought up the subject of Kanon after getting Leon slightly drunk.

"Leon, what are you going to do about Kanon?" he asked.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You must realize she has feelings for you. Don't you know that by ignoring it, you've caused trouble for Kriss, Albert, and Cain?"

"Yeah, I know that... But I just don't know what to do about it."

Leon then told us that he did understand that the situation was creating issues for the three of them, but he didn't know how to fix things.

"The quickest way is for you to cut ties with Kanon," Gramps began. "If you reject her firmly, she'll have to give up. She still thinks she has a chance because you've been so wishy-washy."

Gramps was giving him a serious lecture, and Leon listened intently. I was sitting next to them, but there was no room in the conversation for me, so I just quietly listened and occasionally filled their empty cups with more booze.

After a while...

"And what's this about not wanting to date someone because her chest is too small? A man would say he'd make it bigger for her somehow!" Gramps yelled. "Everyone has their flaws, you know? Take Kriss, for example! Her chest is small *and* she's got a bad temper. But she's picky about men and only wants to choose the best. Compared to her, Kanon's a great catch!"

"That's true! Kriss is too picky, and she tries to act all cool. She gets a ton of attention from younger girls, but I've never seen her get approached by a guy!" Leon agreed.

Gramps was starting to say some pretty wild things. Maybe I had let them drink a bit too much. Since my own tolerance for alcohol was high, I'd ordered stronger drinks than usual when I placed the order for the table—that had probably been a mistake. Fortunately, we were in a private room at that restaurant Albert and Cain had introduced us to, so the soundproofing was good here. No other customers could hear us. But if we'd been in a regular bar, I would've dragged the two of them out of there already. The situation was *that* embarrassing.

"It seems like we've gotten off track here," I interjected. "Leon, are you trying to say that you're seriously considering Kanon?"

"Yeah. I can't keep causing trouble for everyone."

"Good. A man is only as good as his word. Make sure to apologize to everyone too, especially Kriss, Albert, and Cain," I said.

"I know!"

"All right, got it. Now drink up! You too, Gramps!"

I was getting tired of the whole situation, so I just took Leon's word for it and decided to get them both drunk. If I had to listen to this conversation for even a minute longer, I'd go nuts.

An hour later...

"Finally, they're passed out."

At last, the two of them had quieted down.

"Can I order some more food, please?"

I called the waiter over and decided to have a nice, leisurely meal on my own. And since Leon had insisted on paying, I had taken his wallet *before* he passed out. But I had known that wouldn't have been enough, so I'd swiped Gramps's wallet too. Since they were both completely wasted and zonked out at the moment, I wouldn't hear any complaints.

"You can come out now, Rocket, Shiromaru, Solomon, Goldie, and Silvie. Just don't cause any trouble."

My little feast with my followers continued late into the night. I was shocked to see that Goldie and Silvie, who almost never came out of my dimension bag, ordered the most expensive items on the menu, ruthlessly draining Leon's and Gramps's wallets.

The next day...

"Tenma, my wallet is empty!"

"Gramps... What did you expect after you and Leon got totally drunk and kept ordering those expensive drinks? I tried to stop you, but you both insisted on paying. It was really tough getting you two drunks home, even with Rocket and the others! I hope you've learned your lesson and will stop drinking so much. It's bad for your health."

Gramps immediately noticed his wallet was empty, and after my lecture, he thought about it for a moment...but the hangover was making it hard for him to think straight. He just went to lie down in bed.

Seeing this, the girls discussed the situation among themselves

quietly.

"Hey, Jeanne. Do you think Master Tenma is telling the truth?" Aura asked.

"Shh! Don't say anything else."

"Aura, we already accepted bribes, so we're Tenma's accomplices."

"Yeah. But you shouldn't say that out loud."

"I know... I feel sorry for Master Merlin, but Leon's caused me so much trouble that this isn't even close to making up for it," Kriss said.



The day before, I'd ordered to-go meals for the women. I'd given them out today as a bribe for their silence. So even if something seemed off, none of them would point it out. I had also bought some alcohol for Albert and Cain.

While I had been busy getting Leon drunk the day before, Albert and Cain had been lecturing Kanon. It sounded like they had just been threatening her, and they had ended up stressed out as a result. Albert and Cain had stayed up all night drinking the booze I gave them, so they were still asleep.

"Are those two *still* sleeping? I want to leave quickly, but Leon... Well, he's out cold. Tenma, can you wake them up?" Kriss asked.

It seemed a bit inappropriate to have Jeanne and the others go into the rooms where Albert and Cain were sleeping since those two were nobles, so I was asked to go wake them up. I felt a little bad about getting them up when they were already exhausted, but I didn't say anything and followed Kriss's orders instead. It wouldn't have made sense to protect them now that Kriss was in a better mood. Besides, they could just sleep in the carriage if they were still tired. They could put up with it for a little longer.

"Well, we left a note for Leon, and I asked the guildmaster to take care of everything else, so there's nothing for us to worry about. Let's go!"

At Kriss's signal, we decided to leave Russell City.

Yully looked tired as he saw us off. Kanon, on the other hand, seemed scared. Meanwhile, the guild staff bid farewell to Shiromaru and Solomon.

The moment Kanon saw Kriss, Kanon bowed deeply and apologized. Kriss accepted her apology, so it seemed like they'd reconciled. However, from the outside, it might've looked more like Kriss had threatened her into apologizing, which could be a problem...

"Well, Yully, please take care of Leon," I said. "He's still asleep at the inn, so once he wakes up and realizes everyone's gone, he'll probably rush straight to the guild."

"Leave it to me. You *did* tell Leon you were leaving, right?" he asked.

I told him I had, and Yully seemed relieved. He probably thought Leon's confusion would only be temporary. But truthfully, I'd only told Leon yesterday when he had been drunk, so he probably wouldn't even remember. But I *had* told him. It wasn't my fault if he couldn't remember it.

"Tenma! Hurry up and get moving! If we stay here too long, Leon might notice!" Kriss yelled.

"Huh?" said Yully.

Jeanne was in the driver's seat, and I quickly urged her to hurry up and leave before Leon caught on. We set off.

It would take us less than ten days to reach Gunjo City, even with a few detours. At this rate, we could actually even make it back to the capital before the first snowfall.

And so we left Russell City behind, ignoring Yully as he chased after our carriage, yelling something.

Part Five

"All right, that makes ten wins, two losses, and three draws for me," I said.

"You could've lost more, you know. You always say that you're not fully recovered, but you keep winning! It's so annoying," Kriss complained.

We were camping at a site about half a day from Gunjo City. We'd been traveling at a pace that put us three days ahead of schedule.

Since we were making such good time, we decided to take an early rest so we wouldn't be exhausted when we arrived. Kriss, Albert, and Cain had been pushing the carriage to its limits—that was why we were so ahead of schedule.

Part of the reason they had done that was to get back at Leon for the trouble he'd caused in Russell City. They also thought it would be funny if Leon arrived at Gunjo City only to find that we were already done with our business there and on the way to our next stop.

Kriss suggested we spar to check my physical condition. We'd dueled a few more times since we'd left Russell City and set up camp. The result of that was two losses and one draw at the first camp, two draws and one win in the second, and then nothing but wins after that for me. I still hadn't recovered physically, but I'd gotten used to moving again and had found the most effective way to fight against Kriss after having tried several different strategies.

In my first two losses, I had fought with my usual approach. During the draws, I'd been focused on defense. Now, I was focusing on counterattacks. Although I was at a disadvantage when it came to stamina, I'd realized that my explosive strength and speed surpassed Kriss's, so I decided to focus on those aspects.

Also, during my winning streak, I had imagined I was fighting against Dean instead of Kriss. That had allowed me to think more strategically as I'd moved. However, despite all my wins, I was mentally exhausted as a result.

"I kept trying to come up with countermeasures, but you just

kept getting better and better with every match, Tenma! You're really naughty, aren't you?" Kriss said.

"Stop saying things that could be taken out of context, Kriss. If you keep it up, I might have to complain in front of Queen Maria," I said.

"Oh, now you're gonna say that?"

"Tenma, I'm next!" Amur said, stepping up as I glared at Kriss.

However, Amur had such a brute-force fighting style that I knew I wouldn't be up for a proper match with her yet. I had to decline yet again.

"I'd like to volunteer too, but I don't think I'd be much of a follow-up after Kriss," Cain said. He'd quickly assessed the situation and realized he couldn't spar at Kriss's level. He let out a self-deprecating chuckle. "Anyway, dinner should be ready soon, so why don't you go wash up?"

I hadn't realized it was almost dinnertime, so I let Kriss go take a bath first. She casually thanked me and headed to the bathroom.

When we finished our first sparring session, I'd let Kriss go first in an attempt to be chivalrous.

"Oh, you want me to go first? I didn't know you were into that," she joked.

And so I ignored her the next time and used the bath without asking her before dinner was ready. After that, she stopped teasing me. She hated the idea of eating dinner before bathing, so she'd put it off so she could wash up first. By the time she was done with the bath, most of the food was gone. She'd had to eat dry bread and jerky by herself. She didn't want that to happen again.

However, when I tried to go into the bath after Kriss was done, Amur, Aura, and Jeanne would immediately start cleaning, which meant I had to wait longer. I didn't mind since it felt good to bathe in fresh water, but it would make me late for dinner. And depending on how long it took to cook and how long she stayed in the bath, sometimes I would end up sitting down to eat later than I would've liked.

"So? How long are we going to stay in Gunjo City?"

"About five days, I think. I have a lot of friends there, so we can

go there anytime. It could be a shorter trip, but Albert and Primera rarely get to see each other, so I thought five days would be enough," I said.

Primera was the captain of a brigade of Gunjo City's knights, so she couldn't leave as easily as others. And since Albert had to stay in the capital a lot, they didn't have many chances to see each other.

"I guess so..." Cain said, sounding deflated.

He didn't seem to like my answer. He probably wanted me to say something like how I wanted to see Primera, but since I'd just started getting used to interacting with women again, I wasn't in the mood to joke around about it. And I wasn't the type to say something like that so casually.

"I wonder what Leon's doing right now?" I asked.

"Well, maybe the letter from the margrave finally arrived. If it has, he'll probably leave Russell City tomorrow or the day after. And if that's the case, I doubt he'll get to Gunjo City in time to meet up with us."

Cain didn't seem pleased with the topic change, but he seemed to forget it quickly and started chatting about Leon. I could tell he was enjoying the thought of him panicking without us.

"Master Tenma, Kriss will be finishing her bath soon. Amur is waiting with a brush," Aura said. "By the way, there's something I'd like to ask you... Why do Russell City and Gunjo City both have 'City' as part of their name instead of just being 'Russell' and 'Gunjo'?"

I'd been talking to Cain for a while when Aura came to tell me Kriss was almost done with her bath. She also asked about the meaning behind the cities' names. Apparently, she'd been wondering about that ever since she heard Jeanne and the others talking about it. She had cast a sidelong glance at Jeanne and Leni as she'd whispered her question to me.

"It's because Russell City and Gunjo City didn't start out as towns or villages. They started as markets where people from nearby towns and villages sold crops, crafts, and game. And as the market grew, merchants and adventurers began to stay there longer, and then inns and taverns were built to cater to them. So they went straight from market areas to full-blown cities. I guess that's why

everyone calls them Russell City and Gunjo City," I explained.

"Wow, I didn't know that." Aura sounded impressed after I told her what I'd learned when I had lived in Gunjo City.

"Tenma knows a lot about it since he lived in one of them. I'm sure lots of people knew that the cities grew from marketplaces, but not many could explain it in such detail," Cain said.

"I wonder if Amur is already getting ready to clean the tub because she didn't understand the conversation either?" Aura pondered.

I couldn't go see for myself since Amur was waiting for Kriss to be done with her bath, but I guessed that Aura was right.

Some time later, Kriss came out of the carriage, drying her hair. She was followed by Amur, who must've cleaned the tub while Kriss had gotten changed. She'd gotten faster at that recently, and Amur was almost as good as Aina at cleaning the carriage's bath.

"I guess I'll go take a bath, then," I said.

Amur hadn't tried to barge in on me in the bathtub ever since Leni had joined us, so I didn't have to worry about that anymore. I was actually more concerned about Aura. She didn't come in because she was trying to peep, but she had the tendency to accidentally enter the bath or carriage while we were changing. Kriss and Amur would scold her every time. Jeanne actually had a running tally of how many times Aura had accidentally entered the bathroom, and she'd said she was planning on submitting it to Aina when we returned to the capital.

Dinner was ready once I finished my bath—I'd made it just in time. The main dish tonight was grilled meat. It would've been a lonely meal if I'd been late.

We decided to go to bed right after dinner so we could leave for Gunjo City as early as possible. I assigned Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon to keep watch. I also gave Rocket ten golems to manage. The men would set up their tents outside the carriage so we could be ready for anything.

"All right. We'll leave for Gunjo City at dawn and arrive there at noon. Good night, everyone!"

At my signal, everyone headed to their spots to get ready for the

night. The women slept in the carriage, but we men still had to set up our tents.

I was pretty sweaty by the time the tents were set up, but since the women were already asleep in the carriage, I couldn't take another bath. I could only wipe myself down with a wet cloth and wait until the girls woke up. While I could've used magic to prepare some hot bathwater, there was that one time Aura had come out of the carriage while we were bathing outside and screamed. Because of that, I decided not to do that again unless I absolutely had to.

By the way, she had seen Gramps and Leon naked, not me. And to make matters worse, she had witnessed them getting carried away, flexing their muscles while completely naked.

Everyone had felt sorry for Aura after that mistake and had criticized Gramps and Leon. Well, seeing those two do those silly poses in the nude was embarrassing, even to me, so I had to laugh at their expense.

Long story short, that was why I just wiped myself down with a cloth right now. But since the women would use the bath first in the morning, I'd be waiting a long time before I could have my turn. There might not even be much time to bathe anyway if we wanted to get to Gunjo City by noon.

"It's a race against the clock..." I muttered to myself before falling asleep.

"Why did this have to happen?"

Rocket had woken me up in the middle of the night, and he looked like he felt pretty bad about doing so.

He'd woken me up because of Shiromaru and Solomon. Rocket told me that after we had all fallen asleep, they'd gone out on patrol and came across a herd of wild boars, which they had taken out. Wild boars were considered pests around this area, so it was recommended to defeat them if you encountered any. It was a good thing that Shiromaru and Solomon had taken care of them—they could really do a number on crops.

That wasn't the problem, however. The issue was they'd taken out so many boars that the smell had attracted a large pack of

wolves.

Since we had Shiromaru guarding us, the wolves were just watching us from a distance, but it was only a matter of time before they would attack.

"All right, let's increase the number of golems to keep watch. We'll put the boars in magic bags. Solomon and Rocket, take the bags with the boars in them and put them somewhere far away. And when you do that, cut open the boars' bellies to make their scent stronger. If the wolves can get their food safely without having to risk attacking us, they should head in that direction, which would reduce their numbers here. Don't hesitate to confront any of them who come towards us!"

After I gave those orders, Rocket took the bags and mounted Solomon. The dragon flew up into the air and circled above the wolves before flying off with the boars' bodies.

"Looks like they lured quite a few of them away. Shiromaru, we need to strike first! Charge into the rest of the wolves and go wild!"

"Awoooo!"

Shiromaru had been lying on his back and showing his belly like he was trying to apologize, but now he sprang into action at my command. He charged at the wolves, eager to redeem himself.

"Boars are one thing, but there are way too many wolves..."

As I watched the wolves scatter, I heard Gramps step out of his tent. "Is the battle almost over?"

I knew Gramps had noticed the wolves early, but he had taken his time getting ready before coming out since I was handling things.

"Why didn't you come out sooner if you were awake?" I asked.

"There wouldn't have been anything for me to do besides stand here and watch. I thought I might as well take my time," he said.

"Well, that's true. And besides, it was Rocket and the golems who did the work, so I was pretty much just watching too... Oh, wait!"

Most of the wolves had already begun to flee, so I asked Gramps to keep an eye on Shiromaru so I could build a bathhouse while I had a chance.

"Why didn't I do this earlier?" I muttered to myself.

I used Earth magic to create three walls and then hung a curtain to serve as a makeshift fourth wall. I placed a barrel I'd previously used for a tub inside, filled it with hot water, and set everything up. Then, I quickly took off my clothes and hopped in.

"Hey! I'm doing chores while you sneak off to take a bath? That's not fair!" Gramps said.

"Well, both of us can't fit, so you'll have to wait until I'm done, Gramps."

"Fine. Just make sure to reheat the water before I get in."

"All right. Oh, and when Rocket gets back, tell him to collect all the boars and wolves in one place."

"You really work us hard, Tenma. Well, I guess I can just think of it as payment for the bath... I'll go wake up Albert and Cain. It'd be mean to not let them take a bath too," Gramps said before heading towards the tent to wake them up.

I thought feeling sorry for them was just an excuse—his real goal was probably to get them to help gather up the boars and wolves and sort them.

"Albert, I'm done with my bath!" I called.

"Finally! It took you long enough."

When Gramps woke them up and told them about the bath, they were excited. That didn't last long, however, since they found out they had to round up dead boars and wolves first. I couldn't blame them—it *was* a pretty disgusting task, especially when you'd just woken up.

"Oh, it wasn't too bad. We just had to sort what the golems brought over by size and put them in magic bags. But now I reek of blood, and it's all stuck to my clothes." Albert made a face as he noticed the stench on his clothes and then headed towards the bathhouse.

"Well, at least the work is done now... Right?" Cain asked with a worried expression.

Truthfully, there were still some boars left...

"Rocket and the others will take care of the rest, so you can go back to your tent," I told him.

I decided that it would be mean to make them go back and collect more boars after a bath, and there were only a few more left anyway. I didn't want the smell to get on me either, and since the boars that were left would just be used for our meals anyway, it didn't matter if they were thrown in a bag unsorted.

"It looks like there were about seventy boars in the mixed herd of regular boars and dashboars. I've never heard of them traveling like that before, but I guess it makes sense since they're similar creatures. There were about thirty wolves too. Most had either fled or been driven away, so all in all, there were about one hundred monsters total."

I expanded Detection to track the wolves, but it seemed like they were already pretty far away. The one group that did show up was a small pack.

"Do you think the disturbance in the Elder Forest is affecting this area too?"

I might've been overthinking it since we were pretty far from the Elder Forest now, but it was the only possible explanation I could think of. I decided to report it to the guild in Gunjo City, just in case.

"Ahh, that was a nice bath."

Just as I was contemplating collecting the golems I'd sent out to deal with the boars and wolves, Albert came out of the bath, looking content.

"If you're done, then I guess it's time for the last task," I said.

"What? There's more?" Albert seemed to think I was roping him into another dirty job and started slowly backing away.

"No, you don't have to help. I just have to give Shiromaru and Solomon baths."

"Oh. In that case, I guess you don't need me," he said with a sigh of relief. He then hurried off, determined to get back to his tent before I changed my mind.

Gramps had taken a bath after me and had followed that up by chugging down an entire glass of alcohol. He was already snoring away in his tent.

I called over Shiromaru and Solomon, who had gone back to keeping watch after the hunt. Solomon came over obediently, but

Shiromaru must've sensed a bath was on the horizon because he quickly tried to run in the opposite direction. Thankfully, Rocket caught him and absorbed him into his body immediately. He spat him out right in front of me, and Shiromaru quickly calmed down when he saw that I was just wiping down Solomon with a wet towel. I wished I could give them proper baths now, but it was the middle of the night—doing so would take until morning. I decided that it could wait until we got to Gunjo City, so I just wiped Shiromaru down with another damp towel as a compromise.

In addition to his usual grime, Shiromaru was covered in blood, mud, and grass from the hunt. It took nearly ten wet towels before he started looking cleaner, but even then, the smell wasn't going away.

"Rocket, make sure to have Jeanne and Aura help us give Shiromaru a bath as soon as we have time in Gunjo City," I whispered to him as we watched Shiromaru hurry away from us after being wiped down.

Early the next morning, Kriss came over to me.

"Good morn— Er, Tenma? What's that?" She stopped mid-sentence and pointed at something.

I followed her gaze and saw the bathhouse I had forgotten to dismantle the night before.

"You said we were leaving early this morning, but you guys were enjoying an open-air bath last night?" she asked.

It wasn't really that fancy as an open-air bath, but Kriss seemed to think it was. Still...

"Kriss, the least you can do is try not to be an exhibitionist when we get to the city," Amur said, sounding exasperated. All the other women agreed and looked at Kriss pleadingly.

"I don't have that kind of fetish!"

"But Kriss, you said you wanted to use a bath where the inside would be completely visible if the slightest breeze blew. And with the men nearby, it's hard not to believe you might have some kind of weird interests," Leni said.

Kriss paused for a moment. Then, she looked at Amur and the

others and shouted, "I just wanted to take a bath somewhere I felt free, okay?!"

"I *knew* you were an exhibitionist!" Amur shouted.

Kriss stomped off to the carriage to take a bath, pouting all the way.

"Um, putting Kriss's fetishes aside, should we get moving? We'll have leftovers for breakfast, but we can have something that tastes a lot better once we get to Gunjo City."

And so we set off from the campsite. I dismantled the bathhouse, of course, taking down the curtains and the barrel that served as a tub before destroying the earthen walls. We couldn't just leave it up. Some shady characters might use it—or worse, it could become a monster's nest.

We were a little behind schedule now, but I figured it was fine since we'd left Russell City so early. We went ahead and ate breakfast without Albert, who was driving us. Kriss had stayed cooped up in the bath while we ate, but Leni eventually persuaded her to come out.

Kriss made all sorts of excuses about the earlier conversation when she finally gave up hiding, but we just ignored her. Nobody wanted her to take over the bathroom and toilet again if she were to say something weird.

"I can see Gunjo City up ahead, Tenma," Cain called out from the driver's seat.

"Cain, head towards the guard post next to the main gate. The guards should come out once we get close. Just show them the Sanga family crest and follow their instructions," Albert said, handing over his family's crest.

Normally there was a sort of inspection when entering Gunjo City, but since Albert was with us, we could forgo that and pass through a special entrance.

Cain followed Albert's instructions and drove the carriage to the gates. The guards came up, checked the Sanga family crest, and guided us through.

"Please wait a moment while I contact the knights," one of the guards said before running off.

This was odd—I'd thought we'd be free to go where we pleased as soon as we entered the city.

"What's going on, Albert?" I asked.

"Um, I thought there'd be a commotion if a large group of such well-known people were spotted, so I asked the knights to come guard us when we arrived. If people swarm us, we can't just force the crowds away ourselves. And since you spent the longest here out of all of us, I'm sure various people will try to approach you, Tenma," Albert explained.

I appreciated his consideration. I had lived in Gunjo City the longest after leaving Kukuri Village and before reuniting with Gramps. That was also where I'd officially started my career as an adventurer. I probably had more ties here than anywhere else, second to the royal capital. Whether those connections were all friendly or not was a separate matter, though...

Cain turned to look as a knight on horseback and several others approached. "There they are."

"Isn't that Primera?"

"Yes, since I'm here, Primera's fourth brigade is assigned to guard us."

It made sense that Albert would choose his sister's brigade, but after my conversation with Cain the day before, I couldn't help but wonder if there was something else going on. Still, I was glad Primera was coming. I knew I'd feel more relaxed around her than with another captain.

Primera saluted from her horse, looking more nervous than anyone. "Gunjo City knights' fourth brigade, reporting for guard duty!" she said.

"Primera, don't you think it's rude not to get down from your horse when greeting the people you're guarding?" Albert pointed out in an exasperated tone. After all, there were three people in our group who outranked Primera.

"Eep! I'm so sorry!"

Primera looked flustered and tried to quickly dismount to bow, but she got caught in her stirrups and nearly hit the ground. Albert caught her just in time so she didn't fall.

She hurried to straighten her uniform, and her face flushed a deep red. "Er, please allow me to formally introduce myself again. I am Primera von Sanga, captain of the Gunjo City knights' fourth brigade! I am honored to serve as your guard during your stay."

She saluted again.

Honestly, I didn't think it was a big deal, but I supposed she had to set a good example by greeting us formally in front of her subordinates. Incidentally, those subordinates were all knights I'd met before. One was the vice-captain, whom I'd once taught how to properly clean and organize things. They were used to Primera's blunders, so none of them looked surprised.

That might've been a problem in and of itself, but none of the three higher-ranked people (meaning Albert, Cain, and Kriss) seemed to care much. Primera would probably just get personally scolded later.

"Begin the escort!" Primera ordered her men.

They were about to lead us when Albert spoke up. "Primera, you should ride in the carriage so we can discuss our plans. Is that all right with you, Tenma?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

Apparently, Primera's lecture was going to come sooner rather than later. She looked a little hesitant after hearing Albert say that, but her brother immediately ordered her vice-captain to block the way, so Primera obediently followed his instructions and got in the carriage.

"Oh, by the way... Vice-captain, I'm going to stop by the Full Belly Inn first. There are some people I want to say hello to right away," I said.

I was referring to Dozle and Kanna, the innkeepers. They were both the ones who had helped me the most and the ones who I'd caused the most trouble for. After them, it was probably Flute. Even though I hadn't been an official guild member at the time, I'd brought in a huge amount of game and had left it to her to process.

It would delay us too much to go to both places beforehand, though. I hoped Flute would forgive me if we stopped by the Full Belly Inn first and then headed to the knights' headquarters for

some paperwork.

"Tenma! Why didn't you tell me that you were coming?!"

Dozle rushed over to me the moment I stepped into the Full Belly Inn. There was a large crowd of customers lined up outside who were eager for the sweets sold here, but after Albert displayed the Sanga family crest, the crowd split like Moses parting the sea.

"Tenma! It's really you!" Kanna exclaimed.

"Oh, Kanna! It's nice to see you...again?"

Dozle's wife Kanna arrived shortly after him, holding a peacefully sleeping baby in her arms.

