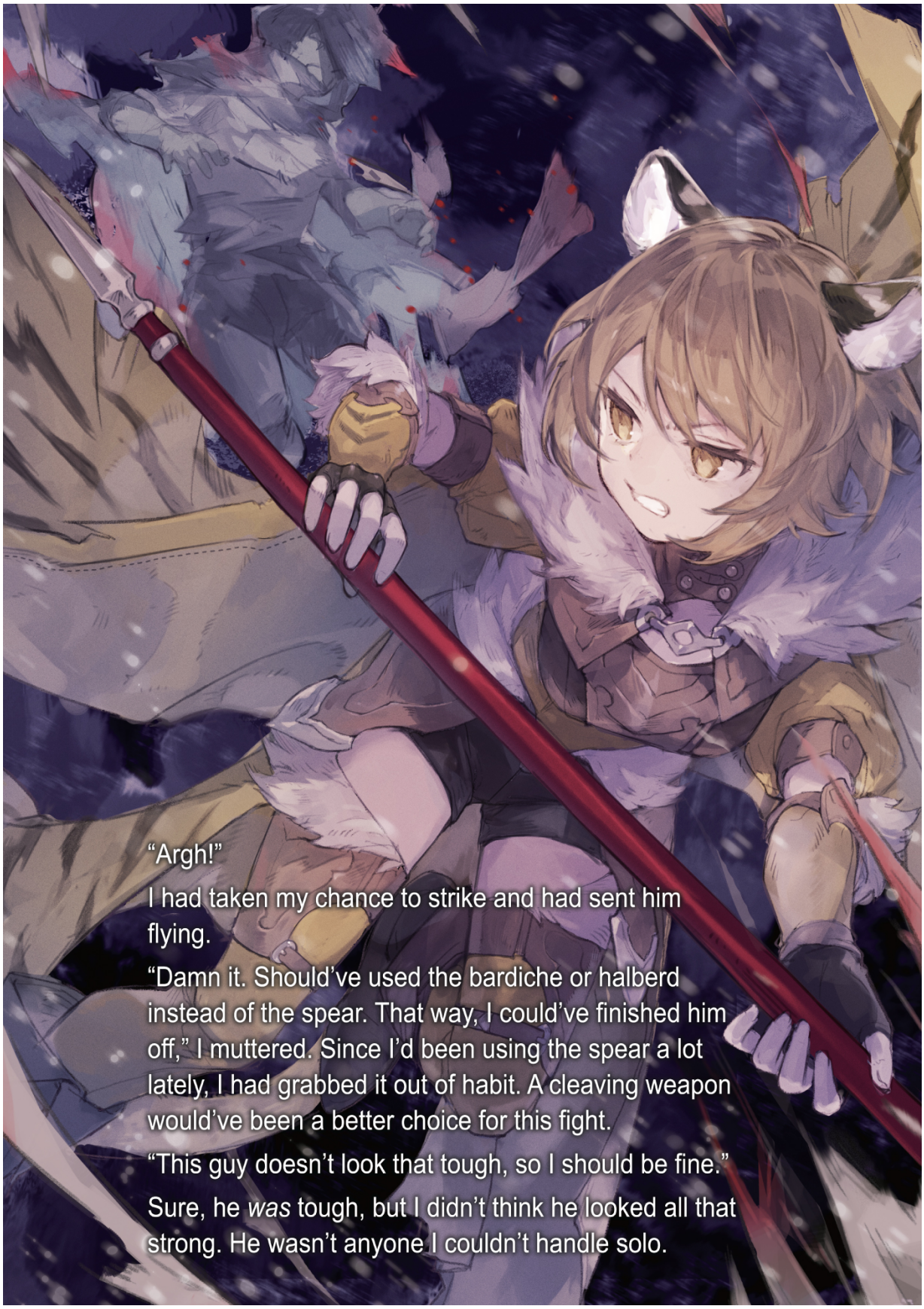

ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD
11
Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem


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“Good job, everyone.”
The students were confused about how they had lost, but when they heard my voice coming from *behind* them, they were even more baffled.
The reason they were so surprised was that I was standing there between Amy and Tida, gently holding them by the scruff of their necks.
ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD
11



“Argh!”

I had taken my chance to strike and had sent him flying.

“Damn it. Should’ve used the bardiche or halberd instead of the spear. That way, I could’ve finished him off,” I muttered. Since I’d been using the spear a lot lately, I had grabbed it out of habit. A cleaving weapon would’ve been a better choice for this fight.

“This guy doesn’t look that tough, so I should be fine.”

Sure, he *was* tough, but I didn’t think he looked all that strong. He wasn’t anyone I couldn’t handle solo.

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Chapter Eleven

Part One

"All right! Let's eat! Time to drink!"

"Grill it! Grill it! Grill it!"

Jin and Galatt were chanting at the top of their lungs as they slapped chunks of wyvern meat down onto the grill. Leon and the guys from the Tamers' guild, not wanting to be outdone, started grilling some meat too.

"Man, these guys really don't know the meaning of restraint," Agris said in exasperation. He was watching Jin and the others practically fight over the grilled meat.

"Well, they probably think this is one of those times where it's acceptable," I said.

I glanced at Agris's plate—it was also piled high with sizzling wyvern meat. He wasn't really holding back either.

Now, why was such a massive barbecue going on, you might ask?

Well, it'd all started when we'd arrived in Sagan and decided to say hello to some old friends. First, we dropped by Karina's place. Then, Jin and the Dawnswords suddenly showed up. The timing had felt a little suspicious, but apparently, they'd heard that we were in town while they had been on their way to the guild, so they went looking for us. They said that they had something they wanted to get some advice from us about.

We had figured that we should move someplace quieter to chat, so we headed to the guild to borrow a room only to find the Tamers' guild hanging around there. As we caught up with them, the topic of the wyvern hunt came up, and next thing I knew, it turned into a "Hey, if you've got wyvern meat, let us taste it" kind of situation. Even Jin and the Dawnswords quickly agreed that food came first,

despite having had something supposedly serious to discuss.

And that's how we ended up having a full-on barbecue outside the city walls.

"Wyvern meat's supposed to be a luxury item, you know," I said.

"Oh, we definitely appreciate it!" Agris said.

"Yeah! We're eating it with gratitude!" Mennas and Leena agreed. Their plates were stacked just as high with grilled wyvern.

"Seriously, though, we really *are* thankful," Mennas added. "And to show our appreciation, we'll share the latest dungeon info with you! So you better be nice to us!"

"Yeah, it's stuff the *guild* doesn't even know yet!" Leena added.

"Oh right, you guys made it to the bottom floor, right? Are you sure it's okay to tell me stuff the guild hasn't officially heard yet?" I asked.

"Any intel an adventurer gathers on their own belongs to them. We're not obligated to report it to the guild right away unless it's an emergency. Dungeon info like this isn't gonna cause a panic."

"Exactly. It'd be one thing if the guild wanted to buy the info, but since they haven't asked, we don't owe them anything."

They probably *could* sell it for a good amount, but that carried the risk of someone else clearing the dungeon first. Then again, the only other party who'd made it nearly that deep had already retired, and the members of the next runner-up group were apparently old enough to retire, so I doubted they were much of a threat.

"I mean, I've gotten pretty deep myself. You sure you wanna tell me?" I asked. After all, I'd made it to around the sixtieth floor, so depending on their info, I could catch up to them real fast if I wanted to. Jin and the Dawnswords were supposedly working on the ninety-eighth floor, and the guild had been buzzing with talk about how fast they had gotten so deep in the dungeon.

"Well, I won't lie to you, but we won't give you everything, of course. Besides, even if you *do* catch up, you're not the kind of guy who'd just ignore us if we were still struggling, right?" Mennas said.

"Right...?" Leena echoed uncertainly.

"What's the going rate for wyvern meat again?" I asked with a serious look on my face.

The second I said that, both of them bowed their heads. “We’re sorry! We got too cocky!” they shouted.

A party like the Dawnswords could easily afford the cost of wyvern meat, so I knew they were just playing along with me. Honestly, I was joking around too, so we were even.

“All right,” I said. “Jokes aside, I’m not planning on doing that. But if I did, then you’d have no right to complain.”

“Don’t worry. We only share info with people we trust!”

“Yeah, if you give information this valuable to the wrong person, it could get you killed!”

Since they insisted, I agreed to hear what they had to say. They mostly told me what kind of monsters showed up on each floor, what ores could be found, and general descriptions of each area. They just didn’t mention *how* to reach the lower levels. Basically, if these scant details were enough to help me catch up with them, it would be kinda funny.

“Okay, now that we’ve gotten through all that, let’s get to the real reason we’re here. Jin! Galatt! Get over here already! Have you forgotten why we were looking for Tenma in the first place?!” Mennas snapped.

Jin and Galatt, who’d been in a meat-eating contest with Amur, finally wandered over.

“Sorry, that wyvern is just too damn good! We got a little carried away.” After they apologized to Mennas and Leena, they turned towards me.

“The truth is... We were looking for you because we needed some advice,” Jin said with a straight face.

But...

“Yeah, I know. You already told me that when we bumped into each other outside my apartment, remember?” I asked.

“Oh, right.”

Galatt and the others were struggling not to laugh at Jin’s forgetfulness, but the second I called over Gramps, they got all serious again.

“So, what’s this about advice?” Gramps asked.

“It’s about the boss on the bottom floor.”

According to Jin, the monster on the bottom floor—which they also thought was the dungeon boss—was a hydra. They'd tried fighting it a few times already but couldn't find a way to defeat it, so they'd retreated every time. The problem was the monster's insane regeneration abilities. It would heal itself back to full health before they could do any meaningful damage.

"A hydra, eh? Now that brings back memories... How many heads are we talking?" Gramps asked.

"Nine."

Gramps raised an eyebrow at that. He told us the biggest hydra he'd ever taken down had eight heads, and even that had been considered the biggest hydra on record.

"Nine heads... The one I fought that had eight heads was its own nightmare," he admitted.

"So that's why we were hoping to get some advice either from you, Master Merlin, since you've already taken down an eight-headed hydra before," Jin said, "or from Tenma, since he's famous for crazy, off-the-wall strategies."

There was something in Jin's reasoning that didn't sit well with me, so I protested. But not only did Jin and his group look confused at my reaction, even Gramps gave me a look as if to say I was the one being weird.

"Setting that aside for now... In my case, I won by brute-forcing it with magic and relying heavily on magical devices. But the real reason I came out on top was because of sheer luck. My spells just happened to hit it in the right spots, and my magical devices worked better than I expected. Honestly, even now, I'm amazed I actually defeated the thing," Gramps admitted.

"What were the magical devices you used back then?"

"You don't really see them around these days. One of them was like an overpowered version of that thing... What was it called, again? That exploding knife the guy Tenma fought in the tournament used. Anyway, even that knife was considered rare, and the one I used was way stronger. On top of that, mine was modified, which is now completely banned," Gramps explained.

Jin and the others looked visibly disappointed to hear that. I was

guessing that Gramps was talking about the knife Chaos had used—the one that had blown off his arm. Depending on how it was used, it could certainly be a handy weapon, but I doubted throwing even ten or twenty of those at a nine-headed hydra would make a dent at all.

But what caught my attention in Gramps's story was how he'd said that they were now banned. I asked him why. He told me it was because of two reasons: First, the tool was dangerously powerful for its size, making it perfect for assassinations; and secondly, if you modded one to boost its output, even a small bump could set it off. Gramps had only avoided disaster because he'd been lucky and because he'd mostly kept it sealed away in his magic bag. He said he'd broken out into a cold sweat once he'd realized just how close he'd been to blowing himself up.

"So basically, as long as you keep it in a magic bag, the risk of accidental explosions is pretty l—"

"Don't you dare even *think* about making one!" Gramps yelled, cutting me off before I could even finish my sentence.

"I know that. All right, if magical devices won't work, then what about a bunch of golems? I could give you a bunch...for the right price," I offered.

The group turned me down, however. They said it wouldn't be as satisfying if they didn't beat the boss with their own strength.

"I guess that makes sense," I nodded.

"We really appreciate the offer, but it wouldn't sit right with us if we went that route," Jin said. Galatt and the others agreed with him.

Yeah. I guess if they beat it with methods they don't agree with, then what's the point of being adventurers? I mentally kicked myself for suggesting it at all and then started trying to think about other ideas.

"Tell me more about its regeneration abilities," Gramps said.

"Well, let's say we spent an hour chipping away at it. In that same hour, it'd heal itself back to full health."

Gramps nodded. "That certainly is troublesome."

If it healed as fast as they could damage it, no wonder it was so tough to defeat. A hydra's recovery power certainly had its limits, but

if their attacks weren't outpacing that regeneration, they were gonna lose. It was the same as having infinite HP and Regen.

"What if you hit it with something that keeps dealing damage over time, even when you're taking a breather?" I asked. "If you can keep the damage constant, even a nine-headed hydra will go down eventually."

"Well, if we could do that, we wouldn't be here asking for help!" Jin snapped back, clearly thinking I was just messing around.

"Hang on, Jin! If Tenma's saying something that sounds nuts, that might be just what we're after! That's why we wanted to ask his advice, remember? Crazy ideas are his thing!"

"Yeah, Tenma wouldn't be making jokes at a time like this! He may be rotten, but he's not a demon!"

"Yeah, Tenma's not *that* rotten!"

"Will you three be quiet for a second?!" I yelled.

The three of them immediately realized what they'd just said and panicked.

Jin grabbed both my shoulders and started shaking me. "Tenma, I don't care what you do to these idiots later; just tell me if you've got an idea!"

"All right already, calm down! What I was thinking is this—you could try firing a bunch of harpoon-type weapons into the hydra's body. As long as those harpoons stay put, they'll keep doing damage," I suggested.

Even a tiny splinter could hurt for days if it were lodged in deep enough. The principle here was the same. If they could use something bigger and deadlier, it could keep applying damage to the hydra from inside the wound.

"Huh, that could actually work."

"Even if the hydra tries to heal, the harpoons would stay lodged inside it. And with the right setup, we could make sure they don't fall out. It's at least worth a try."

"Exactly. We've been stuck anyway, so we might as well give it a shot. We could always try something else if it doesn't pan out."

They'd already survived a few battles, so they clearly knew when to bail. My idea was just crazy enough that it might work.

"In that case, we'll need to design the tips so that they don't come back out. Alternatively, it'd be okay if they break off inside the hydra's body."

"It doesn't have to be a harpoon either. Arrows could work too; they've got the advantage of being long-ranged."

I even told them about toggle harpoons that were used in fishing. Those had detachable tips that stayed in their target and wouldn't come out easily. If you connected the tip and shaft with a loose knot and attached a separate long string to the main shaft, you could pull the whole thing back after throwing it. Then, you just had to swap out the tips, and you'd be good to go again.

"All right! The first step is to go get the weapons!"

"Yeah!"

Jin and Galatt were ready and raring to go, but the moment they turned around to leave, they were quickly drawn back in by the smell of grilled meat. They ran right back to their original spots at the grill like they'd lost control of their bodies.

"Guess we should head back too," Mennas said.

Leena agreed. "Yeah. You don't get the chance to eat wyvern meat every day."

Both of them went back to their seats, reluctant to miss out.

"Tenma, if we don't hurry, they'll eat everything before we get back!" Gramps said.

"There's still plenty of wyvern meat left..."

But even though I'd said that, I wasn't entirely convinced. At the rate they were eating, we would be lucky if they didn't scarf down all the meat I had taken out for today. I figured that we'd better have some orc meat prepped just in case, as backup.

"Come to think of it, we have to meet with the king and the others once we get back to the capital," I said.

Gramps nodded. "Right..."

Actually, Jin and the Dawnswords weren't the only ones who'd had a request for us today. There had been one from Karina and Arie too, regarding Amy. Apparently, there was a party at the academy coming up, and the students' parents were invited. They'd both gotten invitations, but traveling to and attending a party in the

capital meant that they'd be gone for two weeks, and that would be tough. Going to a place packed with nobles made them uncomfortable too, so they wanted to know what I thought they should do.

Since Kriss and the three idiots were all academy alums, we asked them about it. They told us that since Amy was officially part of my family in the capital, we could attend instead. Actually, it sounded like that was the only choice here.

If this were just a casual get-together, skipping it wouldn't be a big deal. However, this party was for the whole school, and the third-years were taking center stage. Some of them wouldn't be moving on to the upper school because they either were leaving or had failed their exams, so this party was also a graduation event—at least for most of the commoner students. The noble kids didn't see it as a graduation party at all, though. For them, it was the perfect chance to find a potential future husband or wife.

"It was like that in my day too, although that was so long ago my experience probably won't be too valuable..." Gramps muttered.

Back then, even though he'd had a reputation of being very talented, Gramps was the third son of a viscount with little chance of an inheritance. He'd also already been labeled as a weirdo, so it wasn't surprising that he hadn't been that popular. For the record, the most popular guy in his class had apparently been Lord Ernest.

"He was a weirdo too, though! But he had money and actually *was* royalty..." Gramps looked especially bitter about that last part. I guessed he still wasn't over it.

"Anyway, Kriss and the three idiots think that Amy's going to be the big draw for the nobles at this party," I said. "That makes sense, considering her ties to us and those three, even though she's a commoner."

Someone who married Amy would automatically gain a connection to the Otori family and the three noble idiots. Of course, even if someone managed that, it would probably put them at odds with the royal family—Tida, to be specific. But even if Amy were to reject Tida, I couldn't imagine him pulling anything shady against Amy's partner because that would put his reputation on the line.

"Honestly, if Amy could just end up with Tida, that would make everything so much easier..." I muttered.

"You should probably keep thoughts like that to yourself, Tenma. If you say that in the wrong place, you'd just be asking for trouble," Gramps warned.

I decided to wrap up that conversation before things got too far. "Anyway, there are probably going to be a few students trying to weasel their way into Amy's heart. We'll need to talk to Queen Maria about how to handle that."

"We should probably talk to Amy's mom and grandma first," Gramps suggested. "There might be people trying to go through them to get to her."

He had a point. We couldn't just move forward without checking in with Karina and Arie. We decided to go pay them a visit.

But before we could leave, Jin and the Dawnswords started begging for seconds. I stuck to the plan and brought out orc meat, which earned me a chorus of boos. Once I threatened to charge them for the food they'd already eaten, they shut up and started grilling the orc meat. Satisfied, I finally headed off towards the apartment.

Karina and Arie were surprised that we brought up the topic of the party right away, but they weren't as shocked as I was when they told me, "We heard Amy was close to one of the royals, but we always thought she would marry *you*, Tenma."

It wasn't uncommon for successful adventurers to have multiple wives, and in their eyes, I outranked Tida as a marriage candidate in terms of status.

I told them I had never thought of Amy in that way.

They just smiled and said, "Well, you *do* have a lot of beautiful women around you."

Now I had yet another secret that no one else could ever find out about...

"We're finally back!" I said with a sigh of relief.

"It's a good thing we got here before the snow started," Gramps said.

After several months away, my party had finally returned to the capital. We had stopped by the guild first to report that the quest was done, and now, we were back at Gramps's estate. Only the Oracion crew and Leni were here. Kriss, Albert, and the others had said goodbye to us at the guild. They'd had a lot of business to catch up on, even though they'd just gotten back, and had already been grumbling about it.

"Huh? Sounds like someone's here," I remarked.

"If someone came by carriage while we were gone, it's probably Alex or someone else from the castle," Gramps said.

We pulled up to the front of the mansion with Thunderbolt, and right on cue, the door opened. I thought Aina had come to greet us as usual, but I was surprised to see Cruyff standing there instead.

"Welcome back, Master Tenma, Master Merlin. I'm just here on a bit of business today."

Hearing the word "business" immediately made me wonder if the king was here, but Cruyff shook his head. Puzzled, we went inside the mansion.

"Welcome home, Master Tenma and Master Merlin!"

"Welcome home!"

Aina *did* greet us in the foyer as usual, but there were two surprising additions to her maid crew. I was about to ask what was going on, but the look Aina gave me said, *Don't say a word.* I played along and walked past them without comment.

"I'm ho— Ack!"

"Waaah! Aura, bwa ha!"

"W-Welco— Pfft!"

"I'm Leni Tantan. I'll be here for a short time. I'm pleased to meet you."

The girls' reactions to our new "servants" were all over the place like it was some kind of comedy sketch. Aina's icy glare sent the first three rushing behind me. Leni, however, stayed behind to properly introduce herself to Aina and Cruyff with a polite bow.

As for Gramps, he was right behind me. He simply said, "Hmph," before walking straight to the dining room without much of a reaction. However, the moment he made it in there, he burst into

uproarious laughter.

"He was just holding it in, huh? Well, can't say I don't understand," I muttered.

"Hrm. Yes, I under-pfft!"

Gramps had shown more restraint than Amur—she was cracking up in front of the dining room.

As for Jeanne and Aura, they'd been quiet, and they looked like they were still traumatized by Aina's earlier glare. Their faces were pale and they were moving very slowly, like they were trying not to be noticed.

"Anyway, I guess I should get the souvenirs sorted in case someone shows up. Oh, but first, I should check on Jubei and the others."

I stepped into the hallway, and just then...

"Baaaaah!"

The door burst open, and a black ball of fluff, aka Mary, came charging towards me.

"Not so fast."

"Huh? Eeeek!"

I had been ready for that as I'd heard Mary's hoofbeats pounding from down the hallway. I sidestepped easily the moment I opened the door. Aura, on the other hand, had no idea what was coming. She took the brunt of Mary's body slam and went rolling a few meters across the floor with the sheep tangled around her.

"Hey, I'm home, Aries! You too, Tama! I'm back!" I called out.

"Baaa."

"Mooo."

Aries came trotting over right after Mary's dramatic entrance, and Tama's head popped up at the nearest window to the dining room, letting out a cheerful moo.

"I got souvenirs for you guys too," I said.

Aries tipped his head in confusion, so I pulled the bundle of hay I'd bought in Shellhide out of my magic bag and held it out to him. He sniffed it once and then happily started munching away.

"It's good, isn't it? Let's head over to where Jubei and the others are and eat there. You'll miss out if you don't come now, Mary."

"Baa! Baa baaa baaaa!"

"Aura, let go of Mary now."

"Okay."

Mary had tried to crash into Amur after tackling Aura, but Aura had caught the sheep in her embrace. Mary made a half-hearted attempt to charge me once she was freed, but I could tell she was holding back. She probably realized that if she went too far, she probably wouldn't get any hay.

"Here, I'll leave it right here for you. It's premium hay straight from Shellhide."

Calling it premium was a lie, but their area *was* known for its horses, so I was sure their feed was high-quality. The margrave had even helped me find a good supplier, and I'd bought it in bulk.

"All right, I should go ask Cruyff what this is all about," I said.

I headed towards the dining room, but Aina intercepted me and guided me to the parlor instead. After waiting a few minutes...

"I have brought snacks to go along with tea, sir."

"H-Here is your tea... Waaah!"

"Hot, hot, hot!"

Lyle had just set some sweets in front of me and was trying his best to smile when Luna came in behind him. She spilled hot tea over his right shoulder.



"Princess Luna! You can't fill teacups to the brim like that!"

"Could you maybe worry about *me* first?" Lyle protested.

Aina scolded Luna while mopping up the spilled tea. Meanwhile, Cruyff stepped in and quietly replaced the drinks, leaving Lyle to dry off on his own.

"Would you mind telling me why the two of you are dressed like that and hanging around my house?" I asked.

"Of course; one moment, please," Cruyff said. "Prince Lyle, where are you going? You still need to explain things to Master Tenma. Please stand behind me quietly."

Lyle had tried to sneak out, but Cruyff had stopped him.

"The truth is, these two have been undergoing butler and maid training under Queen Maria's orders. Of course it hasn't been every day due to their respective responsibilities at school and work. Today just happened to be the day they were being tested. We were supposed to determine whether or not to extend their training."

I didn't know what these two had done to piss off the queen, but it must've been pretty bad. Either that or their past behavior had finally caught up to them.

"So how are they doing?"

"Atrociously," Cruyff said without hesitation.

And judging by how hard the two of them took his answer, they'd clearly been confident they'd been doing well. Being told that the exact opposite was true really took the wind out of their sails.

"Well, poor performance aside, I will admit they worked hard. That much is a fact."

They managed to smile hearing that from him, but...

"The final decision rests with Queen Maria, of course. I'll simply be reporting the facts to her."

Cruyff's final words made that glimmer of hope vanish immediately. Luna's and Lyle's faces were now filled with despair.

"Looks like you've got your hands full," I said. "Anyway, I understand. Now, putting that matter aside, I brought back some souvenirs. I wanted to hand them out."

"But don't you have something important to report to Queen Maria, Master Tenma?"

"Oh yeah. There is something like that."

I *did* have something very important to share with the royal family—an incident that had happened while I had been dealing with the margrave's request.

"I think it's best if you deliver the message to Queen Maria personally. If you're not too tired, I recommend going now. Her Majesty has surely been waiting to hear from you," Cruyff said.

"All right. I'll go get ready, then."

I quickly explained the situation to Gramps and Jeanne. I told them to put on clean clothes, and I changed out of my own dirty outfit. I stuffed the souvenirs into my magic bag and then told Cruyff I was ready.

He was surprised to see Jeanne with me, but once I told him that she was involved in the matter I needed to report to the queen, he nodded in understanding.

"Tenma, I wanna go too!"

"Next time, Amur. I'm sure Queen Maria will want to hear your side of things too. But right now, Jeanne's version comes first," I told her.

"Ugh. Fine." Amur reluctantly backed down.

Gramps, Jeanne, and I followed Cruyff to the carriage.

Aina wouldn't be going to the castle today as she would be staying behind a bit longer to oversee Luna and Lyle's training. I told her that Aura would be resting today and starting her duties again tomorrow. She nodded, even though she was obviously just itching to put Aura to work right away. I caught her glancing sideways at Aura's joyful cheers more than once.

I saw Luna nearby, and she looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to step forward. That was probably because as a trainee maid, she had to mind her place.

"If it's about earlier, Luna, don't worry. I won't mention your little slipup to the queen."

After I tried to reassure her, she shook her head. Apparently, that wasn't the issue.

"Huh? Oh, you mean the souvenirs! We brought back wyvern meat. The palace chefs should be cooking it up tomorrow," I said.

“Really? That’s gre—er, I mean...” She looked excited for a second, but it seemed like that wasn’t what she wanted to talk about either.

Okay, this is turning into a blind guessing game.

Still, Cruyff was waiting on me, so all I could do was apologize and hop into the carriage.

Cruyff was driving while we sat inside.

“Master Merlin, Master Tenma, I see Kriss up ahead,” he said.

I leaned out the window. There Kriss was, standing with some guy. It looked like they were arguing.

“Should we ignore them?” Cruyff asked.

I smelled trouble, so I was ready to do just that. But then, Kriss turned around. Our eyes met.

“Cruyff, full speed ahead!” I yelled. “Dodge!”

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible. Kriss has already noticed us, and she’s heading this way.”

Even if we could outrun her in a straight line, we were still in the middle of the city. There wasn’t a lot of room for sharp turns, so she’d board the carriage in no time.

“Fine, just stop here,” I said. “She can at least walk over to us.”

Thirty seconds later, Kriss power walked right to the carriage.

“Kriss of the king’s guard, reporting back for duty!”

“Understood. Please resume your escort assignment.”

She saluted Cruyff and was about to board the carriage when...

“Kristina! I’m not finished talking to you!”

The man she was arguing with came rushing over. However...

“Did you not hear me when I said I was resuming my duties with the king’s guard?” she began. “The passenger in this carriage is a guest of the royal family! Interfering with a guard’s duty to protect that guest could be considered an act of disrespect towards the crown. Are you prepared for that? Also, my name is Kriss. Not Kristina! And while you may be a baronet, members of the king’s guard are granted nobility equivalent to a baron or higher directly from His Majesty. Do you know what that means?”

She had an icy look on her face, and her eyes were sharper than I’d ever seen. Honestly, if that guy had taken one more step

forward, I wouldn't have been surprised if she had drawn her sword.

"Kriss, I'd like to get to the castle sometime today," I said. "Queen Maria's expecting us."

"I'm sorry about that. Let's go."

Maybe it was me mentioning Queen Maria, or maybe the guy was just finally realizing how angry she was, but either way, he didn't press her any further. However, with the way he glared at Kriss as he left, I could tell he wasn't satisfied.

Kriss, on the other hand, acted like he no longer existed and calmly stepped into the carriage.

The moment the carriage started moving, Kriss was right back to her usual self.

"Thanks for saving me back there," she said. "I was *this* close to murdering that guy. He just wouldn't leave me alone! If you all hadn't passed by, I might've actually gone through with it."

"But who was that guy, Kriss? And what was with that whole Kristina thing?" I asked.

Kriss made a bitter face like she didn't want to answer, but she probably felt obligated to since we'd bailed her out.

"He used to be my father. And Kristina was what they called me when I was a kid," she said, glancing away. I recalled her having told us that she'd cut off ties to her family because they tried to use her for their own personal gain, but it seemed like reality was even worse than I'd imagined.

She continued. "I was twelve when he brought me a marriage proposal from someone. It's not unheard of for noble girls to get betrothed at that age, but that wasn't it. He actually wanted me to get married right then to some creep in his forties!"

The more she talked about it, the angrier she got. She was really worked up about this.

"Even as a kid, I knew there was no way I could go through with it, but both he and his wife were all for it. The whole thing seemed suspicious to me, so I sneaked into their room one day to do a little digging. It turned out that he owed a massive amount of debt to that creep and was planning on using *me* to pay it off! And his wife figured I'd outlive the creep, so she figured she could just swoop in

and take over his house through me. That old guy was a viscount, by the way."

At only twelve years old, Kriss had racked her brain, trying to figure out a way out of marrying the old guy. In the end, she had decided to run away from home. She'd set off for the capital the following day, financing her travels with her parents' secret stash of money.

Once she'd reached the capital, she had run to a guard station and told them why she'd run away from home. The guards there hadn't known what to do, so they had sent word to the king's guard. The guard hadn't been sure how to deal with it either, so the story had gone straight to the king himself.

The king had been shocked to hear such an outrageous story and decided to personally grant her protection. He'd then sent word to both her family and the viscount and formally approved her request to sever ties with them. After that, he had considered putting her in an orphanage, but her practice test scores for the academy had been so good that she had ended up officially taking its entrance exam the following year. She'd landed a spot in the school via recommendation.

Until then, she had lived off compensation money that had been garnished from her former family since trying to force an underage girl into marriage was legally abuse. When that money had run out, she'd borrowed some from a lender in the capital. One of the knights who had been looking after her at the palace had acted as her guarantor—she'd later told me it had actually been Jean.

"Honestly, I'd completely forgotten that my ex-father even existed until recently. But when he found out I'd won the tournament and still wasn't married, he came crawling back and offered me another marriage match. He never learns. Doesn't he realize that since the king personally approved the disownment, I outrank him now? Even approaching me like that is practically defying a royal decree!" Kriss yelled.

Kriss ended up ranting throughout the entire carriage ride. At one point, Gramps and Jeanne pretended to doze off so they wouldn't get dragged into it.

"Kriss, that's enough. You *are* technically back on duty with the king's guard, remember?" Cruyff said, and only then did she finally shut up.

"There's the castle gates..."

Even though she'd said it just to get away from that man, she *had* declared in front of Cruyff and other people that she was returning to her duties, so as soon as we passed through the castle gates, she mentally switched gears.

The carriage passed through and pulled up to the castle's entrance. Kriss hopped off before we got there, though. Members of the king's guard weren't allowed inside the castle without their uniforms except in cases of emergency, so she said she'd go get changed in her quarters first.

Cruyff led us to the room where Queen Maria was waiting. "I've brought Master Tenma, Your Majesty."

The king, Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella, Prince Zane, and Archduke Ernest were all there as well.

"Queen Maria, I completed your request without issue. And I'll take your souvenirs to the kitchen later," I said.

"Thank you, Tenma, and welcome home," she said.

After we exchanged greetings with everyone, I mentioned I had a report to give, so she gestured for us to take a seat. She seemed surprised when Jeanne took a seat too—as my maid, she usually stood behind me. But when I told the queen that this matter also involved Jeanne, she allowed it.

"So, what's this report?" Queen Maria looked kind of excited as she asked, like she was expecting to hear tales of my travels or something.

"You might have heard already, but we ran into a very troublesome monster in the Elder Forest," I said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, there was a lich. Leon said he already sent a detailed report through the guild, but I thought it would be good if I gave you a detailed, personal account. The reason I brought Jeanne with me is because she was the only member of my party who didn't fall into the lich's trap when we visited Kukuri Village. She can give you a

clearer account than I can," I said. "Um... Is something wrong?"

I noticed everyone's expressions shift a bit when I said that, which made me a little uneasy. However, they all shook their heads.

Anyway, I continued and recounted the battle against the lich and what we had observed. Jeanne talked about how even though Gramps and I have high magic resistance, we had still fallen into the trap without even realizing it, and how she had been the only one unaffected. We still didn't know why, but we eventually just guessed the trap had just happened to have been weaker where she'd been.

But, secretly, I had a different theory because of my Identify skill. Jeanne's title was "Saint," so I figured it must have had something to do with that. But since my Identify skill was a secret and I wasn't exactly sure *how* her title affected things, I just nodded and agreed with the theory that it had just been a coincidence.

"I'll go and drop off the souvenirs to the kitchen," I said.

"That's not necessary, Tenma. Just give them to Cruyff, and he'll take care of it."

Just as things came to a good ending point, I stood up to go deliver the wyvern meat to the kitchen, but Queen Maria stopped me. I figured it was because I was technically still a guest in the castle, so it would be inappropriate for me to do it myself. I obeyed and transferred the meat into Cruyff's magic bag before sitting back down.

"Tenma, don't you have something else to report to us?" Queen Maria asked.

I thought about it for a moment before replying. "I built a fortress on the border of the margravate using magic," I said, wondering if she was talking about my having cooperated with the military. That didn't seem to be what she was looking for. "Okay, are you talking about the spies in the margravate, then?"

"No, Margrave Haust already informed us of that matter. We're letting him deal with it," the king replied.

So that wasn't it either.

"Is this about Kanon? No, wait—is it because I used Goldie's and Silvie's thread for Ceruna's wedding dress?" I asked. I wondered if some noble had brought it up.

The queen shook her head, but she *did* react a bit when I mentioned the wedding. I guessed it had something to do with that.

"Is it because I officiated the wedding?" I asked.

"That's it!"

I had finally guessed it, and judging from her reaction, she was quite eager to talk about it.

Part Two

I was kneeling in a formal position, getting scolded by the queen.

Usually, I'd just watch from the sidelines while she chewed out the king, Prince Lyle, and Luna, but now it was my turn. Now I finally realized why those three—sometimes four, if you counted Lord Ernest—always looked so miserable during those lectures.

Oh, and you know how people say beautiful women are terrifying when they're angry? It's true.

Everyone who'd been in the room while I had given my report on the lich was now watching me get yelled at, including Gramps, Jeanne, Cruyff, and Duke Sanga. The men were giving me exasperated and sympathetic looks. Princess Isabella seemed just as angry as Queen Maria, though, and as the lecture went on, Jeanne took her side too.

Why is this happening?

Well, to explain how I ended up in this situation, I'd have to rewind a bit to the moment when I'd given the queen the report she'd *really* been waiting for...

"So Tenma, you're telling me that you officiated the wedding and chose Duke Sanga's daughter Primera as your partner? Why is that?" Queen Maria asked.

I figured she was asking because women loved to gossip about weddings. Honestly, I thought she was just teasing me about doing the ceremony with Primera, so I kept my answer simple.

"Albert asked me to," I said. "He told me that it wouldn't be proper for a man to handle the bride's side of things and that we needed a noblewoman who'd be easy to get family approval for. That's why I asked Primera."

Gramps and Jeanne already knew that, so they didn't react. However, the color drained from the queen's and Princess Isabella's faces. The king and the other men in attendance looked at me like I was a pathetic creature.

"You! Call Duke Sanga and Albert here immediately!" Queen

Maria yelled furiously.

The king flinched. "Y-Yes, Cruyff, go ahead and send word!" he ordered.

"At once, Your Majesty!"

"Tenma. Sit down right there," Queen Maria said.

"Pardon?" I was already sitting in a chair, so I didn't understand.

But then, the queen pointed to the floor. "Sit. Down."

I glanced over to the king, but the moment our eyes met, he looked away, and so did Prince Caesar and Prince Zane.

Princess Isabella was giving me a death glare. "Do as my mother-in-law says. Now," she said sharply.

"O-Okay...?" I had no idea what was happening, but it was very obvious that Queen Maria and Princess Isabella were angrier than I'd ever seen them before. I did as I was told and knelt formally in front of the queen.

"Do you have any idea why I'm angry, Tenma?" she asked. When I shook my head no, she continued. "Do you know what a go-between is?"

"It's the person who arranges and officiates a wedding," I said.

She nodded. "That's right. But traditionally, the role of a go-between is performed by someone who's already married."

"Well, I *did* tell Primera she'd be something like a go-between, and she was fine with it..." I started.

The queen shut me down immediately. "That's not the point!" she said, cutting me off. "If this had just been a small, private wedding with close friends and family, perhaps your excuse would've worked. But this wedding you and Primera officiated had outside guests. Nobles, in fact. The whole town knew about it, and you hosted the wedding. So that won't cut it."

"I don't exactly understand what the problem is here," I said, letting my emotions get the better of me and pushing back. I didn't understand why everyone was so mad.

The queen just let out a long sigh and stared at me. "Tenma, you're a man and an adventurer, so no, there's no problem for *you.* And even if there were, it wouldn't be a big deal. This is about Primera, however. She's a noblewoman. And I hate to say it like this,

but this is going to damage her reputation."

I was wondering why that would be the case when Princess Isabella interjected.

"You might not understand, but noblewomen are expected to be chaste," the princess explained. "It's essential that when she bears her husband's child, it's his without any doubt in the matter."

That made sense to me. If a child born to a noblewoman wasn't actually her husband's, it could end up ending the noble bloodline.

"I understand that. But all we did was officiate the ceremony. It's not like we had any kind of physical relationship."

"Still, there will be speculation, and there are those who will see her actions as her doing something with a man she isn't even dating that a married woman should only do with her husband. Some may take that as her being an easy woman. And even if people know there's nothing going on between you two, there will always be those who will spread rumors to damage her and House Sanga's reputation."

The realization that my casual request might've really hurt Primera and her family's reputation made a cold sweat run down my back.

"Queen Maria, I've brought Duke Sanga and Lord Albert," Cruyff said, showing the two men into the room.

For a moment, a rude thought crossed my mind that perhaps they'd rushed over just to get a glimpse of me getting lectured.

"Oh? That was fast," the queen said.

"I saw their carriage approaching the gates and brought them straight here," Cruyff explained.

"I see. The duke must've had the same concerns, then. Duke Sanga, please have a seat. Albert? You kneel next to Tenma." The queen gestured for the duke to sit on the opposite side of Princess Isabella and ordered Albert to kneel beside me.

The duke sat in the chair Cruyff prepared without a word. He didn't even look at me. Albert was pale as a ghost and was shaking so hard that he nearly fell over as he knelt down.

"Now then, Albert. Do you wish to disgrace the Sanga family? Or do you have some great ambition that's so important that you would

sacrifice Primera over it?" the queen asked calmly, glancing once towards the duke first. Her voice was quieter than when she was yelling at me, but since her eyes weren't smiling at all, she seemed even scarier. "Just like I told Tenma, having Primera act as a matchmaker will destroy her reputation. People are going to think she's a tramp."

Her wording had gotten even harsher, and judging by Albert's expression, it had the desired effect. He looked like he was about to pass out.

The queen continued. "Albert, as the heir to House Sanga, *you* gave permission for Primera to act as go-between and officiant, didn't you? And you had Tenma ask her so it wouldn't come directly from you. Don't you think that's cowardly? Officially, it looks like Tenma asked, Primera accepted, and you approved it. So if anyone's reputation will be damaged, it'll be theirs and not yours. Tenma's not a noble, so that's not much of a problem for him. But your sister is another matter. She doesn't have that luxury."

Albert seemed to understand immediately what had taken me some time to comprehend earlier. He began to panic. "Well, it's just that she said she wasn't really interested in getting married, so I thought..." he said.

"Not wanting to get married and not having the opportunity to are two completely different things. Just because she's not looking now doesn't mean she won't want to someday," the queen said. "But thanks to you, Albert, you've made that possibility a lot less likely. Or at the very least, hurt her prospects considerably."

Queen Maria's logic completely ripped Albert's excuses to shreds. Duke Sanga had been glaring at him this whole time, but when our eyes met, he quickly looked away and cleared his throat. It seemed like all the other men in the room, including Gramps, were trying to become invisible. Meanwhile, the look on Jeanne's face said that she thought I deserved every bit of what was going on.

Why did this have to happen...?

Obviously, it was my fault, but I wished I could go back in time and knock both myself and Albert upside the head for even thinking of doing such a thing. That thought must've shown on my face,

because...

"Tenma? You don't look like you're feeling sufficient remorse about this matter."

"N-Not at all! I mean, I'm just reflecting on my behavior."

"And how exactly do you plan to take responsibility for this?" the queen demanded.

"Responsibility?" I repeated.

In situations like this, "taking responsibility" could really only mean one thing...

"You *do* realize I'm asking if you intend on marrying Primera, don't you?"

I was expecting her to say that. Marriage would be the most obvious way for me to take responsibility for the situation, considering the potential damage to her reputation and family name.

"Primera's the daughter of a duke, so her noble status is far above yours. But your parents, Ricardo and Celia, were nobles, and given all of your accomplishments and your long-standing relationship with House Sanga, it's not an unreasonable match. What do you say?"

I didn't have any objections to what she'd said, and the duke wasn't objecting either, so he must've agreed with the queen. That meant it all hinged on my answer. But if I just got swept up in this solution, then it would show that I hadn't learned a thing at all.

"Tenma?"

"I'll take responsibility however I can, but when it comes to marriage, I think Primera's feelings are the most important thing," I said. "I don't think we should be discussing this without her here."

"The head of the family's wishes matter more than the feelings of the individuals involved. So if the duke tells her to marry, then that's that," the queen said.

"But that's no better than what Albert did," I protested.

"Are you saying you wouldn't be satisfied with Primera?"

I thought it over for a moment. "I didn't say that at all. Primera's personality and character are exactly what I would look for in an ideal partner. But that's a different topic than what we're talking about now," I said firmly. I guess I'd never really considered this

before, but now that I was forced to, Primera honestly *would* be a great choice for a wife.

"And what do you think about all this, Duke Sanga?" the queen asked, turning her gaze on him.

I followed suit.

The duke looked even more serious than before, but suddenly...

"Pfft, ah ha ha! I can't hold it in anymore!"

He burst out laughing. And it wasn't just a little chuckle. He was laughing uncontrollably and clutching his stomach.

Albert and I just looked at each other like *What the hell just happened?*

The queen and king started laughing too. I looked around the room and realized Prince Caesar and Prince Zane were both covering their mouths, stifling their own giggles.

The only ones in the room not laughing, and therefore totally confused, were me, Albert, Gramps, and Jean.

Duke Sanga tried to recover himself a bit. "Sorry about that. Actually, a letter from Primera arrived a little while ago, and she mentioned acting as go-between and officiant together with you, Tenma. She told me about the wedding too. She also said that Albert seemed to be plotting something, but she made it very clear that you had nothing to do with it. I figured I should pass that information along to the queen since she's basically your guardian these days," he said between laughs.

So the whole mess had started because he had given Primera's letter to the queen. Albert and I were beside ourselves.

"However, Albert, I'm still very angry with you. You used our family name without permission to drag Primera into this situation while getting Tenma involved too," Duke Sanga said sternly.

"Exactly. The royal family even put out a formal decree to the nobility not to use Tenma for their own gain, and you violated that," the queen said.

So, thanks to Primera's letter, they weren't actually mad at me but at Albert.

As soon as the queen finished, Duke Sanga handed Albert the letter from Primera.

"We can talk more about this back at home, but today certainly has been full of wonderful surprises!"

That was when I suddenly realized what I'd said earlier.

"I agree! Tenma thinks Primera is a perfect match for marriage! I'm so happy! I might be holding one of Tenma's children someday very soon!" the queen gushed.

She was exaggerating, but...yeah, that was basically what I'd said.

Ugh, this is so embarrassing...

The way the guys in the room were all staring at me was so awkward. I wished they'd just get it over with and tease me instead.

But that would just make it even worse...

"Now, now, Queen Maria. I'll be the one to hold my grandchild first!" the duke said with a grin.

"It'll be my turn after that, since it'll be my great-grandchild!" Gramps added.

Oh, great. Now Gramps is joining in. This is really rough...

I looked at the king for help, but he and Lord Ernest were clearly just waiting to jump into the conversation too. Meanwhile, Prince Caesar, Princess Isabella, and Prince Zane were chatting about old times. Cruyff, meanwhile, had roped Jeanne into helping him set up the tea.

Only Albert was left, but he was busy reading through Primera's letter.

And she had written *a lot.* He was holding at least five or six pages in his hands, and there was no way all of that was about the wedding and Albert's little scheme. I had a feeling at least a few of those pages were her talking crap about him. I really wanted to sneak a peek at it.

"Oh, you can sit down in a chair now, Tenma," the queen said at last. Apparently, she had finally remembered that I existed. She paused her conversation with the duke just long enough to give me permission to sit.

Albert was still glued to what he was reading and slowly started to stand up, but...

"You stay right there, Albert," the duke ordered.

Albert froze and sat back down without a word.

"Tea, Tenma!" Jeanne said loudly.

"Uh, thanks?"

Jeanne practically slammed a teacup down in front of me. She looked like she was in a rotten mood.

"I understand how you feel. I won't mention this to Aina," Cruyff said quietly to her.

"Well, Tenma, I'm glad things worked out this time thanks to Primera's intervention, but under normal circumstances, you *would* be expected to take responsibility by getting engaged or married on the spot."

"I understand, Your Majesty."

"Oh, I think that's enough, Queen Maria," interjected Duke Sanga. "From our perspective, just learning how fond Tenma is of Primera was worth the trouble. Now, Tenma... I'd like to ask you not to do anything like this with another woman. I understand that she agreed to it, but if the same thing happened with someone else, I don't think she'd take it well. And as Primera's father, I would have to take action, if you know what I mean. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

For some reason, the duke suddenly seemed scarier than Queen Maria. It wasn't pressure through strength, but the kind of intimidation that only a powerful noble could inflict. In comparison, the queen's brand of intimidation was something that made your instincts scream at you not to mess with her. And as for the king, well, I never found him scary in the first place, most likely because all my memories of him involved him goofing off, being kind of pathetic, or being just plain sloppy. He felt more like an uncle who was always joking around than a king. Honestly, I felt the same way about Lord Ernest and Prince Lyle too. In my own personal ranking of the royal family, the queen sat firmly at the top in terms of scariness, and those three were at the very bottom.

"Your Majesty, perhaps it's time to call in our eavesdropper behind the door?" Cruyff said smoothly.

Cruyff's suggestion put a faint smile on the queen's face. "You're quite right. There are a few things we need to have a word about."

“Is there someone else out there besides Steel?” the duke asked, raising an eyebrow. He assumed they were talking about his bodyguard Steel, but apparently, that wasn’t the case at all.

Cruyff crept over to the door without a sound and opened it. “Come in, Kriss. The queen would like to have a word with you.”

The moment the door swung open, I heard a thump and a scream, but Cruyff just strolled back to his place behind the queen like nothing had happened.

Kriss entered the room with a guilty expression on her face, rubbing her forehead.

“Kriss, you know that I assigned you to be Tenma’s handler so things like this wouldn’t happen,” the queen said.

“Well, I thought the instructions were more like, ‘You should give Tenma a hand if you’re free...’”

“What was that?”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty!” Kriss cried out.

And now it was time for Kriss to kneel beside Albert for her own lecture from the queen. I took that opportunity to slip away quietly. I might’ve been totally abandoning Albert, but since he was still staring at the letter in shock, I didn’t think he’d even notice me leaving.

“Tenma, you look exhausted,” Prince Caesar said.

“Well, it was his own fault, so he can’t complain.”

“I understand that expecting an adventurer to follow noble customs might be a lot to ask, but...” Prince Caesar began.

Princess Isabella interrupted him. “Still, whether you’re a noble or an adventurer, making a lady look bad is absolutely unacceptable!”

“I think it’s about time for me to be going...” Prince Zane said, and he quietly slipped out of the room while the other two bickered beside me.

“Zane sure doesn’t change,” Prince Caesar said, looking slightly exasperated.

“Speaking as his sister-in-law, I think a happy marriage is a wonderful thing,” Princess Isabella said with a smile on her face.

“Prince Caesar, if you’ll excuse us, I think we’ll head out too,” Duke Sanga said. “I’m truly sorry that Albert caused so much

trouble. My apologies again, Tenma." The duke nodded to both Prince Caesar and me. Then, he turned to say his goodbyes to Queen Maria and the king before retrieving Albert, whose legs must've gone completely numb from sitting formally for so long. Nevertheless, Albert was frantically trying to move his legs so he could get out of there as fast as he could.

"By the way, I had something to ask you about Amy," I said after they had left.

"Did Tida do something?!" Prince Caesar asked with alarm.

I told him it had nothing to do with his son, and his face relaxed with relief. Princess Isabella giggled at the sight of it.

"What's so funny, Isabella?" Prince Caesar asked her.

"At least someone looks like they're enjoying themselves."

Lord Ernest and Gramps wandered over to see what all the commotion was about.

It seemed odd to have such a large group just standing around, so we moved to a nearby table. We were also careful to stay out of Queen Maria's line of sight—Kriss was still being subjected to her lecturing. Kriss noticed us slipping away and looked in our direction, but that only got her yelled at more for not paying attention. The king couldn't exactly ignore the queen's lecture, so he stared enviously at us. It seemed like he wished he could join in on the fun.

"So, what was your question?" Prince Caesar asked me.

"I heard there is going to be a party at the academy soon, and Amy's family can't make it. I was wondering if I should attend the party instead, as her guardian," I said.

"That shouldn't be a problem," he began. "The Otori family are her official guardians in the capital, so even if her birth family could attend, you'd still be getting a separate invitation."

Apparently, the reason I hadn't received anything yet was that different people were in charge of sending invitations to out-of-town guardians and local ones. The out-of-towners' invitations had been sent out much earlier.

I then explained the circumstances further.

"So, according to Albert and the others, there's a chance someone might try to propose to Amy during the party?" Princess

Isabella asked.

"It's definitely possible," Prince Caesar said. "Even with your backing, there might be a student who thinks he can just push Amy a bit, thinking that she wouldn't be able to say no because she's a commoner. The royal family wants to avoid trouble, obviously, but since she's not officially Tida's girlfriend, we can't interfere with her decisions. That's one of the reasons why Tida's been so grumpy lately..."