"Oh, you mean this little one? This is our daughter. She was born just this summer," Kanna said.

Dozle was around the same age as Uncle Mark, and I guessed Kanna was around that age as well. She would be considered an older mother for having a child at this stage of life by this world's standards. But it wasn't that unheard of in my previous world, so I wasn't as shocked as some others might've been.

Kanna told me their daughter's name was Soleil. When I heard that, I couldn't help but wonder why they hadn't named her Minerva considering that their names were similar to characters in a certain TV show... I kept that thought to myself, but anyone watching must've thought I looked surprised for some reason.

We chatted briefly, and I introduced Jeanne and the others while quickly updating them on what had been going on with me. Then, Dozle and Kanna returned to work. I promised to come visit again that evening, and my group departed for the knights' headquarters.

But just as we were about to board the carriage that waited for us outside...

"Tenma's really here!"

"It's true!"

"The rumors were true!"

Lily, Nelly, and Milly came charging straight towards me. However...

"No touching the talent!"

"Stop right there!"

"Back, please! Back!"

Amur, Jeanne, and Aura interrupted them, blocking the Wildcat Princesses like a wall in front of me.

The triplets started to protest.

"Hey, why are you stopping us?"

"Yeah, move!"

"We're here to see Tenma!"

Despite the Wildcat Princesses' cries, my three bodyguards stood their ground. I was about to step in to smooth over the situation when Amur shot a sharp glare at Primera.

"Primera, you need to do your job properly. If you're in charge of security, you can't let anyone charge at Tenma, even if they are his acquaintances!" Amur said to her, and loud enough for the other knights to hear.

Primera hesitated for a moment, but Albert quickly chimed in.

"Amur's right, Primera. Your job is to prioritize our safety," he said. "You should've stopped them first, even if they are people we know."

At that, Primera finally moved between the triplets and Amur, Aura, and Jeanne. She escorted the triplets a little farther away to explain the situation.

"Good job, Albert!"

"Heh."

Amur gave Albert a thumbs-up, and he responded with a faint chuckle.

The girls' real intention, of course, was to keep other women from getting close to me. And while their reasoning made sense, their actions were exasperating. After all, I wasn't the only notable one here—Albert and Cain were the eldest sons of important nobles, and even Kriss was from a prominent noble family. It was only natural that no one should be allowed to approach us while we were under guard.

"We'll see you at the Full Belly Inn tonight!"

"You'd better wash your neck, Amur!"

"We're gonna pluck the fat off your chest, Aura!"

The triplets stormed into the inn, leaving very vulgar-sounding threats in their wake. Primera told me the girls had rented my old

room and were using it as their base of operations.

"Bring it on!" Amur shouted back.

"Yeah, we'll take you down!" Aura chimed in. "And haven't you heard that jealousy is ugly?"

"Why didn't they even mention me?" Jeanne muttered to herself, wondering aloud if she was too plain.

Honestly, the triplets had probably just thought that Jeanne had been dragged into the situation by Amur and Aura, or maybe that they'd egged her on.

After the chaotic encounter with the Wildcat Princesses, Primera received another stern lecture from Albert on the way to the headquarters. I thought her reaction earlier had been understandable, but Albert and Amur *did* have a point about her duties as a bodyguard. That made it so I couldn't step in to defend her.

We arrived at the headquarters a short time later. There, we took care of various formalities and discussed security arrangements for our stay in Gunjo City. Knight Commander Alan also shared some recent news about the city with us. He hinted about a surprise I'd find at the guild, but he didn't give any details. He just said I'd have to find out for myself.

We also learned that the captain of the second brigade, Simon, and the captain of the third brigade, Aida, had gotten married and were expecting a child. That had also led to Aida's retirement.

Finally, Amur told him all about Primera's earlier blunders, including the mistake she'd made by greeting us on horseback and how she'd failed to block the Wildcat Princesses. That earned Primera another scolding—from Alan this time. As punishment, she was temporarily reassigned to act as our guide and liaison with the knights during our stay. Her vice-captain was tasked with leading the fourth brigade while Primera was away.

Given that there had even been talk of the deputy succeeding Aida, it seemed like this wasn't an issue of ability. Incidentally, the reason the vice-captain had declined the position of third brigade captain had been because it would be problematic for someone from another brigade to suddenly switch and take command of another.

But, most importantly, they were worried about Primera.

"All right, next stop is the guild. What are your plans, Albert?" I asked.

"I was planning to visit the guild too, but first, I need to report to Gunjo City's council."

Albert went off to speak to the council alone while the rest of us headed for the guild. He looked a little sad to be going off by himself, but none of us would have much to do even if we'd accompanied him, since he was likely going to be giving a classified report. Besides, members of the fourth brigade were accompanying him as his guards, so he wasn't completely alone.

"What's going on at the guild, Primera?" I asked.

"I don't think you'd believe me even if I told you, so you'll just have to see for yourself."

Since she also refused to give me any details, we had no other choice but to go there and find out for ourselves. I didn't think it seemed like anything bad, judging by the tone of her voice, so I figured there wouldn't be any trouble. At least, that was what I'd thought until I opened the door.

The familiar door to the adventurers' guild in Gunjo City swung open, and what I saw was so unbelievable my brain couldn't even process it.

"Tenma? What's wrong?"

"I-I just can't believe it," I said. "Let me try again..."

What I saw was beyond my comprehension, so I reflexively shut the door. I mentally prepared myself and opened it again, only to react the same way.

"What in the world is going on in there?" Kriss asked.

"Now I'm curious too," Cain said.

The two of them shoved past me to open the door themselves.

"Huh? What is this? My eyes must be playing tricks on me. Or maybe my brain...?"

"I feel the same way. Tenma, do you have any medicine?"

Cain and Kriss had reacted the exact same way as me. Gramps and the others looked on, clearly confused.

Despite the chaos, the door suddenly swung open again from the

inside.

"Hey! Who keeps slamming the door? I can't concentrate on my work! Wait a minute, Tenma? Don't just stand there; come in already! What are you doing out there?"

The man shouting at me was none other than Max Bellcap, the guildmaster of the Gunjo City adventurers' guild. His angry expression quickly softened into a welcoming smile once he saw me.

But as he invited us in, something felt off...

"Everyone get back! That's an imposter!"

"Right?!"

"Jeanne, Aura! Run to the knights' headquarters immediately!"

Cain, Kriss, and I all drew our weapons, ready to fight.

"H-Hey," the guildmaster said.

However, everyone continued yelling.

"Don't move! What have you done with the real guildmaster?!"

"Yeah, what he said! The *real* one is a tired old man who wouldn't know a smile if it smacked him upside the face!"

"If someone is impersonating the guildmaster so brazenly, it could mean that everyone inside the guild has been either brainwashed or killed and replaced! Tenma, in the worst-case scenario, you might have to use the same magic you used to take down the lich!"

The imposter looked surprised—I figured it was just an act to throw us off.

Gramps and the others still seemed confused about what was happening but got ready for battle just in case. Primera tried to stop us, but Kriss just handed her a sword and dragged her away from the front lines to safety.

Just as I was about to make the first strike, I heard a familiar voice ring out from inside the guild.

"What's all this commotion?"

It was none other than Flute, but something about her appearance was...different from what I remembered. I had no doubt it'd been her voice, though.

Oh, I forgot about Identify!

I realized I'd been too shocked to think clearly, so I quickly used Identify on both her and the "guildmaster."

Wait, they're both real?

Identify told me that they were indeed the real Max Bellcap and Flute.

"Cain, Kriss... Both of them are the real deal. Shiromaru, show them!"

"Woof! Achoo!"

I planned to use Shiromaru's sense of smell to confirm their identities to Cain and Kriss since they didn't know about my Identify skill, but the moment Shiromaru sniffed the guildmaster, he sneezed. What terrible timing.

"I knew he was a fake!" Cain yelled.

"Shiromaru, get back!"

Things took a turn for the worse as Shiromaru immediately followed Kriss's command and backed away from the guildmaster.

"No, no! I'm really Max Bellcap!" the guildmaster frantically insisted, but Cain and Kriss wouldn't believe him.

Primera stepped in. "You guys! He really *is* the guildmaster!" she said. She worked on persuading Cain and Kriss, and they finally started to believe that the guildmaster was the real deal.

I ignored the still-suspicious guildmaster. "Long time no see, Flute."

"Yes, it really has been a long time..."

She responded with a warm smile, just like she always had, but I couldn't help but notice that there was something new and different about her.

"By the way, Flute... What happened to your stomach?"

Flute's midsection was noticeably swollen.

"Truthfully... The guildmaster attacked me."

Flute's words made the guildmaster freeze. The situation now felt all the more real, and the women's gazes grew sharper. Primera seemed to know the most about the situation, but even she was glaring at the guildmaster.

"Usually, he would just treat me to dinner to show his appreciation for my hard work, but one night, the alcohol we had was very strong. When I woke up the next morning, the guildmaster was lying next to me...naked," Flute said.

What she described was something that could be considered borderline criminal—no, scratch that—it was definitely illegal.

"W-Wait a second!" Max protested. "We've been over this a hundred times! I warned you not to drink so fast because the alcohol was very strong!"

"But you were drinking weaker drinks, weren't you? And didn't you only order tea towards the end?"

"I couldn't keep drinking alcohol at that pace! And the drinks I had *were* really strong!"

The two of them continued their little lovers' quarrel—er, rather, Flute continued teasing the guildmaster.

This was exasperating. "Ah. So you two are in love," I said.

Flute's cheeks turned red, and the guildmaster was blushing too. It was cute when she did it, but seeing an old man blush frankly made me feel a bit creeped out.

"First Dozle and Kanna, now Flute's pregnant too? Seems like there's a lot of cause for celebration around here," I muttered to myself.

Amur apparently overheard me. "Tenma, you're starting to sound like an old man," she said.

Am I really that bad? I glanced over at Cain almost immediately.

"It's not what you said, but more like *how* you said it. You kind of reminded me of my dad," he admitted.

I looked around—everyone seemed to agree with him.

"I guess that means you've grown up a bit, Tenma. But those aren't all the happy events that have happened. There's something else, and it involves someone connected to you."

The moment Flute said those last few words, I felt the women's gazes sharpen again.

It seemed like Primera knew what she was talking about. She had a look on her face that seemed to say, *Oh, right... I forgot to tell you about that...*

"Let's head into the guild first," Flute suggested. "We'll disturb the neighborhood if we keep making a racket out here. Besides, the person in question works here too."

We followed her inside, and I found myself in the Gunjo City

adventurers' guild for the first time in years. I noticed it was much busier than when I had worked here. One thing in particular caught my attention, however.

"Flute, is it just me, or are there a *lot* of new adventurers here?" I asked.

There were a ton of adventurers milling around—they were rookies who had just started and were younger than me. Because of that, they were scrambling to get to the bulletin board to look for easier tasks that beginners could take on.

"Are you sure that's okay?" I asked.

"It's fine. We've hired veteran adventurers to serve as mentors who will step in if things get out of hand. And we make sure that their usual behavior is taken into account when they rank up," Flute said, turning her gaze towards a staff member who was watching the rookies fight over tasks.

"It's stricter here now, huh?" I mused.

"Well, you were always an exception, Tenma, but yes, it's definitely stricter than before. By the way, this also has something to do with you."

Flute explained that the Gunjo City adventurers' guild had become a sort of sacred spot for adventurers since it was where the kingdom's youngest hero—me—had gotten his official start. In recent days, many young people who'd wanted to become adventurers had chosen to make their debuts here. And since there were so many more rookie adventurers than before, the ranking standards had also increased slightly. But even so, newcomers who still believed in superstitions lingered around.

"No one's coming over to us, huh? Even the veteran adventurers who noticed me either looked displeased or just gave a little wave and that was it," I said.

"The rookies are probably too focused on what they're doing and aren't paying attention to their surroundings. What that basically means is that there's no one outstanding among the newer adventurers right now, you know."

Flute also said that as the number of new adventurers grew, there were more promising ones, but the number of bad ones also

rose. Perhaps the more capable rookies simply weren't choosing to come here to start out because the competition for work was so fierce.

Amur suddenly interrupted my conversation with Flute. "By the way, where's this woman connected to Tenma?"

While Flute had never said it was a woman, Amur and the rest of the ladies in my group seemed to think it was.

"She's over there." Flute pointed with a wry smile to a woman sitting at the reception desk who was talking to an adventurer.



It was Ceruna, a woman I'd rescued during my initial stay here. She looked unusually cheerful today, like she was very close to the adventurer she was speaking to.

"That's Tenma's...?"

"Just so you know, the man she's talking to is her boyfriend," Flute said.

The moment Amur learned that Ceruna had a boyfriend, her attitude changed completely. "I think I can get along with her!"

"I want to say hello to Ceruna, but there are quite a few adventurers lined up behind her boyfriend," I said.

"She's really popular," Flute said.

"Oh! Her boyfriend just got hit from behind!" Amur said.

"Yeah, that happens all the time. The staff will step in if it gets out of hand, but he *has* been loitering at the counter for a while. That kind of punishment is within the acceptable range."

Amur had made it seem like he'd really gotten whacked, but one of the adventurers had really just lightly tapped him on the side from behind. Still, even that light tap seemed to be crossing a line, but if you were patiently waiting in line only to be held up because the receptionist's boyfriend was flirting with her, you might get a little rough too.

Ceruna's boyfriend immediately apologized to the person and gave up his spot. Looking embarrassed, he moved to a seat a little farther away, where he was again lightly tapped by another adventurer. The adventurer who had tapped Ceruna's boyfriend first then began to tease her, and she blushed before quickly getting back to work.

I decided to put greeting her off for later and headed to Max's office to speak with Flute and the others instead.

"So, in other words, the guildmaster became serious about your relationship after you got pregnant?"

"Yeah. At first, it caused quite the commotion at the guild—much like how you and the others shouted 'Imposter!' and all that."

"Those guys were really rude that time, huh? I was just trying to do my job seriously. And well, unlike with Tenma, I was able to

knock them over and quiet them down," Max said.

Although Max had retired from adventuring quite some time ago, it seemed the former Rank A adventurer still had enough pride to stand up to Rank C and D adventurers.

"Well, I had to step in and explain things when a Rank B adventurer showed up, though," he admitted.

"He's just the worst," Kriss said.

"Yeah, he really is," Cain agreed.

"Definitely the worst," Gramps nodded.

"The *absolute* worst!" Amur exclaimed.

Jeanne and Primera didn't say anything, but it was evident they were thinking the same thing. Then...

"Guildmaster, you're really the absolute worst! I'd expect nothing less!" I gave the guildmaster a thumbs-up to praise him, and he looked so happy that he slumped against the sofa with tears in his eyes.

"Well, technically, I am one of the higher-ups in the guild..."

"No, there are people here who are more important than the guildmaster. And over the two years I spent in Gunjo City, I never saw him do any work. Actually, when I first met Flute, I thought *she* was the guildmaster. When I found out that Max couldn't even do half the work Flute handled, I was really shocked," I said.

Flute looked satisfied, and Primera nodded in agreement.

"By the way, do you know why he was ever even able to become the guildmaster in the first place, Primera?" I asked.

"No, I don't know anything."

"Oh, I know! This is just hearsay because I heard it from my dad, who heard it from Duke Sanga, though!" Cain piped up. I asked him for more details, and he explained further.

"So basically, it doesn't matter if the higher-ups are useless as long as the people working below them are solid to keep the organization running. And since the guildmaster isn't the type to flaunt power, they thought he was just right for the job," I said, summarizing what Cain had told me.

"Also, apparently, it's easier to get rid of him if something goes wrong..."

Cain’s words shocked everyone except one person—Flute. She had probably already been told something like that by Duke Sanga.

“I guess I should take my work more seriously...” Max muttered.

“Well, if the worst happens, I can look after you,” Flute said.

“You can’t just be a deadbeat when a kid’s on the way. That wouldn’t be a good look,” Gramps added.

“I understand how you feel, Max, but considering how things have been up until now, you might confuse your employees if you suddenly start working hard out of the blue. That might make things even worse in the long run. So just take it easy,” Flute said to him.

“Yeah...”

Right after the guildmaster had decided to be more serious about his work, Gramps gently stopped him. Since Flute agreed that it would be better for the guild that way, Max started crying again.

“Tenma, Ceruna is tied up with work and can’t leave, but she said she’d come to say hello after she’s done.”

“All right. In that case, tell her to come to the Full Belly Inn at dinnertime,” I said. “We’ll probably be there late into the night. Oh, and Flute, you and the guildmaster should come too if you have some time.”

Flute had gone to check on Ceruna at the reception desk, and when she returned, I asked her to pass on a message for me. Then, when I invited her and Max to come later, Flute promised they would make an appearance—even though the guildmaster was still slumped over in tears.

“Well, my visit with the guild was faster than I expected. I wonder if we should head over to the council headquarters...? Albert might still be there, and there are a few people there I want to visit as well.”

So, I made my way over that way, but it turned out that Albert and I had just missed each other, and he was heading to the guild. Although Albert wasn’t at the council headquarters, I was also looking for Marks—Ceruna’s uncle. I asked the receptionist to let him know I was there, but he wasn’t in.

“Hm, well, if Marks isn’t here either, then I guess there’s nothing I can do about it.”

The receptionist told me that Marks had been very busy lately and was currently running around doing errands, so I left a message for him to also stop by the Full Belly Inn if he had time this evening.

“Guess I’ll head back to the guild and meet up with Albert. If he’s not there, we can go to the estate he mentioned.”

At first, we thought about staying at the Full Belly Inn, but it was such a popular place that we weren’t sure they would have room for all of us. Besides, since Albert told us that Duke Sanga’s estate was available for him to use during inspections, we decided to stay there.

Incidentally, although Primera resided in Gunjo City full-time, she lived in the knights’ dormitory instead of her family estate. The reason for that was that she wanted to become independent and earn a noble title for herself. She wanted to get used to living on her own. Well, since it was a dormitory, it wasn’t *exactly* like living alone, but she said that the estate was too big. When her family was away, it was too lonely for her to live there alone.

We returned to the guild only to find it unusually noisy. At first, I thought the commotion was because the rookie adventurers had noticed me and Gramps arrive, but I quickly realized that wasn’t the case.

“Maybe I should ask Flute...”

I was about to look for her, but a knight who had been with Albert’s guard detail showed up and led me right to the guildmaster’s office.

“Why is the guildmaster still slumped over? And why is Albert’s face so red?” I asked.

I found Max Bellcap slumped over even more deeply than before, and Albert looked clearly embarrassed. Meanwhile, Flute had an awkward smile on her face, and the knights around them seemed to be at a complete loss.

“What happened, Flute?” I asked.

“Basically, Lord Albert had the same reaction you did. The only difference is that Lord Albert caused a commotion in the guild, and the adventurers noticed and started making a scene... Ultimately, it

was like some kind of circus in here."

Albert had been at the center of the chaos and had only realized his mistake when he'd noticed the adventurers laughing and getting carried away. He'd been beside himself with embarrassment ever since Flute had led him to the guildmaster's office a little while ago.

"It was inevitable. Albert. Kriss, Cain, and I had the same reaction, so don't worry about it. It's hard not to react, after all. But let's just view it as an unfortunate accident and move on. Should we head to the estate for now?" I suggested.

Albert nodded without hesitation. He'd probably had embarrassing moments like this before, but he'd likely never had to face them alone. Come to think of it, Leon was probably the quickest to recover after an embarrassing moment out of the three of them since he was so oblivious. Whether that strength carried over to his everyday life was another matter, though...

"Lead the way, Shiromaru. Knights, move casually but make sure to surround Albert. Everyone else, just follow me. Oh, right! Flute, about the guild tags for Shiromaru and my other followers..."

"I already have them prepared," she told me.

"Thanks. We'll see you again tonight," I said.

I put the guild tag on Shiromaru's collar, placed him at the front of our party, and we all left the guildmaster's office. As we stepped out into the guild, a hush fell over the previously noisy area. The adventurers who knew me turned their faces away conspicuously, and some even forced the rookie adventurers to do the same.

Gramps observed the adventurers around us. "I can tell how much of a commotion you caused here just from this reaction, Tenma," he said.

It wasn't like I had gone out of my way to pick fights when I was here last, though. They had all tried to pick on me and got what was coming to them as a result. It wasn't my fault...probably.

"Come on, everyone. Let's hurry up," I urged them on so we could leave the guild as soon as possible, but only Albert and the knights followed me. "I'm really going to leave you behind!" I shouted as I reached the guild doors, and it was only then that everyone began to move.

"I'd heard a little about it, but Tenma, you were quite the problem child, huh?" Kriss teased as she caught up to me.

"This is why no one's interested in you, Kriss," I blurted out without thinking.

However, I immediately realized that I shouldn't have said that. *Crap!* I thought, but Kriss's hand was already squeezing my shoulder.

"And what does that mean?" she asked with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

I decided not to apologize and doubled down instead. "You had problems back in school, right? That's why no guys approach you. So what's the difference between that and what I did in Gunjo City?"

Kriss clearly hadn't expected me to do that. She relaxed her grip on my shoulder.

Seizing the opportunity, I quickly pulled away from her.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed and reached out to me again.

Amur stepped between us. "Tenma is at fault here. But even if you both made the same mistakes, I'm here for him. And so are Jeanne, Primera, and...Luna too? But Kriss has no one. The only person who might've been interested is Leon, and now he's stuck with a stalker, so who knows what might happen. I feel bad for her, but she really has zero prospects..."

Amur kept on promoting herself while talking smack about Kriss like she wasn't there. Jeanne and Primera looked surprised to be mentioned. Meanwhile, Aura stood next to Jeanne and alternated between looking at her and Amur with a puzzled expression as if to say, *Hey, what about me?*

"Wait, Amur!"

Then the usual scene unfolded, and Kriss and Amur disappeared into the crowd.

"All right, let's keep heading to the Sanga estate!" I shouted loudly, trying to change the subject after Amur had made things awkward.

"Tenma, please take care of my sister." Albert ignored me and continued where Amur had left off. However, he ended up being attacked...by his own sister. "Argh! Primera, you— Gah!"

Albert was hit with a second powerful blow from Primera, whose

face was bright red. She was clearly well-trained in combat and delivered several efficient strikes to his body. The way she had made him suffer with the first blow and had knocked the wind out of him with the second was so precise that even Gramps had to speak up.

"Ha. Impressive," he said.

"Tenma, did you hear something?" Primera asked.

"Not a thing, Primera," I replied.

Cain had been about to join in and tease Primera, but once he saw what had happened to Albert, he quickly covered his mouth and turned away. He looked very distressed.

"That's good to hear. It seems like my brother is exhausted from the journey, so I can take over from here. Carry him!" she said.

Even the knights under Primera's command seemed surprised by her sudden change in demeanor. After a brief moment of shock, they quickly picked up Albert and lined up behind Primera. I thought it was a bit odd for them to be carrying the future Duke of Sanga by his shoulders like they were supporting a drunkard, but given Primera's intimidating presence, I decided not to comment on the matter any further.

Part Six

"This estate is owned by House Sanga. It's only used about once a year, but we keep it properly cleaned and maintained, so there shouldn't be any issues. I need to excuse myself for a bit; I have to go back to the knights' headquarters to fill out some paperwork and pick up my personal belongings," Primera explained.

She left again for the headquarters soon after we'd arrived. She was starting to speak in her usual tone and act normally again, but it seemed like she was still angry at Albert. When one of Albert's knight escorts asked her what they should do with him, she shouted, "Just put him in the storage room or something!"

Once Primera was out of sight, Gramps ended up taking Albert from the knights and carried him up to a suitable room. We figured that Primera couldn't be angry later if she found out it was Gramps who had intervened.

"Shiromaru and Solomon, you can play out in the yard, but don't go too close to the walls or leave the property. Rocket, keep an eye on them for me, will you?"

There were still a few people gawking outside, probably because of Shiromaru and Solomon. Still, I doubted anyone would try to trespass onto the property of Duke Sanga, so I decided to let the two of them play in the backyard. Plus, if anyone *did* try to sneak in and attempt to catch them, it wasn't like many people could handle Rank A monsters like them. And if someone were to illegally enter and end up getting killed, trespassing onto the duke's property would be the bigger crime—I doubted we would get in trouble for anything. If anyone raised an issue, we could just say we were trying to protect the duke's heir, which would most likely lighten any punishment considerably.

Either way, I put Rocket in charge to make sure the other two didn't wander off the premises by accident, and also because Rocket could capture any intruders without killing them. Even though we wouldn't be at fault legally if something were to happen, I didn't

want to run the risk of Shiromaru's and Solomon's reputations suffering for no reason.

I asked Goldie and Silvie if they wanted to go outside, but both of them preferred to relax inside the dimension bag instead of exploring somewhere unfamiliar. It was basically their home, after all. They asked me for some food, but they made no attempt to move towards the exit.

"They're the same as always... All right, here's something to eat. Oh, you made more silk again? Good work."

When Goldie came out to pick up the food, the spider gave me a ball of silk in return. The thread was around the second-best tier they could produce, which surpassed the quality most people already considered the finest on the market. It would probably sell for a high price.

"I sure am building up a lot of stock. It might be time to sell some of it."

I generally only sold Goldie and Silvie's silk to people I knew. And since my waiting list didn't have any people seeking the second-highest tier of silk instead of the highest quality, they were still waiting. Besides, Queen Maria was the one who managed the waiting list, so if anyone asked for a lesser quality while waiting for the highest grade, she might bump them down in the queue. That's why I had so much second-tier quality silk piling up in my bag.

"Well, I'll worry about the silk later. Shiromaru and Solomon are fine with Rocket, so next on my to-do list is stabling Thunderbolt. Hey, don't be so mad!"