Ah, so that's why Prince Caesar jumped into the conversation so fast when I mentioned Amy... He'd assumed Tida had done something reckless again.

"You know, the way Tida's been acting lately reminds me a little too much of Father," Prince Caesar confided.

"That's pretty worrying," I said.

Everyone at the table nodded.

"Love makes people do stupid things. Take Alex when he was that age, for example. He was a walking disaster!" Gramps said. Even though that comment had been quite rude, no one objected.

Lord Ernest looked down at his hands. "He really was. I lost count of how many times I had to give him a good walloping," he said.

"Honestly, I'd rather have Tida continue being hung up on Amy than falling for someone worse. But if she rejects him..." Princess Isabella trailed off.

I understood why she was worried. It would be great if things were to work out, but there was always a risk that Tida would freak out if she were to not return his affections.

"I don't think Amy *dislikes* Tida," she added. "He might still have a chance if he doesn't rush things too much."

"I hope that's the case. But even if they do get together, Amy being a commoner still poses a problem. You'll be there to help if we need you, right?" the prince asked me.

"Of course," I said. "Amy's important to me because she's my apprentice. I'll do whatever I can."

I'd thought calling her my student might've sounded too weak to protect her against a bunch of fools, so I'd gone with "apprentice" instead.

Prince Caesar seemed satisfied with my answer. "Good. I'll be counting on you when the time comes. There will be conditions, of course. But given their ages, it might happen sooner than you think."

Basically, it sounded like we were preparing to back Tida if things moved forward with Amy. However, that got me thinking about something Queen Maria had mentioned earlier.

"Prince Caesar, Queen Maria said that when it comes to noble marriages, the head of the family's decision matters more than the individuals themselves. So how does that work in Kriss's situation?" I asked.

Kriss had told me that she'd run away from home because she hadn't wanted to get married to that older man to cover her family's debts. But if the royal family had stepped in to help her, wouldn't that contradict what Queen Maria had said?

Prince Caesar, Princess Isabella, and Lord Ernest all had awkward looks suddenly come over their faces.

"Well... Even Mother couldn't stomach the idea of marrying off a twelve-year-old girl to a man in his forties who'd been divorced three times," Prince Caesar said.

"Especially when he had already been a problem long before that. His first wife was his own age, but the second was only fifteen, and the third was a minor. She was about Kriss's age at the time..." Princess Isabella said, filling in the details that her husband had tried to politely tiptoe around.

"He had an affair with the girl who'd become his second wife while he was still married to his first. When his first wife found out, he divorced her and married the next right away. Then, the same thing happened, and that was how he got married a third time. Apparently, his first wife was just for show, to cover up his, er...preferences. He wasn't interested in grown women—he was only interested in young girls. So when his second and third wives grew up and were no longer his type, he dumped them too," she explained.

Once his first wife had found out about his preferences, he had stopped trying to hide them. As for wives two and three, it was more like he had straight up abandoned them.

"So as we said, not even Mother is heartless enough to marry a young girl off to a creep like that," Prince Caesar said.

Honestly, the way he phrased it made it sound like he still considered the queen to be *somewhat* heartless, but I let it go without comment. If Prince Lyle had said that instead, I would've said something.

"Okay. So basically, Kriss's bad luck with men started from the get-go," I said.

"That's certainly part of it, but Kriss also has very high standards," replied Princess Isabella. "Probably because of what she went through with her father when she was younger. She's not willing to settle."

We all nodded and turned to glance at Kriss—she was still being lectured by the queen.

"Oh, right... By the way, why were Prince Lyle and Luna taking their butler and maid exams at *my* house?" I asked casually. That had been bugging me.

However, the looks I got in response were very tense.

"Basically, they made Mother very angry. And we weren't too happy with them either. To tell the truth, you're somewhat involved too, Tenma."

Apparently, Prince Lyle had been scheming to do something nasty involving me, the queen, and Luna. But since Luna had been the one who'd told on him, they had figured she was making it up.

"Both of them had been causing trouble nonstop anyway, so it was decided that the two of them should be punished. They were put on garbage detail in the castle. Since they were already hauling trash, they were told to go straighten up your estate too. Cruyff and Aina went to supervise, but Luna apparently found a pair of gloves somewhere and decided to use them. She actually said she found two pairs and gave one to Lyle too."

The moment I heard the word "gloves," a bad feeling grew in the pit of my stomach.

"They didn't cause any problems at your house, but right after that, there was a fire at the castle's trash repository. The gloves were the cause of it," Prince Caesar continued.

Thankfully, the fire had been put out quickly, and only some garbage had burned. But even so, the castle had been thrown into chaos for a while after that.

"How is that my fault?" I asked.

"It's not. Luna and Lyle were responsible, as well as the ones supervising them, meaning Cruyff and Aina. And Isabella and I bear some responsibility as Luna's parents too," Prince Caesar said.

Phew. I was gonna say...

Prince Caesar then sat up straighter. "I'm sorry to say that the gloves Lyle and Luna used were completely destroyed. We can't repair them. Please don't give that kind of glove away, and don't reveal how they were made either. They would be incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands."

The gloves they had found were ones that could activate magic if you channeled mana through them. That meant someone could use them for terrorism if they really wanted to. For example, someone could even force a child to wear them and blow something up without anyone suspecting them. The technique used also worked on things besides gloves. For example, it could work on other types of cloth—like a handkerchief. Someone such as Luna could innocently pick something like that up and accidentally cause a disaster.

"All right. I have two or three backup pairs, so I'll destroy them all," I said.

Prince Caesar said he didn't mind if I kept them as long as I kept the method a secret and didn't give them to anyone, but I figured if I wasn't going to use them, it was better to be safe than sorry. That way, I wouldn't have to worry about them falling into the wrong hands.

When I told him that, he asked why I didn't use them myself.

"Honestly, they're a pain to use," I said.

I'd made the gloves a long time ago while messing around in the dungeon in Sagan. I hadn't used them since, and I was fairly sure that anyone who was halfway decent at magic would feel the same.

"Anyone can use them as long as they can channel mana," I explained. "All they really do is shoot fire, anyway. The process is

pretty clunky: You infuse the gloves with mana, the gloves convert that mana into magic, and then they fire off a shot. But casting a spell the normal way takes just two steps, and once you get used to doing that, it's just one fluid motion."

Converting your internal mana straight into magic would let you skip that first step altogether. And with enough practice, you could cast while you finished that conversion. The time difference between casting yourself or using the gloves was negligible, with the gloves taking maybe a fraction of a second longer. However, even that long could mean life or death in a real battle.

"Plus, you can only use predetermined spells with the gloves. They're not very versatile."

Just channeling mana into the gloves could set off a spell you didn't want to cast. The best case scenario was that your spells overlapped. In the worst case, they could cancel each other out or explode. While the gloves might have seemed handy at first glance, they were really just a failed experiment.

"It's just better to get rid of them," I said.

Prince Caesar offered to reimburse me for the cost of the materials, but I declined. They were just a half-baked experiment I'd done while messing around. The gloves were basic, store-bought ones that weren't anything fancy that I'd combined with some goblin magic cores. Plus, this was the royal family we were talking about. They'd never just reimburse me for the materials. They'd throw ten times as much money at me—maybe even a hundred times. And even I'd feel guilty taking that kind of money for something I'd just thrown together on a whim, especially from people I knew well.

Prince Caesar didn't seem completely convinced, but Princess Isabella stepped in and smoothed things over, so in the end, he just apologized again, and we moved on.

We chatted for a little more after that, but once we realized the queen had started her lecture over from square one, we decided to disperse.

Before we left the castle, I made sure to warn Gramps and Jeanne to never bring up that whole conversation about Primera again. However...

"Tenma! Is it true you're going to marry Primera?!"

So much for that...

Luna was still back at the house, and she blurted that out before we even stepped inside.

Then, absolute chaos ensued.

Amur and Aura had been waiting at the estate, and they started grilling me. "Is that why you only took Jeanne with you? Are you planning to marry *her* too?" they asked.

To make matters worse, word had spread that we were back, so Uncle Mark and the others from Kukuri Village were here now too. I ended up having to escape from Amur, Aura, *and* the Kukuri Village crew.

I made it to my room, but they all just stood outside my door, making a ruckus. I ended up hiding in my dimension bag inside the carriage for the rest of the day.

I thought things would cool off if I gave it some time, but they accosted me the moment I came out of my room. Before I knew it, I was completely surrounded and being forced to explain everything.

Thankfully, Gramps had already filled them in the previous day and had explained that the whole marriage thing had just been a plot hatched by the queen to teach me a lesson. Everyone mostly just teased me about it, but it was still annoying. They finally left me alone once I handed over some alcohol.

Amur, however, was a different story. Even if it had just been a warning from the queen, she was mad that she hadn't been there. Normally, she would've been able to hold a grudge for a while, but thanks to Leni's presence, she seemed to bounce back more quickly than usual.

Part Three

Two weeks passed, and it was finally the day of the party at the academy.

Gramps and I were attending as Amy's guardians from the Otori family. We thought about letting Amur tag along as her bodyguard—it was pointed out that it would be odd for a viscount's daughter to guard a commoner, though, so we gave up on that idea. Amur was disappointed, but the queen was the one who shot down the idea, so she had no other choice but to relent.

As for Leni, she had left for the SAR a few days after the commotion. She'd said she would make it back just before winter came. It had already started snowing lightly in the capital, but she'd said the weather would clear up as she traveled south.

"All right, let's go, Uncle Mark."

"Leave it to me."

Today, we were using Thunderbolt and the carriage to go to the academy. I had been planning on driving myself, but Aina had said it would be strange for me to do so since I was attending as the head of the Otori house and not as an adventurer. I'd asked Uncle Mark to do it for me despite the short notice.

Amur had volunteered first, though, and there had even been talk of sending someone from the king's guard to do it. That still had us running into the same issue as before—it wouldn't look right. Having a member of the king's guard drive a commoner's carriage would definitely prompt criticism from other nobles.

Since Uncle Mark was affiliated with my family, no one could complain about it. However, his inn had been busy lately thanks to an influx of guests for this party descending on the capital, so he was going to stick Thunderbolt and the carriage into my dimension bag after dropping us off and head straight back.

The closer we got to the party, the worse the traffic got. It was bumper-to-bumper carriages wherever you looked. Luckily for us, the other horses kept getting spooked by Thunderbolt and gave us

the right of way, so we ended up getting there earlier than I'd expected.

They checked our invitation at the gate. We were supposed to be directed to the stables, but since I'd stowed the carriage and Thunderbolt away in my bag, they took us straight to the lobby instead. We bid farewell to Uncle Mark, and a staff member gave us a quick rundown of the rules on the way over.

The rooms were sorted by class ranking. Since Amy was at the top of her class, her room was the closest to the main hall. That space was reserved for the top ten students and their families, but we were the only ones here so far. Tida was ranked second in the class, but as you'd expect, they'd prepared a special room for him since he was royalty. Since Luna was also attending this year, it was unlikely he'd come to this room at all.

Amy showed up soon after we arrived. The staff member said she was the first commoner to ever take the top spot, and she'd apparently taken a lot of flak leading up to the party. But thanks to Tida and her other friends, she hadn't been directly harmed. She was well-liked by teachers because she was humble, and the influence of the three noble idiots had ended up helping her in a strange way.

As we chatted about life in the dorms and how things were going at school, other students and their families began to trickle in. Just like I thought, there weren't any other commoners here. Amy was wearing her uniform, but everyone else was dressed to the nines. Technically, students were supposed to be wearing their uniforms, but no one was paying attention to that rule.

To make matters worse, a few of them were smirking at Amy because of her outfit. I guess they thought that if they couldn't beat her academically, they'd flex their wallets instead. Eight students had arrived so far, and three girls were behaving like that. Another girl came in with a guy and seemed totally relaxed. The two of them were chatting like they were on a date or something. I figured she probably wasn't interested in starting anything with Amy.

I leaned over and asked Amy about the three girls I'd noticed, and she confirmed my hunch. They all had crushes on Tida and

were in constant competition with Amy for him. As for the other girl here, she was engaged to the guy she'd arrived with.

"Oh, shoot! I forgot I brought a present for you, Amy!" I said loudly so everyone could hear. Sure enough, everyone looked my way.

Normally, bringing gifts to an event like this wasn't allowed, but I'd asked permission ahead of time.

"This is for you. I think it should fit, but try it on just in case," I said.

It was a black cloak with a hood and a button clasp at the front.



"It's a little big, but it's fine," she said. "Thanks!"

"You'll grow into it in no time. The outer layer is made of running dragon skin, the lining is made out of wyvern wings, and the buttons are carved from earth dragon scales. The buttons don't matter much, but the dragon skin makes it heat-and water-resistant. It offers some magic resistance too. Oh, and I stitched a small Otori family crest onto it," I explained.

I'd placed the crest on the lower left side of the cloak. It was about the size of a fist, so it wasn't noticeable unless you were looking for it. I figured putting it there was better than plastering it across the back. As long as people could see the crest, that was all that mattered.

The students and their parents were shocked once they heard what the cloak had been made of. After all, there had only been five reported dragon slayings in the past century. Three had been earth dragons, one had been a running dragon, and the other had been a dragon zombie. Only the earth dragon from eighty years ago had its materials actually go to market. The rest of the dragons on that list had been defeated by either me or Gramps. We had kept most of the materials ourselves, aside from the parts we had given or sold to the royal family or our close friends. That meant these materials were virtually impossible to get.

The situation with wyverns was similar, but their materials did hit the market a few times a year. However, only my party and Margrave Haust had gotten any recently. Hydras popped up every few years or so, but since they were as rare as dragons, whoever defeated them kept the materials most of the time. So, long story short, the cloak I was giving Amy was practically priceless. Even if every single noble in this room begged for one, they'd have zero chance of actually getting one right now.

"Gramps, someone's coming. Pretty sure they're royalty," I said.

"Seems like it."

Most of the students' guests hadn't noticed, but I could hear the sound of several sets of armor clinking. The noise was heading our way. It was probably the king's guard. I used Identify just to be safe and confirmed it. They were here guarding members of the royal

family, of course—and there were a lot more of them than I'd expected.

And leading the group...

"Your Majesty!"

...was the king himself.

We'd been told ahead of time that neither the king nor the queen would be attending this party. Only Tida, Luna, and their parents were supposed to be here. Something had clearly changed.

The moment the parents noticed the king, they all dropped to one knee.

"No need to kneel. You'll only dirty your nice clothes," the king said.

The students in the room were about to follow suit, but he stopped them too. Gramps and I had stayed in our seats. I'd started to stand when I'd noticed everyone else kneeling, but when I figured the king would stop them, I sat back down.

Amy had started to follow suit with everyone else, but I gently nudged her back into her seat. The moment I touched her, Tida glared at me sharply. When I let go of her, he relaxed. But I was feeling mischievous, so I touched her shoulder a few more times just to get a rise out of him. Gramps and the king eventually caught on and gave me exasperated looks, and Amy just stared at me like I was some kind of weirdo.

Meanwhile, the royal party made their way over to us.

"I'll let you tease Tida a bit since his reactions are so funny, but I do actually have a favor to ask you, Tenma," the king said.

"Can I say no?" I asked. I was ready to shut it down before he even said anything because let's face it—when a king says he wants a favor, it's never going to be simple.

"At least hear me out."

"Tenma, this is a serious matter. Will you at least let us explain?" Queen Maria asked.

"All right. There's no point in us standing around, though. Please have a seat," I said.

I grabbed three chairs from nearby and set them down for her, Prince Caesar, and Princess Isabella. I even pulled out the queen's

chair for her. She nodded to me before sitting down, and Prince Caesar did the same for his wife.

Tida and Luna grabbed their own chairs since they were students here. Of course, Tida tried to sneakily sit next to Amy, but Luna shoved him out of her way and claimed that seat for herself. She then immediately started complimenting Amy's new cloak, and the two girls began chattering away. Tida had no choice but to try to talk to Amy through Luna. He pouted the whole time.

"Alex, stop standing there like a statue and grab a seat already!" Gramps said to the king.

"Oh, pardon me."

The king went to grab his own chair, but Amy noticed and stood up to get one for him. But the moment *she* stood up, Tida did as well. He gently guided her back into her seat as he went off to get a chair for his grandfather.

Queen Maria and Prince Caesar looked quite pleased with that exchange...until Tida turned his back.

The moment he did so, Luna slid his chair away from the table. When Tida returned, he looked around, completely lost, wondering where his chair had gone. Luna snickered to herself the whole time, tipping Tida off to her prank, so she put his chair back.

That, however, only made Luna laugh even harder. As I watched this scene unfold, I had to think that Luna was going to get scolded once they were back at the castle. The glares from the queen and Tida made that obvious.

"Luna, remember that you are in a public setting. That's enough," Prince Caesar said sternly.

Luna realized her father was upset. "I'm sorry..." she said, seeming very depressed.

"What we wanted to ask was... Well, I'll just let Caesar explain," the queen said.

"That's right. Tenma, we'd like you to spar with this year's top students."

"Huh? That's fine. What are the rules?" I asked.

Since this was a request from the royal family and I owed them a lot, I agreed right away, which seemed to surprise them a little. But

once I accepted, I learned that the rules were quite a pain.

"A ten-on-one match?" I asked.

"Do you have a problem with that?" the queen asked.

"No, but what if someone gets hurt? And I'm not talking about me not being able to hold back. What if they hurt one another?"

The real danger in a large battle wasn't the enemy—it was friendly fire. I asked Amy and Tida about it, and while the students at the academy did have mock battles a lot, they were always one-on-one or with students acting in small squads of five. They never fought in ten-person squads. That was why I wanted to confirm that condition. However, some of the students and their guests thought I was just being rude, and everyone in the room suddenly got tense.

"You're right to be concerned, Tenma. But the students do have combat experience," Prince Caesar reminded me. "And judging by their reactions, I'd say they're ready to risk a few bruises. Still, I'd like you to go easy on them, if possible."

"I'll hold back as much as I can, but if we're calling it a match, they better be ready to take responsibility for themselves."

With that decided, Prince Caesar turned towards the students and their guests, confirming the deal. Later on, I discovered that this idea had come from the families of some of the top students. Several had backed the idea, and the academy had reached out to the king earlier that morning about it. Incidentally, most of the students in the room were only learning about the match just now.

"By the way, Queen Maria? This match is being proposed by reformists and the academy families who aren't exactly my biggest fans, right...?" I asked quietly.

She sighed and nodded. There weren't many nobles who had both the king's ear *and* a grudge against me, so that narrowed down the possibilities quite a bit.

"I bet it was Duke Durham, huh?"

She nodded again. As word had spread that I supported the royalists, public support for the royals had grown while the reformists had taken a hit. On top of that, Jeanne was my charge, and she was a key member of the neutral faction. So, thanks to me, the royalists and neutrals had formed a friendly relationship.

Because of all that and the fact that a bunch of nobles who had previously backed the reformists had jumped sides, the reformists had lost a huge chunk of their influence. Duke Durham, the leader of the reformists, had also taken a serious hit in regard to his power as a result.

"So this match is just them trying to cause trouble for me, huh?" I asked.

"Precisely. I have a feeling that even Duke Durham thought that no matter how skilled you are, it would be tough for you to handle that many students without hurting anyone."

So if I did end up injuring one of the students, they'd use that as an excuse to chip away at the royalists' support. And if his plan didn't work, there'd be no harm, no foul. It was low risk, high reward if they *did* win, however.

"I'll do my best. Tida, Amy... You two go easy on me, okay?" I said.

The rest of the students were raring to go and practically bouncing off the walls with excitement. But when Tida and Amy saw the smile on my face, they immediately went pale.

"All right, let's go over the rules," I began. "Tida is your team leader. If he ends up unable to continue, I win. If even one of you manages to land a clean hit on me, then you win. I won't use any attack magic or weapons, but you guys can use whatever you want —magic, weapons, you name it."

"Um, are you *sure* you're okay with those rules? And what about your gear, Tenma?" Tida asked incredulously.

This setup gave the biggest advantage to both me and the royal family. In the worst-case scenario, only Tida would get hurt. He seemed fine with that, but he was concerned about my equipment.

That was because the students were all armed like they were about to go on a dungeon dive. As for me, I was weaponless. I wasn't wearing a single bit of armor either.

"What about it?" I asked.

"I just mean...are you really going to fight in regular clothes?" Tida said.

"Now that you mention it, I should probably at least take off my

jacket. I don't plan on getting hit, but I don't want it to get dirty. Cleaning it before the party starts would be too much of a pain," I said.

I shrugged off my jacket and tossed it over to Jean, who was acting as the referee. Both he and Tida gave me exasperated looks. Amy stood behind Tida and had a sheepish smile on her face. Meanwhile, the rest of the students were clearly getting irritated.

"Tenma, enough taunting. All right, both sides take a step back. Ready... Set... Begin!"

At Jean's signal, I started doing some casual stretches like deep knee bends and calf stretches.

"You guys can have the first move. Just whenever you're ready. No rush," I called out.

That must've really hit a nerve—every student but Tida and Amy cast a bunch of spells at once. And they were going all out, like they were trying to end the match right here and right now.

That kept on going for a bit until Jean's voice cut through the chaos.

"Match over!" he cried. "The winner is...Tenma!"

"Good job, everyone."

The students were confused about how they had lost, but when they heard my voice coming from *behind* them, they were even more baffled.

The reason they were so surprised was that I was standing there between Amy and Tida, gently holding them by the scruff of their necks.

Jean, who'd been observing the match as the referee, critiqued the students. "It's not a bad call to go all out when you have a cocky opponent, but not with that strategy. The conditions of this match were landing *any* hit on Tenma to win, and if Prince Tida got taken out, then you would lose. Your top priority should've been guarding him."

Since he was a royal guard, the students listened seriously. But...

"Er, Tenma? How long are you planning on holding us like this?"

"Probably until Jean's lecture is finished," I said. "If the students start protesting, we might have to resume the match. Oh, and Amy,

since you weren't the target, you can feel free to go listen. Jean's great at coaching rookies, so you might learn something useful."

"Okay!" Amy said cheerfully and rushed over to Jean.

"By the way, Amy was the only one who managed to react to Tenma's movement," Jean said. "She wasn't able to stop him and still got taken down alongside Prince Tida, but still. The way she reacted to his sneak attack was impressive, given the skill gap."

Jean praised Amy's actions, and I agreed with him. Of course, since Amy and I had trained together a lot, she had the advantage of already having a read on my habits. I still thought she had done a good job.

"But for the rest of you, you guys all panicked. Blasting off a bunch of spells at random, all at once, didn't accomplish anything except kicking up so much dust you couldn't see a thing. It was also so noisy that it was impossible to coordinate things. Tenma used that chaos to sneak in and go straight for Prince Tida. Now, if you'd put the prince at the center of your formation and had at least three of you stand guard around him, you might've held out longer. I know that you all wanted the bragging rights of landing a hit on Tenma, but, well... Tenma's kind of a jerk. He was counting on that and was egging you on the entire time," Jean explained.

Sheesh. He wasn't wrong—I had known exactly how they'd react if I were to taunt them, but did he have to say it like that?

"But don't beat yourselves up too much," Jean said. "Since Tenma committed to a strategy like that, it meant he took you seriously and fought you as equals. And Tenma? It might be time to disable your spell now."

"Oh, right. Good point."

Apparently, none of the students had even noticed I had cast a spell at the beginning of the match. Even Tida looked totally baffled, despite the fact that he was standing right next to me.

"You might wanna pay more attention to your surroundings during a fight," I said.

As soon as I deactivated my spell, we could hear the cheers coming from the crowd. I'd used a Wind magic spell to block out the crowd so they couldn't warn the students that I had been sneaking

up behind them. I'd also used Wind spells to deflect theirs and kick up even more dust during the battle.

Once the students realized what had happened beyond what Jean had explained, their hostile stares suddenly became looks of respect.

"Oh, and just so we're clear, the one who screwed up the most today was you, Tida," I said in a tone only loud enough for him to hear.

The poor kid looked like he was about to cry. However, Tida should've made a battle plan ahead of time and gotten his team on the same page. Or he should have stepped in to calm them down when they started falling for my taunts, at the very least. At the end of the day, *he* was the team leader, and when a team goes down this hard, the blame falls squarely on the captain.

"There's a good chance you'll be leading knights into battle someday, Tida. It might be a good idea to talk to the king, Prince Caesar, and Prince Lyle about what happened here and get some advice from them," I suggested.

The king and Prince Caesar had probably spent a lot of time thinking about battlefield strategy and command back in their academy days. Lyle might've actually led some troops himself too. I figured that Tida could learn something useful from them.

As I let go of him, I tousled his hair roughly. He quickly swatted my hand away, flushing with embarrassment.

"Tida! Tenma! Come over here so we can wrap this up!"

It seemed that Jean had finished his lecture—now, we were the only ones holding things up.

We hurried over, and I was once again formally declared the winner. I shook the students' hands and headed back to the private room that had been set aside for me. Queen Maria and Prince Caesar were waiting out front, and both of them looked pretty pleased. It seemed like they were happy I'd managed to win without injuring anyone. And they even thanked me for something else entirely.

"The party's been postponed for a bit. I'm sure you're not tired, but just stay here and relax for now. You'll probably get swarmed by students and staff if you head out immediately," Prince Caesar said.

"That's right. The relatives who were already in the room are one thing, but now, students and guests from other areas are probably heading your way to try to talk to you. As for Master Merlin, the king is entertaining him now. There's no need to worry about him," Queen Maria said.

I had wondered where the king was, so that answered that question. I knew that Gramps wanted to come be by me, but if he left where he was, a bunch of people would follow, so he was reluctantly staying put. The reason the king was with him was that Gramps tended to be a bit formal around the queen and Prince Caesar. He'd feel more relaxed with the king since he had been his tutor back in the day. Strangely enough, even the queen and the prince admitted they still got a bit nervous talking to Gramps...

Anyway, the king had been left behind as a decoy to keep the rubberneckers away, leaving the queen and Prince Caesar free to come check on me. They would be heading to see Tida and the others after this. But first, since they were the ones who'd basically strong-armed me into doing the match, they'd come to thank me and to apologize on behalf of the royal family.

Although the match might've been actually proposed by the nobles who belonged to the reformist faction, Prince Caesar had been the one who'd made the request of me. That meant, politically speaking, that the reformists had handed him a favor—or that was how the royalist and neutral factions would see it, anyway. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if some of the reformists saw it that way in the end too.

"Well, we can't just sit back after getting played like that," he said.

"It isn't enough to just get a little payback. We'll just have to use this as our chance to chip away at the reformists' influence just a little more, won't we?" the queen suggested.

Prince Caesar and Queen Maria were wearing identical wicked grins. There was no doubt about it—Prince Caesar definitely took after her and not the king.

"Well, anyway, just let us handle that, Tenma. Don't worry about any of it and just take it easy for now. We'll send a guard to come

get you once it's time for the party."

And with that, the two of them headed back to their room.

"Take it easy, huh? It's not like I have anything else to do..."

But I guessed it was better to be bored than get swarmed by a bunch of students and their families. Still, I was starting to regret not bringing something to pass the time.

Rocket and the others were holding down the fort back at the house. Thunderbolt hated being stuck inside the dimension bag, so he'd gone to sleep the second we had arrived at the academy. The only other thing I had inside my bag was the carriage, and there wasn't enough room in here to take that out.

I also had a magic bag that I had received from the gods. It was strapped to my arm like a bracelet. It was invisible, but it was still there. However, that one just contained weapons and emergency rations. There was nothing inside that I could use to entertain myself.

"If someone realizes I'm carrying weapons, it could cause trouble for Prince Caesar and the others..."

But thanks to Detection, it wasn't likely anyone could come and spy on me unnoticed. Still, taking fewer risks was always better than taking more.

Since I figured I wouldn't be doing anything too exciting here, I thought I might as well just kill some time enjoying some snacks. But just as I started setting them out, I sensed someone approaching. At first, I thought it was the guard coming to get me, but the way they were attempting to conceal their presence made me suspicious. One quick use of Identify confirmed who it was, however, and I decided to wait by the door to ambush them since I figured it might be a fun distraction.

"This should be the room, I think..." Luna slipped into the room quietly and looked around. "Huh?"

"Boo!" I suddenly jumped towards her from behind.

"Aaaaah!" She shrieked louder than I'd expected. "H-Ha ha... Seriously, don't scare me like that!" she protested.

She then spotted the snacks I'd been setting up and took a seat.

"Are you sure you should be in here?" I asked.

"It's fine. Before your match, I had to stay with Mother at work all morning!"

I asked her what kind of work she meant, and she explained that Princess Isabella had dragged her around greeting other nobles. That had involved chatting and exchanging information with friendly royalist nobles and putting pressure on the hostile ones. The match had interrupted their task, and once it had ended, Luna had been expected to go back to her classroom. She had come to find me instead.

"Hey, how'd you even sneak in snacks and juice like this?" she asked.

"It's not that hard to hide things. But now that you've eaten some, you're my accomplice," I warned her.

She nodded cheerfully and reached for another snack. I wondered if she liked the sound of being my accomplice—it probably made her feel like we were doing something a little bad. And honestly, getting caught wouldn't be that big of a deal, but it *was* kind of fun to sneak snacks like this once in a while.

"By the way, looks like Amy's super popular, even with the dumb boys. She's smart, good at magic, your apprentice, *and* a commoner. Even guys from my class are after her," Luna said.

The "dumb" boys she had mentioned were from minor or broke noble households—meaning barons or below—who thought that getting Amy to be their mistress would mean they'd be one step closer to building a connection with me or Albert and the others.

"Some of them have their sights set way out of their league, but they won't even ask about a proper marriage! That just screams they have no future. All the girls are saying it. Oh, and they're also saying they have no class, no backbone, and no charm!"

She'd said "all the girls," but I knew she had meant girls she knew or ones in her class. Either way, if that kind of gossip had been going around about these boys, they must have had pretty bad reputations.

"Girls are scary," I said.

"Some of them only talk to you because they're after money too. You really have to watch out."

At any rate, these were the kinds of things good friends warned each other about.

"So...how do people find out about guys who actually have *good* reputations?" I asked.

"Hmm, well... If you're close with someone, they might tell you. Or you might just have to find out yourself."

Luna didn't seem super interested in hearing about good guys, though. She just needed to know they weren't bad students. She'd never gone digging herself in that way, but she knew the two main methods to go about it.

"Basically, the first way costs money—you literally pay someone who's got the scoop, or you hire someone to find out for you. The other method is the boots on the ground way...which is basically stalking," I said.

"Yep. Sometimes the second way gets you info no one else knows, but you could get in major trouble if someone found out."

If you hired a pro or someone you trusted for the first method, you could probably deny it if you got caught. But stalking someone? Well, that could get you arrested real quick. And if the person you liked found out you were tailing them, the fallout could be fatal to your relationship.

"Come to think of it, didn't Leon stalk me once...?" I muttered.

That comment was enough to catch Luna's attention, and before long, I found myself telling her the whole story about how we had first met. I exaggerated it a bit for laughs.

Since Leon's screwup had caused the "stalking incident," it was a funny story. And since everyone at the academy had known that he'd had a habit of making those kinds of mistakes, it wasn't like I had been ruining his reputation. The fact that it'd been amusing might've actually boosted his image. At the very least, Luna found it funny, and not in a mean way either.

"Someone should be coming to get me soon. You came here because you were worried about me, weren't you, Luna?" I asked.

"Well, that was part of it, but mostly I was trying to get away from Mother."

She was being pretty blunt. I guess that meant she trusted me,

but still... A little white lie didn't hurt every once in a while, you know? However, I had to silently offer a prayer for Luna, because...

"Pfft!"

I heard someone stifle a laugh just outside the room. Actually, there were several people eavesdropping—the king had just cracked first.

When the door opened to reveal the people spying on us, Luna froze in shock. The king was grinning, but Princess Isabella stood behind him, staring blankly at her daughter. There were also a few members of the king's guard, including Jean—they were trying their best to pretend they hadn't heard anything.

"Um, I got it backward! What I meant was I came here because I was totally worried about Tenma! It only *seemed* like I was running away from Mother, but I wasn't! Really!" Luna said in a panic.

Nice try, but...

Unfortunately for Luna, no one was buying it. She kept nervously rambling on until finally Princess Isabella let it go. She said that we would just tell everyone that Luna had come to check on me because she'd been worried.

This was actually some kind of information control strategy to make it seem like the royal family actually felt bad about the match, even though the reformist nobles were the ones who had pushed for it. The idea was to pin the blame on the reformists and win the sympathy of the public. But personally, I didn't care much either way. I was just being used as the face of this whole scheme, and my reward was that the nobles who tried to push me around would be warned—"Cross Tenma, and it might damage your reputation both in the eyes of the royal family and the masses."

"This only works because Tenma's got the public on his side..."

"Yeah, Grandpa could never pull that off!" Luna said.

Her jab made the king chuckle, but honestly, it had probably stung a bit. He gave her a slightly rough pat on the head.

"Your Majesty, it's almost time. We should return to the reception room," Jean said.

That made everyone suddenly remember our true purpose here, and we all began rushing to get back to the party. Princess Isabella

dragged Luna by the arm, and I noticed the king grab a few snacks for the road.

"You're a bit late, Tenma," Queen Maria said when she saw me.

"Sorry, Queen Maria. I was still a little excited after the match, so Luna chatted with me to help me wind down," I said.

Luna nodded enthusiastically beside me. The queen seemed to realize the real reason Luna had gone to where I had been, but she didn't mention it.

"I see. That was kind of you, Luna. You've always been close with Tenma. The perfect conversation partner!" The queen had said that loud enough for the reformists in the room to hear. She then continued, slipping in a few indirect digs at them and blaming them for the match while simultaneously apologizing that we couldn't refuse.

Just then...

"The venue is ready, everyone. Please make your way to the hall."

It was finally time to party.

Part Four

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"It's fine. Tida's lack of ability was at fault," Prince Caesar said.

We had to wait a bit before going into the room because students entered in order of class ranking. However, if royalty were in attendance, that order would sometimes change. Tida was second in the class rankings this time, and Amy had offered to let him go ahead of her, but Prince Caesar turned her down. Tida wasn't crazy about the idea of going in last anyway, so it all worked out.

But then, Princess Isabella said, "I was so hoping Tida would manage to get first place. When I was a student, I always admired the person who got to enter last, but I never managed it myself. But maybe if Tida couldn't do it, perhaps Luna can?"

Luna began to protest, but her mother said, "Since you've got the energy to complain, why don't you try studying seriously for once? If you do your best and still fail, that's one thing. But slacking off and still complaining is just plain pathetic."

Luna backed off when she realized she was getting lectured. She then hurried off to her own class.

When it came to the royals' final rankings when they had been in junior high, the king had placed third and Queen Maria, first. Prince Caesar had also come in first; Princess Isabella had come in fifth; Prince Zane, second; Princess Mizaria, twelfth; Prince Lyle, third; and Lord Ernest, second.

Honestly, I was shocked Prince Lyle had ranked that high, but I guessed that since he had ended up as the Minister of the Military, he must have been fairly good at academics. And the one who had beaten Lord Ernest for first place was none other than Gramps, who was fondly reminiscing to me about those days. For the record, my mom had come in second. Dad had been eighth.

"In second place in this year's rankings is Tida von Blumere Krastin. Please enter."

Gramps chatted away in my ear as the students filed into the

room. Tida's name was called before he'd finished his story.

"Tida's up, which means we're next. Are you ready?" I said to Amy.

"Sure am."

"And in first place in the rankings this year is Amy. Please enter."

Amy's name had finally been called. I lined up behind her to enter the hall, just like Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella had done for Tida.

But for some reason, Gramps suddenly pulled out his staff. A nearby employee came over to stop him—anything that resembled a weapon wasn't allowed.

"Are you trying to tell me an old man can't walk without his cane?" he asked. "And you're worried I could use *this* as a weapon? This hall is packed with people who can cast spells! Besides, if we're banning dangerous items, what about all the fancy jewelry the other parents are wearing? I'm sure some of those hair ornaments and bracelets have been used as weapons before!"

In the end, Gramps just steamrolled them into letting him keep it.

As I watched the scene unfold, I couldn't help but think, *Sure, they can argue accessories aren't weapons, but Gramps literally used that staff to knock out a wyvern. Of course no one can seriously say it's* not *a weapon, and he's been walking fine without it up until now... There's no way he really needs it.*

Still, I felt that it might not be a bad idea for Gramps to look extra intimidating tonight—some students had been rumored to be targeting Amy. I decided not to comment on the matter.

The doors opened, and just as I'd expected, a murmur went through the crowd as we entered and they noticed the staff. However, no one dared to say anything to Gramps directly. I saw a few people whispering to nearby faculty, but there weren't any attempts to stop us. We made it to the seats prepared for Amy and her family without issue.

"Now, let the party begin! Your Majesty, would you do the honors with a toast?"

"Of course! A toast to the shining future of our kingdom! Cheers!"

And with that, the party began. The king and queen were

planning on leaving shortly; they hadn't planned on attending at all, but since they were already here, they decided to stay at least through the opening ceremonies. The other reason they weren't sticking around was that it would make it difficult for the other students to enjoy themselves. They would also draw attention away from Tida and Prince Caesar.

"Gramps, we're really sticking out a lot, huh?"

"We sure are. Some folks are here to see us, and some are here to see Amy. Hey, let's grab some food from over there."

"That sounds good. Amy, should we move over to the side?" I asked. "Everyone's staring at us."

Amy noticed the attention and nodded. We began to walk away, and although no one followed us, people were still watching.

"It looks like they're all holding back and keeping one another in check. No one wants to be the first to approach and risk annoying us."

"It would be great if they just kept that up all night," I said. "Oh, hang on, let's bring this with us."

"Would you grab a plate for me too?" Gramps asked as I made a plate of my own. Before I knew it, my plate was a mountain of food.

A few nearby nobles were clearly laughing, but...

"This is super tasty too, Tenma!" Luna showed up with a plate piled higher with food than mine.

The nobles who had laughed at us suddenly ran away so we couldn't see them anymore.

"The stuff at the school store isn't that tasty, but the food at this party is amazing!" she said.

"Back in my day, that store and the cafeteria weren't anything to write home about either. We used to sneak off campus to eat a proper meal in town," Gramps said.

"Really? I think the cafeteria food is pretty good, but Tenma's cooking is the best," Luna said.

"A lot of the cafeteria food is kind of expensive, so it's hard to eat there every day. Cooking for yourself is way cheaper," Amy said.

Even though Amy was a commoner, she was probably making good money thanks to Spidey's thread and her adventurer gigs...but

not even she had been eating at the cafeteria every day. I asked her if she needed money or anything, but she shook her head.

"There are cheaper options, but they're not very good," Amy said.

Apparently, the tasty stuff came at a premium, so she'd only have those occasionally. She figured if the cheap meals were going to be bad anyway, she might as well cook something she actually liked for cheaper.

"Whoa!"

As we chatted, I suddenly heard a loud clatter nearby. Gramps had dropped his staff.

"Sorry about that," he said with a bow, but he didn't look sorry at all.

I realized he'd dropped it on purpose. Gramps had done so because a handful of guys were trying to inch their way towards Amy. Gramps must've guessed that since Luna had come over to talk to her first, the guys were trying to use her as a buffer so they could slide in and get near Amy that way. They probably thought they could just say hello to Luna first and then sneak over to Amy. However, Gramps wasn't having any of it, so he had dropped his staff on the floor to startle them.

"Look at them all, buzzing around like flies. Tch, they're nothing but cowards. One loud noise and they're already scattering! Don't any of them have a spine?" he muttered.

None of them could hear him, of course, but the moment he said that, someone actually *did* step up and start walking purposefully towards us. And that someone was Tida.

"Tenma, would you mind if I joined you?" he asked.

"It's fine with me, as long as it's all right with Amy."

Tida glanced over at Amy with a slightly worried look. She smiled awkwardly at him and let him join our conversation. However, Luna stood behind her and held her arms up in an X formation, trying as hard as she could to stop him. Amy didn't see her, though, and Tida just ignored her like she didn't even exist. Luna's protests were for naught.

Tida joining us made it harder for other guys to approach Amy. Several of them gave up entirely and went to talk to other girls

instead. However, our moment of respite was soon replaced with another problem. A swarm of girls was lining up to talk to Tida, and they were already starting to size one another up. The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Just then, Luna spotted someone in the crowd and started waving them over. When that person didn't respond to her, she ran off to get them herself. She soon returned with a very small group of girls.

"Here are my friends, Tenma!"

The girls fidgeted nervously, glancing around timidly.

"Don't worry, everybody! Tenma, Gramps, and Amy are all super nice!" Luna said, deliberately not mentioning her brother on that list. He noticed, of course, but didn't comment on it. Instead, he smiled at her friends, but the way he glared at Luna when the girls weren't looking told me he wasn't thrilled.

"Mind if we join you for a bit?"

We chatted with Luna's friends (or rather, answered their barrage of questions) until Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella showed up. And since those two had guards and knights with them, that made the crowd around us even bigger. Luna's friends had just started to relax, but now they were getting overwhelmed again. The girls' parents noticed this, and after greeting the prince and princess politely, they quickly retrieved their daughters.

Other students then began to approach with their own parents to greet the prince and princess and to chat with Amy, Tida, and me. They asked for my thoughts on things like the earlier match or the tournament, and I did my best to answer them politely. I did shut down any student who was clearly just trying to butter me up to get close to Amy or Tida, though.

And if I was getting that much attention, Amy and Tida were even more swamped. Tida was used to it and handled it like a pro, but Amy was clearly struggling. One guy even tried to pressure her into agreeing to something or other.

"Do you mind if I steal her for a second? Let's go, Amy." Luna stepped right between them and grabbed Amy's hand.

The guy tried to stop Luna and told her that it was rude to

interrupt a conversation.

"Don't you think it's even more rude to ask why a girl wants to step away? You're forcing someone to stay and talk when they don't want to."

And just like that, Luna pulled Amy out of the room.

The guy in question got laughed at by his friends. His flustered parents pulled him away—they had been panicking as the scene unfolded while they'd been chatting with the prince. I had a feeling that either he or the princess had said something.

Luna had hinted that she and Amy needed to go use the restroom, but her real reason for dragging Amy away had been obvious—she'd wanted to get her away from that guy. Everyone who'd seen what had happened probably realized he'd embarrassed a girl, thinking that he was a blockhead who couldn't take a hint.

"I can't believe so much time has passed," Prince Caesar said.

"That's true," his wife agreed.

The couple began quietly chatting to each other, making it awkward for the students and parents nearby who'd been lining up for a chance to speak to them. They couldn't exactly interrupt the two of them now.

"Are you all right? Want me to grab you anything?" I asked.

"We're used to this, Tenma, but you must be exhausted. We can have a waiter bring over some drinks," Prince Caesar said.

"Yes, you've had a rougher time than we have. Some of these children don't know how to read the room," the princess said.

Now that the crowd had thinned out, I joined them for a bit. The princess mentioned that certain students and parents had been pestering me to introduce them to Amy or Tida, and she said that loudly enough for others to hear. Anyone who had been guilty of that quickly made their way to the opposite side of the room.

"That should take care of the worst of them," Caesar said.

Princess Isabella sighed. "I certainly hope so."

"There are probably still a few of them floating around, but there are definitely fewer than before. By the way, where are Tida and Gramps?" Caesar asked.

None of us had noticed them slip away, so I started looking

around for them.

"Oh, Gramps is just getting more food, but Tida..."

"What's he doing?"

"Didn't Amy and Luna go that way?"

Tida was staring in the direction the girls had gone with a troubled look on his face.

"Well, at least all the annoying types are gone now. We can leave him be for a bit," Prince Caesar said.

Princess Isabella agreed, and I decided not to worry about it either. Gramps came back a little after that with another mountain of food, and the four of us just stood around picking at it, chatting about nothing in particular.

"Hm? Looks like Amy and Luna are back," Tida said with a sigh, looking visibly relieved. The two girls had disappeared about an hour ago now. "What took you so long, Luna?"

"We were just talking with some friends."

Just as I'd thought, Luna hadn't just taken Amy to the restroom—she'd wanted to get her away from that pushy guy. Apparently, she'd also promised her friends, meaning the ones from before Prince Caesar showed up, that she'd go see them at some point. She had initially planned on sneaking off alone, but since she had been worried about Amy, she'd thought she'd just take her along.

Amy said that Luna's friends had been surprised to see her tagging along, but since they'd heard so much about her from Luna, they'd given her a warm welcome. They *had* asked her a ton of questions, though, and in the end, she'd wound up agreeing to tutor them sometime.

"But they were all really nice and easy to talk to," Amy said.

They were all from noble families, but since they were friends with Luna, none of them were judgmental about that kind of stuff.

"Sounds like your underclassmen are pretty nice," I said.

"They are!" Amy said with a broad smile, and Luna looked proud to hear her friends being praised.

Prince Caesar laughed. "Well, if that's the reason you were late, I can't get mad about it. I'm sure it was hard for them to relax with me and Isabella around," he said.

Just as I thought the conversation was getting started since Amy and Luna were back...

"Amy, can I talk to you for a second?" Tida suddenly spoke up in a serious tone. He'd clearly been anticipating her return more than anyone else.

Amy looked a little puzzled, but she nodded and turned to face him. "Sure. What is it?"

"Is he about to confess?" Princess Isabella whispered to me.

"That's what it looks like," I muttered back to her.

"Wait, right here? Right now?!"

"Shh, he's doing it..." Gramps said.

We were all talking quietly so Tida and Amy couldn't hear us.

Meanwhile, Luna was clearly trying to interrupt the two of them, but Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella shot her with irritated looks on their faces to stop her in her tracks.

After a few deep breaths, Tida looked Amy in the eye. Then...

"Amy, will you marry me?"

Everyone in the room froze.

We had thought Tida was just going to tell Amy that he liked her. He had gone way beyond our expectations. We were all too stunned to speak.

Amy was the most shocked of all. She didn't even blink.

Ugh, another guy's hitting on Amy...

The moment some of the parents came over to retrieve their daughters—Luna's friends—it gave a few others the excuse they needed to greet Mom and Dad. But really, they were just using that opportunity to push their sons towards Amy. Some of them even tried to nudge their daughters towards me. Since I was a prince, I was used to that happening at every party I went to. It wasn't a big deal.

But Amy clearly wasn't used to this kind of attention. I could tell that she was struggling to bring the conversation to a close.

I want to stay here and watch over her, but I can't ignore everyone else because of all the noble faction politics, I thought.

I pondered what to do when a new student suddenly approached

her. I could immediately tell this guy was way more aggressive than the others.

This isn't good...

I was about to go help her when...

"Do you mind if I steal her for a second? Let's go, Amy."

Luna stepped in between the guy and Amy. He tried to argue with her, but she was smarter than him and successfully led Amy away. The crowd wasn't impressed with him either. His friends laughed at him, and his dad dragged him away.

Wow, Luna was actually useful for once. And now that Dad's scared off all the girls who were trying to talk to me, I can finally have a moment alone with Amy.

Since Luna didn't say anything to anyone, I figured she was just using a trip to the restroom as an excuse for their escape, so I decided to wait. I'd find a chance to talk to Amy once they got back.

However, Amy and Luna were gone for a while.

"What's taking so long?" I wondered. I was starting to worry that another guy had ambushed her when they had left the restroom. "Well, she should be fine since Luna's with her. She'd never let that happen..."

Besides, if I went looking for her now... Even if everyone didn't think I was being pushy like that other guy, Luna would make a huge deal out of it if it got back to her. In the end, I decided not to go, but I couldn't stop worrying. I just kept kicking myself for not confessing to her before the party. But just then...

There she is! Amy's back.

I studied her face and those of the people around her. Everything appeared to be fine.

"Good. No creeps got to her."

I was happy that she was safe, but if I didn't do something soon, I'd just keep feeling like this over and over again.

That's when I heard Tenma say, "Sounds like your underclassmen are pretty nice."

I knew that Luna was friends with some boys, but if she had met up with the friends she'd been with before Dad had showed up, she'd probably just been hanging out with girls this time. Still, I

worried that connection could lead to more of the younger guys trying to get closer to Amy. And the moment that thought hit me, my feet moved on their own accord.

"Amy, can I talk to you for a second?" I began.

I knew if I didn't do it now, someone else would beat me to it. But still, the words felt stuck in my throat. The longer I hesitated, the worse I'd look in Amy's eyes. I just couldn't let that happen, so I went for it.

"Amy, will you marry me?"

I confessed to her. But honestly, it hadn't come out the way I'd practiced. But that didn't matter—the most important thing was how Amy would respond.

At first, she said nothing. Was she that surprised? I stood there with my head bowed and my hand reaching out to her, silently praying that she'd take it.



But...

"I'm sorry."

The moment her response hit me, my whole world went dark.

"Prince Caesar, I don't think Tida's breathing."

"Judging by the look on his face when he went down, I think he was so choked up that the second part of her sentence didn't even register."

"Don't just sit there and analyze! Someone get Tida and Amy out of here!" Princess Isabella said sharply, and the guards quickly sprang into action. They surrounded Tida, shielding him from the crowd.

"Amy, let's go somewhere else for now."

Once I stood next to her, Prince Caesar had one of the staff members escort us back to the reception room.

"Come on, Tida! Snap out of it!"

Once we got there, Prince Caesar posted guards at the door. He then started shaking Tida by the shoulders. And when that didn't work, he slapped him firmly on the cheek.

"Huh?"

That did the trick. Tida blinked and then looked around in confusion.

But then, he locked eyes with Amy.

"Ah... Ah..."

Everything must've all come rushing back again, because his shoulders slumped in despair.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things awkward..." Tida muttered. He then whirled around, clearly intending on running out of the room, but...

"Hi-yah!"

"Argh!"

Luna had been waiting behind him, and she stuck out her leg to trip him. He'd been in such a rush to leave that he wasn't watching where he was going—he never saw it coming. He landed hard on the floor, right on his face.

While Luna looked very pleased with herself, their parents were frowning. They didn't scold her, though. I guess they figured that keeping Tida from running away was more important. For now, anyway.

"Tida."

Amy knelt down beside him and gently said his name. Tida wasn't ready to face her yet, so he kept his forehead pressed against the floor.

"I don't think you heard everything I said before, so I'll say it again. I'm not ready to get married yet. We're still kids. But...I'd love to be your girlfriend. Because I like you, Tida," she said.

"Huh?"

Amy repeated everything he'd missed before, and he looked totally baffled. He just stared at her with a dazed look on her face for a while. Then, he glanced around at his mom, dad, me, Gramps, and then Luna—she was watching the scene unfold with a scowl on her face.

I wasn't sure whose reaction snapped him out of it, but when it sunk in, he leaped to his feet.