The moment I led Thunderbolt into the stable, he started pawing the ground in protest. I guess he didn't like the idea of being in such a cramped space. It wasn't that the duke's stables were small, though—Thunderbolt was just *that* big. Since he seemed to be so upset, I let him roam around the yard like Shiromaru and Solomon under the condition that he wouldn't run wild, wouldn't charge at full speed, and wouldn't break anything.

Once he agreed, he immediately began to slowly walk around the perimeter of the property, starting from the gate. Incidentally, when I went to look for my other three followers to tell Rocket about the

rules Thunderbolt had agreed to, I discovered that Rocket had already scolded Shiromaru for knocking over a tree.

"You guys haven't changed much either, huh? I'm sure Rocket can handle it, though."

As usual, Rocket had taken over my role as master. I didn't mind it, though. This happened so often that my only thought was *Man, this saves me a lot of trouble. Now I can relax.* A normal Tamer might see this as being an issue, but since this arrangement worked well for us, I figured it was fine.

Now that my followers were all settled in, I headed into the estate to find rooms for us to use.

"I was going to pick out my room myself, but since Albert and Primera aren't around, I'm not exactly sure which ones are available to us..." I wondered to myself.

I wandered around the estate, thinking about just picking a room and then letting Primera tell me if it was all right or not when she got back. But a short while later, I sensed several people gathered in one particular room.

I stood in front of the door and identified them by their voices, even though they were making an effort to be quiet. They'd probably let down their guard since they were inside a room and hadn't taken my superior hearing into consideration. All I had to do was concentrate a bit and I could tell who they all were.

"This must be it... Looks like Jeanne, Aura, Leni, and Amur are inside? Wait, when did she get here? And how did she figure out where we were?"

If Amur was here, that must've meant Kriss could still be running around town looking for her. And that meant Kriss hadn't come because of our argument earlier. I thought about going to look for her since it was partly my fault. Eavesdropping on the women didn't feel right either.

I was just about to step away from the door when I heard Amur say something that stopped me in my tracks.

"When it comes down to it, I think Primera's got a really good chance of being a powerful rival."

I paused and kept listening.

"I mean, think about it. Her family status, her personality, and her figure are all top-tier! Jeanne, the only advantages you have over her are your youth and how long you've been around Tenma!"

"Aura, Primera might get mad if she heard you say that," Jeanne said.

"Yeah. Besides, Primera is only twenty-three, which isn't much older than Master Tenma," Aura said.

"Exactly. And a five-year age gap is nothing when you consider how old Kriss is! Honestly, it's the perfect age difference if you think about having kids. Kriss may look young, but she's already twenty-seven. It's all downhill from there!"

"It's true. Primera's five-year age gap is nothing compared to Kriss's. But that's exactly why Kriss might resort to using any means necessary, and that's kind of scary."

"She used to act like an older sister to everyone and was a lot more confident, but now that Tenma's surrounded by younger girls who don't show the slightest bit of interest in her, not to mention having a new potential rival who outclasses her in every way... Well, who knows what she might do? I don't think she'd do something illegal, and I doubt sleeping drugs or aphrodisiacs would even work on Tenma, but..."

Alarm bells started going off in my head. It would be very dangerous to stay here any longer. I could manage Jeanne or Aura alone just fine, but Leni was a trained operative, and Amur had razor-sharp instincts—just one slipup from me, and they'd find out I was eavesdropping.

I decided to leave. Trying to be as silent as possible, I quietly crept away, inching farther and farther away until...

"Ah! Argh!"

I spotted a certain troublemaker just around the corner—Cain. And to make matters worse, he saw me and immediately began shouting my name.

Since I was already on high alert, I reacted purely on instinct the moment I saw him round the corner. Before even the first syllable of my name could have passed his lips, I'd darted forward, clamped a hand over his mouth, and dragged him silently around the corner.

Looking back, it was probably one of the five fastest responses I'd ever made in my life. It was the kind of thing you could only describe as miraculous, like I'd entered some kind of zone. I was honestly impressed with myself.

Seconds after I pressed myself against the wall around the corner, still holding Cain, Amur flung open the door and scanned the hallway.

"Hm?"

"What is it, Lady Amur?"

"I thought I saw Tenma. Must've been my imagination."

Fortunately, I'd already slipped farther away and was holding my breath. Cain, my only worry, seemed to have understood how frantic I was and thankfully stayed quiet.

Dismissing it as all being in her imagination, Amur went back inside.

"Sorry, Cain. I just kind of reacted."

"Argh! Cough, cough! Nngh... Cough! I thought I was gonna die!"

Apparently, Cain hadn't been so quiet because he was cooperating. It was actually because I'd accidentally covered both his mouth and nose and had pressed him so hard against the wall that he couldn't move.

"I seriously thought you were trying to suffocate me to death! Did I really do something that bad?" he asked.

Cain looked clearly annoyed with me, and I couldn't blame him. I apologized as sincerely as I could, but he insisted on knowing why I'd done such a thing, so I explained.

"Pfft, ah ha ha! Wait, you mean to tell me you've fought against earth dragons, wyverns, and bicorns without a bit of fear, but you were terrified of getting caught eavesdropping on the girls?!"

He burst out laughing. Loudly. He tried to stifle it by pressing his forehead into the wall, but he ended up just banging into it repeatedly, shaking with silent laughter.

Why are you banging your head against the wall when you're trying to be quiet?! I thought in exasperation. Luckily there was a bathroom and another room between us and the girls, so they probably couldn't hear anything.

Still, someone was bound to find us here sooner or later.

"Let's go somewhere else for now," I suggested.

"Yeah, how about we...ha ha...head to my room? Pfft!" Cain wiped the tears from his eyes as he continued to stifle his laughter, and he eventually led me to his room.

"This area is soundproofed, so you can say whatever you want. This particular guest room has reinforced walls for privacy," he said.

Since he'd stayed at the Sanga estate before, Cain had been sure to snag one of the better guest rooms for himself. I thought about asking him what rooms were similar, but I couldn't risk ending up next to Primera. It would be best for me to just wait until she got back.

"I guess the women are starting to feel the pressure now that Primera's here. And I bet seeing a baby, a pregnant woman, and someone with a boyfriend all in one day didn't help either!" Cain said with a smirk.

I couldn't deny it—I'd been just as stunned when I had seen all the changes that'd happened in Gunjo City too. And it was even more shocking to me since I knew all of these people personally. I guess it wasn't that surprising that Ceruna had a boyfriend, but Kanna having a child and Flute being pregnant with the guildmaster's baby had left me floored.

"It's one thing for them to be self-conscious about it, but why are they directing it all at me?" I muttered to myself.

"Let me give you some advice, Tenma. Don't ever say that out loud again," Cain warned with a laugh.

I realized that I shouldn't have said that and nodded. It was incredibly rude to consider someone's affection as a burden. In fact, I felt guilty for even having thought that in the first place.

"Just think about poor Leon. He's got such terrible luck with women that he was crying about it! And now the one person who's interested in him isn't exactly his cup of tea *and* she's turned into a stalker. If you said that in front of him, he might cry tears of blood and have a mental breakdown."

I had a feeling Cain just wanted to say all that, but knowing Leon, it might not have been impossible.

"I'll make sure not to do that, then," I said. "Anyway, what should we do about Kriss?"

That topic of conversation had reached a natural stopping point, so I took the opportunity to change the subject. I didn't want to give Cain any more openings to tease me about the girls.

"I wouldn't worry about Kriss. She'll end up here on her own eventually. She'll just accuse you of treating her like she was lost and get mad at you if you go out looking for her now," he suggested.

"That's true," I said.

I'd been hoping Cain would agree to help me search for her, which would in turn give me an excuse to leave. But instead, he suggested we let her be, which was a surprisingly good choice considering Kriss's tendency to get defensive. She probably would've said, "You're treating me like a lost little kid!" Still, the look on Cain's face told me he wasn't interested in Kriss at all. He was more concerned about keeping me here so he could keep teasing me. It was the same mischievous look he always had on his face when he was playing pranks on Leon.

I gotta get out of here, I thought.

Cain must've been reading my mind, because the moment I started thinking about escaping, he quickly stood up. His intentions were clear. I decided to act before he could stop me, even if it meant being a little forceful. I ignored him and made a run for it, but...

"Ugh... What a rough day..."

Unfortunately, Albert suddenly appeared through the back door, looking pretty worse for wear.

"Sorry, Albert, but you gotta move!"

Albert barely had time to react before I pushed past him. My hand, unfortunately, landed on the exact spot where Primera had punched him earlier.

"Argh! Not there!"

He collapsed to the floor with a groan. To make matters worse, my blow hadn't been strong enough to knock him out—he couldn't escape the pain. Albert just writhed on the floor in agony, tears

streaming down his face.

"Damn it, he got away! Couldn't you at least hold him for one second, Albert?" Cain shouted.

"H-Help, Cain..."

"Sorry, can't! I'm busy!"

I sprinted down the hall, hearing the chaos intensify behind me.

"You won't get away, Tenma!" Amur yelled.

"I'll hold him off, Lady Amur! Go call for reinforcements!" Leni said.

"Reinforcements? Like who?" Aura asked, baffled.

"Aura, go get the knights! I'll summon Rocket!"

Just like that, all the women had turned against me in an instant. And it was all because Cain had stupidly yelled, loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Tenma was eavesdropping on the girls' private conversation!"

Amur chased after me while Leni cut me off, wielding a net. Jeanne ran off to summon Rocket, who seemed like the most reliable source of backup.

Meanwhile, Cain took charge and directed the chaos from a safe distance. Albert was still down for the count, so he was totally useless. As for Aura, she was just caught up in the commotion and ended up being more of a liability than a threat.

"You're way too stubborn!" Amur growled as she got closer to me.

"Step aside, Lady Amur! Huh? He dodged this one too?!" Leni shouted as her trap failed.

"Waaah! Leni, why did you catch *me*?" wailed Aura—she'd fallen victim to Leni's trap instead.

"Rocket, help me! Oh, never mind. I guess you're not joining in..." Jeanne sighed.

"Hey there, Rocket. You might as well watch the battle with me," Gramps said.

"Oww... My stomach's throbbing..." Albert moaned.

The chase was playing out in full view of everyone at the estate. The knights refused Aura's requests for help, saying, "Captain Primera is too scary. We're sorry, but no." Gramps had them serve

tea while he watched the scene unfold instead.

Thankfully, Rocket didn't turn against me, but unfortunately, Amur's movements grew more desperate, and Leni's tactics became even more merciless.

Earlier, Aura had screamed after getting caught in the net Leni had thrown at me, which left both the net and Aura out of commission. It seemed like a win-win situation for me, but since Aura had been useless from the start, it might've actually improved the enemy's chances. And it looked as though Leni still had more nets at her disposal...

"You're not gonna get away, Tenma!" Amur yelled. "Hup, hup, haah!"

When I tried to escape from Amur using a triangle jump, she imitated a defense technique I'd only ever seen used by a main character in a certain basketball manga. But...

"Looks like you're a little too short for that!" I shouted.

Amur couldn't block me with that technique due to her petite frame. I dodged her and saw the exit ahead of me. Victory seemed to be within my grasp...!

But then Aura came flying towards me. Literally.

"Wh-Why meeee?" she cried.

Amur had switched tactics after I'd dodged her attack. She'd decided to use Aura, who'd been tangled up in the net and sprawled out on the floor, as a projectile. Fortunately, Aura landed short of hitting me directly, rolling a few times before she came to a stop.

"Whooooa! Oww! Wait, what?"

I managed to jump over Aura but accidentally stepped on the net and tripped. I stumbled towards the front door, just barely grabbing onto the handle to catch myself. Just as I tried to steady myself, the door swung open from the other side.

"Eeeeek!"

"Waaaaah!"

Something soft broke my fall, and then I heard a noise like a frog being squished underfoot.

"Ahhh!"

"Hold him right there, Lady Primera!" Leni immediately shouted.

The soft thing that broke my fall turned out to be Primera, and the squished frog was Kriss.

Primera was pinned beneath me, and she looked utterly bewildered. But before I could make my escape, Leni shouted out her orders. Primera was confused but obediently tightened her grip on me, which inadvertently left Kriss still crushed beneath both of us.



“Argh, fine! I’ll overlook this for now, since capturing Tenma takes priority!” Leni said.

“Leni! Rope! I need rope!”

“Here, use this.”

“I’ll tie him up!”

Amur and Leni worked together flawlessly, tying me up to restrain me. But...

“Um, Cain? Why am I tied up with Tenma?” Primera asked.

“Whoops, didn’t notice you there. Well, Tenma will escape if we let you go, so just bear with it, okay?”

He had absolutely done it on purpose. I couldn’t see Cain’s face due to the way they’d tied me up, but I could hear the amusement in his voice.

Primera hadn’t realized it yet, but my situation was dire. And when I say dire, I mean...

“Hey, you two! How long are you planning on hugging each other on top of me?!”

Primera and I had been tied up, locked in a tight embrace. And the worst thing was my face wasn’t at its usual height...but buried into her chest. It was soft and comfy there, to be sure, but it was a very bad idea for me to stay like this much longer—for several reasons.

“Ah! Tenma escaped!”

While Primera’s attention was on Cain, I used that opportunity to cut the rope with magic and get away. Unfortunately, I was too tired to move very fast and couldn’t manage to put much distance between myself and Primera.

Exhausted, I called out, “Rocket, come here! Shiromaru and Solomon, stall them! I’ll give you all the meat you can eat as a reward!”

I decided to take refuge in Rocket’s internal dimension bag while I left it up to my greedy followers to stall the others. The moment they heard the reward that awaited them, they immediately stood guard in front of me. Drool dripped from their mouths as they faced off against Amur and the others.

“Hide me until things settle down, Rocket.”

Rocket came over, nodded once, and opened his mouth wide. I glanced at Primera just once before I slipped into his dimension bag. Our eyes met briefly before she looked away, and I quickly averted my gaze afterward. This was incredibly embarrassing and awkward.

"The first thing I'm gonna do once things calm down is punch Cain," I decided.

Meanwhile, I decided to escape from reality inside Rocket. Still, I couldn't fall asleep right away, not even after I had burrowed under the covers. And then Shiromaru woke me up just as I finally nodded off.

"Fine, fine. You want meat, right? But only a little bit. If you have too much now, you won't have any room for dinner."

We were going to eat dinner at the Full Belly Inn tonight, and Shiromaru hadn't eaten there in a while. I figured I'd let him have a small snack of meat in the meantime.

"I need to wash my face first, though. It's all sticky, thanks to you," I said.

It was sticky and a little...no, *really* stinky from Shiromaru's drool. He gave me an apologetic look, but his tail was still wagging wildly, so I doubted he felt any remorse. *Typical.*

"We're in the dining hall, huh? That's convenient. Thanks, Rocket."

The moment I stepped out of Rocket, I found myself in the dining hall. Apparently, Shiromaru and Solomon had chosen to wake me up here so they could eat as soon as possible.

"Guess I'll borrow the kitchen and cook up some meat," I said.

Shiromaru and Solomon started drooling a lot once they heard that. Rocket wiped it away, but the slobber just kept coming.

"Here, eat this for now." I tossed them some jerky I had stored in my bag, and they caught it in midair, swallowing it whole. I worried about them not chewing it properly, but they would have plenty of food later, so it was fine. I also handed Rocket some jerky to distribute as treats to occupy the two of them while I cooked.

"All right, it's ready. Eat slowly because it's still hot," I warned them.

I placed a large plate piled high with grilled meat on the floor.

The two of them yelped joyfully and buried their faces in the mountain of meat.

Now that the most pressing task was done...

"What's everyone else up to?" I wondered.

I could see Amur, Jeanne, Aura, Leni, and Cain at the far end of the dining hall, all sitting formally on their knees. Kriss stood in front of them—her arms were arms crossed, and she had a stern expression on her face. Primera looked slightly angry, and Albert looked half dead. He wasn't sitting on his knees, but in a chair near Kriss and Primera, though he was clutching his stomach in pain. I hoped I hadn't caused him *that* much suffering by pushing him earlier.

"I have some questions for you, Tenma. Would you mind sitting here for a bit?"

Even though Kriss had phrased it as a question, I could tell that I had no choice. She pointed to the seat across from her instead of at the others sitting on their knees. I obediently sat down.

"From what I understand, the commotion was caused because you were eavesdropping. Can you explain what happened?" she asked.

I knew that answering the wrong way could land me in the same situation as the others, so I took a moment to think about my response first.

"Well, I guess it's true that I overheard something, but it wasn't intentional. I was about to knock when I accidentally overheard part of their private conversation. Once I realized it was personal, I decided to quietly leave."

"So why did you restrain Cain?"

"Because I thought if he walked in and saw me, he'd blow things out of proportion, and I was right. Amur came out of the room looking for me right after I hid Cain and moved away."

"So you'd already left by the time Amur came out? And then you went straight to Cain's room?" Kriss asked, checking her notes to confirm my story.

I nodded, and she let out a deep sigh. Meanwhile, the faces of those sitting on their knees grew paler—Amur in particular.

“You’re cleared, Tenma. Although you may have been the cause of the situation, you didn’t do anything wrong. The real issue was how Cain and the others overreacted and escalated the situation. In fact, it’s safe to say this incident was almost entirely Cain’s fault,” Kriss said.

“Also, when I suggested we go out looking for you, Cain told me that wasn’t important,” I said.

Kriss then glared at Cain. He stammered out a denial, but although I was paraphrasing, that was what he’d said. He really wasn’t able to make excuses for himself.

“And what about Albert?” I asked, pointing to the man as he clutched his stomach in pain.

“She...got me again...” he groaned, pointing at Primera.

She looked startled. “I-I couldn’t help it! I thought my brother was the one behind the whole mess, so it just kind of...happened,” Primera said.

“Well, I guess that’s understandable,” I said.

I decided to just chalk it up to Albert’s usual behavior and dropped the subject. I still couldn’t bring myself to make eye contact with Primera, but at least enough time had passed that I was able to hold a conversation with her.

I quietly watched Cain endure Kriss’s interrogation for a while. Eventually, one of the servants came to inform us of a visitor. Surprisingly, they weren’t here to see Albert or Primera—they’d come to see me.

I was suspicious for a moment when I heard that but quickly made my way to the parlor once the servant told me their name. Normally, one had to have a personal invitation to be allowed into the manor, but it seemed that Primera had already approved of him coming, so the servants had escorted him inside.

“Long time no see, Marks,” I said. “I heard you were out when I stopped by and left you a message. Is something the matter?”

I thought maybe he had come to tell me he couldn’t meet us at the Full Belly Inn that evening, but I was wrong.

“I came to ask you for your help, Tenma!”

The moment I walked into the room and said hello, Marks

dropped to his knees and bowed his head. Normally, I'd have ignored such dramatic behavior from someone I didn't know well, but Marks wasn't just anyone. He was an old acquaintance, and I knew he wouldn't grovel without a good reason. I decided to hear him out. After all, I couldn't just leave him kneeling there like that. And I'd known him for too long to just throw him out too.

"Marks, you'll need to explain what this is all about. I can't decide whether I can help you if I don't even know what you're asking."

"My apologies. Lord Albert, Lady Primera, I'm sorry to trouble you as well."

Although he was technically my guest, he was still a guest of the manor, so Primera and Albert had accompanied me as the hosts. But their real reason for coming with me was to escape Kriss's lecture in the dining hall.

By the way, Gramps had been soaking in the bathtub for an unusually long time at this point. I'd asked a passing servant to check on him on the way to the parlor because he'd been gone so long, and also due to the fact that he'd brought alcohol into the bathroom. Knowing him, I doubted anything was the matter, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"So what's the favor?" I asked.

I wanted to help if I could, but of course there were limits to what I could do or what I was willing to do. I hoped he was asking for something I could manage.

"It's about Ceruna. She has a boyfriend now, but there's a bit of a problem."

"Yeah, I saw the two of them at the guild. They seemed very close, but the man didn't seem odd in any way," I said.

"No, no, the problem isn't with him. It's his family. Tenma, are you familiar with the Gloriosa Trading Company?" Marks asked.

I drew a blank at the name, but Albert and Primera looked surprised at my reaction.

"Tenma, the Gloriosa Trading Company is the largest in Gunjo City! They mainly deal in weapons and armor."

"Surely you dealt with them when you lived here before. Are you sure you don't remember?"

It was understandable that they were surprised, but I quickly realized why I had no memory of them.

"Oh, I never bought weapons from big trading companies when I was in Gunjo City. I visited smaller shops for tools or disposable throwing weapons. They were cheaper, and sometimes I'd find hidden gems too. Those big stores never appealed to me."

Albert and Primera nodded once they heard my explanation. I trusted magic and my prized sword *kogarasumaru* more than relying on ordinary weapons. I had no interest in weapons that were only decent and far inferior to my *kogarasumaru.*

"I might've been there once or twice, but it probably didn't leave much of an impression if I can't remember it... Anyway, Marks, what does this trading company have to do with your request?" I asked.

"Ceruna's boyfriend Henri is the third son of the Gloriosa family. He wants to marry her, but his father is opposed to their relationship." Marks hesitated when it came to explaining why the father was against it. He paused for a moment and then finally spoke, steeling himself. "When Ceruna was captured by those bandits a few years ago, she was...assaulted. Her boyfriend's father found out and said that he wouldn't allow a tainted woman to join their family."

"What a disgusting and infuriating story. Does this Henri still live with his family?"

"No, he was disowned after he said he wanted to become a painter. He earns a living as an adventurer now, and what he makes covers his living expenses and art supplies."

The Gloriosa Trading Company was based in another city, so Henri had spent a few years moving from town to town. He'd arrived in Gunjo City about a year ago and had fallen in love with Ceruna. His father had only found out about their relationship recently.

Despite the circumstances, Ceruna and Henri were planning their wedding. But now that the date was drawing closer, Henri's father had begun to sabotage their wedding plans.

"Why does Henri's father care if he already disowned his son?" I asked. "Why doesn't he just leave them alone? When's the wedding, anyway?"

"In two weeks. So I'd like you to attend the ceremony, Tenma." Marks then explained that lately, he'd been busy trying to gather information on Henri's father and had discovered that the man was planning on crashing the wedding with another nobleman in tow.

"It's not unusual for the groom's father to attend the wedding, obviously. But bringing a noble guest is clearly designed to create an imbalance between the two families. He probably intends to use it as an excuse to claim the ceremony isn't worthy enough for his son," Marks explained.

"And who's the noble?"

"Viscount Abyss."

"Wait, Viscount Abyss?" Albert reacted with surprise before I had a chance to speak.

Primera looked shocked too.

"Who's this Viscount Abyss, Albert?"

"A noble who has long served my father. He's proud and difficult, and he detests dishonesty. He couldn't stand Regir back in the day, but he also recognized his usefulness," Albert explained. "Anyway, when Regir fell from grace, no one was happier than Abyss."

"He was strict with my brother but kind to me and my sisters," Primera said.

I didn't know whether he'd been kind to Primera and her sisters because they were women or because they weren't heirs, but he sounded like a respectable noble to me.

"Why would a noble like him assist in disrupting a wedding, then?" I asked.

"It doesn't seem like Viscount Abyss is aware of Henri's father's true intentions. I think he really believes he's going to celebrate their marriage."

"So this is all the father's doing... He probably hasn't even considered what would happen if the viscount found out the truth."

This reminded me of Regir, in a way.

"So you want me to attend the wedding to even out the guest list? That's fine," I said. "You can invite me officially as the former master of Ceruna, since she was a maid in the Otori household. That should keep Henri's father from complaining. Even though my time

as Ceruna's master was very brief, it's a valid claim as long as Marks or I attest to it."

"Thank you!" Marks let out a sigh of relief and bowed deeply.

"Oh, and make sure to invite Ceruna and Henri to tonight's gathering. I'll ask them directly about their wedding," I added.

Marks wanted his visit with me to remain a secret, so the plan was for me to "overhear" them talking about their wedding and express interest in it. That way, it would seem natural for me to attend and not like I was going as a favor to Marks.

Once Marks had left the estate, I headed to the dining hall to inform everyone that our stay in Gunjo City would be extended. On the way there, I ran into Gramps, who was carrying an empty bottle of alcohol. His face was noticeably flushed, even though it was a small bottle.

"You shouldn't drink by yourself in the bathtub. You're not young anymore, you know. It wouldn't be surprising if you just keeled over one day," I warned.

"That's no way to talk to your grandfather. Don't you agree, Primera?"

"Wha...? Well, um, Master Merlin may be older, but he's still so strong and looks so young! I-I think it's fine as long as he drinks in moderation..." Primera stammered.

Even though she'd been caught off guard, she had still come to Gramps's defense. He seemed delighted and had a huge grin on his face the whole way to the dining hall.

"Hmm, what's going on here?" Gramps stepped out into the dining hall, looking completely bewildered. He turned to me for an explanation, but honestly, I didn't have one.

"Well, Kriss... I'll leave this one to you!" I said, pushing the responsibility onto her. She was the only person still left functioning in the room. In fact, she was the only one even still moving, besides Rocket.

"Um, well, I guess my lecture went on a bit too long..."

At this moment, everyone who had been kneeling on the floor when I'd left was now sprawled out and groaning in pain. Meanwhile, Shiromaru and Solomon, who'd finished their treats,

were stretched out on their backs, snuggled together, fast asleep. Kriss and Rocket were left tending to the fallen, minus Cain.

"I got so caught up in lecturing them that when I finally looked over, I realized Cain was on the verge of passing out. When I checked on everyone else, they were in the same state. Totally weird, right?" she said.

Leni didn't hesitate to expose how Kriss had gone overboard. "You're such a liar! Kriss kept glaring at us like she was a serial killer. Every time any of us even moved a muscle, she'd yell, 'Don't move!'"

None of this surprised me, but I had to admit it *had* been a bit excessive.

"You could've at least let the others besides Cain go," I suggested.

I knew if I tried to defend him too much, Kriss would flip out and become a whole other level of annoying. I decided to throw him under the bus instead, but it wasn't because I was getting revenge or anything! At least, I'd like to think that wasn't why I was doing it. I couldn't say that with confidence, though.

"Anyway, that's not important. I need to let you all know that we'll be staying in Gunjo City longer than we planned," I said, changing gears. "Unfortunately, that also means we'll have to meet up with Leon again. I know it's a shame that things are about to get noisier around here, but I wanted to make sure you were all on board with the plan."

Amur and Aura both gave me looks that said, *Did you really just say we aren't important?* but Leni and Jeanne seemed to be more interested in learning why we had to stay here longer. I was grateful that Cain was still unconscious—if he were awake, he'd definitely pitch a fit about reuniting with Leon, and then I'd have to waste precious time shutting him up—probably by force.

Come to think of it, maybe it *was* kind of disappointing that I wouldn't get to do that...

"S-So Tenma, why are we staying?" asked Kriss. She was probably the first one to speak up because she wanted to change the subject.

There was no reason for me to call her out on that, and Amur,

who was usually the one to do such things, was quiet right now, so I let it slide. Instead, I told her that I had been invited to Ceruna's wedding before anyone else could butt in.

"Huh," Kriss said. "A wedding, you say?"

Her mood soured instantly after she heard the reason for our extended stay. Amur had said that Kriss'd been getting anxious about turning thirty soon, so it made sense that hearing about others getting married wouldn't exactly be a fun topic for her.

"You're so petty, Kriss."

"Oof!"

Amur's dig landed a critical hit, and Kriss looked uncomfortable.

"All right, so you have to stay for a wedding. But what are *we* going to do?" Leni asked.

I told her that I hoped they would consider attending too. My answer was vague, which made them all suspicious, but they understood once I explained that I still needed to confirm the details with Ceruna and Henri.

"I know how much you love putting nobles in their places, Tenma," Amur said.

"Don't make me out to be the villain here. I only deal with ones trying to cause problems. And this Viscount Abyss guy apparently isn't involved in the plan this time," I explained.

Albert and Primera nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, I'll find out more once I talk to Ceruna. But why did Kriss make you guys kneel for so long, anyway?" I asked.

Now that the wedding discussion had been settled, I shifted the conversation back to the lectures. I probably would've gotten punished too if it were just about the commotion, but thankfully, Kriss had said I wasn't guilty. Anyway, this seemed like too stiff a punishment for merely eavesdropping.

"It's because Amur and the others were talking about two different things!"

Kriss had been quiet since taking damage earlier, but she'd perked up now that she had a chance to counterattack. Meanwhile, Amur and the others looked very guilty.

"You know the stuff you overheard, Tenma? Well, that was no big

deal," she began. "But then they started talking about something, um...inappropriate for a guy's ears once you left. So when Cain screamed, 'Tenma was eavesdropping!' they all panicked and thought you overheard the thing you really weren't supposed to overhear. But if they'd just stopped and asked what you'd actually heard, they would've realized that Cain was full of it. Instead, they jumped straight to conclusions and went rogue. That's why I got mad at them!"

Kriss was so enthusiastic that I could tell that she was probably venting her frustrations from earlier.

"Okay, I get it. Give me some space. Anyway, I apologize for the misunderstanding, so please forgive everyone except Cain," I said.

"Huh? Well, putting Cain aside, maybe I *did* get a little too angry with Amur and the others..."

And with that, everyone except Cain was cleared of their charges.

Cain, however, regained consciousness, and once he realized he was the only one being punished, he shot desperate looks at me and Albert. We both ignored him. Honestly, we'd both suffered enough thanks to him today, so we felt no obligation to help him. Primera must've felt the same, because she looked away when he tried to plead for help from her.

"This is supposed to be *Leon's* job!" Cain shouted, earning him yet another scolding from Kriss.

"Sorry, Tenma," Jeanne said.

"Yeah, me too," Amur added.

"I apologize, Master Tenma," Aura said.

"I deeply regret my actions, Tenma," Leni said, apologizing formally.

I had a hunch that Leni had known that Cain was making stuff up from the beginning, but she'd gone along with it anyway. I couldn't be sure, though.

"Like I said, it was my fault for overhearing and causing the misunderstanding, so it's fine," I said. "Anyway, the real culprit here is *Cain,* remember? No worries."

Since I'd already decided to dump the whole debacle onto Cain's shoulders, I accepted their apologies and told them to let it go.

Part Seven

"This was supposed to be Leon's responsibility..." Cain whined.

Cain had gotten released from his punishment because we had to leave soon for the Full Belly Inn, but he was right—it was usually Leon who'd get lectured about things like this. If you asked me, though, Cain and Albert were tied for second place. So if our usual scapegoat was absent, then it was only natural to pin the blame entirely on Cain.

Kriss, the reason behind his complaints, ignored him. "Fine, fine! Enough already! Go get ready. We're running out of time!" she yelled.

Cain looked like he still wanted to argue about how unfair it was, but once he realized she was right about being short on time, he reluctantly went to get dressed.

"Ugh, I thought things would be easier around here without our number one Problem Child Leon, but I guess the runner-up just moves to the top, huh?" Kriss sighed, apparently thinking the same thing I was.

I had to admit that in my rankings, Kriss was actually tied for fourth place in that regard with Amur after Albert and Cain. Then came four royals who deserved a special ranking in the hall of fame too... Still, if we were only counting my party, then Leon was number one without a doubt.

"Okay, I'm ready!" Once Cain returned, everyone was ready to go.

"All right, let's get going."

"Got it! Jeanne, Aura, from here on out, we're in enemy territory, so look alive!" Amur said.

"Roger that!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Amur, Jeanne, and Aura enthusiastically formed a protective formation around me, with Amur in front and Jeanne and Aura on either side. Leni took up the rear.

"No Wildcats will get through us now!" Amur yelled.

I was used to Amur's hostility towards the Wildcat Princesses, so I let her say whatever she wanted. It was a friendly rivalry, so as long as it didn't turn violent, I wasn't going to interfere.

"Sorry to mess up your strategy, but we're taking the carriage," I said, pointing to Thunderbolt.

There was no way I was making the nobles in our group walk all the way to the Full Belly Inn. Once we arrived, I'd store the carriage in my magic bag and let Thunderbolt rest in the dimension bag, although I doubted he'd be happy about it.

"Tch, fine. But as soon as we get there, we resume our formation!" Amur said.

She sounded slightly grumpy, but she boarded the carriage first and sat near the entrance. Jeanne and Aura did the same, fully prepared to resume their formation the moment we arrived. I really hoped they would keep the rivalry a friendly one...

"Are you sure it's okay for us to come along?" Primera asked. She sounded a little worried, but I knew Dozle wouldn't mind. If anything, he'd probably be excited to have more people to cook for.

"It's fine. Honestly, I'd probably get yelled at if I *didn't* bring everyone. Besides, they're definitely cooking with all of us in mind, so food might get wasted if you don't come along," I said.

"You heard him, Primera! Aren't you lucky? Tenma needs y— Argh!" As soon as Albert started to joke around, Primera jabbed him in the ribs without hesitation. I followed up with a punch to his other side.

"You two are merciless, huh?" Gramps said.

"It's fine. This is what happens to Leon all the time, and he always survives, so Albert should be able to handle it. Although there is a bit of a difference between the two when it comes to endurance," I said.

"Exactly! Once my brother becomes Duke Sanga, no one will be able to keep him in check. He needs to learn his lesson now and understand that his actions have consequences!" Primera said, abandoning Albert, who had now collapsed onto the floor.

When Primera was angry, she seemed like a completely different

person compared to her usual composed self. But it made sense that she would treat her brother differently than others, and honestly, I didn't want to think about it anymore. It was mainly because she was giving off the same kind of vibes Queen Maria did when she was angry, and that was downright scary. If sacrificing Albert was what it took to get Primera back to normal, then I would side with her.

I wasn't the only one who found Primera scary, however.

"Y-Yeah, Albert's definitely at fault here," Gramps quickly added.

Kriss looked away and pretended not to see anything. Meanwhile, Cain, Jeanne, and Aura trembled with fear.

Then Amur just came right out and sided with Primera, saying, "This thing is the real problem! It's in the way. Let's put him in the corner." She then worked with Leni to move Albert.

After that, Amur locked herself in the bathroom. Leni looked like she wanted to do the same, but since Amur had beaten her to the punch, she hesitantly sat down next to Kriss instead.

"Looks like we made it, Tenma! Let's go in."

The trip over to the Full Belly Inn had been eerily quiet for a while, but once we arrived, Primera spoke up, and the heavy mood lightened a bit.

She took me by the arm and led me towards the inn's entrance, but right before we could step inside, Amur, Jeanne, and Aura reformed their defensive formation around me.

And just as Amur pushed open the door...

"You're finally here, Ten—"

"Nope, sorry! Jeanne, Aura!"

"Got it!"

The Wildcat Princesses immediately made a beeline for me, but Amur and her team resumed their guard strategy.

"You're blocking us *again*?!"

"But why?"

"He's here during his free time!"

The triplets all protested one after the other.

"Um, well..." Amur trailed off.

"That was *then,* and this is *now*!" Jeanne exclaimed, impulsively

charging ahead, but the Wildcat Princesses' protests were already starting to wear her down.

"Yeah, we won't let you near our Master Tenma, you cat burglars!" Aura agreed. She and Amur were refusing to budge an inch.

"You've got this, Lady Amur! You can do it!" Leni cheered, adding to the chaos of the situation.

"Tenma, don't just stand there, you'll get in the way. Let's go inside. And Cain, don't worry about *that*, we can just leave *it* behind," Primera ordered.

"Yes, Captain!" Cain had been waffling over whether or not to check on Albert, but he now stood at attention.

Primera had just referred to her own brother as a thing and had told Cain to leave him behind. The moment she'd said that, Cain had dropped all concern for his friend, saluted, and fallen in line behind Primera.

Meanwhile, Gramps and Kriss quietly walked into the inn, doing their best to blend into the background.

"Oh, Tenma! You're finally...here?"

"You reserved the whole place for us? Thanks, Dozle."

"Tenma, you should probably go say hello to Ceruna first. Henri looks like he's shaking in his boots," Dozle said.

Dozle was acting a bit weird, but figuring that out could wait. Primera was right—Henri seemed stiff as a board.

"Sorry, but I gotta go say hi to them first. I didn't get a chance to talk to her at the guild," I said.

"O-Oh yeah, good idea. You should try to loosen Henri up a little too. There's no way he's having a good time. Plus, I need a minute to, er...sort through my thoughts," Dozle said.

"Huh? Okay... Well, I'll be right back," I said.

Once again, Dozle was acting weird, but I didn't have time for that right now. I instead headed towards the two main guests tonight.

"Oh, Tenma! Long time no see! Sorry I didn't get to say hello at the guild. This is my boyfriend..."

"I-I'm Henri! Nice to meet you!"

Ceruna looked a little shy as she introduced Henri to me. As for him, he just looked plain tense. I asked why he seemed so flustered, and he said as someone who dabbled in adventuring on the side, he had no idea how to act around a top-notch adventurer.

"Sorry to jump right to the point, but...are you two dating?" Ceruna asked.

Primera and I both froze. Where the heck had *that* come from?

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

Ceruna gave me a puzzled look like she didn't understand my confusion. "Well, I just assumed...since you two are *arm in arm*, after all."

Arm in arm? I looked down, and sure enough, Primera's arm was wrapped around mine.

"I, um, no, this is, er, well...!" She started stammering.

"Calm down, Primera! It was just an accident. It's *all Albert's fault*!" I said.

"R-Right!"

I used the magic phrase "all Albert's fault" to snap her out of it. Normally something that dumb wouldn't work, but right now, it was super effective.

Primera took a deep breath. "It's all my brother's fault," she muttered over and over again like an incantation.

"So you two aren't dating, but don't you think calling it an accident is a little harsh?" Ceruna asked.

I pretended not to hear her. There wasn't any room in my brain to deal with that right now.

"Anyway, I heard you two are planning a wedding. Is that true?" I asked, changing the subject.

Ceruna and Henri looked surprised that I knew, but when I told them that I'd overheard it at the guild, she nodded slightly.

"Congratulations. Do you have a date set yet?!" I was trying to make it sound like I was really excited for them.

They both looked a little embarrassed and told me it was in two weeks.

"Two weeks, huh..." I made sure to sound disappointed, but that

made them look confused.

Just then...

"Sorry I'm late, Tenma. I got held up at work." Marks walked in at just the right time, playing his role perfectly. "Is something the matter?"

"Not at all. I just asked when their wedding is, and well, unfortunately, it's the exact day we were planning to leave!" I said.

Marks caught on and played along before Ceruna could get suspicious. "I see. I was hoping you'd be there to celebrate with us."

"Ceruna, could you move the date up?" I asked.

"Well, we *are* holding the wedding here, so I guess it's not impossible, but..." Ultimately, she seemed to buy our little charade and said it would be possible to adjust the wedding date.

"Dozle! We all wanna go to Ceruna's wedding, so let's move the date up. And I'll cover all the costs, so pull out all the stops!" I said.

"Wait, what?! Tenma!" Ceruna exclaimed in surprise.

Henri and Marks both looked at me in shock as well. After all, Marks'd had no idea I was going to say that. I'd just come up with the idea on the spot. They all protested and insisted that they'd pay for the wedding themselves, but then, an unexpected ally stepped in.

"Personally, I'd be more than happy for Tenma to foot the bill," said Albert. He was still a bit weak, but he'd finally recovered enough to move. Marks looked a bit concerned, but Albert convinced him that he was just tired from traveling.

Marks had met with Albert earlier, but Ceruna and Henri were caught off guard by his sudden arrival and immediately started to kneel. Primera gently stopped them.

"Do you three know about Tenma's accomplishments in the Haust borderlands?" Albert asked.

Marks nodded. Albert was referring to me defeating the wyvern horde and the fort I had built along the border, but I could tell he was more concerned with the fort.

"Ordinarily, constructing a fort of that size would require a great deal of money and time, but Tenma was able to create walls and a moat in an *instant.* Thanks to that, the margrave was able to

redirect most of his budget towards promoting economic growth. Merchants and craftsmen flocked to the fort, boosting tax revenue and the economy. We may not see the same level of results here, but even having someone like Tenma involved in an event will draw attention," Albert explained.

The whole room went quiet, and I listened to him speak along with Gramps and the others.

"Not only that, but Tenma has been hoarding far too much money. I mean, it's his money, so he can do whatever he wants with it since he earned it fair and square, but there are people who have a problem with that, and they're mainly nobles. Most of it is just petty jealousy, but there *are* some people who are genuinely concerned that his fortune is interfering with the economy. So if Tenma spends a bunch of it on this wedding, it could silence his critics and keep him from making unnecessary enemies. And, the fact that all that money will be spent in the Sanga duchy is a nice little bonus for me too!" Albert said.

Ah, I see. So my paying for the wedding wasn't just for Ceruna and Henri's benefit—it was in my own best interests to do so, as well as being good for the kingdom as a whole. And Albert made sure to slip in how it also benefited him to make it seem like he was pushing me into it. He sounded like a total con man.

"Don't overthink it, Ceruna. I just want to use your wedding to trim down my list of enemies. And even if you turn me down, I'd still spend a bunch of money on it one way or another. I *was* your master after all, even if only for a short time, so don't go embarrassing me!" I joked.

That finally got her to crack a smile, but she still looked a bit hesitant. When I told her it was better to know ahead of time that her wedding was being turned into a royal banquet, she finally relented.

Just when I thought we had things settled, Albert threw another wrench in the works. "But there's one other problem. This still doesn't give *me* a good enough reason to attend... Oh, speaking of which—who's officiating?"

"We asked the guildmaster and Flute," Ceruna said.

"Oh, we can't have that. The guildmaster is unreliable, and Flute is expecting. She shouldn't be doing something so stressful. I have a better idea... Why don't you have *Tenma* officiate? He's paying for it anyway, so he might as well handle the ceremony too. And if we make Primera assist him, then it would be perfectly natural for me to attend!" Albert grinned at his own brilliance, but personally, I thought it was a pretty flimsy excuse. He must've noticed my suspicion because he added, "Father will want to know how Primera ended up officiating. He adores her, you know. He practically dotes on her. So for his sake, I have to attend so I can relay all the details back to him. That settles it!"

So basically, he was blaming Duke Sanga's fatherly love for Primera. It wasn't a bad strategy. He had more than enough pull to get in just by saying he needed to be there to watch over his sister.

Cain butted into the conversation then. "In that case, I guess I can't go. What should I do?"

"Just say you're tagging along so House Sammons's political standing doesn't suffer," Albert said.

"Yeah, that works. And everyone will think that Leon just showed up too without thinking about it."

"Or, we could just say that I invited all three of you as the host. Right, Ceruna?" I said.

"Um, sure... Do whatever you want, Tenma. I can't wait to see just how extravagant this wedding ends up..." Ceruna sounded resigned, but when I said I would make Marks help with the planning, she seemed relieved.

So, in the end, Albert would be Primera's guest, and as the host, I'd invite Cain and Leon. Gramps would come too, since he was my family. Since Amur was technically under the Otori family's protection, she would come along, as well as Leni, as her retainer.

"All right, Dozle. Now, let's talk about the wedding feast. For meat, we've got wyvern, bicorn, and white buffalo..." I began.

"Hang on a second! I've never cooked bicorn or white buffalo before! Are you seriously planning on serving such high-end meats?!" Dozle practically shouted in shock. His outburst startled Soleil, who had been napping peacefully in his wife's arms, and she

started crying at full volume, earning him a lecture from Kanna.

"That's some lump you got on your head. Want some medicine?" I asked and handed him a salve.

"Thanks," he said after taking it with a frown. He dabbed it on his bump.

The reason he had shouted wasn't just because those meats were expensive. He thought I should save those premium ingredients for my own wedding. I told him that I had plenty, but he argued that serving bicorn and white buffalo might make Ceruna and Henri too self-conscious about their wedding to enjoy it. In the end, we settled on just wyvern meat. It was still impressive, and I had plenty of it to go around.

While we were on the subject, I let him in on my plan to wreck Henri's father's scheme to ruin the wedding. He responded by bonking *me* on the head.

"Why didn't you tell me that earlier?!" he said. "Well, if that's the plan, then we need to make sure the food really makes an impact."

"If this were just a regular banquet and not a wedding, I could put the wyvern's head up on a stake or something, but yeah...probably not very romantic." I glanced around the room and saw everyone chatting and laughing, hoping for some kind of inspiration to strike—and then it did. "I've never heard of that before... Hey, Dozle. I've got a great idea."

I then explained to him what I had in mind.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah! That could actually work. Might be a bit of a hassle, but with your help, I think I can pull it off," he said.

We already had the ingredients on hand, so all we had to worry about was making sure the end result was ready in time for the wedding.

"We can have a lot of side dishes and then let Albert and the others be in charge of the presentation. If they approve, there's no way anyone else can complain about it," I said.

Dozle agreed. "Sounds like a lot of work, but if I get started tomorrow and store everything in your magic bag, I think we can pull it off."

"Yeah, I'll come help out whenever I have time. Let's try to get

around ten different dishes done."

Dozle said ten was a lot, but we were trying to make an impact here. The more we had, the better. Of course it'd be extra work for me, but between my stockpile of pre-prepped ingredients and the food I already had stored, I still had time for other evil schemes.

I called Albert and Cain over to finalize the menu. They agreed to help, but not out of the goodness of their own hearts. Albert was already thinking about how this could benefit the Sangas, saying, "This could be a new Sanga duchy delicacy!" As for Cain, he said, "Remember this when I get married!" Still, having their help would make things go smoother, so it was a small price to pay.

By the way, the reason I didn't invite Kriss to help was because my instincts were screaming at me not to.

"Found an opening!"

"Not even close!"

"How about this?"

"Not happening!"

"Now's my chance! Myaah?!"

"Game over!"

After we wrapped up our meeting about the food, I went looking for something to snack on in the dining room only to find a full-blown battle unfolding between the Wildcat Princesses and Amur, Aura, and Leni. The last scream from the triplets' side had come from Milly—she had managed to dodge Leni only to end up tied up in her ropes.

Meanwhile, Jeanne, who seemed to have been left out, was happily chatting away with Primera, Ceruna, and Kanna. All of them were fussing over baby Soleil. On the other hand, Henri had somehow ended up seated between Gramps, Kriss, and Marks. Kriss and the other two gave Henri drink after drink while they vented to him.

"Gramps and Marks still seem sober, but Kriss is getting a bit wild. Better send in Shiromaru to keep her distracted..."

I could probably step in and get Gramps and Marks under control, but Kriss would turn into an even bigger headache if left unchecked,

so it was safer to deploy Shiromaru.

And sure enough, as soon as I made my move, Gramps and Marks stopped teasing Henri. And the moment Kriss saw Shiromaru, she completely lost interest in Henri and tried to pet Shiromaru. He started begging for meat, so she wandered off to get some.

"That takes care of Kriss," Albert said.

"Looks like it," Cain agreed.

Now that the coast was clear, Albert and Cain came over to me. I wondered what Dozle was up to and discovered he'd gone into the kitchen. He'd probably been inspired by our earlier discussion.

"Forget the fighting girls. Let's head over to where the other ladies are chatting. I'd like to properly congratulate the bride and groom." Albert said.

"Good idea. You coming, Tenma? They'll probably freak out if just the two of us walk over there unannounced," Cain said.

I thought it was smart to evacuate to the place in the Full Belly Inn where we'd take the least amount of damage, so I followed them over to the table where Ceruna and the others were gathered.

However, Albert and Cain's sudden approach startled Ceruna and Kanna so much that they tensed up, which then startled Soleil, who began to wail again. That was when Primera chased us off.

Well, she didn't exactly chase *me* off, but the two fools who had ruined the mood forcibly dragged me away after *they* had been chased off. Being the only guy in a room with a group of women fussing over a baby seemed like trouble anyway, so I didn't put up a fight.

"You made the baby cry and got chased off, so you're hiding out with us, huh?"

Since we had nowhere else to go, the three of us reluctantly sat down next to Marks. Unfortunately, the two of them seemed pretty drunk. Henri, the target of their teasing, looked to be relatively sober, though, most likely because he was trying to pace himself around them. Or maybe they'd actually been nice enough not to force drinks on him. Either way, now that three younger guys had joined the table, two of whom outranked him significantly, Henri seemed a little nervous. But this was the only safe zone left for us,

so he'd just have to deal with it.

"So what am I supposed to do as a wedding officiant anyway?" I asked.

"No clue. I've never done it before. I guess just think of it as being the event's emcee?" Gramps suggested.

"I don't have any experience doing it either, but I've seen others do it before."

Marks explained that his boss had previously taken on the role. He'd handled it like a cross between a host and a witness.

So basically just act like the host of a variety show? I wondered as I took a sip of my juice.

"In that case, maybe we should have Primera help out too," Albert suggested.

That nearly made me choke. I barely managed to avoid spitting my drink all over the table, but unfortunately, some of it went down the wrong pipe and I ended up coughing like I'd just snorted milk through my nose.

"Yuck, Tenma! That's disgusting!" Cain pulled away, but I was too busy coughing to reply. It took me a while to recover.

Koff, koff...

"What the hell, Albert? Where'd that even come from?" I said, glaring at him, but he ignored me.

"Weddings are typically officiated by a man and a woman. It wouldn't be right for you to handle the bride's needs on your own."

"That does make sense," Gramps said, nodding in agreement. Soon the others followed suit.

I understood the logic, but why did it have to be Primera? But before I could ask...

"Although Jeanne and Aura are both competent, they're not high-ranking enough for the role. Amur and Leni would need approval from Lady Hana to do it. And the Wildcat Princesses would just fight over who would get to be your partner," Albert said.

He had a point.

Flute was with child and Kanna was married, so it wouldn't be appropriate for one of them to be my partner either. Married (or pregnant) women should probably stick with their significant others

for such an occasion.

"Primera is a high-ranking noble, and I can grant her permission to participate. She also already knows both you and the bride, so it wouldn't seem weird either," Albert said.

Well, I guess when you put it that way, she is *the best choice... Wait a second. Shouldn't there be another candidate, though?*

"Kriss...wouldn't exactly be able to celebrate from the heart," Albert said.

Yeah, that tracks.

I had no more objections. "Okay, I guess Primera's our best bet," I said.

I called her over and asked if she'd help officiate the wedding. She looked a little confused at first, just like I'd been, but once I explained the situation and Albert's reasoning, she accepted. When I got to the part about Kriss, she didn't comment and just smiled wryly.

After that, Amur and the others got even louder. Gramps yelled at them to quiet down, and the sudden noise caused Soleil to burst into tears. Dozle brought out some soup to settle everyone's stomachs, but things just got rowdy again once the food arrived. The party lasted late into the night.

Leon's POV

"Hurry up, we can still make it!"

"Please, my lord! Riding through the night is too dangerous!"

Despite the late hour, one young man was determined to reach his destination. The knights escorting him, however, were frantically trying to stop him.

"If we don't hurry up, Albert and Cain will find an excuse to leave Gunjo City without me! And I just *know* they're gonna ditch me!"

"Still, if you plan on riding through the whole night, when will you rest? Our horses aren't golems too, you know!"

"Argh! I, uh..."

"If you push them too hard and one gets injured, what then? We'd have to stop and find a replacement, which would cost us even

more time. And if we don't notice the injury in time, the horse could fall. One bad landing and we'd be heading straight back to Shellhide...carrying your corpse!"

"..."

"And once your funeral is over, we'd be executed for allowing the next margrave of Haust to die on our watch."

"That wouldn't—"

"Men, Lord Leon insists on riding through the night! Hurry up and write your final letters home, your wills, last words, anything! Once you're done, we'll ride into the darkness! Hurry up!"

"I was wrong, I'm sorry! Stop sobbing into your goodbye letters! And don't mumble your family's names like you'll never see them again. I get it, okay?!"