"Really?! Thank you! Yessss!" He grabbed Amy's hands and started dancing around so joyfully that you'd never guess this boy was really Tida. He was literally dancing like no one was watching.

"Anyone up for tea?" I asked.

"I'll take some," the prince said.

Princess Isabella nodded. "Me too, please."

"Count me in," Gramps said.

"Tea, please!" Luna exclaimed.

I passed around some tea and snacks while we all watched Tida and Amy dance. She didn't seem exactly thrilled with this, but she was putting up with it.

About ten minutes later, their dance came to an abrupt end when Tida tripped over his own feet. He wiped out again.

"Looks like that's the end of that. Isabella, would you handle Amy?" Prince Caesar said.

"Of course."

The prince and princess split up, taking Tida and Amy to opposite

ends of the room.

"What do you think they're talking about? I'm guessing it's about what comes next, right?" I asked.

"Probably. And since Amy's involved, I'm sure you're about to end up busier from now on, Tenma," Gramps said.

The biggest issue this new couple would face was their difference in social status. Amy was born a commoner, so there wasn't much she could do about that. Well, not under normal circumstances, at least. But thanks to Cain, I already knew a little trick to work around that problem if Amy was up for it. It would be a surprisingly simple fix too. It did mean Gramps and I would have to jump through some hoops, but it would be worth it for Amy's sake.

The princess returned with Amy before Prince Caesar and Tida finished their talk. "Tenma, can I ask a favor of you?"

She wanted me to speak with Amy's mom and grandma to start moving things forward. She even offered to make it a formal request, but I told her that wasn't necessary. I was already involved, so this wasn't going to be a job for me. I would do it as a personal favor.

"Tenma, I have a feeling Tida's going to be causing you all kinds of trouble from now on... And since Amy's involved, we'll be counting on you," the prince said to me after he finished his talk with Tida.

Tida and Princess Isabella bowed politely, and Amy followed suit.

Although Amy had said she wouldn't marry him right now, she hadn't said that she would *never* marry him. That meant that, technically, marriage was still on the table at some point. And since she was now officially Tida's girlfriend, that essentially made her the first candidate to be the next queen. That meant she had a long, tough road ahead of her. Amy would have to undertake a formal, royal education, learn about politics and high society...

We returned to the party, and the moment the crowd saw how excited Tida was, everyone in the room realized that he and Amy must be dating now.

"Let's just hope no one gets any strange ideas about trying anything with her," I muttered to Prince Caesar.

“Don’t worry. The royal family’s already planning on assigning guards and assassins to her,” he said.

The two of us sighed quietly and continued chatting about Amy’s safety. As for Tida, he was still acting like a lovesick fool.

Part Five

Since the party, a lot had changed around me and Amy—both our environment and our relationships.

Thanks to Tida practically skipping with glee through the party, rumors had spread like wildfire that the two of them were dating. Shortly afterward, the king had publicly recognized Amy as a potential future queen—a candidate for the crown princess. That had set off a huge commotion between the noble factions. Many nobles had a problem with the fact that she was a commoner, and some had even gone to the king in protest. But once they had heard the plan I'd devised and suggested to His Majesty, most of them had shut up real quick.

"I can't believe Amy was adopted by the Otori family *and* the Sylphid family on top of that! So that means she'll be my sister-in-law, right?" Albert asked.

Family ties mattered a lot in noble marriages. We officially adopted Amy into my family first, since I had influence with the royal family and several major noble houses. The next issue was her rank, so Eliza's family adopted her as well. With that done, the next step would be for her to eventually get married to Tida.

Since there wasn't an official engagement yet, there had been some talk about holding off on the adoption. However, Eliza had insisted on it and had filed the paperwork almost immediately.

I thought Karina and Arie might hesitate to give Amy up for adoption, even if it was just on paper, but they had been thrilled when I brought it up.

"Really? That's amazing! Yes, we agree!"

They had told me that they'd already figured Amy would have to be adopted into a noble family if she were to end up with a royal like Tida. They had actually been thinking about asking me if she could be adopted by the Sammons family.

I'd been bracing myself for having to try and convince them, so their enthusiasm had caught me off guard.

Right after I had returned to the capital, Eliza had stormed into the house since she'd heard about the whole thing. Her father had shown up not long after, apologizing profusely, and had tried to drag her back home. But since Amy and Eliza were already close and becoming a Sylphid would make her Albert's future sister-in-law, Eliza had argued it would only strengthen the bond. It had honestly made sense.

After some discussion with the queen, we went through with the plan, and Amy was formally adopted into the Sylphid family.

Of course, some nobles were still trying to cause trouble, saying things like the royal family was just passing Amy around for their own gain. But the queen put a stop to that talk by bringing it up at every tea party she hosted. She spun it all as a heartwarming tale of a sweet commoner girl who had followed her heart and had ended up with the boy she loved. By the time the critics even started, the story had already spread through the whole capital, and people thought it was lovely. There were even plans to turn it into a book once Amy and Tida were officially engaged or married.

But that wasn't all that had changed. Amy now had a small squad of female knights from the king's guard. And Karina and her family had a new knights' garrison base built near their home. Technically, it was a broader security upgrade across Sagan City, so it wasn't like they'd be guarded twenty-four seven or anything.

Meanwhile, I'd started getting invited to a lot more parties being hosted by the Sylphids and the Sangas.

This was all part of the strategy to publicly show that the Otori, Sylphid, and Sanga families were all backing Amy. I saw lots of familiar faces at those parties, including Marquis Sammons, Cain, Leon, and a bunch of other royalists. There were also some attendees from the neutral faction I'd met during that whole coup ordeal. They all helped spread the word that our three families were close and were backing Amy.

Even nobles who didn't like her had to think twice before making any bold moves. There wasn't a guarantee that no one would try to find weaknesses to exploit, but so far, the alliance between the three houses was rock solid.

“Is it just you today, Tenma?” Albert asked.

“Yeah. Gramps said it was too much of a pain and stayed home to relax. And the girls are out shopping with Amy for future events,” I said.

Up until now, all the parties I’d been to had been pretty casual, but eventually, I’d have to show up to some formal ones with a date. That was why the girls were out shopping for dresses. They had taken Amy along because they thought it would be good for her to have some outfits from my family too.

“Eliza’s probably already met up with them.”

“Oh, I guess that’s why she said she couldn’t make it today.”

I was at a party hosted by Albert, mainly for younger noble acquaintances of his. Eliza really should’ve been in attendance too since she was the future duchess, but she’d picked her new little sister over her fiancé. Under normal circumstances, that would’ve been a huge problem, but since the people at this party were all ones they were close with, we were all just joking about it. Eliza had likely figured that no one here would care. She was probably still due for a lecture from her dad when she got home, though.

“Hey, that reminds me... Albert, what was in that letter you got that time Queen Maria lectured you?” I asked.

“Which time?”

“After you got in trouble because of that thing about Primera.”

I was talking about the letter Duke Sanga had given Albert right after his lecture. I’d meant to ask about it ages ago but had never found the right moment. Now seemed like the perfect time to bring it up.

“Ugh...” The color drained out of Albert’s face, and he started to tremble. I quickly dragged him into a side room before anyone noticed—they might’ve thought I’d done something to him.

“Take some deep breaths. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” I said.

“No, it’s fine. Actually, Tenma, it involves you, so you should probably know.”

Hearing that made a knot form in my stomach, but at the same time, I really wanted to know what Primera had written.

"Just so you know, the problem wasn't Primera's letter. She didn't write a single bad thing about you," he said, much to my relief.

But in that case, what did that have to do with me?

"Primera's letter was fine. But there were letters from my other two sisters too."

Duke Sanga's oldest and second-oldest daughters had both married into royalist families and were now countesses. It just so happened that they'd both come to the capital around the same time, which had been just before we returned.

"They were going to give me the letters in person when we got back, but since both of their duchies are to the north, they had to leave to beat the snow."

Primera's letter had arrived right before they left, so they had also decided to leave their letters behind instead of waiting.

"Most of what they wrote was furious rants directed at me. But they also demanded that I tell them about you. I think they want to judge for themselves whether or not you're good enough for Primera. They probably won't come here over the winter, but I bet they'll show up the second the snow melts."

He told me that his two older sisters adored Primera. It wasn't a matter of if they'd come see me, but when—Albert told me to prepare myself.

I listened as Albert told me a few more stories about them, and once he had calmed down enough, we returned to the party. A few guests asked where we'd been, but when Albert told them we had been talking about future cooperation between the Otori and Sanga families, they didn't push any further.

"Hm? It's getting chilly out. Looks like it's already started snowing," I said.

It was light now, but I could tell from how the sky looked that the snow would start coming down hard any minute.

"Good thing I made this a daytime party. This may end up being the biggest snowfall of the year," Albert said.

And sure enough, the snow really did start coming down harder. The party wrapped up early, and the guests began heading out in their carriages.

I stuck around to continue my show of how friendly Albert and I were, saying goodbye to all the other guests before I headed back home on foot. Albert offered to send me home in a carriage, but with the snow piling up, I declined because I figured it would be a pain for the driver to get back here. After all, in the worst-case scenario, I could just fly home.

"Brr, it's freezing. Glad I changed before heading home," I muttered.

Party clothes weren't exactly made for snowy weather. It might have been against proper etiquette, but I'd switched into my usual outfit before I left Albert's. I had put on a coat and used magic to warm the air between the layers. I wasn't worried about freezing, but I didn't feel like walking in this mess for over an hour either.

I decided to use my flying magic. Technically, flying through the capital was restricted and could get you fined, but I thought if I got caught, I could just say it was an emergency because of the snowstorm.

Armed with that excuse, I launched myself into the air, heading for the estate. I took it slow because flying through the snow too quickly wasn't just cold—it *hurt.* My visibility was terrible too. I decided to just put safety first. It wasn't a long way back home, anyway.

After flying for a while, I was just about to the estate when I suddenly felt a strange, ominous presence.

"Where's it coming from?"

I tried to scan my surroundings, but the snow made it impossible to see anything. I quickly cast Detection to pinpoint it.

"Amur and the others are fighting someone on the opposite side of the mansion!"

Amur, Eliza, and two female knights from the royal guard who had been assigned to Amy were fighting someone. Jeanne and Aura were keeping their distance from the fray, shielding Amy along with one of the knights. The other three were directly fighting their opponent.

And they were quickly losing ground. At this rate, the enemy

would break through their defenses and reach Jeanne and Amy.

"Who the hell is that?"

I started flying faster and closed in within five minutes. I set my sights on the battlefield just in time to use Identify on the enemy. They were fighting...

"Chaos Mysails..."

He was the ex-tournament champion I'd fought against in my very first tournament.

"This is a good one, Amur."

I wasn't really too interested in fashion, but Jeanne had insisted I go shopping for dresses for future parties I might attend with Tenma, so I reluctantly agreed. And I ended up finding something really nice. But it wasn't a dress—it was a knife. I still didn't know how to pick out clothes, so I had Jeanne and Amy do it for me. If I were to leave it up to Aura, she'd probably mess around and pick out something weird, so I told her not to from the beginning. Anyway, I was looking at a beautifully constructed knife, probably made by a real craftsman. There was no way something this nice should be this cheap.

"Amur, since we're all out together, how about we stop for some tea?" Jeanne suggested to me. It had probably been Aura's idea, but I didn't have any objections. Tenma's snacks were way better, but if we brought him home something from this café, maybe it would ignite his competitive spirit and inspire him to come up with something even more delicious.

Or that's what I thought when I followed Aura into the café, but...

"I'm not impressed."

"Yeah, it's not as good as everyone said it was."

"Amur, Eliza, don't say that while we're still in front of the café!"

It was a total disappointment. Even the desserts Jeanne made tasted better than the ones here. She got all flustered when I told her that, and she pushed me away from the front of the store.

"Someone who worked near the castle once told me this place was amazing, but yeah... It wasn't that great," Aura agreed.

Amy nodded too.

It seemed all of us shared the same opinion, except for the two knights. Those two seemed confused, but that was probably because they'd never tasted Tenma's desserts. I knew they'd understand after one bite of his, though.

"It looks like it's starting to snow pretty hard. Should we head back soon?" Amy asked quietly while we were all still talking about the food.

She was right—this really was turning into quite the storm. Since I had grown up in the south, I didn't tolerate cold weather very well. And now that I was paying attention to it, all I could think about was getting home.

"Ugh, it's freezing! Let's go back!"

As soon as we get home, I'm gonna take a hot bath and have some cold milk. Seriously, why does ice-cold milk taste so good after a hot bath, even in winter? Well, who cares? What's good is good.

"Bath! Bath!" I started chanting as I marched towards the mansion, urging the others to hurry up. "Ba— Wait a minute! Everyone, halt!"

Just as I rounded a corner, I spotted a sketchy guy heading towards us. His clothes were ragged, and his face was hidden behind a filthy cloak. He looked like a vagrant. But this wasn't a slum or some back alley—we were in the middle of the city, and I'd never seen a vagrant out here before. But most of all, he gave off a really bad vibe.

"Amy, get back!" Eliza yelled, noticing how sketchy the guy looked. She tried to move beside me while she pushed Amy behind her. But...

"You move back too, Pigtails! Your magic's too dangerous in the snow!" I said.

"Stop calling me that! But fine, you have a point. I'll retreat a bit. The front line is all yours!" Eliza yelled. The moment she stepped back, one of Amy's guards stepped forward.

Eliza's lightning spells were incredibly powerful. They were probably super effective against human targets, but in this snowy weather, there was too much of a risk of friendly fire.

The second knight, Jeanne, and Aura all surrounded Amy. The

three of them would cover her while the other knight and I went after the suspicious guy.

Jeanne and Aura already had their weapons drawn. They were ready to summon the golems at a moment's notice, but the street we were on was too narrow. If they were to activate the golems too soon, we'd lose visibility on our target, and that would be too dangerous. I could tell that they knew that as well since they were waiting for just the right moment. If we'd been on a wider road, they would've summoned the scorpion golems right off the bat and made a break for it with Amy.

And that would've been pretty awkward, had this guy just been a regular vagrant. I could tell he was an actual enemy, though. The second we finished getting into formation, he pulled out a sword that he had hidden and charged.

"He's fast! But..."

He pretended to attack me and then swerved and went for the knight instead. But the knight was ready—she dodged the blow and delivered a clean counterattack. The guy just barely blocked it.

"Argh!"

I had taken my chance to strike and had sent him flying.

"Damn it. Should've used the bardiche or halberd instead of the spear. That way, I could've finished him off," I muttered. Since I'd been using the spear a lot lately, I had grabbed it out of habit. A cleaving weapon would've been a better choice for this fight.

"This guy doesn't look that tough, so I should be fine."

Sure, he *was* tough, but I didn't think he looked all that strong. He wasn't anyone I couldn't handle solo. I even had Eliza and a knight at my side.

"Airball!" Eliza launched a spell at him just as he was getting up. The knight rushed forward at the same time and attacked again.

"All right, that's that!"

The knight landed the final blow, and the man dropped into a pool of blood. It looked like he was just barely alive. If we stopped the bleeding, a city guard could take him away for questioning. The knight must've had the same idea, because she went over to tie him up, but...

“D-Don’t you dare underestimate me!” the guy yelled.

He pulled out a suspicious-looking vial from his pocket and downed it in one gulp. The second we saw that happen, we both jumped back reflexively, figuring it had to be poison or something explosive. But once we realized he was drinking it, we thought either it might be a healing potion or the guy was trying to finish himself off. The knight rushed in to stop him and make him cough it up.

But it wasn’t poison. And it wasn’t a healing potion either.

“Argh!”

It was something that had an effect I’d never seen or heard of before.

The guy had been close to death moments earlier, but now, he was up on his feet. He punched the knight and knocked her down. His body had swelled to more than twice its previous size, and his muscles were bulging unnaturally.

“Get back, Pigtails! Farther! And Jeanne, Aura, get the gol—Huh?!”

I slammed my spear down hard on his head, using my full body weight, but...

“Arghh! That hurts! That hurts, damn it!”

He caught my spear with his bare hands to block my strike, then swung my spear around with me still hanging onto it.

“Nngh!” I let go of my spear before he could slam me into the ground with it. Then, I jumped back to put distance between us.

“All right, fine! Let’s chop him down, then!” I yelled, drawing my bardiche.

Jeanne and Aura sent out their golems to keep the guy busy while I waited for my chance. I thought maybe if several golems rushed him all at once, I would have a chance to strike. However, he tore through most of the golems with two or three punches. Some of them shattered with a single hit. I hadn’t expected the golems to break like that at all.

“Now!”

One golem had managed to get behind him and was now stopping him for a moment. This was my chance. I raised my bardiche high and charged, slamming it down with all my strength.

“Arrrgh!”

“Ahh! Nooo!”

The man raised up his right arm to defend himself from the blow, and I ended up hacking off that arm of his and tearing into his right leg. But in the next second, his attack hit me from the left and sent me flying. I was pretty sure he’d shattered the bones in my arm. I knew I had to get away, but the pain was so intense that I couldn’t even move.

“Come over here!”

Eliza was casting Airballs over and over again at the man. He let the spells hit him as he continued moving closer to me.

“His arm... It’s growing back...”

Something that looked like a bundle of tentacles sprouted from his bloody stump and twisted into the shape of a new arm. The wound on his leg was sewing itself up as well.

“Everybody... Run...”

He stopped in front of me and slowly raised his new arm. I could see Eliza rushing towards me out of the corner of my eye, but I knew she wouldn’t make it in time.

His arm rose high over my head, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I was sure I was done for, but...

“Get away from Amur!!!” I heard Tenma shout, and the guy’s right arm went flying again.



◆◆◆

"Get out of the way!"

I slashed Chaos's arm off at the last possible moment and kicked him so hard that he went flying away from Amur.

"Aqua Heal! Aqua Heal! Aqua Heal! Eliza, take her!"

"Leave it to me!"

I triple-cast Aqua Heal on Amur, which closed her visible wounds. She had already passed out, either from shock or blood loss. I figured she probably had a few broken bones too. Amur needed to be moved carefully, but we didn't have time for that with Chaos still on the loose. I had to let Eliza handle her while I finished off Chaos.

"Eliza, use this on the knight!" I tossed the strongest recovery medicine and salve I had on me over to her. She could treat Amur and the fallen knight with it. "Try to get them back to Gramps's mansion. If you can't do that, just take them far away from here! I'm gonna kill this guy."

The right move would've been to incapacitate Chaos and hand him over to the knights to be interrogated, but I knew in my gut that wasn't going to happen. He'd grown two new arms where I'd cut off the last one. His body was even bigger now, with bulging veins all over. His eyes were glowing red, and his hair was falling out in clumps.

"You look like a demon," I said. "I don't know what happened to you, but I can tell you're too far gone."

He didn't even look like a human anymore. For a second, I almost felt bad for him, but he had shattered my golems with his bare hands and healed himself faster than we could keep up with. He could kill someone if I were to turn him in to the knights—there was no way I could expose everyone to that kind of danger.

"Arrghhh!"

"He's fast... Stone Bullet!" I cast two bullets right where I predicted Chaos would be heading—one aimed at his chest and one at his head. "How did he block that?!"

Chaos batted both spells away with his two right arms. The stone

bullets didn't even pierce him. Instead, they just bounced off. Not even a direct hit with magic could slow him down.

As he charged me, I switched my weapons. I sheathed my *kogarasumaru* and drew my halberd. I put my entire body weight into my next strike.

"It's still not over?!" I said.

I'd thought I'd sliced him right in two, but the second my halberd had made contact with him, he'd suddenly pumped the brakes and stopped. It had thrown my timing off enough that I had only *nearly* sliced him in two. The two halves of his body were still connected, though just barely. There were maybe a few centimeters of flesh left holding them together.

Under normal circumstances, that would've been the end of it. I really *had* thought I'd beaten him, but he was still alive. Even though he was lying in a heap on the ground, he wasn't stopping. He smashed his body back together again and started to heal himself.

"His regen ability might be even better than a hydra's..." Speaking of hydras, I wondered how Jin and the Dawnswords were faring against the one in the dungeon.

Chaos lunged towards me again.

"He's super strong with crazy regen abilities, and he attacks with both brute force and speed. This *should* be a nightmare of a fight, but his brain is turned to mush," I said.

Maybe the muscles had taken over his brain because all he did was charge blindly ahead. That made him easy to dodge.

"Take this!"

I evaded his attacks and landed a clean blow on him. This time, his left arm went flying.

"I'm sure that's just gonna grow back too... But it does look like he's starting to wear down."

Sure enough, two new arms sprouted from this new wound, but they were way thinner and shorter than the ones that had grown before. He had probably used up a lot of juice reconnecting his torso. But even so, he still kept charging.

I could see that his left arms were weaker, though. Every time they hit the ground or a wall, they split open and bled. The bone

was starting to show through.

"Let's finish this!"

Even though Chaos had turned into a monster, he had to run out of stamina sometime. His movements were getting sluggish. I spun my halberd and pushed him back with a series of attacks. He barely had the strength to resist now, although he was still flailing his arms.

Then...

"Haah! Nngh!"

I landed a two-hit combo on him that severed both sets of his arms at the shoulders. It seemed like his body couldn't keep up because when I sliced through him this time, his flesh felt a lot softer than before. That meant he had most likely been using magic to boost his body earlier.

"Grhghh..." he groaned.

"Haah! Huh? Nngh, gah!"

I went in for the finishing blow—a diagonal slash across his chest—but my blade hit something hard. It came to a stop in the center of him. I adjusted my angle mid-swing and forced the halberd down with everything I had. And this time, I made sure that the two halves of his body landed far apart from one another so they couldn't reconnect.

He looked dead, but I wasn't about to take any chances just in case there was some kind of nasty surprise left in him.

"Jeanne, Aura," I called out. "Go back to the mansion and bring Gramps here. And Rocket too. Eliza, once Rocket arrives here, put Amur and the knight inside of him. And Amy, stay close to Eliza and don't move."

"Tenma! What happened?!"

Jeanne and Aura were just about to leave to get Gramps when he showed up with Shiromaru instead. Rocket must've stayed behind, so I asked Shiromaru to run and fetch him.

"I sensed something strange and came out to check. Was that a monster?" Gramps asked, looking at Chaos's corpse.

I explained the situation, and his eyes went wide. He immediately crouched down and inspected the body. "Tenma, hide the body before anyone else sees it. Now," Gramps said suddenly. His tone

was dead serious.

I noticed a group of people approaching us. I wanted to ask him why I should do that, but the look on his face shut me up. I stuffed the corpse into my magic bag without another word.

"We received reports of a disturbance in the area and— Oh! Master Merlin!" The usual town guards who patrolled the area around Gramps's mansion had arrived. They recognized him immediately. They looked around a bit. "What happened here? Were you the one fighting?" one of the guards asked Gramps.

He shook his head and told them that I had been fighting an attacker instead. Once he mentioned I'd ended up killing him, the guards wanted to take me in for questioning, but Gramps said, "I'm sorry, but I can't allow that. This incident will likely fall under royal jurisdiction, so we're going to head over to the castle immediately to explain the situation."

We started to leave, but the guards stopped us. They insisted they couldn't let us go without at least seeing the body and hearing why the case had to be handed over to the royal family.

"I'm sorry, but we can't let you look at the body, but I'll tell you why. The attacker attempted to murder two noblewomen, and they weren't just any nobles. He targeted Lady Amur, the daughter of Viscount Hana from the SAR, and Lady Eliza von Sylphid. The crown prince's fiancée, Amy, was also present, and Amur was seriously injured. There are other details as well, so it's best this doesn't spread too far," Gramps explained.

The moment he made it clear these weren't just any noble women, the guards froze. These women were very important—if harm came to them, it could cause fractures in the very kingdom. I could feel the tension in the air. They weren't sure how to respond.

"But I know you have a job to do, so how about this? One of you can come to the castle with us, and you can explain the situation directly to whoever the king's guard sends when we get to the palace," Gramps suggested.

That seemed to smooth things over. The guards agreed, and their leader came along with us. But since they still needed an official statement, I gave one right there on the spot.

"Amur and the knight were being attacked. I arrived and engaged in combat, and I killed the attacker in the course of battle," I said.

They wrote that down, and at the end, they added "Self-defense most likely." They made two copies of the statement and gave one to the captain to keep on his person.

"We should take Amur with us, but there's no way we can move her now with those injuries," I said.

"True. Her testimony will have to wait. Healing should take first priority. I don't think Alex and the others would expect an injured girl to come testify anyway," Gramps said.

So it ended up being just me, Gramps, and Eliza who went to the palace. Jeanne and Aura stayed behind to take care of Amur, and Amy stayed with them too. The other knight who'd been assigned to guard Amy stayed behind as well, at least until her replacement arrived.

"Rocket, I'm counting on you to guard the house. If something happens, get everyone out of there and escape."

After I finished treating Amur and the knight, I remembered that I'd been on the way back from Albert's party, so he would need to be informed. And since Eliza had been attacked too, her family would obviously need to know as well.

"Oh, excuse me. Could you let Duke Sanga and Count Sylphid know what happened?" I asked the guards if someone could deliver that message for me. I worried for a second that maybe I was overstepping, but since it involved notifying the families of the victims, they agreed.

As for injuries, the knight had suffered a concussion from when she'd hit her head, and Amur had a concussion and a compound fracture in her left arm. Their lives weren't in danger and both were conscious after treatment, but Amur's arm would need to be immobilized to heal for a while.

Part Six

"Tenma! Master Merlin!"

When we reached the castle and told the gatekeeper we were there, he went to fetch someone from the king's guard. Prince Lyle showed up with Edgar and Sigurd in tow.

The prince was about to question me, but Edgar stopped him.

"Prince Lyle, I think we should hear the guards' report before Tenma's," he said.

The prince nodded and took the guards' report first. After reading it, he said, "Good work. I'll handle the rest. Consider this report the entire official account."

Essentially, he was imposing a gag order on them. The guard saluted and left.

"Prince Lyle, you came out here personally... Does that mean you had some idea this might happen?" Gramps asked.

"I did," he admitted. "Word just came that Chaos escaped from the prison camp mine he was working in. We figured he'd target Tenma, so we were preparing to send guards his way. We were just about to send someone to let you know when I heard that you'd already arrived at the castle."

"So that's why you were in such a hurry," I said.

"Exactly. I'm sorry, I should've sent the knights the moment the alert came in." He then told us that it was his fault that he didn't do things in the correct order and bowed his head to us right there in the entrance of the castle.

"Nah, Gramps and I are fine. We didn't get hurt at all. The real problem is that Amur and Eliza were attacked, right?"

They were both daughters of powerful nobles, and since Lyle had accepted fault in the matter, the royal family would need to take responsibility, especially since Amur had nearly been killed. Now, the only question was how they would do that.

"I'll discuss it with my father and the others. I'd like you to attend that meeting and explain everything you know about what

happened," Prince Lyle said.

We followed him to a room where the king and the others were waiting. The moment I stepped inside, the tension was so stifling I wanted to turn around and walk the other way.

"Tenma, Master Merlin, this way, please. Lady Eliza, over here."

Gramps and I were led to seats near Prince Caesar. Eliza was directed to a seat right across from the king and Queen Maria. Prince Lyle sat beside the king. In terms of royals, the king, Queen Maria, Prince Caesar, Prince Lyle, Dean, and Jean were all present. Edgar and Sigurd had gone to alert the knights who'd been preparing to attack Chaos.

The meeting began. It seemed like I had come in second to Eliza when it came to apologies, but that made sense given the situation. Gramps and I didn't mind, so it wasn't a big deal.

"Tenma, Master Merlin, here are some tea and sweets for you..." Jean said, being extra considerate.

Prince Caesar and Dean also seemed to be walking on eggshells around us, but Jean especially was. I asked him why, and he told me that he felt personally responsible for the girls having been attacked since his response had been delayed.

Apparently, when the news about Chaos's escape had come in, Prince Lyle had wanted to deploy the knights immediately. However, Jean had convinced him to wait, citing the bad weather. He'd also said that since Chaos was a former tournament winner, they should avoid fighting him and that there'd be no guarantee that Chaos would be heading to the capital. He'd suggested that they organize themselves better before making a move.

"But everything backfired," Gramps muttered. "Still, anyone would've done the same. You made the best decision at the time."

"Yeah. It's a shame people got hurt, but no one died. And let's be real...if you had sent out those knights unprepared, someone probably *would've* died," I agreed.

Dean started to argue, but he eventually agreed with me. "But... Well, I suppose if three of them couldn't take him down and Amur nearly got killed, that's certainly possible..."

Even though Kriss had beaten Amur in the tournament, she'd had

the advantage in terms of pure physical strength. Yet even though three of them had fought against Chaos, Amur had nearly been killed. Even if they'd sent elite guards, they could've lost their lives.

"There's a lot more to talk about, but I think we should discuss the details with Father," Prince Caesar said.

Just then, the king and the others finished talking, so Gramps and I were called upon next.

"Master Tenma, Master Merlin. I am deeply sorry for putting you in danger due to my lack of judgment," Prince Lyle said.

"I accept your apology. I wasn't hurt, so please don't worry too much."

"And I only showed up at the end, so there's no reason to apologize to me," Gramps said.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Please focus on Amur more than us," I said. "Chaos nearly killed her."

"Of course," the prince said. "I'll make sure to pay her a visit and apologize properly."

It was weird seeing Prince Lyle like this, but I guess that just went to show how seriously apologetic he was.

"I'll go thank Amur as well. It's not an exaggeration to say that her fighting as hard as she could against Chaos was what kept others safe," he said.

He was right. If Amur hadn't fought as hard as she had, several of the girls might've gotten killed. Or worse, Chaos could've slipped away and hurt people elsewhere.

"That doesn't change the fact that you also did a service, Tenma. We're all very grateful to you," the king said.

Then, we moved on to the next topic.

"So the attacker really was Chaos... You say that Amur was holding her own against him at first, but then he drank some kind of suspicious potion, and even three of them attacking him at once wasn't enough to stop him? I don't think you're lying, but there's so much I don't understand..."

Since Eliza was the only one who could explain what had happened before I had gotten there, she took the lead in retelling

things. The king and the others still seemed confused.

"I'd guess it was something like a powerful performance-enhancing drug. But I've never heard of one that can alter your body so drastically and so quickly," Gramps said.

At any rate, we knew Chaos had used some kind of illegal substance, but other than that, we didn't have much to go on.

"Your Majesty, Count Sylphid and Lord Albert have arrived," Cruyff said as he entered the room with Eliza's father and Albert.

"They came together?" the king asked.

"Yes. It appears that Count Sylphid was on his way to Duke Sanga's estate when he ran into Lord Albert, who was heading here after hearing the news. They decided to come together."

"I see. Bring them in at once."

The king was surprised they'd arrived together and ordered Cruyff to show them in. Apparently, he'd thought they were going to come separately, but I figured that Count Sylphid had been planning to visit to apologize for Eliza having skipped Albert's party. Then, he'd run into Albert and had found out what happened. That would explain why they had rushed here.

And sure enough, the moment they greeted the royals, Count Sylphid started scolding Eliza. Queen Maria stepped in to calm things down. The count apologized to everyone for making a scene, but something told me the real lecture would start once they got home.

"Your Majesty, Lady Eliza seems quite exhausted from the ordeal, and I imagine she and her father have a lot to discuss. Perhaps this would be a good chance to pause for the day?" Prince Caesar suggested.

And just like that, Eliza was dismissed. Gramps had whispered something to Prince Caesar right before the prince had made that announcement, so I figured there was a reason they didn't want her to hear what would come next.

"And Mother, we need to examine Chaos's body next, so I suggest you return to your chambers," the prince added.

The queen agreed. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. A woman shouldn't need to see that." She nodded and left the room without pressing for more details.

"So what's the issue with Chaos's body?" the king asked Gramps.

"There's something about it we need to discuss, and I don't want that information getting out. I could barely believe what I'd seen with my own eyes," Gramps said. He was wearing the same serious look on his face that he'd had when he'd told the guards to keep the body hidden.

Prince Caesar and Prince Lyle glanced at me while Gramps spoke. I shrugged—Gramps hadn't explained anything to me either.

"Tenma, do you have a dimension bag you don't mind getting ruined?" Gramps asked.

"Yeah, I have one that's about half the size of this room inside," I said.

"Bring it out. And depending on what we find, we might have to destroy it afterward. Is that okay?"

I had plenty of dimension bags, so I decided to take one out that I figured I'd destroy afterward. Even if I didn't actually need to, there would be no way I'd keep a bag that'd held Chaos's body in it.

"Um, should I leave?" Albert asked nervously when I pulled out the bag. It was clear he was wondering if he'd been forgotten.

The king looked like he'd forgotten that Albert was here too, but he quickly composed himself. "No, you should stay. You're here on behalf of Duke Sanga, and I'd like another young man's opinion—besides Tenma."

Honestly, the way he said it made it sound more like *You've heard this much, so you're in it for the long haul. Don't even think of running.*

Albert seemed to catch what he'd been implying. He continued to sit there, and the color drained from his face as he did.

"Cruyff, don't let anyone into this room. Not even the queen."

"Understood."

Cruyff went to stand outside while the rest of us stepped into the dimension bag. At Gramps's instruction, I pulled out Chaos's body. It was still split clean in two. I laid the pieces down in the center of the room.

Everyone grimaced and instinctively glanced away for a second before turning back to look again.

"Master Merlin, I agree this is all very unusual, but why are you going to such lengths to keep it a secret?" Prince Lyle asked.

Everyone besides Gramps nodded in agreement.

"If it were just a case of him growing extra arms, we could blame it on some magical device or spell," Gramps began. "But *this* can't be explained that way, so we'll need to keep it a secret at all costs."

Gramps then pulled out a knife and sliced open Chaos's chest. We were all surprised by his sudden action, but then we all stared in shock. And that was because...

"A magic core..."

I was all too familiar with the item—there was one inside every monster, of course. But here one was, inside Chaos's body.

"Only monsters have magic cores. Not even beasts who are as strong as monsters or regular humans who have surpassed their limits have ever been found with one. I don't know if this was implanted in him or if it was the result of a drug, but if word gets out that a living human being turned into a monster, it'll stir up quite a commotion," Gramps said.

If his body had turned into a monster's, we could've chalked it up to zombification. But according to Eliza, Chaos had definitely been human when the fight began. Although he had barely spoken, the words he'd said had been in human language. It hadn't been until Amur had knocked him down and the knight had pinned him that he'd become a monster. His drinking the potion had definitely been the turning point.

"Whatever it was, the drug Chaos used either turned him into a monster or triggered the transformation. What happened to him after Tenma beat him in the tournament? And why was there such a delay in reporting his escape?" Gramps asked.

"After the tournament, Chaos was convicted for his crimes and was sent to work as a slave in the mines," Prince Lyle explained.

In the mines, slaves were split into small groups who worked in separate areas. A few days ago, one group had stopped reporting in. At first, the official in charge had thought it was due to bad weather, but when no report had come the next day as well, he'd finally gotten suspicious and had sent soldiers to investigate. All they had

found were the bodies of most of the slaves and their overseers...but not Chaos.

Since Chaos's body had been missing, it had been immediately concluded that he'd been responsible. Notices had gone out to nearby towns and villages, and a report had been sent to the capital as well.

"But that report took several days to reach us. From the estimations of when the incident occurred, not even ten days passed between then and when Chaos reached the capital. It's very likely he had help."

Even accounting for some delay in the official's actions, the report had been sent out two days after the incident. Using a relay system with fresh horses and riders at waypoints, the message had arrived as soon as it could.

Meanwhile, even though Chaos'd had a two-day head start, he'd had to have traveled on foot, or perhaps ridden a stolen horse. But if he *had* been on horseback, someone would've spotted him along the way. That meant he'd probably taken the long way around.

"So you're saying that if he'd traveled by horse, arriving at the same time as the report would be odd, and it's even stranger that he would've traveled by horse in the first place."

"Exactly. That's why I think he had some help."

Chaos had known magic, so maybe he could've boosted his abilities or even flown. But if he could've escaped this whole time, why now instead of right after he'd been sent to the mines? And where had he even gotten that drug?

"If we could at least figure out where or when he got it, we might be able to narrow it down. And what about his arm? Who healed that?" I asked.

I'd sliced off his arm during the tournament, and the knife he'd used had exploded and had blown it into pieces. He had been taken away right after. If he were just being sentenced to slavery afterward, no one would've gone out of their way to reattach it. And yet Eliza hadn't mentioned him missing an arm.

"Jean, go ask Eliza. She might still be in the castle!"

Jean dashed out of the bag before Prince Lyle even finished his

sentence. He came running back about ten minutes later.

"Haah, haah, haah... I made it in time! She said Chaos definitely had both arms!" Jean said, panting.

Eliza and the count had been finishing up some pleasantries with an acquaintance and had been just about to board their carriage when he'd spotted them.

"Then we need to find out exactly when he got that arm back. Immediately!" the king said, and Jean dashed off again.

It sounded like there wouldn't be anything in the castle's records, so he'd probably have to check with the mining office or even travel out to the worksite. Either way, it would be some time before we got answers.

"So we'll need to store Chaos's body in a safe place..."

"That means..."

"No way," I said before the king could finish. I wasn't about to hold on to that *thing,* dimension bag or not.

But after he and both princes pleaded with me for a while, I reluctantly agreed to keep it for the time being.

"Tenma, what exactly was Chaos like after he transformed?" Dean asked. "Like, how strong was he? Tell me about his abilities. Any information will help."

Everyone looked curious as we stepped out of the dimension bag to continue our discussion.

"So you're saying after Chaos took that drug, his strength and power overwhelmed Amur's, and he had a regenerative ability on par with or even greater than a hydra's? And then his abilities dropped back to human levels as the fight went on?" Gramps asked.

"Yes. I'm not exactly sure why, but something like Boost magic might've increased his physical capabilities," I replied.

"That would make sense. If his mana ran out, that would explain why his strength dropped, or at least returned to normal. It definitely could've been some kind of magic," Gramps said.

"Or maybe the effects just wore off? Either way, if we ever face someone like him again, we'll need to tighten our defenses and drag out the fight," I said.

Chaos was the only example of this we'd seen, so we couldn't be

sure of anything. But for now, it seemed like the best approach would be a drawn-out defensive battle if this were to happen again. We had no other leads to test out.

"Hopefully, nobody else like him shows up. But since there's a chance someone gave Chaos the drug, we should just assume we'll see another monster like him in the future," the king said. "Lyle, gather the knight captains and brief them on a potential emergency situation. Dean, make sure my knights can move out at a moment's notice. But don't disclose any information about Chaos's magic core yet. We'll wait until there's a second case before informing the public."

The king put a gag order out regarding Chaos's magic core, but he wasn't going to restrict information about the drug. Hiding that would be far too dangerous.

"It would be hard to explain why Amur lost to Chaos in the first place if we kept the drug a secret," I reasoned.

Because of her performance in the martial arts tournament, Amur was known to be one of the strongest fighters in the capital. Even though Chaos was a former champion himself, he'd been working in the mines for three years. No one would believe that he could've nearly killed her in that state unless we gave them a sufficient reason.

"Anyway, Tenma, you're free to talk about the drug, but not the core. Don't mention it to anyone who asks—not even Amur," the king said, making sure I understood.

Once I nodded, there wasn't much left to discuss, so the meeting ended.

After I said my goodbyes to everyone and headed for the door, Albert said farewell to the king and tagged along behind me and Gramps as we walked away from the meeting room.

"Wanna ride back in our carriage, Albert?" I asked after we'd walked for a bit.

He politely declined, saying he'd go in the duke's carriage instead.

"I was shocked when I heard that something happened to you on the way home from the party, Tenma. Thanks for saving Eliza," Albert said.

"If anyone saved her, it was Amur," I said.

"Well, I'll make sure to thank her next time, but...things could've gotten really bad if you hadn't gotten there when you did." Albert bowed, making me feel slightly embarrassed.

I waited for him to lift his head, and...

"Tenma! Is Amy okay?!" Tida came running over from off in the distance, clearly out of breath. He must've been really worried, because he had run as fast as he could and was panting by the time he reached me. "Tell me about Amy, Tenma!"

Albert stepped in. "Please calm down, Prince Tida."

Tida was so beside himself with worry that he hadn't noticed Albert at all. He jumped a bit at his voice.

"I understand you're concerned about Amy, but you should thank Tenma first, and then ask about Amur and the others who were injured. Amy should come last," Albert chided him gently.

Tida seemed to realize his mistake and apologized to me and Gramps. He thanked me and then asked about Amur and the others before bringing up Amy again. I told him she was fine thanks to Amur and everyone else, but he still wanted to check on her himself because he was so worried.

Princess Isabella suddenly appeared. "I can't let you go out in this snowstorm," she said, and Tida quieted down and stepped aside. "Thank you for earlier, Albert. Having someone in your position say that to Tida must've made an impression. And Tenma, Master Merlin, I'm so sorry for the trouble. If you hadn't made it in time, it could've damaged the kingdom's relationship with the SAR and House Sylphid. I'm so grateful. I'm going to send Amur and the others a letter of thanks later."

She sounded more formal than usual, perhaps because we were still in the castle where other nobles could overhear us. I gave her the most proper response I could manage.

"Tida, let's go back to our chambers. Amy's safe at Tenma's estate. You shouldn't worry so much."

"Okay," Tida said obediently to the princess.

"Trust me, nobody shady can sneak into my place that easily, and we've got an escape plan if something does happen. I'll tell Amy that

you were worried about her. And if you want me to pass along another message, I can do that too," I offered.

Tida thought for a moment and then said, "Tell her, 'I was so worried when I heard you were attacked. I can't wait to see for myself that you're well and smiling when we meet again next time.'"

It felt a bit simple, but it would've been way worse if he'd gone with some over-the-top declaration of love. I promised to pass it on and said goodbye to them both before heading home.

Finally, we arrived back at the estate.

"It's crawling with golems," Gramps said.

The golems I'd stashed around the property for security had all gathered in the yard. They were on full alert.

"I bet Rocket did this," I said.

He must've taken extra precautions, and honestly, I was glad it was snowing so hard. If it had been clear today and there were people out and about, there would've been a crowd gathered at the estate already.

"For now, let's pull the extra golems and just boost our overall security a bit," I suggested.

"Right. With this many golems out there, our carriage might have a hard time getting through," Gramps agreed.

We left about twice the usual number of golems out and sent the rest back to their spots. Jeanne must've heard them moving because she opened the door to greet us.

"Jeanne, how's Amur?" I asked.

"She woke up a little while ago, but..."

The way she trailed off made me nervous that something was wrong.

"She's being really cranky and demanding meat," she said.

That was such a classic Amur thing to do that both Gramps and I nearly fell on the floor like in a comedy sketch. We managed to stay upright, but the snow had made the floor so slippery that we really did almost wipe out.

"She didn't say anything about being in pain, did she?"

"She says her left arm, left side, right shoulder, and right leg hurt.

But she didn’t mention nausea or a headache,” Jeanne said.

She was probably feeling pain from getting hit or slammed around, which was to be expected. There likely wasn’t anything to worry about for now.

“Did she eat anything?” I asked. If she was asking for meat after already eating something, I thought it would be best to hold off on that, but Jeanne told me she hadn’t yet. I decided to make something easier for her to digest.

“Amur, I made you some rice porridge. This’ll have to do for now.” I had gone with a simple porridge with rice and egg since it would be light and easy on the stomach. It wasn’t a meat dish, but as a little compromise, I added a small amount of sweet and savory ground beef on the side for her to use as a topping.

“Hmph! Why didn’t you just make me a thick-cut steak instead?!”

“Oh, I guess you’re not hungry,” I said, pretending I was going to take her bowl away.

“Wait, no! Owww!” She panicked and tried to stop me but ended up hurting herself in the process.

“You need to stick to soft foods until the pain goes away. I’ll make you whatever you want once you’re fully healed.”

Amur grumbled and finally nodded, looking over at the porridge on the nightstand.

“Tenma, ahhh!” She opened her mouth like a baby bird. Clearly, she wanted me to feed her, but that wasn’t happening.

“You’re up, Aura.”

“Leave it to me!”

I handed the job off to Aura, who’d been eyeing the food. Amur started complaining loudly, but I ignored her and let Aura deal with her instead.

A bit later, I heard Amur yell from her room. She’d probably shoveled the porridge in her mouth without cooling it down first. Jeanne would get her water, so I figured I’d just head down to the dining room and get something cold ready for her.

“Water! I need water! And Tenma, you come too!”

It turned out the burn was worse than I had thought. Jeanne had

come to get water, and once she spotted me, she dragged me off to help treat Amur.

It was only then that I realized I had forgotten to relay Tida's message to Amy.

I should probably do that before I forget again...

Things had been nonstop chaos—pun intended—since we had gotten back to the capital, what with the whole Tida and Amy situation and then the fight with Chaos. I wished things would finally calm down, but there was a fat chance of that happening. I could probably relax about Tida and Amy now, but the Chaos incident was way too suspicious. There was no doubt that more trouble was on the way.

For now, all I could do was hope that things would be more peaceful until the snow melted and it became easier to move around again.

"Tenma, hurry! Amur freaked out from the burn and smacked her arm. She's in total agony!"

Yeah... Some peace and quiet would be really nice.

Part Seven

"It's really starting to warm up now, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, though we'll still have some cold days to get through. I recommend this."

The snow had melted, the sun was finally out again, and that was when Lani showed up at Gramps's mansion for the first time in a long while. Leni was with him too, but she'd gone shopping with Amur and the other girls.

"Is this a mandarin?" Gramps asked. He took the fruit Lani showed him, peeled it, sniffed it, and popped a wedge in his mouth. "Blecch! That's sour! What *is* this?!"

It must not've tasted how he expected—he spit it out.

"Is it yuzu?" I asked.

"That's right," Lani said. "On cold days, you can float this in your bath to help you warm up. Not many people eat it plain because of how sour it is, but you can use the rind and juice in alcohol, cooking, and even sweets."

When Gramps heard that it could be used in alcohol, he sniffed the yuzu again. He nodded thoughtfully and gave me an expectant look.

"All right, I'll buy it."

"Thanks! It's 1,000G per kilogram, and I have about a hundred kilos. If you're buying the whole lot, I'll let you have it for 900 per kilogram."

I bought all of it without hesitation.

"I figured you might want these too."

Lani then pulled out three yuzu trees, which I bought as well. Their branches were trimmed back, but each tree was about three meters tall. If we were lucky, we'd get fruit in two or three years.

"Now, as an intelligence officer from the SAR, I need a detailed account of what happened to Lady Amur when she was injured," Lani said, no longer smiling. He was here for intel on Chaos.

"Unfortunately, the king issued a gag order on that," I said.

"I'm well aware, but I still need to ask you. Please tell me."

I debated what I should do, and he continued. "Technically, the SAR is part of the kingdom, but in practice, we're a separate domain. And regardless of her current standing, Lady Amur is an important figure in the SAR. The fact that she went through something so dangerous and her family—a viscount's household, mind you—wasn't briefed is unacceptable. We may have to consider the idea of being an autonomous region of this kingdom."

I sighed. "If Queen Maria chews me out for this, I'm dragging you down with me."

Faced with that threat, I had no choice but to spill the beans as long as Lani would share in any consequences I faced in doing so. He agreed to my condition without hesitation. Meanwhile, Gramps had slipped out of the room while I'd waffle over what to do. He had clearly wanted to remove himself from the blame.

"Hm, I guess Gramps won't be getting any yuzu."

I wrote him off and turned back to discuss the situation with Lani. The biggest issue we came to was...

"I think Lady Hana will understand the situation, but Lord Lobo might just storm over here himself," Lani said. "He tends to go overboard when it comes to Lady Amur. And he's a lot more mobile than he used to be, if anything. I'd say it's almost guaranteed that he'll be coming. Actually, he tried to tag along on this merchant trip and got lectured by Lady Hana..."

Lani said he'd received a thorough scolding and Lady Hana had said, "What are you going to do if Amur ends up hating you and it damages relations with the kingdom?"

That had been enough to make him back down for now, but if he were to find out that Amur had suffered serious injuries and that they might've been caused by a mistake the kingdom had made, there was no doubt in my mind that Lobo was going to show up.

"We'll need to ask Lady Hana, Lady Sana, and Lord Blanca for help to prevent that from happening."

"Come to think of it, I heard from Amur that he used to be the head of your organization in the SAR?" I said.

Lani told me that it was in the past now, and these days, Hana

held all the authority. Apparently, there'd been complaints from within the group, mainly that it was a bad idea to have the intelligence division under the control of anyone but the family head.

"Right now, Lord Lobo's job is to serve as Lady Hana's proxy when necessary, but his main responsibility is actually being the festival committee chair."

That was quite a fall from grace from his former position, but weirdly enough, it sounded like the role really suited him. Apparently, he was always the first to pitch new festival ideas to Hana. But really, most of the actual planning and details were passed off to the other committee members.

"So he's just the idea guy?" I asked.

"Well, according to people who work with him, he handles the important stuff like getting permits and negotiating budgets, and then gives everyone else free rein to do the rest. So it's actually a very easy environment to work in."

Handling the hard parts and not micromanaging the rest? Maybe he was actually a pretty solid boss.

Anyway, there wasn't much point in talking about Lobo any further, so I asked Lani for other updates from the SAR. He told me mostly about Yoshitsune. Since the child was the next in line to become the viscount of the SAR, he'd been getting a lot of attention. There were already talks of engagement.

"There has been discussion about daughters and relatives of powerful families, of course, but we've also heard from nobles outside the region. Some of them are just after the SAR's influence or might even be aiming for a takeover. Still, it's the first time outside nobles have sent proposals, so whether he accepts it or not, it's the hottest topic in Nanao right now."

Up until now, the SAR had only ever received honorary titles, but now that Hana had become an official viscount, her son Yoshitsune was suddenly seen as potentially being a major influential figure.

"Also, one of the newer rumors is that you might be involved in deciding Lord Yoshitsune's marriage partner."

"Huh?" I said.

"Well, your apprentice was adopted by the Otori family and is

now engaged to a royal. So, the theory is that the SAR might want Lord Yoshitsune to marry another one of your adopted daughters in exchange for marrying off a lady from the SAR to the capital. Specifically, people are speculating that your daughter might come from Duke Sanga's family, Marquis Sammons's family, or even Margrave Haust's family."

It was an amusing theory, and I had to admit it sounded just plausible enough to gain traction. But when I said I had no plans like that at all, Lani just chuckled and said, "I figured."

"Still, if it did happen, the SAR—and more specifically the viscount's family—would be tied to the Dragonslayer, to a high-ranking noble, and maybe even to the royal family. It'd be a far better match for their future prosperity than allying with some greedy noble who was only after power or influence," he said.

It sounded like a bit of Lani's real feelings had slipped out there, but I just smiled and let it slide.