"So you'll be following my instructions from here on out?"

"Yes, I'll leave everything up to you!"

And just like that, the knights shut down Leon's reckless plan.

Incidentally, their group was attacked by a pack of wolves at dawn the next morning. Thanks to the knights getting a good night's sleep, they managed to fight them off without a single person getting injured.

After the battle, the lead knight casually said, "If we'd been attacked at night, we might've had casualties. We have Lord Leon's wise decision to thank for this outcome."

And from that moment on, Leon never questioned his knights' orders again. Thanks to that, his party's travel time improved dramatically, and they ended up reaching Tenma's group faster than they'd expected.

Part Eight

"All right, today I'm going to start prepping the food for the wedding. Tenma, are you sure you're good to go?"

"Have you ever seen me hungover, Dozle? I didn't even drink as much as usual last night, so I'm totally fine," I said.

"I know you can handle your liquor. I was more worried about the taste testers, Lord Albert included."

"They should be fine. I think..."

Following last night's feast, the only ones who'd been drinking but weren't suffering the effects of a hangover were me, Gramps, and Leni. Everyone else was wiped out. Jeanne hadn't touched a drop of alcohol, so she had been stuck taking care of them all morning.

Albert, Cain, and Amur had drank like they were competing in some kind of endurance match. Kriss had alternated between drunkenly pestering Henri, snuggling with Shiromaru, and drowning herself in alcohol while watching the blissful Ceruna. That had made her the most hungover one out of the whole group.

Primera had gotten roped into drinking with Albert and the others. She'd claimed she'd been training with the senior knights, but she'd mistakenly grabbed a bottle of high-proof liquor and had ended up tapping out early.

Even Aura, our resident maid, was completely out of commission. It wasn't really her fault, though. Unfortunately, she'd gotten caught up in Kriss's drunken venting about Ceruna's happiness. We had abandoned Aura because we'd been too afraid of Kriss, making us partially responsible for her suffering. Because of that, we agreed to keep the whole thing a secret from Aina, and if she did end up finding out, we'd cover for Aura the best we could.

"What about the Wildcat Princesses? Where'd they go?"

"They had a scheduled quest to do, so they dragged themselves up early this morning. They looked like hell, though."

It was obvious they hadn't wanted to go, but blowing off a quest just because they were hungover wasn't an option. They'd had to

suck it up and go anyway.

The reason I knew all that was because the feast had gone way past midnight, and getting all these drunkards home had sounded like a massive pain. I had just let them pass out in the dining room instead. Normally, Dozle would've kicked us out, but he had been hesitant due to Albert's presence. Plus, all the other guests at the inn had been participating in the festivities, so he had decided to cut us some slack.

We'd still inconvenienced him, though, so I figured I should make it up to him somehow.

"I hope their hangovers don't interfere with the quest... Anyway, what's the plan for the wedding menu?" I asked.

"Let's see... We'll need appetizers, fish, meat, a dessert, something light in between courses like soup or salad, and drinks, of course. We already decided on the dessert, so we just need to sort out the rest," he said.

"We'll need booze too, and milder options like juice for guests who can't handle alcohol. Oh, and some tea for after the meal."

Just listing out the drinks alone was helping us cover half our bases. But more choices were always better, so Dozle decided to put in an order with the local liquor and tea shop.

"I think we should do seasonal greens for the salad. For the meat, how about roasted wyvern? Should we do that? We've got tyrant salmon for the fish, so we could also do a baked fillet," I suggested.

"We should add one more dish for both meat and fish. Things that'll really make an impact."

Dozle wanted something visually striking as well as delicious. He asked me for some ideas, but nothing came to me on the spot. I decided to think about it more later.

"How about the sliced chicken breast and pickles I served yesterday for appetizers?" he asked.

"That sounds good to me; those were delicious. We should add the soup from last night too."

"That'll work. I'm used to making it, so it'll help save us some time," Dozle said, agreeing.

We now had most of the wedding menu locked in, minus the extra meat and fish dishes.

"All right, let's make a test batch of the chicken and the soup. Not just to taste test, but honestly because I think that's all the others will be able to handle right now..."

This was less about fine-tuning the food and more like making a hangover meal. If the food was mild enough for people with wicked hangovers, that meant they'd be safe bets for the wedding too.

"Tenma! Gimme some bread!"

"Me too!"

A short time after the meal began, Amur seemed to have bounced back, and she and Gramps began demanding bread. Leni and Jeanne were both perfectly fine and started eating as well. Meanwhile, the other five who were hungover still looked absolutely miserable. They spooned soup into their mouths like they were half dead.

"Lady Amur, you're being improper. You're making a mess with all those crumbs," Leni said.

"But it tastes better this way," Amur protested.

"Well, it's true that food does taste better when you're not minding your manners so much," Gramps said.

Leni was scolding Amur for dunking her bread into the soup and slurping it straight from the bowl. Gramps seemed totally on board with the method, however, and defended her.

"What do you think, Tenma?" Amur asked.

"Dipping bread in the soup is fine, but slurping it up like that is kind of bad manners."

"Well, that's how you eat rice with miso soup! It's just an extension of the proper way to eat a rice bowl!" Amur argued back, probably because my opinion leaned closer to Leni's.

"Cultural differences aside, you shouldn't treat soup like a rice bowl. It'll obviously be considered rude," I said.

She must've finally realized she was on the losing end, but she shot a desperate look at Gramps and Jeanne, hoping for backup. They both immediately looked away.

“There’s your answer, Lady Amur. Now, let’s begin a lesson on proper table manners, shall we?”

Amur had exhausted all her arguments and had no allies in sight, so she had no choice but to go along with Leni. The latter grinned as she began lecturing Amur on how to eat soup properly.

“Dozle, should we serve the soup with bread in it? Like croutons?” I suggested.

“That could work. If we put it in the soup from the start, people won’t leave crumbs all over the place.”

Dozle was worried that chopping the bread up into croutons would leave us with wasted scraps, but when I told him we could use the leftovers in another dish, he nodded and agreed to try it. He headed into the kitchen and returned a while later with three bowls of soup.

“All right,” he said. “Here’s one with plain sliced bread, one with toasted bread, and one with fried bread.”

He set them down in front of everyone, and then we took a vote.

“Toasted bread won by a landslide.”

“It’s settled, then.”

There were five votes for toasted bread and zero for the other preparations: only five votes in total. The nobles, who were supposed to be our biggest assets here, turned out to be completely useless. Not only could they not tell the differences in flavor between the three, but they couldn’t even stomach the plain bread, so they forfeited their votes in the end.

“Yeah... There’s no way they can taste anything in that state.”

“Still, I can’t believe our MVPs are totally out of commission.”

“Sorry...”

“My bad...”

“I’m really sorry...”

“Ugh...”

Albert, Cain, and Primera seemed to be recovering now that the medicine was kicking in, so they were able to respond. Kriss, however, still looked pretty bad and could only groan. I wasn’t even sure if she’d heard me. As for Aura, Jeanne had taken her straight to the bathroom as soon as the soup had been served—she was still

there.

"Guess I've got no choice. Let's go, Kriss," Leni said. "Honestly, you were supposed to help me with disciplining Lady Amur, but now I have to babysit you too."

Kriss was in such rough shape that even Leni couldn't ignore her. She took Kriss by the arm and led her towards the bathroom. But judging by the way Kriss was swaying, even the slightest bump could be catastrophic. The bathroom was only a few meters from us, but they were moving so slowly that it might as well have been a hundred meters away.

"All right, Dozle. I've got an errand to run, so I'll leave the rest to you," I said.

"I've got work to do here today too, you know..." he protested.

I ignored him and turned to leave for the adventurers' guild only to see Amur getting ready to tag along.

"You're still hungover, Amur. You're not coming," I told her.

"I'm totally fine," she insisted.

I decided to be blunt. "Amur, you still reek of alcohol, and you can barely stand without swaying. It's not gonna end well for you if you try to come with me."

My words made her freeze, and she looked completely shocked. She then plopped down in a chair with her lips in a pout and turned her back on me.

"That was a little harsh, don't you think, Tenma?" Jeanne asked.

"Yeah, you shouldn't talk like that to a girl," Dozle said.

That was fair, but I knew if I hadn't been that direct, Amur wouldn't have backed down. Dragging her along in her current condition would've only made things worse. I told them as much before I left the Full Belly Inn behind and headed towards the guild.

"Huh?"

The moment I stepped into the guild, I spotted exactly who I was looking for, right in her usual seat, but I was surprised.

"Are you sure you should be working, Flute?"

I'd come here to see Flute. She'd said that she would be at the inn last night, but she had never shown up. I hadn't received any

urgent news from the guild, so it probably hadn't been a health issue. I'd wondered if she had ended up working late instead. That was why seeing her sitting there, calmly handling paperwork, had thrown me off a little.

Flute looked genuinely sorry. "Oh, Tenma! I'm so sorry about last night. You went to the trouble of inviting me and I didn't even show up..."

I asked her what had happened. Flute told me that she and the guildmaster had planned to come after work, but wrapping things up had taken longer than expected. They had thought they could still make it, but just as they had been heading downstairs, her baby had kicked her. The sudden movement had startled her and made her lose her balance. The guildmaster had panicked and rushed to catch her, but he misunderstood and thought she had collapsed due to overwork. He had taken her straight home instead, ignoring her protests.

"I'm just glad you're okay," I said. "The guildmaster must've been really spooked, though."

"He was. I kept telling him I was fine, but he insisted I lie down. I even asked him to send word to you all at the inn, but he forgot."

I let out a sigh. The fact that he had forgotten was annoying, but it also meant he cared about her enough to completely panic. It was oddly sweet in its own way but didn't quite fit the image of the guildmaster I'd had in my mind.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Ceruna's wedding," I said.

I already knew Ceruna had the late shift today, so she wasn't here right now. That was why I'd come at this time.

Flute listened quietly, showing no reaction to the fact that she and the guildmaster had been replaced as the officiants. She had one concern, though.

"Is it really okay for an unmarried man to officiate?" she asked.

It was a good question, but since it wasn't like I was acting like an official go-between, I assured her it wouldn't be a problem. My role was more like being a ceremonial witness, and it'd been Albert who'd come up with the idea in the first place.

It was time to tell Flute why I had come here. "Also, I kind of

have a little...plan for the wedding, so I wanted to go over the details with you. Do you have some time to talk?"

She let out a deep, exasperated sigh. "Fine. Let's talk in the guildmaster's office. I'm not sure exactly what you've got up your sleeve, but at least make sure it doesn't ruin the bride and groom's day, okay?"

She shook her head and led me towards the office. Once we got there, I was surprised to see the guildmaster hard at work—it was a very unusual sight. Honestly, I was used to seeing him either slacking off, napping at his desk, or just plain not in his office. I guessed that Gramps's scolding must've really gotten to him because he was actually here working.

To be fair, he *was* only stamping paperwork as it came in, so maybe it was less like he was working and more just not making his subordinates' jobs harder. Still, this was an improvement.

"So your next opponent is Henri's father, huh?" Flute asked.

"I doubt he even realizes he's made an enemy out of you," Max said. He almost seemed sympathetic towards Henri's father, but he was clearly angry about the way the man had spoken about Ceruna. "I understand your reasoning, but don't you think moving their wedding was a bit much? You should apologize to them once this is all over."

He had a point, but since I'd known the guildmaster for so long, I couldn't shake the feeling that the man in front of me was an imposter. Maybe my thoughts were showing on my face, because Flute let out another sigh and said, "You just need to get used to it, Tenma."

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she'd really been through the wringer.

"Anyway, we can deal with that later. Flute, do you know where Ceruna ordered her wedding dress from?" I asked.

Ceruna had told me that her dress had already been finished and was being stored at a shop, so I figured that I should find out where it was.

"I know where she had the dress made," Flute said. "I recommended a place that's owned by someone who used to work

here.”

The shop was run by a former guild staff member. It was common for guild employees to use that shop for their weddings, and they had a solid reputation.

After Flute explained further, I realized that the shop owner wasn’t just a tailor—he was a skilled artisan who was known to be moody but highly talented. So talented, in fact, that just a few years after he went pro, a big-name shop owner from the royal capital had personally recruited him.

“All right. I’ll head over there and check it out,” I said.

“Got it. Mention my name, and he should hear you out, even if the shop’s busy. But just so you know, he’s got a bit of a temper, so please don’t start a fight,” Flute said.

She sounded concerned—I wondered if she thought I just went around picking fights with random people.

I hesitantly pushed open the shop door despite still being worried about Flute’s misconceptions about me.

As soon as I did, I was greeted by a deep, booming voice. “C’mon in.”

The man who stood before me looked more like a bodybuilder than a tailor. For a second, I thought I’d gone into the wrong door, but a quick glance at the shop’s sign confirmed I was in the right place.

“Hello?” I said. “Flute told me about this shop.”

“Flute, eh? What does the Dragonslayer need from a tailor?”

Well, it seemed like he already knew who I was. Wasn’t it obvious that anyone walking into a tailor shop would be there for clothes? I wasn’t just here to browse, though, so I supposed that was a fair enough question.

“I need to talk to you about Ceruna’s wedding dress,” I said.

“Huh?”

I was starting to get why Flute was worried. Her warning wasn’t because of me—it was because of this guy. The man had been glaring at me with a scary look on his face ever since I’d walked in. It was like he thought I had come to criticize his handiwork.

"I want to give her a gift, and I was hoping you could incorporate it into the dress," I explained. "I'd like you to use this material."

When I pulled out a bundle of top-quality silk thread spun by Goldie and Silvie, his eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

"Th-This is on a whole other level than anything I've ever used!" he cried. "Wait, is this that legendary spider silk I've heard about?!"

I gave him a confused look, and he quickly explained further. "There's a rumor that only those personally approved by the queen can get their hands on this stuff. It's practically a national treasure!"

Well, that wasn't too far from the truth. Goldie and Silvie were incredibly rare creatures, and they only spun silk when they felt completely safe. Not to mention that any excess silk I didn't use myself was handled by the queen, and she distributed it only to those she trusted. That meant nearly everyone who owned clothing made from this silk was a noble who was part of the royalist faction, and the only tailors who worked with it were ones directly employed by those nobles.

A lot of people had tried to question the tailors about their sources, but they never got past the noble middlemen. And even if they were to, Queen Maria was the final boss. Nobody could get through her. If someone were stupid enough to push too hard, they'd end up being very publicly spurned by the royal family. No one wanted to be in that situation.

"So can you do it?" I asked.

"Of course!" he immediately replied. "But what do you want me to make?"

"A wedding veil. Think you can do it in a week?"

"One week, huh? Well, I love a challenge! But if I use this silk for the veil, it's gonna look way too fancy compared to the dress. It'll throw the balance completely off," he explained.

Hmm, I hadn't thought about that.

But the tailor was already coming up with solutions—just what I'd expect from someone who earned Flute's approval.

"One way to fix it would be to weave half the veil with this silk and mix in some standard thread to tone it down. Then, we could use the leftover silk to add embroidery to the dress. That should

help keep it look more balanced," he suggested. Ultimately, he was talking about scaling down the veil while improving the quality of the dress.

"All right. I'll leave it to you, then. Here's some extra thread, so please use it however you like."

"Got it. Also, you don't need to be so formal with me," he said. "Talk just like you do at the guild. I sure as hell don't change how I talk for anyone!"

This guy's personality was exactly what I expected from his appearance. I gave him complete creative freedom for the veil and dress as long as he didn't stray from Ceruna's original order. He grinned and said that wouldn't be a problem.

I asked what he meant by that, and he told me that since Ceruna was on a budget, she'd only specified a general design and price range. She'd left all the details up to the tailor.

"I can use whatever materials I want as long as I stay within her budget. I still have to make sure it matches her vision, of course."

Plus, if Ceruna didn't like the extra embellishments, removing them wouldn't be that hard. As long as nothing extraordinary happened, I figured it would work out fine.

"Well, I guess I'll leave it to you, then," I said.

"You can count on me!"

The tailor reminded me a little of Master Gantz, but he didn't seem as eccentric. I guessed he'd probably be easier to deal with.

"I sorted out the dress situation," I said to Flute, reporting back to her.

She looked surprised at first, but then she just sighed. "Sounds like you were Felt's ideal customer."

Felt was the muscular tailor I'd met. He was an ex-adventurer—he'd nearly been at Rank B when he'd gotten injured. His legs had been permanently damaged, which had forced him to retire. The guild could use his experience and had hired him after that, but eventually, he quit and became a tailor instead.

Sewing had apparently been a longtime hobby of his. When he had been a rookie adventurer, he'd bought tattered secondhand

clothes to save money and had fixed them up himself. He'd kept at it through the years, sewing to kill time while he camped, and before he knew it, his skills had surpassed an amateur's.

But since he was an ex-adventurer with a hotheaded personality and the strength to back it up, he had no hesitation about kicking out customers he didn't like. Apparently, he had been among the people the guildmaster had used as human shields during that whole pregnancy fiasco.

"I've dealt with plenty of craftsmen like that," I told her. "And besides, I was the one asking for a favor, so a little patience is only fair."

Honestly, he had gotten on my nerves a couple of times, but thanks to my interactions with Master Gantz, I'd learned how to tolerate people like him. The old me might've just walked out and looked for another shop.

"I'd really like it if you could take on some guild requests while you're here, but I guess that might be difficult, huh?" Flute asked.

"Yeah. Maybe another time."

I had more important things to focus on now, like Ceruna's wedding. I felt bad for disappointing Flute, but I had to pass on work for now.

"I won't be taking on any requests, but I would like to post one," I said.

"Really?" she asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

Flute's POV

"Ugh, I'm so tired..."

"He was being way too bossy, just 'cuz we're his daughters! Seriously!"

"The whole village could've handed those horned rabbits on their own. They didn't need to call us there for that!"

The Wildcat Princesses had returned. It was easy to tell when they showed up at the guild, even before I heard them talking—rookies would practically fall over themselves the moment they arrived.

"We're back from our quest, Flute!"

"There were tons of horned rabbits!"

"There was even a king horned rabbit! We haven't seen one of those in a while."

As soon as they said that, the eavesdropping rookies reacted. They all either bolted out of the guild or started flailing about so much that they crashed into tables and chairs.

"What the heck?"

"Don't startle us like that!"

"We just got back from a job! We're exhausted!"

The triplets must've still been on edge from their quest because they immediately started taking out their irritation on the frantic rookies. Under normal circumstances, I'd have told them to relax, but since some of those rookies had been ogling them earlier and whispering all sorts of crude things, their anger was more than justified. Neither my staff nor I reprimanded the girls for a time.

"All right, you three. Calm down now," I said mildly. "A new request came in while you were gone, which is why the rookies are freaking out."

"A new request?" they answered in unison before looking over at the bulletin board.

Their cute reactions are part of the reason they're so popular... I thought as I handed them the quest.

"It's a delivery request for horned rabbit meat. The client needs a certain level of quality," I said.

"Oh, perfect!"

"We'll take it!"

"We already let our family take the imperfect ones, so we still have the good ones left over!"

The triplets immediately started pulling horned rabbits out of their magic bags.

"Sorry, but I can't let you take this request," I said.

"Why not? These are all top-notch horned rabbits!"

"Were we supposed to accept the request before we hunted them?"

"The paper's still up on the board, and it's posted in the same

section as recurring quests, even if it is time-limited."

The triplets weren't happy that I'd shut them down.

"Read the request carefully. This one is *specifically* for rookies, and there's a limit of two rabbits per person," I said.

The three of them were so exhausted they hadn't read the details properly. They sighed when they read the request again after I had pointed out the problem.

"That sucks."

"Oh, well. Guess we'll just sell half to the butcher as usual. They pay a little better than the guild anyway," Milly said. She made a point of mentioning the butcher's superior prices loudly, probably to get back at me.

"Darn, I was hoping to make some extra pocket money..."

The other two began to chat about which butcher would be the best option.

"Are you sure you wanna say all that out loud?" I asked.

"I-It's our meat! We can sell it wherever we want!"

"Yeah, yeah!"

"We're already giving half to the guild, so what's wrong with keeping the rest?!"

Well, they aren't wrong...

"I was just trying to let you in on a better deal. No need to be so cranky."

I wasn't that annoyed, but their attitudes had pissed me off just enough to make me want to play the victim a little. I pressed a hand to my forehead and held my stomach.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"Flute, don't cry!"

"We're sorry!"

The triplets totally bought my act and panicked while the other guild staff and veteran adventurers covered their mouths—they were trying not to laugh.

"Well, as long as you understand," I said. "Now, could you all quiet down a bit before I tell you about the deal?"

The moment I dropped the act, they immediately started yelling.

"You tricked us!"

"That was mean!"

"You're a villain, Flute!"

That last comment had been from Nelly, and I made sure to make a mental note of it.

"Anyway, the deal is with Tenma. He's the one who posted the request. He needs rabbit meat for the wedding dinner," I explained.

"Tenma?!"

"Let's go!"

"Let's hurry!"

They had sprung into action the moment they'd heard Tenma's name and were halfway out the door before Nelly realized something important.

"Wait, are you sure we can just skip the guild and go straight to the client?!" she asked.

"Not under normal circumstances, no. It's a very gray area. We'd have to issue a formal warning to both him and whoever circumvented the guild if Tenma withdrew his request," I explained.

The triplets and the rookies who were eavesdropping gave me a look that said, *Then why even bring it up?*

"But if Tenma doesn't withdraw his request, there's no actual rule against it. The guild wouldn't be happy about it, but we couldn't penalize anyone either. However, if you're bringing him king horned rabbits instead of regular ones, then, technically, you're selling a completely different product. Those aren't part of the request, so the guild has no say in it. Of course, if anything goes wrong, that'll be your problem to deal with."

Basically, this was a loophole—and one that wouldn't cause any trouble for the guild as long as the girls handled it properly. If other adventurers wanted to complain, they could either build up a good enough relationship with Tenma to do the same or bag their own king horned rabbit. It was as simple as that. And if they still had a problem, we could always blacklist those adventurers.

Not that it matters. Tenma will probably buy up all the regular rabbits too just because it's these three bringing them in. The privilege of being friends, I thought, which I also muttered under my breath.

“Did you say something, Flute?”

“Nope, nothing at all! You better hurry, or Tenma will finish dinner before you get there.”

“Uh-oh!”

“Get ready, Amur! Your time has come!”

“And you too, Aura! You and your useless, flabby chest lumps!”

The triplets were always so loud, but I supposed that was part of their charm.

Ideally, they would’ve figured out the loophole I suggested themselves. However, I wanted to avoid someone else realizing it first and causing trouble with Tenma and his friends. Besides, I’d rather not deal with adventurers getting themselves blacklisted over something trivial. Then again, if they were too stupid to heed my warning, I probably didn’t want them in the guild anyway.

Part Nine

"Thanks for going to all the trouble, Tenma. The Sanga family will pay for the rabbits, so don't hesitate to send over the bill."

"No way; I'd be scared word would get out. I already said I was covering the wedding myself, and I have three greedy followers to boot. There's no such thing as too much meat. Plus, weren't you the one who said there was a point to me spending so much money, Albert?" I asked.

Going to the trouble of posting a request at the guild for the horned rabbits wasn't just about getting enough meat for Ceruna's wedding; it was also a substitute for a previous request to supply materials to the duchy. I had posted it under my name, but it hadn't been part of some big plan to train or help out rookies. Honestly, I'd originally planned on making the quest open to anyone—I'd only changed it because Flute had asked me to.

"This should boost your reputation a little, Tenma!" Amur joked.

"That's rude! I'm already a top-class adventurer, I'll have you know!" I protested lightheartedly.

"You forgot to add, 'only to the people who don't actually know you,'" Cain piped up unnecessarily.

"Albert, I just noticed that my schedule had 'Visit the Sammons domain and accept a quest' on it, but it's just been canceled. What should I put in its place?" I asked.

"Hmm, in that case, why don't we visit the Sylphids' domain instead? Eliza's family specializes in Wind magic, so that might be helpful for you."

And just like that, I decided to break my promise to Cain. Since I had an opening in my schedule (date TBD), I asked Albert for suggestions. The one he gave me was pretty tempting.

"That sounds good. All right, forget Sammons; I'll pay a visit to Sylphid instead."

The moment I pretended to take Albert's offer seriously, Cain immediately gave in and apologized. "I'm sorry. I went too far! I'm

really sorry! Please put the schedule back to how it was!”

Kriss and the others watched with exasperation, except for Primera—she looked visibly uncomfortable at the sight since she wasn’t used to this sort of exchange.

“By the way... Tenma, how are you planning on cooking the horned rabbits?” Cain asked, suddenly changing the subject. He probably couldn’t handle Primera’s gaze.

Everyone knew exactly what he was doing, but since we were all curious about it anyway, we went along with it.

“Rabbit meat is pretty versatile, so I was thinking of a stew. We could also fry some up.”

“That sounds so good, Tenma! Make it!” Amur said.

And just like that, we decided on today’s meal. I’d made stew and had fried meats several times before, but since I’d mentioned it right when people were starting to get hungry, that’d made the choice that much easier.

“All right, then. Let’s start cooking. Jeanne, Aura, can you help me out?” I asked.

“Primera, you should help too. It’s a good chance for you to learn,” Albert suggested.

“Huh?! I’m not sure I can...” Primera looked uncertain at first, but in the end, she began cooking alongside the estate’s staff.

Meanwhile, Kriss, Amur, and Leni were abstaining. Kriss and Amur proudly called themselves Team Eat Only, meaning they had zero intention of helping. Honestly, that was probably for the best, considering they’d just get in the way. Leni seemed willing to help, but since Kriss had already roped her into a conversation, I just decided to let them be.

“We can use the usual seasonings. Aura, you’re in charge of the stew. Jeanne and I will fry the rabbit meat.”