"Well then, I guess I'll try making something with all that yuzu. Lani, do you and Leni have a place to stay?" I asked.

They'd come straight to my place after arriving in the capital, so they hadn't booked an inn yet. I offered to let them stay here. At first, Lani tried to politely decline, but when I said Leni could stay here alone if needed, he must've pictured what that would look like and gave a sheepish chuckle before agreeing.

"In that case, I'll go take a look around the capital later. Oh, right, there's still something I haven't asked about Chaos. Would it be okay if we talk about it tonight?"

"I can't make that call since it falls under classified kingdom intelligence," I told him. "Even if you say you'll drag Leni into it too, it's not worth the risk for me."

The classified information he was after was probably about when Chaos's arm had regenerated. Based on what we already knew, it had likely grown back around the time he had escaped. The last place he had been transferred to had only started being mined about six months ago, and the physical description listed in the registry from then had noted that he still had one arm.

I hadn't told Lani about any of this because it involved internal

records from the mines. I thought sharing it would cross a line. When I turned him down, he just gave a little smile like he already knew and didn't push any further.

After that, I showed him to the guest room. Once he finished unpacking, he headed out to stock up on goods. I saw him off and then made my way to the dining room.

"With this much yuzu, I could make a ton of stuff, but prepping it all's going to be a pain."

There was no way I could prep and cook all at once. I decided to focus on just prep today and to take my time cooking over the next few days.

Unfortunately, Jeanne and Aura were out shopping, so I had to ask Rocket for help. When I called him into the kitchen, he had a useless bonus member with him. I didn't particularly care as long as they didn't get in the way.

But of course, Solomon ended up sneaking a bite of yuzu. He freaked out from how sour it was and made a whole scene. Cleaning up after his little rampage ended up wasting more time than I expected, but I pulled myself together and got everything prepped in the end.

I then gave Rocket his instructions. His job was to clean the yuzu. I knew he could take them into his body and dissolve the dirt on the surface, getting them nice and clean. I was still going to rinse them off with water afterward, though.

Once they were clean, I separated the peels and the pulp, carefully removing as much of the white pith as possible.

"I just need to put it all in a container, pour in some high-proof alcohol, seal it up...and I'm done! Now it just needs to sit."

Since I only had regular sugar, I didn't add any. If it needed a little sweetness when it was done, I figured I could always mix some in when it was time to drink it.

"Maybe I'll make some yuzu pepper paste next."

I still had a ton of green chili peppers from last year's harvest, so it was a good excuse to use up some of them. The process itself was pretty simple, but if I wanted to make the real thing, I'd have to pay attention to a bunch of details, and that was a pain. For now, I

decided to whip up a quick, low-effort version and see how people reacted before going all in.

"Shiromaru, Solomon, don't come near this stuff. It's dangerous," I warned them. I knew curiosity and hunger might get the best of them, so I had Rocket keep the two of them away.

"Next, I need to finely chop the yuzu peel and chilis, mix in salt, and grind it all up."

Ideally, I'd remove the chili seeds too, but that was way too much work for now. I just lopped off the stems this time.

"Now I'll stick it in a container and let it sit in a cool place. There we go!"

I put a label on the container—"WARNING: SUPER SPICY YUZU PEPPER PASTE"—to make sure no one accidentally ate it. Then, I stuck it in a cool, dark spot.

"Let's see, what else can I make? Jam, tea, ponzu, maybe a cake? I bet I can swap it in for other citrus in a bunch of recipes too. Might as well experiment a little."

And with that, round one of my yuzu cooking spree came to an end. But that evening...

"SPICYYYYYY!!!"

Two victims fell prey to the yuzu pepper paste.



Even though I'd clearly labeled the jar, both Gramps and Aura had decided to taste it. By trying huge *spoonfuls* of it.

If they'd just sniffed it or dabbed a little on their fingers, it wouldn't have been that bad. But no, they had gone all out.

"It's something we've never seen before!"

"Tenma made it!"

"He just bought yuzu."

"It says pepper, but I don't see any black flakes..."

"That means it should be edible."

"Maybe he meant sour, not spicy?"

"You can't really know unless you taste a proper spoonful."

And that was how the two of them had ended up in agony.

Aura had found it first. While she had been examining it, Gramps had happened to walk in and hadn't been able to resist tasting it himself.

"I figured it was fine since it was made with yuzu..." Gramps muttered.

Aura agreed. "No one expects yuzu to be spicy!"

They didn't seem particularly sorry, so I decided dinner that night would be extra hot. Literally.

"H-He's a demon... N-Never mind..."

"That meanie—er, that meat looks delicious..."

I served up a special superhot stew I made just for them. They started to mutter things under their breath, but the second our eyes met, they both clammed up and began eating in silence.

"This sure is an interesting seasoning. So this is yuzu pepper paste? Kind of funny that you made it with chilis but you're calling it pepper..."

"In some parts of the SAR, 'pepper' refers to chili peppers, so it's not entirely wrong. Still, I've never heard of a yuzu-chili blend before. It's unusual. Whether it sells well will depend on what you pair it with."

Leni and Lani sampled the yuzu pepper and started discussing it seriously.

"Tenma, would you be willing to sell us the recipe? I'd love to try marketing it through Lady Sana's network."

"If we do that, we can lock in distribution across the SAR. Others will copy it eventually, but we want to establish it as a Tenma-branded product before that happens."

My own brand, huh? I'd had no idea they knew I sold other products, but I guess they would've seen them if they had done a quick survey of Gunjo City.

"It's simple enough, so I don't mind giving it away for free," I said.

But then they explained that if I didn't have a formal deal, I'd end up with all kinds of unauthorized products using my name. So in the end, a proper licensing agreement was necessary.

I asked why that rule didn't apply to the sweets from the Full Belly Inn, and Lani said that was different. That had started before I had gotten famous, and everyone in Gunjo City already knew that I'd stayed there a while and had ties to the shop. Plus, Duke Sanga was backing them, so no one was dumb enough to mess with it.

"Selling sweets is tricky, but I'd really like to sell the condiment in the SAR."

In the end, we agreed to sign a deal. It was a contract that gave me royalties instead of a flat sale to them. I'd get a cut of the profits, and they'd pay me in local food, drinks, and other products. Lani would be in charge of putting together a selection of goods for me and would deliver everything on his merchant visits.

The next morning...

"Well then, I'll be heading back to the SAR first."

Lani had bumped up his schedule to head back earlier than planned so he could bring the intel on Chaos and the yuzu pepper recipe back with him.

After we saw him off at the gates, I was lounging around the house. However...

"By the way, Tenma, didn't you say you were going to take my brother and go see the king?" Leni suddenly asked.

"Oh!"

That was right—I'd told Lani I'd go report to the king that I had shared sensitive information with him and that we'd go together to

get scolded. When we had been drinking after dinner the night before, Lani had told Leni, "We'll stop by the castle together," so he must've remembered.

Still, if Leni was going to bring it up, I really wished she'd remembered a bit earlier.

"So that's the situation, Leni," I said. "Let's go get yelled at together."

"Why me?!"

Leni must've thought that when Lani and I had said we were going to see the king, the purpose was to strengthen ties between the SAR and the royal family or something. She clearly had no idea our actual intentions were to apologize.

"I'm going to drag my brother back here!"

She turned on her heel to chase after Lani, but...

"You're not going to catch him," I told her. "Even if he took his usual route home, it'd still take two or three days to catch up and bring him back. And if he left early on purpose, you'll probably have to chase him all the way to the SAR."

Even if what I'd told him had been within acceptable limits, it would still be better to let the king know as soon as possible. Lani was long gone now, so it sucked to be Leni...but honestly, it didn't make much of a difference to me which one came with me. And considering how much trouble it would be to get Lani back here, it was better to just take Leni along instead.

"When I get back to the SAR, I'm spreading nasty rumors about my brother," she said. The cold smile on her face was one I'd never seen from her before.

I had a feeling those rumors would either be wildly exaggerated or outright made up, but I didn't ask. Poking that bear would only get me bitten. I just focused on staying in the background and praying none of her frustration would be directed at me.

"Ah, so that's why you've summoned me," Cruyff said.

I'd decided to go to the king, so I asked Cruyff to come by the estate. I could've gone straight to the castle like usual, but...

"People might get the wrong idea if you show up there with a

young woman. However, if we frame it like you're escorting an official from the SAR, then we can explain things if rumors do start," Cruyff said with a smirk. He then headed straight for the carriage before I could say anything else.

"All right, let's hop in."

Leni looked tense as we got into the carriage and headed for the royal castle with Cruyff driving. We traveled the whole way there in silence.

"I see. So that's what happened... Well, it's understandable—you had no choice but to give them some information if that's the card the SAR played. Just to be safe, nothing else leaked, right?" the king asked.

"No, that was all," I said. "Lani is one of their intelligence agents, and he seemed to understand that the rest was classified. He did try to negotiate some other matters, but they had to do with me personally, so there weren't any conflicts there."

The second I mentioned those negotiations, both the king and Queen Maria stiffened a bit. But when I explained what he was actually after, they burst out laughing. Leni had been so nervous as this went on that her face was twitching and her tail had puffed up.

"Well, if you're fine with it and didn't cause any problems, then it's not really our place to interfere," the king agreed.

"But I'm curious. What does this yuzu pepper paste taste like?" Queen Maria asked.

Of course they brought that up. I had figured this would happen, so I'd made sure to bring some with me. I gave them a few warnings as I handed it over, but the king gave in to his curiosity and dipped a finger right into it. He immediately recoiled from the heat. Then, he made it worse by rubbing that same finger near his eye—he started writhing in pain.

"It's not as overpowering as I expected. I could see this working in a lot of dishes as a spicy seasoning..."

While the king was suffering, Queen Maria calmly offered her opinion. Cruyff tried it too and said that once the flavor mellowed a bit more, he'd like to try it in a few recipes.

"Leni, you're worrying too much. The king and queen can be strict, but they're not the type to blow up over small stuff. You should try to relax more," Kriss said.

"I can't! If someone acted like you do in front of most royalty, in the best case, they'd get fired, and in the worst, they'd get executed!"

"You're overthinking it."

Kriss had heard that Leni was in town, so she'd decided to swing by since she had the next day off. She had hopped into the carriage with us on our way home.

"Well, they're not the kind of people who'd come down hard on someone who's genuinely trying after a little slipup."

"Exactly. I mean, Tenma here called His Majesty 'Uncle Alex' the first time they met. And he's still not that formal with him even now. He doesn't treat the queen like that, though."

"Kriss, I only act that way towards the king when he's being difficult. I've never treated Prince Caesar, Princess Isabella, Prince Zane, or Princess Mizaria like that," I countered.

"What about the royals you didn't mention?" Leni teased.

I ignored her comment. It wasn't that I treated them poorly—I just treated them appropriately based on their own behavior.

"But even when Queen Maria goes off the rails, you never speak casually to her, right?" Kriss asked.

And I had a pretty clear answer to that. "Kriss, do you really think someone who always loses control and someone who only does every now and then should be treated the same?" I asked.

"Well, no." She understood instantly and shrugged a little as if to say, *Fair enough.*

"Master Tenma, there's a carriage from House Sanga waiting at the estate." Cruyff had spotted the carriage just before we reached the mansion and reported as much back to us.

"Who do you think it is?" Kriss asked.

It had to be either Duke Sanga or Albert, but what could they want? I was still wondering about that as I stepped inside the house, but I was immediately summoned to the parlor.

Duke Sanga bowed to me the moment I walked in. "I'm so sorry,

Tenma!”

Albert stood beside him and followed suit without a word.

“Albert, what did you do now?” I asked.

He was the only reason I could think of why the duke could be apologizing to me. I figured I’d try to lighten the mood a little, but...

“Hey now, I take offense to that... But, well...it *is* pretty much my fault.”

He actually admitted it...

“Tenma, they’re here to talk about something serious. Stop fooling around and take a seat,” Gramps said, stepping in.

Honestly, I was grateful he did that, because I had no idea how to react to Albert’s reply.

“Okay, so why are you and Albert looking so apologetic, then?” I asked, trying to reset the mood.

“Well, my daughter’s coming,” Duke Sanga said.

“You don’t mean Primera, do you?”

I couldn’t imagine they would both go out of their way to apologize to me if it was just Primera. But the moment I said her name, I remembered something. *The ones who sent the letters that freaked Albert out so much were...*

He must’ve been talking about his older sisters. They had written scathing letters after the whole matchmaking debacle involving Primera and had warned that they’d come see me themselves someday.

“My second daughter is coming to the capital soon, and she’s asked to meet you.”

Well, at least it’s just one of them. Still, that could mean they might be planning a staggered ambush. That made me uneasy.

“I don’t mind meeting her, but Albert will come with me, right?” I asked.

She was married, so I doubted we’d be meeting alone. And, if Albert wasn’t there, I’d be her only target. I also needed someone to mediate. In the best-case scenario, I could even throw Albert under the bus and minimize the damage to myself.

“Of course,” the duke said. “According to Primera, the person truly at fault here is Albert. She thinks you just got caught up in it.

So Albert has an obligation to be there."

Basically, what he was saying was that since Albert had dragged me into this mess, he had to take responsibility for it.

"So...how soon is soon? Do you have any idea?" I asked.

Now that I had Albert all lined up as my human shield-slash-sacrifice, I just needed to know when she would arrive so I could get some intel on her beforehand, but...

"Honestly, it's hard to say when it comes to Angela. She's got a strong personality, and she's always been very strict on Albert. She might already be on her way."

That meant she could've mailed the letter and left immediately, just to catch her brother off guard. Queen Maria had pulled that same move on me once, and I remembered how shocked I'd been then.

"So basically, she could show up today or tomorrow. All right then, Duke Sanga. I'm borrowing Albert for a while," I said.

"By all means. Work him to the bone if you'd like!"

I needed to learn more about Angela and come up with a plan. That meant I'd have to ask Duke Sanga or Albert a lot of questions, but I knew I shouldn't keep the duke here for too long. That meant Albert was the obvious choice. Apparently, most of his work was just standing in for the duke anyway, so although it would make his father busier without him, it wasn't like things would fall apart.

They both seemed to understand because the duke gave permission without hesitation, and Albert nodded without any pushback.

"I'll have someone from the house bring Albert some clothes and funds to cover his lodging expenses."

I tried to refuse the money, but the duke insisted. He said that since they were imposing on me, I should accept it—it was a matter of noble pride. In the end, I had no choice but to take it.

"In that case... It's not much, but please take this in exchange."

I handed him some yuzu. I told him even though it smelled nice, it was too sour to eat as is, and that it was best used in the bath or with alcohol. He said he would try it tonight and left looking pleased.

"Tenma, Duke Sanga is... Wait, why is Albert still here?"

Kriss spotted the duke's carriage leaving and called out to us from the hallway. She was also confused to see that Albert hadn't left. Since she had been somewhat involved in the matchmaking incident too, I gave her a quick explanation.

"One of Primera's older sisters is coming? Is it Rachael or Angela?" she asked.

Apparently, Rachael was the oldest. They had both graduated from the academy, and Kriss had gone to school with them. She told me she'd never spoken to them directly, though. They were five and three years older than her, respectively, but since they were famous, everyone knew them.

"It's Angela. Do you wanna stay and meet with her too, Kriss?" I asked. I thought the more people were involved, the better, but...

Kriss turned me down immediately. "I don't want to get lectured for not stopping Albert, so I'll sit this one out," she said.

"Albert, the first thing I need to know is what she's like. I can't make a plan otherwise," I said.

Truthfully, it didn't matter in the end—I'd still offer Albert up as a sacrificial lamb.

"Well, Rachael is a sadistic type who goes for the jugular. She pokes at people's weak spots in a really passive-aggressive way. But Angela is the kind of sadist who doesn't hold anything back. She'll hit you hard, both mentally and physically."

"Great, got it. I'll hand this one over to Angela. Rocket can be our witness."

I held up a sheet of paper. I had Albert's statement written down word for word. I pointed to Rocket, who was looking my way as if to say *You called?*

"I'm sorry, I was just joking!" Albert claimed.

"Don't mess around anymore. If you crack another joke, I'll give this note to Primera and make sure she gives it to your sisters."

I filed away the paper detailing Albert's insults to his sisters as one of my secret weapons, just in case. Then, I got Albert to give me a more objective opinion on their personalities.

"Rachael's laid-back, but she's also very stubborn," he began. "If she thinks you're hiding something, she'll keep on digging until she

gets the truth. And even after that, she'll badger you endlessly about why you tried to cover it up. As for Angela, she's got a strong personality and a pretty blunt way of speaking. She won't hesitate to throw a punch if she gets mad. She'll freeze you on the spot with a glare and start yelling like she owns the place."

Well, both of them sound like a handful...

"Is this based on your personal experience?" I asked.

He nodded, which made it very likely that he was the real problem.

That meant I couldn't tell how accurate his description was, but at the very least, that was how they came off to their own brother. I made a mental note of all this and started thinking about what kind of topics they were likely to bring up with me.

"I'm guessing they're going to want to hear all about how I feel about Primera. I'm pretty sure that's the only reason she's coming."

The most likely scenario would include a discussion about Primera. Then, there might be an apology for something Albert did after that. There was also a chance there'd be some attempts to try and strengthen ties between the Otori family and her in-laws. Her coming here for just a casual visit would be pretty unlikely.

Those were all the possibilities I could think of, but it was hard to believe she'd come all this way for any reason other than Primera. If any of the other topics came up, it would only be long after we'd settled her main objective.

"The best I can do is tell her the same thing I told Queen Maria and the duke," I said. "There's no point in trying to spin it."

"Yeah, it's really for the best, though to be honest I don't really remember much about what you said back then..."

Albert had been lectured by both his father and the queen and had gotten hit with the letters from his sisters after that. Maybe his brain had subconsciously locked away his memories to protect him. But in the end, thanks to Albert's biased takes and selective memory loss, this conversation hadn't been exactly productive, so I decided to ask Kriss for info instead.

"Rachael and Angela?" She gave me a look that said, *Why ask me when Albert's right here?* But once I explained Albert's condition, she

gave me an exasperated look and agreed to talk.

"Let's see, I'll start with Rachael. She was always laid-back and had this really gentle, calming presence. She's really beautiful and has long, silver hair that really stands out. I remember that she was graceful and always had a soft smile on her face, but she wouldn't back down when it counted, not even against the teachers," she explained.

Rachael had been popular with pretty much everyone at the academy, and Kriss said there had even been a few unofficial fan clubs for her. The description she gave me was very different from Albert's.

"And Angela was this cool, big sister type. Gorgeous but tough. There's this one story about how she saw one of the girls in the lower grades being harassed by an older guy, and she slapped him right across the face. And when he tried to yell at her, she verbally destroyed him so thoroughly he was left speechless."

Okay, that sounds a lot like Albert's description.

Kriss continued, saying how before Angela had slapped the guy, she'd made sure to hear both sides. She had only slapped him after deciding he was wrong, especially since he'd started threatening her in the middle of their conversation. Some of the boys hadn't liked her, but she had been very popular among the younger girls.

Once I heard all that, I thought that Angela might be a lot like Kriss. Maybe that was the reason Albert was so hopeless around her —Kriss reminded him of Angela.

"So when's Angela coming to the capital?" Kriss asked, probably planning on making herself scarce while she was in town.

However, I was hoping to drag as many people into this as I could. "The letter just arrived today, so it'll probably be a while," I told her.

"Angela married into a family that lives pretty far away from the capital, right? It'll probably take a while for her to get ready, so I bet she won't even get here for a month!"

I had no idea where she lived, so I just gave her a "Yeah, maybe," in response. Angela's father and Albert knew her better than anyone, and they had said there was a chance she could show

up any day now, but I had no reason to mention that to Kriss.

Even if she did get here earlier than that, it wasn't like Kriss was guaranteed to stop by on that specific day. And if she just so happened to run into Angela, well, that would be her own bad luck.

I was just about to head back to my room when...

"I'm staying over tonight. I'll just borrow a room!" Kriss announced, and then she walked off towards the one she always used. She was being almost as bold as the king lately, but at this point, it was such a regular occurrence that I wasn't even surprised. Technically, she was here as a liaison for the royal family, but she *did* pay for all her meals, so it wasn't like she was freeloading.

Jeanne showed up next. "Tenma, there's someone waiting for you at the gate. They said they have a letter to show you directly. I asked them for identification, and they showed the Sanga family crest. They don't seem suspicious."

"Got it. I'll be right there. And Jeanne, don't tell anyone about this. That's an order."

For some reason, every time Kriss stayed over, something bad seemed to happen to her. And this time, the dark cloud was already on our doorstep.

The letter was from Angela, just like I expected. It started with an apology for reaching out all out of the blue and for the trouble Albert had caused. She also wrote that she wanted to offer her thanks and apologize in person, and she asked if she could visit on a day that was convenient for me. She'd written this letter after having come to the capital, and she'd even said that she could be here today if that was all right with me. I told the messenger that today was too soon, but we would be happy to receive her tomorrow morning.

Later that night...

"Yuzu is amazing! You can toss it in the bath or into your drink! It's perfect either way!" Kriss said.

Leni agreed. "Some people complain that yuzu ruins the alcohol's original flavor, but I think it just gives it a different kind of charm. The only problem is that it makes you drink more."

The two of them were having a great time sipping on yuzu-infused drinks, and both were a little tipsy as a result. They were feeling completely relaxed, convinced that Angela wouldn't arrive for at least another month.

Gramps was probably off drinking by himself in the bath. I'd provided him with a huge stash of yuzu, booze, and snacks, so he was likely experimenting with different combos by now.

Albert had gone back to his room early, saying he was exhausted. He'd mentioned that he had a bad feeling about something as he'd wandered away. He'd most likely sensed that Angela was near.

Jeanne kept sneaking glances at me, curious about the letter she thought was from the duke. Meanwhile, Aura was watching Jeanne and seemed to have gotten the wrong idea, thinking that something was going on between us.

As for the others... Amur had finished the snacks Leni made and was now rummaging around the kitchen looking for more food. Shiromaru and Solomon were sticking close to Kriss and watching Amur out of the corner of their eyes, waiting to see if they could swoop in for any leftovers. And Rocket was busy collecting empty dishes and taking them back to the kitchen. Every now and then, he would snack on the leftover yuzu rinds—maybe he'd developed a taste for them.

Basically, it was just another ordinary evening at our place, but to me it felt like the calm before the storm. Still, the first poor soul who'd be facing the storm was currently getting some much-needed rest, and the runner-up had nowhere to run.

Honestly, I was just hoping we could keep the peace going until the storm hit.

Then, the next morning...

"Nice to meet you, Master Otori. I am Angela von Cagliosto, the second daughter of Duke Alsace Sanga."



And the storm arrived just as forecast, right as we finished breakfast.

I led her to the parlor, and once everyone had been served tea, introductions began. Angela had only brought one maid with her while we had four people present: me, Gramps, Albert, and Kriss. Angela's maid and Kriss stood quietly at the back of the room.

"My father and brother owe you a great deal," Angela said.

"It definitely goes both ways," I said.

After the introductions, we exchanged some light small talk. Albert and Kriss were both very tense. Every time Angela moved even slightly, they flinched.

"I've heard so much about you, Master Otori, from all sorts of people. It feels like we've already met, especially when it comes to how much trouble my little brother has caused you." Angela paused and flashed Albert a smile while her eyes glared at him. Albert instinctively got up from his seat so he could flee, but the moment Angela cleared her throat, he froze and quickly sat back down. He *did* shift a few centimeters farther from her, but I'm not sure it was a conscious movement.

Honestly, if someone gave me that look, I'd want to run too.

"I've heard so many things, but when I heard he'd been *stalking* someone, I blacked out! Apparently, when I had been told that, I grabbed a sword from the wall and was about to head straight for the capital myself. That's what my husband and the staff say, anyway. They had to physically restrain me right as I was about to mount my horse," she explained.

"Oh, just so you know, Albert wasn't the instigator of that incident. He was simply dragged into it," I said. "Also, please just call me Tenma. That's what my friends call me."

The first thing that came to mind when I heard Angela's story was *Man, Albert really lucked out that she wasn't in the capital that day...* But of course I couldn't say that out loud. And since I didn't know how else to respond, the only thing that I could get out was a weak attempt to defend him.

"If you say so, Tenma. I did learn later that he wasn't the instigator, but he *was* involved nonetheless. And when you're acting

as an accomplice, you're equally responsible," she reasoned. "It's nice that he's close with those two since they're all heirs, but honestly, they might be a little too close..."

Of course, being family and a fellow academy graduate, Angela must've known that Albert and the others were pretty much idols among the fujoshi crowd.

"Half the rumors about Albert and his friends are those kinds of stories, you know. But I wish people would consider how it feels to be on the receiving end of them."

Albert couldn't take it any longer and tried to shift the attention away from that topic. "Sis, can we not? That's not why you came here today, right?"

"Oh, right. We got a little off track. I came here today to discuss Primera, after all."

Here it comes...

"First, I want to make it clear that I'm not here to demand you take responsibility for anything involving my youngest sister. If you do take responsibility, that's great. But I don't think being together out of a sense of obligation will lead to happiness for either side."

That wasn't what I'd expected her to say at all. Or, at least, she was veering way off course. But just when I thought this discussion would go one way, she threw me a curveball.

"At this rate, however, she's never going to get married. And you're the most promising candidate I've heard of so far. So I hope you don't mind if I start thinking of you as my future brother-in-law," she said.

"Come on, Sis..."

"I'm only saying that that's how I feel! I'm not going to go blabbing that to just anyone," Angela said. "But you're the one who tried to force them into a marriage by using someone else's wedding as bait, weren't you, Albert? So between you and me, which one of us crossed the line more?"