I told Jeanne to start prepping the batter while I got started on making the cutlets. The stew would take a long time to cook, and Aura, Primera, and the kitchen staff were working on that. This arrangement would make it easier for Primera to get any help if she needed it since she was still lacking confidence.

“Jeanne, I’ll help with the frying later, so you just focus on cutting

and seasoning for now. And let's make a lot; we're going to need it."

I got to work on the rabbit cutlets. I was going to make two kinds—a standard breaded and fried cutlet and another version stuffed with cheese. I prepped twenty of each. It was a lot of work, but since the stew would take a while to simmer, I hoped the timing would work out. It'd be close either way, though.

We finished most of the prep work an hour later, and all that was left was the frying.

One of the servants came over to let me know that someone had arrived. "Master Tenma, you have a visitor."

"Someone's here for me?" I mentally ran through the list of people who might show up here. I knew who it was before I even saw or heard them. "Oh. It's the triplets," I said.

I had known that because...

"Amur, stop pushing me."

The moment I stepped out into the hallway, Amur lunged at me and tried to shove me away from the entrance. That was enough to confirm my hunch. Aura must've caught on at the same time because she yanked Jeanne along with her and rushed into the hall.

"Aura, Jeanne, do your thing!" Amur said.

"Got it!"

"Ugh, fine..."

Since Amur realized she wasn't going to get me to move, she recruited Aura and Jeanne to stop the triplets instead. Jeanne didn't seem very enthusiastic about it—she was probably still bitter about not making much of an impression on the triplets last time. Aura, however, seemed pretty fired up.

Primera stepped in to stop them. "Let's not do this in here," she said.

She had a good reason for it too.

"Lily, Nelly, and Milly may be Tenma's guests, but they're also guests of my estate," she added.

That made sense. Now that they had come here, they were now official visitors of Duke Sanga. Amur and the others couldn't just attack them.

"But...!"

“The triplets followed the proper procedures to visit this time. The situation is different from before,” Primera said.

“Ugh...”

Amur had been shut down by Primera’s logic. She seemed frustrated but didn’t press the issue any further. From the sidelines, Aura watched with a similarly frustrated expression. Jeanne was the only one who looked relieved.

“All right, then. Everyone settle down.”

Now that Primera had managed to keep Amur and Aura quiet, the only concern left was whether the triplets would cause a scene. But...

“I’ll have you three thrown out if you cause a commotion here,” Primera warned.

“Yes, ma’am...”

Once again, Primera was able to keep things under control. She was acting a bit differently from usual, probably because she was playing the role of a noblewoman welcoming guests into her estate.

“So, what brings you three here?” I asked the triplets once things settled down.

Their ears perked up as if they’d just remembered their reason for coming. They all spoke in a rush.

“Today, we went to our village for a request!”

“Our family worked us to the bone!”

“And then all kinds of things happened!”

“Tons of horned rabbits!”

Amur called them out and said, “Try explaining things properly, you three.”

I didn’t think Amur was really one to talk, but since I could generally understand her more than the triplets, I didn’t say anything.

“Yeah, I need some more details. Especially from you, Nelly. What do you mean, all kinds of things happened?” I asked. “Actually, never mind that for now. What’s this about tons of horned rabbits?”

I figured going off-topic wouldn’t get us anywhere, so I focused on the main reason for their visit.

“Well, we wiped out a whole herd of horned rabbits during

today's quest, and one of them turned out to be a king horned rabbit."

"Yeah, and when we went to sell them at the guild, we heard you were buying horned rabbits!"

"Flute said we couldn't sell the regular horned rabbits since we didn't qualify for that request, but she said you might be interested in the king. So we brought it!"

"A king horned rabbit, huh? That's a pretty rare find. I'd love to take it. Might as well take the rest of the rabbits too," I told them.

They protested, saying Flute had specifically told them that they couldn't sell me the regular ones. I assured them it was fine since taking them wouldn't interfere with the request I had put in, so I bought up everything they had.

Honestly, I was shocked when I saw how many they'd caught. It wasn't in the triple digits, but there were well over fifty. Still, since my three followers had bottomless pits for stomachs (not to mention the rest of my party members and other people who showed up to eat all the time), I had no doubt we'd get through the meat quickly.

However, the *real* problem was what I said next.

"You three might as well stay for dinner."

Of course their answer was an immediate yes, and it wasn't long before I realized that the amount of stew and fried food we'd prepared wasn't nearly enough. We then scrambled to make more food.

It was easy enough to make more stew, but the fried dishes were a different story. There were only so many to go around, so I had no choice but to switch things up. I left Aura to handle the stew alone while Primera and the household staff helped me prepare as much fried food as we could.

"All that effort, and it was gone in a flash... I'm used to it by now, though..."

The fact that the food disappeared so quickly was a testament to its flavor. That satisfied me as a cook, but I still wished they would at least take the time to savor it...

"The wedding's the day after tomorrow. Are you ready?" I asked

Ceruna during our final meeting at the Full Belly Inn.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

Meanwhile, Henri was so nervous that he didn’t even respond.

There were only two days to go and he was already in this state, which gave me a bad feeling that he’d be completely useless tomorrow. Honestly, I was worried his heart might give out on the big day.

My concern must’ve shown on my face because when I glanced over, I saw that both Dozle and Kanna were looking just as apprehensive.

“Maybe we should go over all the stuff Henri needs to do first. That way, he can just rest until his wedding day,” I suggested.

“That might be for the best. Henri might be one of the guests of honor as the groom, but let’s be honest—a groom’s job is just to make the bride look good.”

Dozle didn’t seem to expect much from Henri, so I figured he must’ve been speaking from experience. Kanna, who sat beside him, just nodded in agreement.

In the end, we somehow managed to get through everything Henri needed to do, though it did take a while. Once that was done, he slumped over in a corner, totally exhausted, and we moved on to Ceruna’s tasks.

Hers were done in a fraction of the time. Thankfully, we managed to finish on schedule.

“Henri’s out of commission for the rest of the day. Tenma, take him back to his room,” Dozle said.

“Sure,” I said.

I lent the dazed Henri a shoulder and started helping him to his room, but he was so out of it that I basically had to carry him. The moment we got into his room, I tossed him into his bed. The blankets were all messed up, but I figured Ceruna would come fuss over him later anyway, so I just let him be and headed back to the others.

“All right, Dozle. I put Henri down.”

“Good. Go put this away for me, Tenma.”

Dozle had been busy in the kitchen while I was dealing with

Henri. He handed me a pot full of freshly made food, and I quickly stored it in my magic bag. All I'd have to do on the wedding day was plate it out.

"A magic bag really takes the pressure off. We can prep days in advance and keep things stress-free on the big day," Dozle said.

This way, we could store everything until it was time to heat the food and serve it. Some dishes would still need some final touches before we served them, so we couldn't totally relax, but cutting down the workload was definitely a plus.

"All right, I'll head home for now," I said. "I'll be back tonight."

The moment I left the inn, I nearly bumped into a man standing near the entrance. I nodded a quick apology, and he did the same before walking off without entering the inn. That seemed a little suspicious to me, but maybe he just wanted a peek inside. Still, though...

When I turned to look back, the man was already gone.

"He didn't seem hostile, but I should probably keep an eye out."

Just in case, I went back inside and told Dozle what had happened. He shrugged it off and said it wasn't unusual for people to lurk around.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much. We get all kinds here," he told me.

His attitude seemed a little *too* easygoing for me, but Dozle was an ex-adventurer and still kept up with his training. If he insisted he wasn't worried, then I wouldn't get too concerned.

I brought up what'd happened later on when I returned to the Sanga estate.

"Most of the Full Belly Inn's regulars are adventurers. If anything happens, they can handle it," Primera said.

She had a point. Maybe I really was worrying too much. But when I saw Cain and Kriss grinning at me from across the room, I felt incredibly irritated. What was even worse was that the second they saw my reaction, they wiped the smirks off their faces before I could even get my revenge.

"If only Leon were here... I could take it out on him..." I muttered.

"That's...a bit concerning," Primera said. She looked a little freaked out.

Albert, Cain, and Amur all nodded in agreement, though, so I felt like I wasn't too far off.

"Anyway, I'll be having dinner at the Full Belly Inn tonight. If anyone's heading out, make sure you're back in time to head there. Otherwise, you can just meet us there," I said.

Everyone went off to do their own things, though it didn't seem like anyone had any plans to leave the estate. I was going to take a rest, but for some reason, Albert and Cain followed me to my room. Cain had a deck of cards with him, and before I knew it...

"Yes! Revolution success!"

"Nooo!"

Kriss and Amur both groaned as Cain pulled off a game-winning move in our current round of Tycoon.

"Albert, it looks like Cain just goes after whoever he wants since Leon's not around," I muttered.

"Yeah, but it does make the game more exciting. I'm out already."

Without Leon as a target, Cain was unpredictable, which made the game more balanced and competitive. The last time we'd played, it'd pretty much been the three of us just ganging up on Leon. This was probably how the game was supposed to be played.

The game was so exciting that time flew by, and before I knew it, it was time to head out to dinner. Even though I didn't get my nap, playing a game was a nice distraction. I felt refreshed.

"Guess it worked out after all," I mumbled.

It seemed like Amur had heard me. "Hm? What'd you say?"

I brushed her off and kept walking.

Since Albert was coming with us, the estate staff offered to prepare a carriage. However, we would've needed several to fit everyone, so we decided to walk. There wasn't much risk since Gramps and I were with the group. Still, some people in our party were probably going to end up drunk, so we all came to an agreement that anyone who couldn't walk back would get stuffed into my dimension bag along with Rocket and the others.

“It’s quieter than usual in here, huh?”

This place was normally so rowdy that you could hear it out from the street, but tonight, it felt oddly quiet.

“There seems to be guests inside, though. Maybe it’s just one of those nights. Anyway, let’s head in and see what’s going on,” Gramps said.

The usual crowd was inside, but the vibe felt different—almost like everyone had their guard up.

Dozle spotted me the moment we stepped in and waved me over in a panic. “There you are! Tenma, go to the big room upstairs right now!”

“Huh? What’s going on?”

“Oh, right. Well, basically, Henri’s two older brothers showed up separately and ran into each other here. They started arguing, and then to make things even worse, Viscount Abyss showed up in disguise! Now the whole thing’s a mess.”

Just hearing that made me want to turn around and go home. Not that I would, though.

“I really, *really* wanna go back now, but I guess I don’t have a choice. Gramps, Albert, Primera... Will you come with me?” I asked.

Gramps and Albert immediately nodded, but Primera looked surprised like she wasn’t expecting to be asked. Amur, on the other hand, had been ready and raring to go, and now she looked just as surprised as Primera that she *hadn’t* been picked.

“Gramps, you’re my advisor. Albert, I need you to keep Viscount Abyss in check if things go awry. And Primera, I want you to stay with Ceruna.”

“What about Henri?” asked Amur.

“Leave him alone. I wish he could’ve dealt with his two older brothers, but that obviously didn’t work out and that’s why things are a mess now.”

After I had told everyone their roles, Amur had brought up Henri’s name. Honestly, I had intended to ignore him from the start. She seemed to accept that, but the others looked like they wanted to say something.

“Just to clarify, it’s not that I dislike Henri. I’m not being rough

with him because he's a guy either. It's just that this whole thing is his family's problem, so I thought he should take some responsibility."

They seemed to understand a bit more, though Kriss, Albert, and Cain looked a bit skeptical still.

"Anyway, let's go see what's going on with Ceruna and the others," I suggested.

I trudged my way up the stairs to the second floor. The atmosphere was so thick that I could even feel it outside the door. When I actually knocked and opened it, the pressure inside was even heavier than I'd expected—so much, in fact, that I almost wanted to immediately shut the door.

"Nice to meet you, Viscount Abyss. I'm Tenma Otori, the one organizing Henri and Ceruna's wedding."

"I'm Bonito von Abyss, head of House Abyss. We have been loyal servants of the Sanga duchy for generations."

I was getting the feeling the viscount had a bit of a stiff personality, but...

"It's been a while, Viscount Abyss."

"Oh, Lady Primera! It's wonderful to see you again!"

The moment Primera greeted him, his stern expression melted and became a big grin. Albert greeted him at the same time, but it was obvious that the viscount was only focused on Primera.

Before I could even comment on it...

"I'm used to it... I don't take it personally..." Albert muttered to himself as he sadly watched Primera and Viscount Abyss talking.

"Well, while they're catching up... What's the situation, Ceruna?"

Ceruna was probably the only person in this room who could give me an objective explanation of what was going on.

She glanced at Henri before letting out a sigh. "First, Henri's oldest brother showed up. They were talking downstairs in the dining hall when his second brother showed up."

From what I remembered, Henri's oldest brother was on good terms with him but not with their father. He worked at the Gloriosa Trading Company, but their father refused to acknowledge him as the heir. Meanwhile, the second brother was said to be less capable

but was their father's favorite. Their father had openly declared that his second son would be his successor.

Henri and his eldest brother shared the same mother, but the second brother was the son of a mistress. The second brother had been about twelve or thirteen when his mother had passed away, and he'd been taken into the family at that point. That was why the brothers didn't get along very well.

"So when the second brother, the one who's on Henri's father's side, suddenly showed up, he got into an argument with the oldest brother. Viscount Abyss appeared after that, and things haven't escalated into a full-fledged fight because of that...but things have been tense, even after we moved to this room."

I thought the viscount would've mediated the situation, but instead, he had just followed them here and calmly sipped his tea instead of breaking up the fight or taking control of the situation. He'd continued doing nothing until we (mainly Primera) had walked in.

"And Henri's brothers are...?" I asked.

"I'm Daniel," the oldest brother said.

"I'm Falman," the second brother said.

The two of them had been listening from a distance and came over to introduce themselves. The eldest son was Daniel, and the next oldest was Falman.

I asked why they had come here. Daniel said that he had wanted to congratulate Henri before their father got involved. Falman, on the other hand, admitted that he'd come to convince Henri to cancel the wedding. The reason they had argued in the dining room was because Daniel had asked Falman why he was here, and once he'd found out, they started yelling, "Get out!" and "No, listen to me!"

"Should we ask Falman to leave, then?" I asked.

From what I understood, he was just here to sabotage things. I turned to Ceruna for confirmation, but before she could even respond, Falman panicked.

"Wait, no!" he yelled. "I *did* come to stop their wedding, but I'm not against their marriage! I want them to be happy!"

That was certainly a sudden change, but we were all

understandably skeptical—especially Daniel.

Viscount Abyss finally shifted back into his initial serious demeanor and joined the conversation. "I know this seems abrupt, but he's telling the truth," he said. "I was suspicious at first too, but after speaking with him, I've determined that he is not like his father. In fact, *he* is the one who called me here today."

If Viscount Abyss was here because of Falman, then maybe he wasn't actually trying to sabotage the wedding after all. Daniel still looked suspicious of Falman, but the rest of us were starting to see him in a different light.

"You can believe me or not, but won't you at least hear me out?"

Falman's story was full of surprises that completely turned our impression of him upside down. Even Daniel, the most skeptical of us all, changed his mind. He even shared things that Viscount Abyss hadn't heard before, even though he'd known the story beforehand. The viscount's sharp gaze now was a far cry from the one he'd had while chatting with Primera earlier.

"So basically, you *do* support Ceruna and Henri," I said. "You only tried to stop the wedding because you thought it was for their sake? And you had your own reasons for it too..."

"Yeah. I do want what's best for them, but I also didn't want them interfering with my plans. I genuinely believe that holding the wedding after what I'm planning would be better for them in the long run."

He had a point. If his plan succeeded, Ceruna and Henri would be in a much better position. And even if it failed, they'd just be back to where they started and they could proceed with the wedding on their own. Honestly, even in the worst-case scenario, things might still turn out better for them.

"Let us in on this plan of yours, Falman. The wedding will go on as planned, but we'll tweak your plan a bit before we put it into action. Having more people on board should give you a better shot at success."

Falman was reluctant at first, but as we went over the details, he slowly started to come around to our side. By the end of it, he was fully on board, even bowing his head as he said, "Please let me join

you.”

And just like that, we unexpectedly gained another ally on Ceruna’s side. Meanwhile, their father’s camp was left with almost no one.

Leon’s POV

“Phew, I finally made it! I’ve returned, my friends!”

“Lord Leon, please refrain from shouting like that. It’s late at night, and you’ll disturb the people around us.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Leon had now lost all authority he’d had over his knight escorts. He apologized and bowed to the few people who were still out and about.

The townspeople recognized him as a noble right away and were startled by his sudden outburst, but no one complained. They just gave him simple nods in return. As for the guards at the gate, they ignored the outburst but took the situation more seriously. They immediately called for backup and began to question Leon’s party. But once the knights showed Margrave Haust’s crest and explained their reason for the visit (and why Leon had shouted), they were let off with just a light warning.

“All right, let’s head straight to the Sanga estate. And remember, Lord Leon, your horse *must* stay at a walking pace inside the city. Understood?”

“Yes...”

As the guards at the gate watched a full-grown noble being lectured like a child, they found themselves feeling a little sorry—but for the knight, not Leon.

The knights had no idea their escort was the one being pitied as they took the lead, guiding the way to the duke’s estate without any further trouble. However...

“Lord Leon, I’ve been informed that Lord Albert and the others have gone out to dinner and aren’t home at the moment.”

“Okay, let’s just go wherever they’re eating, then.”

Leon remembered the name of the inn from Tenma's stories about Gunjo City and figured that was where they were. But...

"Lord Leon, some time has passed since they left. If we go now, they might be on their way home already. We could miss them. What would you like to do?"

"Well, that wouldn't be good. Okay, let's wait here a little longer."

And so Leon and the knights stood outside, waiting for the others to return. But after a half hour had passed, Leon ran out of patience and declared that he was going to the Full Belly Inn.

The knights had no choice but to follow, but before they could even ask the servants at the estate for directions, Leon had already begun walking away. The knights scrambled to catch up with him and soon realized that he didn't actually know where the inn was. They wasted a bunch of time, and it wasn't until Leon passed by a random drunk on the street and asked for directions that they finally got back on track.

By the time they finally arrived, the Full Belly Inn's dining room was closed. They had no other choice but to walk all the way back to the duke's estate. Unfortunately for Leon, upon arrival, a servant told him that Albert and the others still hadn't returned.

Leon frowned—so everyone wasn't at the Full Belly Inn after all?

Well, technically, they *were*, but since they were in the private rooms upstairs discussing things with Ceruna and the others, they weren't in the main dining hall when Leon arrived. His hunch that they were at the inn had been right, but he had no way of knowing that.

He suggested they head back into the city and keep looking, but his knights put a stop to it. He had no choice but to give up and continue waiting for the others.

However, back at the Full Belly Inn, what had started as a dinner had now turned into a full-on drinking party, which meant it would still be quite some time before anyone went home.

"Why was this the one time Leon didn't live up to our expectations?"

We'd finally met up with Leon and his party late last night after

we had gotten back from dinner. Cain was ready to ditch him again today, so he was mumbling to himself already.

"You were the one going on and on about how much we needed Leon. Don't tell me you're actually just tsundere?" Amur said.

"Seriously?" Leon said, looking oddly pleased.

Cain, on the other hand, seemed horrified. "This sounds like a setup for a punishment game! Don't say things that'll cause misunderstandings!"

"That's enough talking, you guys. Get back to work!" I said.

We were currently in the middle of transforming the Full Belly Inn into a wedding venue. Well, "transforming" was a bit of an exaggeration. We were mostly just clearing out anything we didn't need for the wedding and decorating the place.

"Henri, this is where you two will exchange rings."

"R-Right. But where are they?" he asked.

"You left them in the dressing room!"

Felt had come to drop off Henri's suit and was doing a final wedding rehearsal with him, but Henri was so nervous that he kept messing up. I really hoped he'd pull himself together by tomorrow.

"Hey, Tenma! This is fresh out of the oven. Will you put it away for me?" Dozle asked.

He was busy in the kitchen, pumping out the wedding feast with Kanna. Ceruna was in another room, getting her dress fitted by Felt's wife. The men weren't allowed to see her dress before the wedding—especially not Henri. Primera and Jeanne had gone to help out too. At first, the entire group of women had been trying to assist. It had been too many people, though, and it hadn't ended up working out because Kriss, Amur, and Aura were getting in the way or just plain useless. Eventually, Felt's wife kicked them out and only allowed Primera and Jeanne to stay.

Kriss was too overcome with jealousy to be useful. Amur was hopeless when it came to anything that required a lot of attention to detail, and Aura had a knack for screwing things up at the wrong moment. Leni was competent, but once Amur had gotten kicked out, she'd left as well and helped her instead.

"All right, shall we take a break?" I asked.

Since it was well past noon, we decided to rest and eat a late lunch. There was still work to do, but now that Leon and his knights had joined in, we could take it easy for a bit. Plus, judging by Henri's condition, it seemed like he would need the recovery time.

"Felt seems really experienced with weddings," I mused.

"Well, considering my line of work, I have a lot of grooms, brides, and guests of weddings as customers," he explained. "Once you start working with dress codes and wedding gowns, you naturally pick up the rest along the way."

It made sense that Felt knew his stuff. The thing that surprised me most, though, was that he was married. I could definitely see guild members going to his shop with no problem, but picturing a random woman off the street walking into his shop and asking a mountain of a man like Felt for fashion advice, especially when it came to undergarments? That seemed like it would be pretty awkward.

"Tenma, whatever you're thinking right now is probably right."

Apparently, a bunch of people had already told him the same thing. And when Felt's wife wasn't around, any first-time female customer who would walk in and see Felt in there by himself would immediately turn around and walk back out. In other words, the only reason Felt stayed in business was his wife, despite the fact that *he* was the one designing and making the clothes.

"Tenma! Get over here and give me a hand!" Dozle called out as I was talking with Felt. He needed my help in the kitchen.

Normally, Kanna would've been helping him, but she was busy taking care of Soleil. The baby was in a very bad mood because of the hustle and bustle of the wedding prep. That had left Dozle short-staffed, so he roped me into helping since he couldn't handle the workload alone.

He could've just asked Jeanne and Aura since they were actual maids, but I guessed that it was easier for him to just boss me around.

After I helped Dozle for a while, Jeanne and Aura came in to help with serving the food. For some reason, Kriss was with them.



"Hey, Cain? What's Kriss doing?" I asked quietly so Kriss wouldn't hear me.

"Well, a long time ago, Kriss actually confessed her love to the captain of Leon's knight escort. He rejected her, though."

A loud, surprised noise nearly escaped me. That wasn't the answer I'd been expecting.

"I bet she's thinking she can't let someone she used to like see her looking like a loser or something like that," Cain said.

"Yeah, that tracks," I said. If anyone was going to be hung up on appearances, it was Kriss.

"Let's just pretend we didn't notice. It'll be safer that way," I said.

"I expected you to want to tease her for fun instead."

"I'll leave that job to you, Cain."

"No, thanks."

"Kriss..."

"I'm sorry!"

I was about to rat him out to Kriss just to mess with him, but Cain picked up on what I was up to and immediately cut me off, bowing his head and apologizing.

"Okay. I'm gonna go bother Leon instead."

Cain decided that Leon would be his next target and ran off. A few minutes later, Kriss's shouts echoed throughout the Full Belly Inn, followed closely by Leon and Cain's screams.

"Ha ha. Kriss hasn't changed a bit since we went to school together."

As I set out more plates, Nikolas Hellman, the captain of the knights who had escorted Leon to Gunjo City, came up beside me.

He was pretty young for a knight captain, but that made sense if he had gone to school with Kriss. His predecessor had resigned after the incident at Kukuri Village, and since he had been one of the top candidates, he'd been promoted to captain way earlier than expected.

He was a talented knight, but the higher-ups had also wanted a fresh, younger face to improve the military's image. By putting Nikolas in charge, they could ensure stability within Margrave Haust's forces for a long time to come.

Another major reason for his promotion was that Nikolas was the adopted son of the former knight captain. Some people had called it nepotism, but his appointment had been unanimously voted in by Vice-Captain Lyra and the other top officers. Margrave Haust himself had approved it too, so there had been no issue within their ranks.

And as for Nikolas himself...

"You want me to take this over there, Otori?"

He didn't bat an eye when I asked him to help serve food. Apparently, both the margrave and his adoptive father had told him to help wherever we needed him.

"That's the last of it," I said. "Go ahead and take a seat. Kriss, that's enough. Let's eat."

The moment Kriss turned towards me, she noticed Nikolas watching and immediately stood straighter. She flashed a forced smile and then quietly escaped to the restroom.

"Phew, I'm beat..."

"Man, it's been a while since I got lectured like that..."

Cain and Leon, now free from Kriss's wrath, slumped into their seats and grumbled their frustrations. Cain still looked exhausted, but Leon had a huge grin on his face. I wondered if he was just happy to be back in his usual place.

Come to think of it, no one had even asked Leon what'd happened with Kanon yet. It wasn't that we weren't curious, but it just felt like an awkward subject. Plus, there was always the chance that we'd get dragged into some major headache. That said, judging by the way that Leon, Nikolas, and the other knights were acting, there probably wasn't any huge problem. Or at least I hoped not...

A little while later, Kriss returned like nothing had happened and quietly took a seat far from Nikolas. She was also eating way more properly than usual.

"All right, this is what we're serving tomorrow," I said. "Does everything seem okay?"

We'd decided to serve all the dishes, minus the dessert, for lunch as a test run. Everyone seemed to like the food, except for a few people who complained about the portion sizes and tried to get seconds. When I reminded them that this was just a tasting menu,

so there weren't going to *be* any seconds, they looked very disappointed.

Still, since this was only about half of what we'd be serving at the actual wedding, I figured their complaints were reasonable.

I brought out some extra bread to make up for it. Now, everyone grabbed some—not only the ones who had been complaining about there being insufficient food.

That made me think that it might be a good idea to increase the portion sizes for the wedding, but it was also a little late to adjust the main dishes now. I decided to have some extra bread on hand for anyone who wanted some.

"All right, let's rest a bit more and then get back to work," I said.

I figured it was time to get back to it, but then I noticed that Henri, Leon, and Amur didn't look like they could even move. I decided to extend the break.

Henri was still exhausted from the wedding rehearsal. Leon and Amur were simply stuffed from having eaten too much. Ceruna went ahead and took care of Henri, but as for Leon and Amur, well...they were getting absolutely roasted.

Leon, in particular, was catching it from all sides. Albert, Cain, and Kriss were on it. Even Nikolas joined in.

"All right, that completes our preparations. Thank you all very much for your hard work, and I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow," I told the group.

We finished the rehearsals a lot sooner than I expected. A bunch of adventurers who were staying at the inn had jumped in to help. They had already been planning to pitch in since the wedding was happening here, but they'd missed the first part of our preparations since most of them had jobs to do, which meant they couldn't join us until later. I figured they must've wrapped up their quests early and hurried back here to help out. That was why I made a point of speaking a bit more politely than usual.

"It's pretty weird hearing you talk like that, Tenma," Dozle said. And judging by the way everyone around me was nodding in agreement, he wasn't the only one who thought so.

The second I even thought the words *you bastards,* the

adventurers scattered and rushed to their rooms. Only Dozle and my party members were left here now, and the cowards immediately made a beeline for Kanna, who was holding Soleil.

"By the way, Kanna. I made some herbal soap that should be gentle on Soleil's skin. Would you like to take a look?" I asked.

That got her attention. She walked over to me, still holding the baby.

"Here you go. The girls already tested it, so it should be fine. Go ahead and try it out and see what you think."

I felt a little bad using Soleil as a guinea pig, but I knew the ingredients were completely safe, so I figured it'd be okay. Kanna took the soap, smelled it, rubbed some on her wrist, and asked me about the ingredients. Satisfied, she and Soleil headed off to the bath.

"Anyone else got something to say?" I asked.

"Oh, right! I need to bake more bread," Dozle said, his eyes darting around. He was clearly using baking as an excuse.

"Phew, I worked up a sweat. I should probably take a bath!" Gramps said.

"Master Merlin, so sorry to bother you, but could you help change the bathwater?" Kriss asked.

"Kriss, don't make Gramps do all the work. You should at least help clean the men's bath too," Amur said.

"Amur's right. Jeanne, let's go," Aura said.

"Good idea," Jeanne agreed.

"We should probably help with the cleaning as well."

"Yeah."

"Leave the heavy lifting to me!"

Albert, Cain, and Leon were about to join them, but...

"Not so fast. You three still have one last job to do," Kriss said, cutting them off. "We can clean, so you can thank us later."

In other words, she was abandoning them.

"It's not like you have to do it right away. How about we work up a sweat first?" I said.

I threw my arms around Cain's and Leon's shoulders and dragged them out back. Even though I didn't have enough arms to do the

same to Albert, he didn't even try to flee. He probably knew that if he did try to get away, he'd have to deal with both me and the two who'd just abandoned him.

I got payback on—er, I mean, I trained them—for about an hour before we finished our final task. After that, we headed for the baths.

The job I gave them wasn't tough. It didn't take very long either, so the three of them should've been fine even though they were exhausted. However, Amur tried to join in, and that turned it into a whole thing, which somehow drained them mentally more than physically. By the time we got to the baths, all three of them were so exhausted that they nearly drowned.

"All right, everything's set. We're all done for today," I said. "If you're staying here, I'm counting on you to help with tomorrow's prep."

Since we had to start getting things ready early tomorrow to set up the venue, welcome guests, and so on, Jeanne, Aura, Amur, Leni, and Rocket were staying at the Full Belly Inn tonight. The rest of us would go back to the Sanga estate and then take a carriage over here in the morning.

At first, I was planning on staying too, since I was officiating, but it would be better for me to make an entrance to show that the Otori family was officially attending the wedding. That was why it would be best for me to go back to the mansion. The same went for Primera.

"Aura, Amur, Lily, Nelly, and Milly... Just so we're clear, you better not fight tonight. This is Ceruna and Henri's wedding. If you cause a scene, you'll be ruining their big day, and I'll be extremely angry if that happens," I said firmly, in a sharper tone than usual. Even if they didn't get into a real fight, the last thing we needed was some petty argument to ruin the atmosphere.

A little chaos might've been entertaining if this were just a casual celebration, but a wedding was a once-in-a-lifetime event. Even if Ceruna were willing to forgive them for such a thing, no one else would.

They must've realized I was dead serious, because all five of

them nodded very firmly in response. The reason they had been so quiet up until now was because they'd bickered as usual at dinner, ended up waking Soleil, and made her cry. Then, they had gotten a colossal lecture from me, Gramps, Kriss, *and* the adventurers staying at the Full Belly Inn.

Ever since Soleil had been born, the adventurers here would dote on her. They were very protective of her too. These days, the place wouldn't get very rowdy anymore. The usual crowd had become strangely close-knit.

"Even if someone tried to crash the wedding, with this many adventurers on our side, it'd be fine," I said, talking out my reasoning.

Then again, if Henri's father actually had the guts and manpower to pull off something greater than that, he would've done so a long time ago.

"He's probably trying to use the viscount's authority to force his way through, but he's merely an emperor with no clothes."

Henri's father could push ordinary citizens around as much as he wanted if he knew how to properly wield that power. Honestly, he'd lost the moment he thought of using Viscount Abyss, though, since the viscount was someone who actually liked Henri.

"Not that I really care how this plays out," I muttered.

I'd never even met the guy, and considering that he was actively working against Ceruna, I didn't care what happened to him. My friends might tease me about it, but that was it.

"All right, we've got an early start tomorrow. Go get some rest, everyone. You're dismissed."

Gramps and Leon looked like they were eager to start drinking, but I knew if I let them, they'd have hangovers the next day. I wasn't about to let that happen, so I shut that idea down quickly.

However, the moment we returned to the estate...

"Please, Tenma? Just a bit?"

"Yeah. A little sip won't hurt," Gramps agreed.

"You never stop at one sip. Give it up," I said. "And just so you know, Leon, if you try to sneak any drinks behind my back, I'll be reporting this to your father. And Gramps, you can expect a lecture

from Lord Ernest."

Margrave Haust would be furious if he heard that Leon had shown up to my friend's wedding hungover or worse, since he would be attending as a representative of House Haust. But the real threat was Lady Edelia. As for Gramps, the worst that would happen to him was that Lord Ernest would say something nasty to him, but in Gramps's eyes, that was the worst form of humiliation.

Judging by how quickly the two of them immediately shut up and went off to bed, they had gotten the message loud and clear.

I noticed someone peeking at me from the shadows. "That goes for you too, Kriss. No drinking tonight," I said to her.

"Fine, fine." She waved me off and backed up into the kitchen.

I figured that would be good enough. "I should turn in too," I said.

I asked one of the servants to wake me up early and to keep an eye on Gramps and Leon in case they tried anything. After that, I got my stuff ready for the next day and headed to bed.

The next morning...

"Leon *still* managed to oversleep even though he didn't drink?"

We needed to leave soon, but he was still getting ready. I couldn't help but complain.

Part Ten

"All right, let's get started."

The Full Belly Inn had been transformed into a wedding venue. At my signal, the curtains were drawn shut, making the room totally dark. Primera and I moved to the officiants' seats, and once we were in place, Gramps cast a Light spell that illuminated the two of us.

"Welcome, everyone," I began. "We're gathered here today to celebrate the marriage of Henri, the adventurer, and Ceruna, a guild staff member."

My formal tone of voice prompted a few chuckles from the crowd, but they fell silent the moment Primera spoke up.

"Before the ceremony commences, allow me to introduce our special guests." Primera went on to introduce Albert, Cain, and Leon.

Introductions like this weren't usually a part of a marriage ceremony, but considering we had the future duke, marquis, and margrave in attendance, the vibe in the room immediately changed. I felt some tension in the air, but I wanted the guests to realize how special this wedding was.

"And now, let's welcome our bride and groom."

Primera's subordinates had been standing by the entrance, and they swung the doors open at my cue. Gramps's Light spell dimmed, and a soft light glowed behind Henri and Ceruna as they stood in the doorway.

The door slowly closed, leaving the venue dark once again. As the couple stepped forward, Gramps cast a Light spell on them. Henri actually looked cool for once as he proceeded, bathed in light. As for Ceruna, her dress shimmered with every step she took, thanks to the silk threads from Goldie and Silvie that'd been woven into her dress. She had a nearly solemn radiance.

The men in the audience were entranced by her, and even the women let out sighs of admiration.

I waited for the bride and groom to step forward.

I faced the two of them. "On behalf of everyone here today, I,

Tenma Otori, will now ask the two of you to make your vows as husband and wife."

I still wasn't sure if I was the right guy for this role, but apparently, it wasn't unusual for someone like me to do it. It was common at noble weddings for a priest, a superior, or someone of higher status to officiate and act as a go-between, but at commoner weddings, they would often ask a friend or acquaintance. There was really nothing strange about me being here.

"Henri, do you take Ceruna to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love, honor, and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for as long as you both shall live?"

"Yes, I do!" Henri practically shouted his response, letting his nerves get the best of him. At least he sounded more confident than he had during the rehearsals.

"And do you, Ceruna, take Henri to be your husband? Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish him, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for as long as you both shall live?"

"Yes, I do." Ceruna, on the other hand, answered softly. Her voice trembled with emotion, and her eyes welled up with tears.

"It's now time to exchange rings."

Primera stepped up beside me, holding a small box with the rings inside. I subtly signaled to Henri for him to place Ceruna's ring on her finger. But for some reason, he took his own ring instead.

I felt a wave of hostility shoot from the audience towards Henri—it'd been from Felt. The sudden intensity made Primera's subordinates—Nikolas and his knights—and several adventurers twitch in response, ready to spring into action. But before things got out of hand, they quickly realized what had happened, and they kept a cautious eye on the situation.

That'd been a close call, but thanks to Felt's terrifying presence, Henri realized his mistake. He picked up the correct ring and slid it onto Ceruna's finger.

Ceruna's hands shook, but she managed to get through the ring exchange without any major disasters.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Back in my previous life, cameras would've been flashing like

crazy to capture this moment. But that technology didn't exist in this world, so Gramps and I used magic to illuminate the happy couple instead.

"I hereby declare these two husband and wife. Everyone here stands as a witness to your union, and we hope you both live a life worthy of the vows you made," I said.

"We will!" they said in unison.

And with that, the room erupted into cheers and applause. A few overly enthusiastic adventurers tried to hoist Henri up and carry him off somewhere, probably to toss him outside, but a group of female adventurers stopped them before they could.

"All right, let's move on to the meal," I began, but then, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. "Primera, it looks like we've got a guest."

Rocket had been stationed outside as a lookout, but now I saw him holding up a red flag. Primera noticed it too and signaled to her subordinates by the entrance.

And just as Rocket lowered the flag...the doors burst open and Henri's father stormed in.

"How dare you do something so selfish, you—?!" he began, only to fall flat on his behind as several of Primera's subordinates drew their swords on him. They didn't even let him finish his sentence.

"What do you think you're doing? We're Henri's family!" Falman shouted up on behalf of their father since the man was too stunned to say anything at the moment.

But then the father remembered why he was here in the first place and started shouting again. "Do you have any idea who you're dealing with?!"

Henri's father was clearly trying to use Viscount Abyss as leverage. But unfortunately for him, the viscount ignored him and instead dropped to one knee.

"It's been so long since I last saw you, Lord Albert, Lady Primera," said the viscount.

Henri's father looked completely lost. Falman seemed flustered for a moment, but he quickly began to play along and knelt, just like the viscount.

"Long time no see, Viscount Abyss," Albert said in a sharp, accusatory tone. "What brings you here on such a blessed day?"

The viscount, still kneeling, lowered his head as he answered Albert. Meanwhile, Henri's father had been forced to kneel by Falman, who was whispering to him frantically about who Albert was. Once Henri's father learned the answer, he fell totally silent.

"I'm so sorry for the sudden intrusion, but would it be possible for us to join this celebration?" the viscount asked me eventually after a short conversation with Albert.

"As long as you're here to celebrate the couple and their marriage. I can arrange a seat near the front for you. The others will have to sit in the back, however," I told the viscount.

He accepted that without an issue, but Henri's father was enraged.

"That's absurd!" he yelled. "Why should I sit in the back? Just shove some of these adventurers back there instead!"

The adventurers had been quiet until now, but they were about to lose their tempers and stand up.

Henri's father continued. "And another thing, who the hell do you think *you* are, telling me where to sit? You're just a commoner! What gives you the right?!"

At that, the adventurers who had just been ready to start a fight suddenly sat back down.

"A commoner? Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you a commoner too?" I asked. "You don't have a noble title, so that makes you just as much of a commoner as I am. Also, you keep saying you're Henri's father, but didn't you disown him? That means you have nothing to do with him anymore. Why do you deserve a front-row seat at a wedding for 'some random commoner' that you showed up to uninvited? You should be grateful you're even getting a seat at all."

His face turned bright red, and for a moment, I was afraid he'd explode. However, a sharp voice rang through the room before Henri's father could respond.

"That's enough! I've been listening quietly, but you've been spouting nothing but nonsense!" someone interjected—it was none

other than Viscount Abyss.

"Viscount Abyss, why in the world did you bring this guy here? Thanks to him, the entire wedding's been ruined!" Albert said.

"Well, I never imagined he'd pull something like this at his own son's wedding, even if he *did* disown him. I'll admit that I thought my presence would be enough to prevent any incidents, but I clearly underestimated him. My deepest apologies."

The viscount's sharp reprimand left Henri's father frozen in shock. When the viscount turned to apologize to Albert and the other guests, the glare he shot Henri's father alone drained all the color from the man's face. And then, to make matters worse...

"And you know that so-called 'commoner' you were just bad-mouthing? Well, that's none other than Tenma Otori, the *Dragonslayer,*" the viscount explained. "While yes, he *is* technically a commoner, it's common knowledge in this kingdom that the Otori family has earned more respect than half the noble class put together!"

The second Henri's father was informed of my true identity, he passed out and fell to the floor.

"Seriously, that's all it took? Guess all the plans we came up with were a complete waste..." Falman muttered to himself as he stood over his unconscious father. He then turned to the wedding guests and apologized. The sudden shift in his attitude earned him suspicion from the crowd until Albert casually mentioned that Falman had been in on the plan to take his father down from the very start. The moment he made that announcement, the room erupted into applause.

"Well, now that that's settled, shall we move on to the feast? We have drinks too. But everyone, please remember to drink responsibly," I said.

The mention of the alcohol got a cheer from the drinkers in the crowd, but I shot a hostile glare, and they settled down.

That should keep them from behaving like they would in a common tavern...

Just as we were about to start serving dinner, Falman moved to take his father home, but Ceruna and Henri stopped him. They

ended up just propping his dad up in the back of the room and leaving him there before taking a seat near the front with the rest of us.

"All right, let's start off with the appetizers."

The first round was the smoked ham—Dozle's specialty.

"Next up, we've got horned rabbit stew and salt-grilled tyrant salmon."

Now it was time to serve the heartier dishes. The guests were expecting the usual basic stew and pieces of grilled fish, so they were shocked and delighted when they saw a hearty horned rabbit stew under a golden pastry crust and a whole tyrant salmon encased in a salt crust, marinated and baked to perfection.

"We'll be carving up the salmon tableside for everyone."

I served the stew first while Dozle cracked open the salt crust in front of everyone and began to slice up the fish. Normally, you'd space out the courses a bit more, but I'd originally planned this doubled-up course to rub it in Henri's father's face. Of course, it didn't matter now since he was unconscious, but if the guests were happy, I considered it a win.

I glanced around the room as I served a palate-cleansing sorbet. Everyone looked like they still had plenty of room left in their stomachs, which meant they'd be able to fully enjoy the main event.

"Up next is a special platter featuring a selection of wyvern dishes," I said.

This was basically a platter of all of my personal favorites. It consisted of roasted wyvern, wyvern burgers, wyvern cutlets, fried wyvern, and wyvern skewers. These were the dishes I was most confident in. The novelty factor alone had the guests hyped up more than ever.

"Now, we'll be serving a light salad, and after that, we'll bring out tonight's grand finale."

The guests began to whisper that nothing could top the wyvern platter. That was exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

The lights dimmed right on cue. Aura, Jeanne, Amur, Leni, and the Wildcat Princesses emerged from the kitchen carrying a humongous five-tiered wedding cake that was nearly a meter tall.

"It's time for Henri and Ceruna's first official task as a married couple—they must cut the cake!"

The girls set the cake down in the center of the room, and I called Henri and Ceruna over to it.

"Okay, whenever you two are ready!"

The bride and groom gripped the knife together and made the first cut at Primera's signal. Albert and the others started clapping, and the rest of the guests quickly followed suit, filling the room with applause.

Dozle then cut the rest of the cake and served it, except for the top tier, which was carefully removed and set aside for the happy couple.

"The first bite is for the bride and groom. Enjoy!"

Once everyone had a piece of cake, the plan was for Ceruna and Henri to feed each other, but Henri was so nervous that he almost took the first bite himself. Luckily, Ceruna stepped in and gently held her piece up to his mouth, which finally prompted him to remember what he was supposed to be doing.

"Okay, everyone. Dig in!"

As the guests started eating, I noticed they split into two clear groups—couples feeding each other and others quietly eating on their own. Flute and Max led the first group, and leading the second was Leon, of course.

Once the meal was complete, all that was left was to let the guests chat and relax until the end.

That was when Falman stood up and said he'd be taking his father home. Apparently, the man had been out cold long enough that he could wake up at any minute, and Falman wanted to be there to smooth things over, in private, when that happened.

"Fine, but whatever you do, don't kill him. I know you've cut ties with him, but if Henri's brother ends up killing his own father, it'll cause problems for both Henri and Ceruna no matter how you spin it," I warned.

Falman smiled and gave me a quick nod. "Don't worry. I wouldn't go that far." And with that, he quietly pulled his father up to his feet and into a waiting carriage. They slipped out the back without Henri

or Ceruna noticing.

"Tenma, thank you! Thank you so much!" I heard someone yell behind me.

The moment I turned around, Marks ambushed me with a teary big-bear hug.

"Whoa!"

"The wedding was incredible!" he cried. "I'm so glad to see Ceruna so happy. I just wish that my sister could've seen this too!"

"I know, I know. But Marks, could you let go for a second, please?"

He was so hammered that he wasn't even listening to me. Aside from his first thank-you, he was just rambling incoherently about Ceruna's parents, who had been killed. I didn't want the guests overhearing all that, so I dragged him off to a quieter corner of the venue. Not that it helped much, though—he was talking so loudly that half the room could hear him.

Luckily, most everyone knew Ceruna's story already, so they either pretended not to hear out of politeness or tried to distract those who weren't aware by striking up conversations about this and that.

"I'll take it from here, Tenma."

I was trying to get Marks to calm down when Gramps showed up and stepped in for me. I felt like Marks would be more comfortable venting to me instead, but seeing how wasted he was, I figured it'd be easier for everyone if I just let Gramps handle it.

I watched over them to be sure I had made the right decision. After a while, Marks began to settle down and ended up quietly listening to Gramps.

"Congratulations, Ceruna."

"Thank you, Tenma. I don't even know how to show my gratitude. You gave me such a beautiful wedding." She thanked me with tears in her eyes as Primera stood beside her, gently rubbing her back. I thought that should've been Henri's job, but when I looked over at him, I saw that he was completely surrounded by senior adventurers and fellow guild members with no chance of escape.

Since Ceruna and Henri were busy attending to their friends and colleagues, I decided to give them some space and went to check on Daniel. I found him completely out cold, passed out drunk, face-down on the table.

Viscount Abyss came over to thank me directly. "Master Otori, I really appreciate you letting me attend today's festivities."

"You should really be thanking Ceruna and Henri, Viscount."

"Well, normally it's the hosts who decide the guest list...and although I know Henri, I'd never met you before. I wouldn't have been surprised if you turned me away, considering that I showed up and brought in trouble." As he spoke, he looked at the four banners on the wall featuring the crests of the Otori, Sanga, Sammons, and Haust families.

"I'd guess Henri's father's plan was to use me as leverage to pressure the couple to call off the wedding. Honestly, I'm glad I didn't get involved in it. Trying to pit a lone viscount against these four houses would've been laughable. I would've just embarrassed myself no matter how it played out," he said.

It sounded like the fact that I had approved his attendance before Henri's father could've stepped in had ended up saving him from a whole lot of trouble.

"Well, I should be going." The viscount told me he was planning to meet up with Falman and lend him a hand. He'd actually been supposed to leave before they had, but since he'd stuck around to talk to me, he needed to hurry now.

"I doubt I'll be much help compared to Lord Albert and the others, but do let me know if you ever need my assistance," he said to me. "Oh, and take care of Lady Primera."

"Thanks, I... Wait, what?" I turned to ask him what the heck he'd meant by that, but the viscount was already halfway out the door. "Why do people always jump to conclusions that Primera and I are...?" I muttered.

"Isn't it true, though?" I heard Flute ask from behind me. "Anyway, putting that aside... What an incredible wedding. I guess this is what happens when the Dragonslayer pulls out all the stops, huh?"

She gave me a teasing smile, and I realized the guildmaster wasn't with her. I glanced around, looking for him, and she followed my gaze. She pointed in one direction.

"Oh, he went straight for Henri the moment the ceremony ended."

I squinted and saw that the guildmaster was right in the center of the crowd around Henri, practically glued to his side. And judging by how red his face was, he was already pretty drunk.

"Are you sure you wanna leave him like that?" I asked.

"I'll scold him later. It'd just kill the mood if I did it now."

Well, I can tell who wears the pants in their family... I thought.

"More importantly, should you really leave *her* alone like that? Looks like she's in trouble," Flute said.

I followed her gaze and spotted Primera. She had a very drunk, clingy Kriss latched onto her.

"I'll be right back." I gave Flute a quick bow and headed over to where Primera was. Kriss was draped over her. "You're bothering her, Kriss. Come on, let go."

"Noooo, I don't wanna!"

I peeled Kriss off of Primera and plopped her down into a chair. Leni appeared almost immediately to drag Kriss off somewhere.

"Thanks for that, Tenma," said Primera.

"It's been a long night, huh? And Kriss is a handful when she's drunk. Speaking of drunks, it looks like they're multiplying by the minute... Maybe we should wrap this up and shift to a more casual after-party."

Henri and his guests were fine, but poor Ceruna was still in her wedding dress. I thought this would be a good time to pause the formal reception and let her change.

Ceruna's face filled with relief once I announced that, and she headed upstairs to put on something else. Henri couldn't escape the adventurers, so I left him to fend for himself against the guildmaster and the others.

"All right! Now that the bride and groom have changed clothes, it's time for the after-party! We've got plenty of food and drinks, so dig in and enjoy yourselves!" I said. "Well, within reason...

Otherwise, I *will* get mad."

The second I mentioned there being food and drinks, the whole room burst into cheers. But when I added my warning, the crowd went deadly silent. The place got rowdy all over again once the food started coming out. I figured that as long as no one got *too* out of line, I could allow them to let loose a little.

The food was mostly just leftovers from dinner, plus some quick-and-easy dishes and a bunch of bread. It was set up as a buffet so everyone could just grab what they wanted. I decided to set a rule just in case some idiot hogged too much for himself—everyone was allowed one plate, and they could only take as much as they could fit on it with no seconds.

It worked out surprisingly well. Even Ceruna's guild colleagues who usually got steamrolled by adventurers were able to eat a proper meal. However, when it came to the desserts that I brought out after the food ran low, the girls completely took over. They hoarded nearly everything and split it among themselves, barely leaving the guys with anything at all.

"Guess I should've made a separate rule for the desserts..." I grumbled to Albert, Cain, and Leon.

"Yeah. We should've seen this coming."

"Look over there. Primera's female knights left the men with security duty and joined in to raid the desserts."

"Well, knowing you, I'm sure you've got some backup desserts stashed somewhere, right? Hand 'em over, Tenma!"

Leon just *had* to open his big mouth. Naturally, every single pair of eyes in the room turned towards me after he said that. I could practically hear them begging for desserts. *"Hand 'em over!"*

The sheer intensity of their dessert obsessions was honestly terrifying. And no matter how many times I told them I didn't have anything left, they absolutely refused to believe me.

"Why are they so obsessed with sweets? It's scary..."

Setting that little incident aside, the after-party wrapped up without any trouble. And from there, it naturally flowed into a third round of drinking and partying, and a fourth, and a fifth... In the end, practically all of the guests had passed out drunk.

“Wake up, old man!”

“Huh? What’s going on?!”

Falman dragged his father to a private room at the Gunjo City branch of Gloriosa Trading Company, dumped him on the sofa, double-checked the hallway, and then shook him awake.

The sound of Falman’s panicked voice made his father jolt upright. His head snapped to the left and right as he tried to figure out where he was. Having just woken up, he was in a state of total confusion.

“Dad, we’re in serious trouble here.”

“Hang on... How did I even get here?!” Still dazed, Falman’s father demanded an explanation. The man was still trying to piece together the fragments of his memory up to the moment he blacked out.

“That Dragonslayer Tenma filled Henri’s head with all kinds of nonsense and how he has a bone to pick with you. And now, it’s not just him. The Sanga, Sammons, and Haust heirs are all falling in line to suck up to Tenma and back him up!”

“Wh-What? That can’t be! What about Viscount Abyss? What’s he doing?!”

“Viscount Abyss serves House Sanga. There’s nothing he can do.”

“No...” His father clutched his head and slumped forward.

Falman continued. “At this rate, Gloriosa Trading Company will be ruined. Supposedly, Tenma’s got ties to the J Trading Company. He plans on using his quarrel with you to destroy our company and help J Trading Company expand into Gunjo City!”

“Those cowards... There’s gotta be something we can do!”

Falman inwardly rolled his eyes at the hypocrisy but maintained the sympathetic expression on his face. “Well, there *is* one way.”

“What is it?” His father took the bait immediately and leaned in, looking desperate.

“When I begged Viscount Abyss for help, he said there was no way to fight this head-on. But under the right conditions, I think we could still survive. First, you’ll have to take responsibility for all this and step down as company president.”

"There's no way I'd do that!" his father shouted in protest.

"Calm down. It's just for show. You don't *actually* have to quit. You just have to pretend to."

"O-Oh, I see..."

"Here's the plan. You step down—not because of Tenma, but to take responsibility for offending Lord Albert. That way, you don't have to bow to some commoner, and you'll still be showing respect to Viscount Abyss. At the same time, we'll draw up papers officially transferring all your assets and control of the company to me. If we have those documents, Viscount Abyss will definitely cover for us," Falman explained.

"H-Hold on... *All* my assets? Don't you think that's a bit much?" Clearly, the thought of losing everything didn't sit well with the father. He tried to negotiate with him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Father. Tenma's wiped out plenty of enemies before, including nobles. And nobody's ever held him responsible for it. That just shows how many powerful people have his back. If you want to protect the company, you've got to make it very clear that you're stepping down and handing everything over to me. Then, we'll get Viscount Abyss to pass that along to House Sanga, and they'll make sure Tenma doesn't touch us. Besides, even if you transfer everything to me, it's not like it's going to be confiscated and you can't touch it. We're just changing the ownership on paper, anyway. Nothing will really change."

"Okay, fair point. No need to follow every word on the piece of paper to the letter."

"Exactly. So hurry up and sign this. We need to get it over to Viscount Abyss right away or we'll be in trouble."

Falman handed his father the document, barely able to conceal his smirk. The paper was a formal contract to hand over full control of Gloriosa Trading Company and all the family assets to Falman, declaring that his father would be stepping down and retiring. Falman had already signed his part, so all that remained was getting his father's signature.

"F-Fine. Got it."

His father was a little thrown off by how prepared Falman was,

but the fear of losing the entire company pushed any suspicion out of his mind. He signed without hesitation.

"And these three copies are for Viscount Abyss, Duke Sanga, and the council. They all say the same thing, so just sign these lines too."

"Right."

Falman knew every second counted. His father didn't even question what was happening—he simply signed all three.

Once Falman had all the signatures, he finally let himself grin. "That should do it. Everything's going to work out just fine now."

"Yes, you're right."

Falman gathered up the papers and held them like a precious treasure. Then, he turned towards the door. "Everything's ready, Viscount Abyss," he called out.

At his signal, the door swung open. In walked Viscount Abyss, along with several knights from Gunjo City's guard.

His father sat there completely stunned while the viscount flipped through the papers he had just signed.

"Are you sure about this, Falman?" the viscount asked.

"Absolutely."

After getting Falman's confirmation, the viscount signed every document except for the last one. Then...

"Arrest that man, and take Falman in as the key witness!" Viscount Abyss instructed the knights to seize the father and to take Falman away as well.

"Wh-What in blazes is going on here?!" Falman's father shouted.

The knights seized the shouting man, shoving him down on his knees. Another knight stood behind Falman, more for formality than restraint.

"This document details every crime you've committed and concealed. And your signature's there too, acknowledging every word of it."

The document Falman had prepared was a full record of his father's hidden crimes. The first paper was the one transferring everything to Falman, while the second was a document transferring those rights from Falman to Daniel and Henri. The third was a formal affidavit from both his father and Falman, cutting all ties with the

Gloriosa family and the Gloriosa Trading Company.

Falman had completely deceived his father. This was technically fraud, but with Viscount Abyss's signature, these documents became official and would hold up no matter where they presented them.

If his father wanted to appeal, he'd have to go to someone ranked higher than the viscount, which meant either Duke Sanga or the royals themselves. But if he went that route, they'd have to launch a full investigation to verify his claims, and that kind of scandal would destroy the company. That was exactly why the viscount was still leaving the final document unsigned for now.

In other words, the viscount was giving Falman's father one final out. He could either flee as a criminal or disappear as a common exile. If he was branded a criminal, life in either prison or slavery awaited him. And even if he chose exile, plenty of people still held grudges against him, so staying alive would be a matter of luck.

The whole thing went against the viscount's usual sense of honor, but they'd reached an agreement that Daniel would use the Gloriosa name to make restitution to the victims. The viscount was also willing to turn a blind eye due to Henri's wedding celebration.

"Y-You traitor! Why?! How could you do this to your own father?!" The man had now realized that no matter how this played out, he had lost everything—his assets, his position, and even his life if he wasn't careful. He turned his anger on Falman.

"'Father'? Please!" Falman shot back. "You and I don't share even a drop of blood. Sure, you took me in, but I never once thought of you as my father."

Falman's cold voice was like a slap to the face. For a moment, his father just stood there, not understanding what'd been said. But the second it clicked, the older man exploded into a screaming tirade, attacking both Falman and Falman's mother with every insult he could think of. Even the viscount and the knights winced as they listened to it.

And the longer Falman stayed silent, the more his father's rant spiraled out of control until...

"Shut up."

"Argh!"

Falman drove a front kick right into his father's face, leaving him with a bloody nose. The old man tried to shout something back, but one glance at Falman's face shut him right up. Instead, he turned to the viscount and the knights, trying to paint Falman as the villain here, but...

"Oh? Finally quieted down, have you?" the viscount said. "Your words were so vile I had to cover my ears and look away. By the way, what's with the nosebleed?" Viscount Abyss didn't even try to hide the fact that he'd been ignoring it all. "Anyway, take him away, guards. You can patch him up once he's in a cell."

At the viscount's order, the knights yanked Falman's father up to his feet and dragged him out of the room. Even as they pulled him away, the old man kept shouting something. Perhaps because of the nosebleed, none of it was clear enough for the viscount to understand.

"Falman, I'm not going to praise what you did, but I understand. If you need a minute to cool off, we can wait."

"I'm fine. Let's go."

Even though Falman was technically on the viscount's side, he was still a key witness to all this, so the knights brought him to their headquarters as well.

"Thanks for all your help yesterday, Viscount Abyss," I said.

"Oh, it was nothing at all. I barely did anything. Falman and Lady Primera's subordinates did all the heavy lifting."

Viscount Abyss had come by the Sanga estate to give his official report on everything that had gone down at Gloriosa Trading Company the day before. He started off addressing Albert, but after that, all his attention was on Primera. Albert was definitely pouting about that. From the corner of my eye, I could already spot three familiar figures lying in wait to pounce and tease him, so today was shaping up to be another chaotic day.

As I listened in on the conversation between Primera and the viscount, I learned that Falman's father had been given two choices —either be shipped off to the mines as a criminal slave or be exiled after officially cutting ties with the Gloriosa Trading Company and

the family. He'd apparently fought hard, but in the end, he'd chosen exile. Some of the viscount's men would come in a few days to escort him to an undisclosed location.

As for Falman, while he hadn't directly taken part in his father's crimes, he had admitted to knowing about them and helping cover them up. Still, since he'd come forward and cooperated with the arrest—along with agreeing to compensate the victims—they had cut him some slack. His punishment ended up being several years of community service under the viscount's supervision. The compensation would come from Falman's personal assets, with the Gloriosa Trading Company covering the rest.

The reason his father had gotten exiled after having been stripped of all his rights and assets while Falman had been sentenced to years of service was simple—his father had way too many enemies. That guy would be a walking target for the rest of his life, constantly looking over his shoulder, wondering when someone would come for payback. That fear was part of his punishment.

Falman, on the other hand, was different. Making him pay restitution and putting him to work doing community service sent a message that he was making amends. Attacking him would be seen as an insult to both Viscount Abyss and the Sanga family since they had approved the arrangement. Sure, there was always a chance someone might come after him anyway, but compared to his old man, Falman was under the protection of nobles. Besides, if someone really wanted revenge, they'd get a heck of a lot more satisfaction going after the father. Falman knew that too, and from what the viscount had said, he'd already made peace with that possibility.

As for the reason Falman hated his father so much, well, that tied back to his mother and his real father.

Falman's birth father had died in an accident right before marrying his mom. But the truth was that the so-called accident had been arranged by his fake father—the guy who had married his mom after that incident.

To keep things clear, let's call them Real Dad and Fake Dad.

A few days after Real Dad had been killed, Fake Dad had forced himself on Falman's mom, and that was how Falman had come to be. Except...Falman wasn't Fake Dad's kid after all. He really was Real Dad's son.

Of course, Fake Dad hadn't known any of that. All he knew was that he'd stop by a few times a year to visit Falman's mother whenever he felt like it. And every time he saw Falman, he had gotten the idea in his head that the kid looked more and more like him. (Actually, they didn't look anything alike at all.) Still, Fake Dad had treated Falman better than his actual sons, meaning Daniel and Henri, which had driven a wedge between the brothers.

Falman's mom had been desperate to protect the baby growing in her stomach and did whatever Fake Dad told her to—despite her absolutely despising him. But one night, while Fake Dad had been completely drunk, he had let something slip, and she'd found out the truth. From that moment on, her hatred for him had burned brighter than anything.

She had wanted revenge, but before she could retaliate, she had gotten sick. Once Fake Dad had found out she wasn't well, he'd stopped visiting altogether, so she'd been unable to get even. In the end, she'd developed a mental illness as well and passed away.

Even as a child, Falman had done everything he could to take care of her. Somewhere along the way, he'd learned the truth about his real father and what Fake Dad had done to his mother. From that moment on, he swore he'd get revenge on Fake Dad.

"Still, with all that, it's kind of a miracle he turned out as well as he did."

"Well, it would be a stretch to call him normal, but it's pretty surprising that he didn't drag Henri and the others into it," Albert chimed in, still sulking a little.

He had a point. Given everything that'd happened, nobody would've blamed Falman if he'd wanted to take down the entire Gloriosa family. But in the end, he had only targeted Fake Dad, sparing the rest of the family as much as possible. That was definitely unexpected.

"Actually, he admitted that for the first few years after being

taken in, he had fully intended on getting revenge on the entire Gloriosa family." Viscount Abyss said, pausing his chat with Primera to join our conversation. "Apparently, Henri's mother was always kind to him, and when he saw little Henri clinging to her for comfort, it reminded him of himself and his own mother. That's what drove him to come up with this plan instead."

"The power of a mother's love..." Primera said.

"It's remarkable, isn't it?" Viscount Abyss said. Up until now, he'd had a stern look on his face, but the second Primera had chimed in, his whole expression softened. He turned his back to Albert and me entirely.

"Albert, why don't we leave this to Primera and go get ready for our trip?" I suggested.

Since the viscount was ignoring us in favor of Primera, Albert and I made our escape, heading off to prepare for our departure coming up in two days.

"We don't really have much to prep, but I guess we can at least go pick out some souvenirs," Albert said.

Even though Albert was still pouting a bit, I took him out to town. We spent about three hours picking up souvenirs and stocking up on our supplies. Primera was waiting for us back at the estate when we returned, angry about being left behind. Apparently, after we had left, she had gotten stuck entertaining Viscount Abyss. Gramps had shown up after that, and she'd ended up being their conversation partner for hours. To make matters worse, somewhere along the way, the conversation had shifted from Ceruna's wedding to *her* future wedding, and for some reason, Viscount Abyss had started spilling the beans on all sorts of embarrassing stories from when she'd been little.

The viscount must've realized he'd made her angry because he had left before we returned. Gramps had taken the chance to slip away too. And since both of them had bailed, Primera had been left with no one to vent her frustrations to until Albert and I got back, which had just made her even angrier.

"Hey, Albert. You two aren't gonna see each other for a while soon, so why don't you spend some quality sibling time together? I'll

go make the rounds and say goodbye to everyone," I suggested.

"Wait, Tenma!"

"There's probably a bunch of stuff about the Sanga family and the duchy you don't want outsiders hearing, right? No need to hold back with me gone. Later!"

I gave Albert a shove towards Primera. He tried to run back towards me, but Primera had already grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Come on, Tenma! Let's go!"

Before Albert could yell for help, Amur grabbed my hand and bolted out the door, dragging me along. Cain, Leon, Jeanne, and Aura all slipped past Albert and Primera as well, making their escapes.

Once we were all gathered just out of sight of the front entrance, I noticed two people were missing. "Hey, where are Kriss and Leni? Don't tell me they didn't make it!"

"Kriss is holed up in her room, cuddling Shiromaru. And Leni—"

The second Amur said Leni's name, she popped out of a bush nearby.

"I'm right here," Leni said. "I was just standing a bit farther away from everyone at the time. I thought it would be rude to run past them, so I slipped out the window instead."

"Gramps made a break for it early. Kriss is off in her own little world, but at least everyone's accounted for."

"Um, Albert's still trapped, though..."

"They're just having some good old sibling bonding time, Leon. Don't you dare interrupt them."

"If you're so enthusiastic about it, why don't you go ask if they'll let you join in?"

"I wouldn't interrupt family time like that! Don't want to stick around and risk getting dragged into it!" Leon protested.

Yeah, right...

Still, if we kept hanging around here, there was a good chance we'd be spotted. I was perfectly happy to follow Leon's lead and head back out into the city—using the back door, of course.

And so we left Albert to fend for himself while we wandered around Gunjo City, enjoying some shopping and street food. But

when we got back...

"Tenma, listen! My brother's the worst!"

The minute I walked into the door, Primera latched onto me and started venting. It seemed like whatever anger I'd sensed before we escaped had been unloaded entirely on Albert, so at least I was only getting her complaints now. That being said, after listening to her for a while, I started feeling the urge to go yell at someone—at Cain, Leon, Amur, Jeanne, Aura, and Leni, to be precise...

As for the six of them, the second Primera called my name, they shoved me forward and bolted. And they didn't just run off. The girls actually started tidying up the estate, making the excuse that they wanted to show their gratitude for letting us stay here...spying on me the whole time. And just then, Cain and Leon showed up too. They even dragged Gramps along, setting him up at a table where they all pretended to chat while sneaking glances my way. Apparently, Albert was holed up in his room recovering since I hadn't seen him once since we got back.

"Here, Primera. Cain and Leon's treat. Have a drink and chill out," Amur said.

"Thanks."

Primera accepted the drink and downed it in one go. I was wondering why they hadn't gotten me one until Amur immediately handed me a drink of my own. The second I took a sip...

"Wait, this is alcohol. Hey!"

I turned around to check on Primera only to see her already asking Amur for a refill. Amur must've prepped a second round ahead of time because she handed over another glass before I could even say a word. Primera downed that one too and asked for a third.

I knew she would end up drunk and clinging to me if things went on, but...

"Zzz..."

The moment she finished her third glass, she was out cold, breathing softly in her sleep.

"Mission accomplished!"

"Amur, Cain, Leon... Get over here."

I called the three of them over and interrogated them, wondering if they had put some kind of suspicious substance in it or something. They confessed to having made a cocktail using a type of alcohol that makes you super sleepy.

"Well, I guess I'm reporting all of this to the duke. Actually, I'll let Albert do the honors," I said. "Jeanne, Aura, can you take Primera to her room and tuck her in?"

Jeanne and Aura had a feeling things were going to get bad and immediately obeyed. They carried Primera to her bedroom. I figured they'd probably find some excuse to stay gone after that.

Cain, Leon, and Amur looked around the room, desperate for someone to save them. Unfortunately for them, Gramps and Leni—who'd been lurking around spying on me and Primera just a minute ago—had already disappeared.

"Well, shall we have a little chat?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

Honestly, I was a little relieved that Primera had passed out. But spiking someone's drink could be considered illegal, and I made sure they knew it. After I finished chewing them out, Albert and Kriss showed up. They'd been called in by Gramps and Leni, and the three of them got another round of scolding for good measure.

When I asked Gramps and Leni about the whole cocktail incident, they both played dumb and stuck to their stories, so I didn't have much choice but to let it go. Instead, I slapped them both with a temporary alcohol ban. No drinks with meals, and no nightcaps either. Leni didn't seem too bothered, but Gramps was definitely hurting from it. He put up a fight, of course, but I told him that since it was a collective punishment, he had to deal with it.

Finally, the day of our departure arrived.

"You stupid head!"

"Idiot, idiot!"

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Aura, right! Leni-tan, left!"

"Got it!"

Even though we were supposed to be leaving soon, the six girls

were in the middle of yet another three-on-three brawl. I'd lost count of how many times they'd gone at it since we'd arrived in Gunjo City, but at this point, neither we nor the people seeing us off were even fazed anymore.

People's well-wishes for me mixed in with the girls' cries and taunts.

"Thanks for everything, Tenma."

"Nelly, Milly! Cover me!"

"I won't let you!"

"I should be apologizing for dragging you all into this mess," I said.

"Gotcha!"

"My butt!"

"It really was a wonderful wedding. Honestly, I wish you could've been at mine too."

"Lily, Milly, heeeeelp!"

"Secret technique! Shrimp Lock!"

"Hey! Knock it off!" I shouted.

"Okay!"

"Well, they're certainly as lively as usual, aren't they?"

As I was chatting with the people seeing us off, the six idiots were causing such a commotion that I had to raise my voice a bit to shut them up. Primera had been watching from nearby and tried to say something to defend them, but since she couldn't come up with anything, her voice just kind of trailed off.

"Amur and Aura acting up is one thing, but why is Leni involved?"

I'd thought the whole point of her tagging along on the journey was to help train Amur, but...

Kriss came over. "I know exactly what you're thinking. I was curious too, so I asked her about it," she said. She then told me that, apparently, Leni had been teaching Amur that part of a wife's duties was to keep other women away from her man.

"Wife, huh..."

"Well, that's one way to think about it," Kriss said. "What bothers me more is that it feels like Leni's just using Amur as an excuse to have some fun herself. You don't think Amur's rubbing off on her, do

you?”

Honestly, Kriss’s theory was plausible, but I wasn’t too worried about Leni. She had a boyfriend back in the SAR, so there was no way she’d stick around the capital permanently. She’d probably drop by now and then to visit Amur, but if those visits were just here and there, we could deal with it...

With that in mind, I made my rounds, saying goodbye to everyone who’d come to see us off. That included talking to Primera, Kanna and Soleil, Flute, Ceruna and Henri, Marks, and the rest. The only ones missing were Dozle and the guildmaster, but they both had to work and couldn’t leave. That was fine, though, since I’d already said my goodbyes to them earlier. Still, I asked Kanna and Flute to pass along my thanks one more time.

While I said my farewells, Amur and the others were still quietly fighting in the background.

“Hey, it’s time to leave!”

“Crap!”

“We missed our last chance!”

“Damn you, Amur and Aura!”



“Ha ha! Victory is ours!”

“Complete and total victory!”

“We did it, Lady Amur!”

I had no idea what the fight had even been about, but apparently, Amur’s team had come out on top.

“Well, we definitely stirred up plenty of trouble, but I’m sure we’ll be back before too long. I hope you’ll put up with us again when that time comes,” I said.

And just like that, everyone waved and watched me leave, the way they had three years ago, as I departed from Gunjo City once again.

Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume Ten / End

Afterword

Hi everyone, this is Kenichi, the author! Thanks so much for picking up *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World* Volume 10! For some reason, even though I'm writing this in early October, I'm more sunburnt now than I was in the middle of summer.

We've finally hit double digits. I can't believe we've made it this far. Honestly, I think it's all thanks to a whole lot of luck. I was just a regular reader with zero writing experience when all this began. The only reason I started writing *Isekai Tensei* was because I happened to upgrade my PC and wrote something on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* purely out of curiosity. I never dreamed that something I started on a whim would actually get published, much less make it all the way to ten volumes!

I began this whole series with that kind of laid-back attitude, and even the title came from how I got into *Shousetsuka ni Narou* in the first place. I was hooked on isekai stories, and pretty soon afterward, they were all I was reading. So when it came time to write something myself, I figured I'd stick to my favorite genre and slapped "Isekai Tensei" in the title.

For a while, the title was just a temporary one, and I figured I'd change it if something better came along. But nothing ever did, and since no one else had already used it on *Narou* (at least not that I could find), I just quietly dropped the (Temporary) tag and left it as is.

Anyway, back to Volume 10. The first half is more action-focused, while the second half is more slice-of-life. Tenma finally returns to Kukuri Village and faces off against a powerful new enemy: a lich. The lich is a character I'd been wanting to introduce for ages, and if all goes according to plan, it'll have a pretty big role in the story moving forward.

The first volume of *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World*

started off being set in Kukuri Village, and now Tenma's finally come back in Volume 10. It works out nicely numbers-wise, like a neat little milestone in the story's progression. However, I didn't plan it that way at all. Honestly, I didn't even notice until my editor pointed it out! If they hadn't said anything, I probably wouldn't have even realized it until after the book came out and someone else mentioned it...

During the second half of the book, I focused on the wedding celebrations, which featured some familiar faces from past volumes. In a way, you could say the first part of the volume brings closure to Celia's and Ricardo's stories with Tenma visiting their graves, and the second half introduces some new life into the story in the Gunjo City section.

Finally, I just want to say that when I started writing this series, I never dreamed that I'd make it to ten volumes. It's all thanks to my editor for finding my story, Mag Garden for publishing it, and most of all, every single reader who's supported me along the way. My ultimate goal is to see this story through to a proper ending, and I'm going to do my best to make sure that happens.

Thanks again for sticking with me all the way through Volume 10. I hope you keep supporting me!

—Kenichi

Bonus Story: Behind the Scenes at the Wedding

Flute had come to the Full Belly Inn to help us prepare for Ceruna and Henri's wedding.

"By the way, what was your wedding with the guildmaster like, Flute?" I asked casually.

"It wasn't a big affair. Since we're both higher-ups at the guild, we're always pretty busy with work. In fact, we went right back to work the day after our wedding."

That sounded pretty sad for a couple of newlyweds. I thought that the Gunjo City adventurers' guild should start training someone besides Flute to take care of things there.

"We have so many responsibilities, it couldn't be helped... But actually, we have a tougher time dealing with people who misunderstand things and cause a commotion."

There were a lot of eccentric and hot-tempered adventurers out there, so I figured dealing with those types was an everyday occurrence.

"Just recently, a hero called the Dragonslayer misunderstood the situation between me and the guildmaster and tried to destroy the entire guild because of it!"

She was talking about me.

"I'm really sorry about that... It's just...when I saw the guildmaster working with such a serious look on his face, my body just rejected the whole situation as reality. I couldn't even think straight." I apologized and blamed the whole thing on the guildmaster.

"Everyone says that. But he changed the day I told him I was pregnant, and ever since then, he's been working really hard. When the staff members came in to give him a report that day, they

screamed...”

That had set off a chain reaction, sowing chaos among the staff members. Some people had even started sobbing and saying that the end of the world was at hand. When Flute had tried to explain, some adventurers who’d been on their way back from a quest heard the commotion and rushed in, escalating the situation even further.

“Then, on top of that, another staff member rushed to a knight who happened to be passing by and gave them incorrect information. The entire first brigade of the knights deployed as a result. It was absolutely humiliating to have to explain what *really* happened...”

After Flute had explained things, the knights had managed to calm things down momentarily, but that hadn’t been the end of it. Later that day, Alan, the commander of the knights, had shown up along with the former captain of the third brigade, Aida, for a formal inquiry, even though he’d really just wanted to spy. Apparently, Aida had happened to be at the knight headquarters when the report had come in and had decided to join in for the fun of it. On top of that, Primera had rushed over after hearing a wildly exaggerated version of the story, which had involved the guildmaster forcing himself on Flute.

And because those lies had spread like wildfire among the adventurers, a big group of them had kept trying to jump the guildmaster. Felt was one of many who’d heard that version, by the way.

“So, to clear up any misunderstandings, we figured we should just go ahead and have a proper wedding. But even after all that, rumors still pop up now and then. At this point, it’s like a running joke at the guild,” Flute said.

“Well, I’m sorry I added fuel to the fire. Take these as my official apology.”

I handed Flute a few samples of the desserts I was planning on serving at the wedding. She happily put them away in her magic bag. I figured she would share them with Max later. Despite all the fuss they’d caused, it seemed like they really loved each other.

“There were no consequences even after all that drama, though?”

I asked.

"Not for me, no."

"Oh, I meant for the guildmaster."

"Well, Duke Sanga gave him quite a lecture since he was the one who started all the trouble," she said. "But it was mainly just the duke's way of teasing him, from what I heard."

It seemed like the adventurers, staff, and knights who'd joined in the chaos had all ended up paying a "fine" to Flute, which was basically just a wedding gift. No one had actually been punished.

"So the guildmaster was the only one who got in trouble? See, it just goes to show you how important someone's reputation really is," I mused.

Flute nodded. "That's pretty much what Duke Sanga said too."

As the two of us chatted...

"Hi, Flute! Oh, are you taking a break, Tenma?"

Max Bellcap himself strolled in. I had a feeling that if he'd come all the way here, it was because he was worried about Flute—not because he wanted to help prepare for the wedding.

"Yeah, but I should get back to work soon. I'll leave Flute with you. Don't worry, I behaved myself."

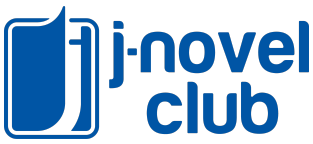
"Don't tease me, Tenma!" Max exclaimed.

"Ha ha. Thanks for the treats, Tenma," Flute said with a laugh.

Sure enough, he'd come to check on her. The second I had teased him about it, his face had turned bright red, and he'd yelled at me. Flute had just stood there by him, looking like she was enjoying the whole thing.

Max was still blushing as he opened the door for her. He kept a careful eye on her pregnant belly. He was a far cry from the irresponsible guildmaster I remembered. Seeing the two of them so happy together like that kind of reminded me of my own parents...


ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD
10
Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem



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by Kenichi

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