And just when I thought that curveball was headed towards me, it changed directions and hit Albert right in the face.

"By the way, I've been wondering for a while... Isn't the one standing behind you a knight from the king's guard? Kristina, I

believe? Or wait...Kriss, right? Either way, why is she here?”

And just like that, Angela’s gaze slid right past Albert and landed on Kriss.

“H-Hello, Lady Angela! I’m, um...here today because I felt like I should apologize for going along with Albert’s plan, and we ended up tricking Primera. That’s why I asked to be here today!”

Kriss stepped forward and bowed, acting like she’d come to apologize entirely of her own volition...but not before shifting the blame squarely onto Albert.

“Oh, you don’t need to apologize for that. I don’t believe your actions directly affected Primera in any significant way. And more importantly, I’ve already heard that Her Majesty gave you a thorough scolding. If I were to scold you again here, it might be seen as me insulting the queen’s judgment.”

Angela told us that while she had every right to scold Albert as his sister, she had no such authority over Kriss. Since the queen had already reprimanded her and Duke Sanga had accepted that and closed the matter, it would be improper for Angela to step in and say anything else.

Basically, if she were to go after Kriss now, it’d look like she was saying Queen Maria hadn’t done a good enough job in the first place.

“I’m truly sorry,” Kriss said again, offering one final bow before returning to her spot.

Angela gave her a soft smile and then shifted her gaze back to Albert.

Isn’t there any way I can excuse myself for a bit here?

She didn’t seem upset with me, but I didn’t want to get caught in the cross fire while she focused on Albert. I figured that if I could step out now, she’d take the opportunity to talk things out with him. I just couldn’t figure out how to make a clean exit without it being awkward.

As I pondered that, Jeanne came in, using the more formal tone she reserved to announce guests. “Pardon the interruption, Master Tenma, but you have a visitor.”

“A visitor? I can’t really step away right now. Can you ask them to

wait for a moment?" I maintained my composure on the outside, but internally, I was striking a victory pose. And thanks to Detection and Identify, I already knew who it was.

"Well..." Jeanne glanced at Angela before leaning down to whisper the visitor's name to me.

"I'm terribly sorry, Lady Angela, but I need to step away for a moment," I said. "Kriss, can you come with me?"

"Of course. Please excuse us."

Angela must've guessed that the visitor had something to do with Kriss, since she nodded right away when I asked Kriss to come along. "Of course. I'd actually like to have a little chat with Albert, so please don't worry about me."

She had a pleasant smile on her face, but Albert looked like he wanted to cry. I felt like I could hear him silently screaming, *Please don't leave me!*

Kriss and I left the room without even glancing his way. Whatever Angela said to him after that was none of our business. Honestly, I didn't even *want* to know.

The guest who'd shown up at the perfect moment—and one who Angela had to be on her best behavior with—was Prince Lyle.

"Hey! Sorry to drop in while you've got company!" he said.

And the reason he was here was because he'd brought a fishy idiot along with him.

"Yo! It's me, Nami-kins!" Namitaro said, goofing around as usual.

Apparently, Prince Lyle had been returning from a knights' training exercise when one of the knights had passed by a river and had spotted a monster splashing around. The knights had checked it out, and the monster had turned out to be Namitaro. One of the knights had actually met him before and had called out to him from a distance just to be safe. They'd confirmed it was him and had reported it to Prince Lyle.

"And that's how I got a ride here! I was gonna sneak in like I always do after dark, but this was way easier. I've got a gift for ya too!" Namitaro shouted. He then suddenly started building a mountain of seafood in front of me.

"Uh, thanks, Namitaro... But can you maybe take this to the

kitchen? Hang on a second—what's this egg?"

As I started transferring the fish into a magic bag, I spotted a large egg rolling around.

"Whoa, it's huge! How many omelets do you think this could make?" Amur asked.

"I think you could make enough for a few hundred people!" Jeanne said.

And they were right. The egg was about a meter tall, and as for its weight...

"Wow, it's so heavy!" I couldn't even lift it without using magic to boost my strength.

"Tenma, that's not a gift! It's something I'm holding on to for a friend, so don't you dare drop it! Well... I don't think it'll crack even if you did, but be careful anyway!" Namitaro quickly took it from me and stashed it away in his magic bag. "It's my friend's kid."

Apparently, a close friend of his had fallen ill after laying the egg, and he was keeping an eye on it until they recovered. I thought he was being pretty clumsy with it for something so important, but according to him, it was really hardy, so it was fine. In fact, giving it stimulation like this was good for the egg's development...supposedly.

"Master Otori, Lady Angela and Lord Albert have finished their talk. She's asked if you'd return to the room."

Angela's maid came to get me, politely informing me that the conversation was over and they'd like me to rejoin them.

"I'll be right there. Jeanne, Aura. Time for the usual. Will you get it ready?"

I handed them the magic bag full of seafood and headed back into the parlor alone.

"Sorry to leave you like that," I said once I returned.

"No need to apologize. Unexpected guests happen." Angela and I continued to chat for a bit, but she never brought up Primera once. "Oh my, look at the time. I should be going soon, Tenma. But before I do, there's something I'd like to ask."

Just when I thought I was out of the woods, Angela mentioned that she had a request.

"Sis! What about the thing with Primera?"

"Be quiet, Albert."

Albert assumed she was about to bring up their sister and tried to stop her, but Angela shut him down with a sharp glare.

"Albert, I have no intention of reopening a matter that Father has already settled. I'm putting my personal feelings aside and will not challenge a decision made by Father."

Albert and I exchanged glances, tilting our heads. If this didn't have to do with Primera, then what was it about?

"Would you sign this for me?" Angela asked instead, pulling out a picture book.

"Um..."

It was a children's book based on a story from my childhood. It was part of the official licensed series that Queen Maria had approved. Since then, the same author published three more books. I'd heard the series was quite popular among kids.

"My youngest insisted. I was going to try to ask Father to get your signature, but after everything that happened with Albert, I thought I should come in person to thank you and ask you myself."

So *that* was it. Seeing me and chatting about Primera might've been one reason for her to come, but more than anything, she was here on behalf of the Cagliosto family and to get my autograph. She was also using Albert's apology as a convenient excuse. Honestly, she could've asked the duke to deliver a letter for that—Albert was just bait. Though from her perspective, catching Albert while he was staying here had probably been the ideal setup. Maybe the duke had even planned it that way when he'd "lent" Albert to me.

"Sure, I don't mind. But my signature's not very pretty, just so you know."

I'd only ever signed a book a couple of times. So far, the only ones who owned signed copies were Queen Maria and Yoshitsune—they each had four.

When I mentioned that, Angela said that she wished she'd brought the rest, so I signed three volumes that were lying around the house and gave them to her too.

"Oh, my kids are going to love these! And I know it's

presumptuous, but I think Rachael's children will want one too. Could I ask you for another one later?"

I didn't mind signing copies, but I decided I'd just leave them with the duke to give to her other sister. I really didn't want to have another meeting like today. And if we had to meet up again, I'd just ask Duke Sanga to make a party out of it or something. That way, I could at least bring along Cain, Leon, or whoever else I could rope in as backup. It'd be much easier on the nerves.

Lunch was ready just as we wrapped up. I invited Angela to join us, but she already had plans and needed to take Albert along with her. He gave her a shocked look, but he seemed to know better than to argue and nodded quietly.

Angela said she'd be back later to pick up Albert's things, so we saw them off at the entrance. On her way out, Angela bumped into the prince in the hallway.

"Hm? Oh, long time no see."

"It's been a while, Prince Lyle."

Apparently, they were close in age and had gone to the academy together.

They exchanged quick greetings and a bit of small talk. After that, Angela and Albert returned to their carriage, and Prince Lyle walked out with them. They must've been closer than I thought.

"Well, time for lunch! But I gotta say, I've got a bad feeling about this..." Prince Lyle said ominously before we entered the dining room.

What he'd said gave me a bad feeling, and I just couldn't shake it off. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to ask what he had meant until later...

Part Eight

"All right, does everyone have their bowls ready? Let's start picking ingredients."

We were just about to build our seafood rice bowls using the haul Namitaro brought back, and the selection round was underway. The first ingredient everyone wanted was tuna.

"I figured that would be the top pick. Time to play rock, paper, scissors. But actually, Leni goes first since she chose something else."

"Thanks!"

Leni had picked raw whitebait for her first ingredient. She said she had chosen it because she'd never tried it before, but I thought that was a pretty high bar for a beginner.

"Um, right. Anyway, the rule is one scoop per turn, and I've got to lift the spoon completely before transferring it to the bowl, right? Well, here goes!" After double-checking the rules, Leni carefully dipped her spoon into the whitebait and quickly tried to transfer the fish to her bowl.

"It's not as easy as it looks, huh?"

She wasn't able to get much. Raw whitebait wasn't really the type of ingredient you could scoop in big chunks anyway. *Maybe next time I should set different scoop limits depending on the ingredient.*

"All right, now it's our turn!"

Kriss led the charge and kicked off the rock, paper, scissors tournament for the minced tuna.

"I get first pick!" Aura cheered.

"I'm second!" Amur said.

"I guess I'm third," I said.

"This time for sure, I'll..."

"Pfft, ah ha ha!"

Aura and Amur both went in for a big haul and tried to scoop from the very bottom of the center of the mound. They both failed miserably, barely getting anything in their bowls.

"I'll go for this spot, then... Not bad."

I put my spoon into the gap they'd opened up and got a pretty decent scoop. Kriss and Jeanne watched closely then copied my approach. They both managed to get almost ten times as much fish as Aura and Amur had. Not that ten times was a lot since Aura and Amur had barely gotten any. Even though Prince Lyle messed up a bit, he still ended up with about three or four times more than Aura and Amur had gotten.

"All right, let's eat!"

Once everyone had finished loading up their bowls, we all dug in at the same time.

"I'm ready for seconds!"

"Me too!"

Amur and Prince Lyle were the first to finish and were already diving into round two.

"Damn, I'm falling behind!"

"Hey, you two! Don't take everything!"

Kriss and Gramps weren't far behind. They'd cleaned their bowls and gone for seconds to keep the pace.

"I...mmph!" Aura tried too hard to catch up and ended up choking.

"Here, drink this." Jeanne quickly handed her a glass of water.

Lunch was loud and chaotic, but once everyone had eaten their fill and started relaxing, I noticed Prince Lyle heading off to the restroom. I got up and quietly followed him.

"Hey, Prince Lyle? There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

I waited for him to come out of the bathroom and then led him to my room. Once we were inside, I locked the door. Prince Lyle gave me a suspicious look, but then he relaxed and sat down in a nearby chair.

"What's so serious that you have to lock the door?"

"You know when you walked Angela out earlier? I heard you mutter, 'I have a bad feeling about this.'"

He looked a little surprised that I had heard that. Then, he let out a long sigh. "I didn't think I said that out loud..."

"It was really quiet, so don't worry, no one else heard you." I then explained to him that I had just happened to be standing close enough to overhear.

Lyle frowned slightly but soon got serious. "Well, since you did, there's no helping it. It's nothing definite and it's just my guess, but...to put it simply, when I saw Angela, it made me think there might be a chance that the royalists will split."

"The royalist faction, splitting up? You mean Angela might start her own faction?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think she has any interest in that. I think if anyone is to start a new faction, it would be Duke Sanga."

There were several noble factions in our kingdom, but the big three were the royalists, the reformists, and the neutral factions. In terms of numbers, all the others combined didn't even come close to the smallest of those three.

"And even within those major factions, there are sub-factions. You've got the central group led by my father in the royalists, the northern bloc, the western bloc, and so on," Prince Lyle explained.

The king's bloc consisted of people like Lyle himself, Duke Sanga, Marquis Sammons, and Margrave Haust.

"But lately, there's been one noble in the royalist faction who's been gaining a lot of influence..."

"Duke Sanga?" I asked.

"Yep. On top of his own standing, three of his children have married into powerful noble families. In addition to that, the adopted daughter of Albert's fiancée's family is now engaged to the prince, who will one day be king. That alone puts the duke's bloodline dangerously close to the throne. If things play out right, someone from the Sanga family could end up as a monarch one day. They might even try to replace the existing royal family." Then, he quickly added, "Now, I don't think Duke Sanga or Albert have those kinds of ambitions, but who knows about the next generation? People change, and lofty goals can pop out of nowhere."

I understood Prince Lyle's concerns, but that kind of speculation wasn't exactly new either. It also didn't quite explain why seeing Angela made him blurt that out. I told him as much.

He mulled it over for a bit. "Tenma, when you heard she was coming, what did you think the visit would be about?" he asked.

"Huh? Well, I figured she'd be trying to marry Primera off to me."

He nodded. "Exactly. And that's what every other noble will think when they hear about her visit too. That means that some of them will start assuming that Duke Sanga is using his daughter to pull the Dragonslayer, the strongest adventurer in the kingdom, into his faction. Considering your popularity among the capital's citizens, Duke Sanga would gain power, military strength, *and* public support if you joined his camp. He'd have enough of a foundation to build his own kingdom, if he wanted to."

That sounded like a stretch, but maybe it wasn't so impossible.

"Even if Duke Sanga isn't aiming for that, the possibility of it happening might make other nobles act out on their own—especially the reformists. They're already straggling behind the royalists, so stirring up tension or planting doubts in people's minds could be a way to tip the balance."

And even if they couldn't create a real rift, just causing people to be suspicious of the duke could weaken the royalists' bloc.

"Well, stuff like this tends to flare up whenever noble marriages are involved," the prince said. "It's not all that unusual, really. The same thing happened during Angela's wedding and Albert's engagement. Still, it's a pain to have to deal with it every time."

"Wait, so when she said she had other places to visit..." I began.

"Yeah, she's definitely out taking preventative measures."

Sheesh. Being part of the ducal family sounded like nothing but trouble. That reminded me about how I had signed books for Rachael's kids. I asked Prince Lyle whether I should just give them to the duke or hand them over at a party.

"A party might be better," he suggested. "If you hand them off through someone else, nobles are still expected to show their gratitude face-to-face, so you'll end up with a meeting anyway. Exchanging them at a party would be more efficient. That said, if you're only giving them to Rachael's kids, it'll look like you're playing favorites."

But if I were to hand them to the duke first and let him pass

them on, that would at least help avoid any awkward situations.

"And if you issue the party invitations under the duke's name and include Tida, it would be a good show of solidarity between the royal family and House Sanga. And since Tida's girlfriend Amy is Lady Eliza's sister now, saying the invitation came through that connection would be totally natural," he explained.

I decided I'd pass that advice on to the king and duke soon. They were probably already thinking along the same lines, but since most of my political instincts were brute force or half-baked at best, I figured I should be ready to follow their lead when the time came.

"Well, you were dragged into this mess, Tenma. Just leave the heavy lifting to Father, my brother, or Duke Sanga. Actually, it'd be better to include Mother too. Father and the duke are trustworthy, but my brother might try to use you..."

I didn't know Prince Caesar as well as the king or the duke, so I couldn't be sure, but it wouldn't be surprising if I ended up being used for the royal family's benefit in one way or another. That probably just meant that Queen Maria would give me a few stern words, but if I let my guard down, I could find myself being adopted by Lord Ernest or something. I needed to be careful.

"I'll report this to Mother myself," Prince Lyle said.

I was fine to leave the royals to him. Once the king and the duke agreed to a course of action, I'd have more room to speak up anyway.

"All right, I should head back to the castle. I think Mother will either show up soon or summon you, so I'll be counting on you when that happens."

I could've rushed things and gone straight back to the castle with Prince Lyle, but I decided to have him wait a bit while I put together a gift. He might not've noticed, but it wouldn't have looked good if it leaked that he was the only one who ate something nice, even if the fact that he'd only come over to deliver Namitaro would've been a valid excuse. The people at the castle would definitely give him grief over it.

Besides, while I'd gotten caught up in it unintentionally, I had still caused trouble for Queen Maria. I owed her a...well, "bribe" might

be a strong word, so let's just call it a token of appreciation!

"Here, give this to Queen Maria. Cruyff or Aina should be able to take care of cooking it," I said.

"Sorry for all the trouble. You're really saving me this time."

As soon as Prince Lyle saw what I'd packed, he must've realized he could've gotten a lecture from the queen if not for my quick thinking. He bowed his head, clearly grateful. I was sending along enough seafood and rice to make a dozen or so seafood bowls, and I included a note that was signed with my name and Namitaro's. Now, there'd be no way they could get mad at him for hogging the good stuff.

I said goodbye to the prince, and once he was gone, I went back to the dining room.

"C'mon, just a bit more! You can do it!"

"Nngh!"

"You can do it, Lady Amur!"

Everyone had gathered around Namitaro and was making a huge commotion.

"Mmph... I gave it my all, but it's impossible!"

"Tch, I knew it. Only Merlin and Jeanne have managed it so far," Namitaro said in disappointment when Amur gave up trying to do...whatever the heck they were doing. He gently tapped on the egg she released from her grip.

"What are you guys up to?" I asked.

"Oh ho ho! The main event's just getting started! Let's get to it! Over here, Tenma! Right this way!"

The moment I entered the room, Namitaro beamed like he'd been waiting for this. He waved me over and was putting on a weird Kyoto accent for some reason.

"Right here, right here! Just put your hands on the egg and feed it a bit of mana. Just a bit, now! That's all I'm askin'!"

"Okay..."

"Wait, Tenma! Not my head! The egg, man, the egg! You gotta touch *the egg*! Um, Tenma? Can you hear me? Helloooo, Tenma?"

Since Namitaro was clearly messing around, I decided to mess with him right back. I grabbed his face in both hands and started to

chant a spell. “Takemi—”

“W-Wait! Waaaait! You can’t say that! Don’t even joke around about that!”

I was just about to cast the most powerful spell I knew, and I didn’t know whether he’d heard about it from someone or what. Either way, he immediately yanked my hands off him and scuttled backward like his life depended on it.

“I’m only kidding, Namitaro. Even I can’t pull off Takemikazuchi without proper prep. You’d just end up feeling all tingly at worst,” I said.

He was all worked up and started ranting. “Even if you whisper it, these Namitaro ears catch everything! You can’t just go around zapping fish! Electro-fishing is banned, remember?!” he yelled. “Zappin’ fish is evil! That’s environmental destruction! Even if the gods forgive ya, the great Namitaro sure won’t!”

I waited a bit for Namitaro to calm down. “Yeah, yeah. So what exactly do you need me to do?” I asked, wondering what this was all about.

“Oh, right. I just need you to share a little mana with the egg,” he replied, like nothing had happened at all.

“That’s it? After all that yelling, you’re just back to normal now?” Kriss said, probably speaking on behalf of everyone.

But honestly, that’s just how it always was with me and Namitaro. I pretended not to hear.

“You infused Solomon’s egg with your mana back when he hatched, right? I want you to do the same thing here.”

That was when I became certain this wasn’t just any old egg, not that it was hard to guess. Identify hadn’t worked on it, so I had figured it wasn’t from an ordinary monster. Still, I had a bad feeling about this.

“You look kinda on edge, but don’t worry! The mom’s the one who asked me to do it. Apparently, the more different types of mana it gets, the stronger the baby ends up!”

That wasn’t what I was worried about exactly, but if the mom had given her permission, then I guessed it was fine. I recalled what I’d done with Solomon and placed my hand on the egg, channeling

mana into it.

"Whoa! Just like I thought! Smooth as butter! You've got the touch, dude!"

It'd been a while, but I guessed my mana infusion skills were still up to snuff. Maybe they were a little *too* up to snuff, though, because I actually felt as drained as if I'd just cast Tempest. And then...

"There's a crack!" Amur exclaimed.

"Is it hatching?" Aura asked.

Both girls leaned in.

"Get back, you two! Now!" Kriss yanked them both back by the collars, and just in time.

"It's happening, it's happening... It's out!"

"Biii... Biii...?"



Crack! The egg split open, and something that looked a lot like a turtle's head poked out. Everyone besides me and Namitaro stared at it, either in fascination or just in plain delight.

Meanwhile, I was breaking out in a cold sweat because Identify finally worked. The result was...

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Class: Behemoth
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In this world, behemoths were a type of ancient dragon. They were wingless, but once fully grown, their bodies could easily end up a hundred meters long. They were the most frequently sighted dragons out there. They were relatively docile, so as long as you didn't get too close, you wouldn't be in much danger. But if you *did* get too close, their sheer size meant you'd get caught up in the shock waves they'd cause just from moving around.

In terms of looks, they were similar to oversized tortoises. They apparently lived in the ocean.

"Ah! It's hiding!"

Maybe it didn't like being surrounded by so many people. The baby behemoth yanked its head back into its shell. While everyone was distracted by its cuteness, I dragged Namitaro out into the hallway.

"What the hell, Namitaro?!"

"Oh, you figured it out?"

He was trying to be dumb, and for a moment, I seriously considered hitting him with Takemikazuchi. But before I could do anything, he read my mind and dropped into a deep bow.

"I might've mentioned her before, but remember my friend Hii? She's the baby's mom."

I did remember the name at least. I hadn't asked earlier when I had first seen the egg because I'd had a really bad feeling, and it turned out I was right. The second Identify hadn't worked on it, I knew we were in trouble.

When I pointed that out, Namitaro puffed up like I'd insulted him. "You think I'd bring something dangerous home?!"

Um, you mean like a huge, suspicious-looking egg?! Spare me!

"Anyway, that's not the issue. What I wanna know is if the mommy behemoth is gonna show up pissed that we hatched the thing without permission!" I hissed back quietly so the others couldn't hear.

Namitaro just grinned. "Oh, she might come by...to say thanks...out of pure joy... Errgh! Ow!"

I was so annoyed that I smacked Namitaro's head hard.

Back in the day, that wouldn't have done much, but I'd gotten stronger over the past few years. I had even learned how to channel my mana more effectively. And now, I could actually hurt Namitaro with my bare hands. But...the kickback had still hit me harder, and I was pretty sure I had cracked a bone in my hand.

"A-Anyway, don't worry!" he said. "I'll talk to her and make sure she doesn't come storming over or anything! She might ask to meet you, though!"

If she were coming to the capital, I'd rather go to meet her myself. I made Namitaro swear up and down that he'd smooth things over with her when he saw her.

Now that that was settled, I went back to the dining hall to check on the baby. When I had left, Gramps and the others had been huddled around the egg, but now, they were all keeping their distance. Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon were standing watch over it.

"Oh, you're back!" Gramps said.

"Why's everyone so far away from it? Did something happen?"

Gramps looked relieved when he noticed me, so I figured that something must've gone down while I was out. Apparently, the baby had gotten stressed from being surrounded by everyone and had used magic on them. Luckily, it had just been a Water spell and Rocket had absorbed it before it caused any real damage...but it had caused there to be a lot of water.

"That's why we backed up from that little turtle. Rocket and the others are probably staying close because they're monsters too, maybe? I'm not sure. But the baby doesn't seem to mind 'em," Gramps said.

Ah, so they left it to Rocket and the others to babysit.

"Actually, there's something you should probably know... Mind coming with me for a bit?"

"What's this about?"

I pulled Gramps over to the corner of the dining hall. Kriss and Amur looked like they wanted to follow us, but I motioned for them to wait. Then...

"What did you say?!" Gramps's voice rang out across the entire mansion.

I tried to clamp my hand over his mouth. "Shh! Gramps, keep it down!" I said.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

"Tenma, what are you hiding from us?"

Kriss and Amur rushed over to us and demanded an explanation.

"Tenma, let go of Gramps before he dies. He's about to croak," Amur said.

"Oh, sorry!"

I was so panicked I'd accidentally covered both his mouth and his nose. Gramps's face had turned beet red from the struggle.

He gasped for air. "Bwuuuh! I thought I was a goner!"

Well, at least he's alive?

Once he was breathing normally again, I gave them the rundown on the baby's identity and what Namitaro had told me.

"Tenma, are you *sure* the mommy behemoth isn't coming here? Because if she does, Queen Maria's gonna blow a fuse!" Kriss said.

"Lady Amur, let's return to the SAR right away!" Leni urged.

"Ooh, a trip! We need to pack lunches!" Amur said.

"Aura, hurry! Start packing!" Jeanne said.

"Right! Rocket, help me out!" Aura yelled.

And just like that, all hell broke loose.

"It's fine! C'mon, just trust ol' Nami-chan, will ya?" Namitaro was acting like he had everything under control, but absolutely no one calmed down.

The commotion fizzled out after a bit, though. The turning point had come when Leni, who'd packed the lightest, had finished putting her stuff together, took a breather...and then came to a sudden

revelation.

She said that there wouldn't be a problem if I just went to see the behemoth mommy myself.

The second she brought that up, all the women turned to me like *Why didn't you say that sooner?!* But I had my counterargument ready. I *had* said the same thing myself multiple times. But no one listened to me. I even got Rocket to back me up on that.

Anyway, after all that physical and emotional exhaustion, everyone just slumped into their chairs, drained.

Oh, and fun fact! Kriss, someone who didn't even need to pack anything, had actually been the first one done. But then she had jumped right into taking care of Mary and the others, and that was why she ended up being the last one to settle down. By the time she'd finally cooled off, she was holding a dimension bag and a magic bag stuffed with gear, food, and basically all the necessities for our livestock.

"So yeah, the behemoth mom's not coming to the capital," I reiterated. "And if she does want to see me, Namitaro will give us a heads-up first. I'll go talk to her then. I really don't think it should be a problem."

I mean, I'd never actually seen a full-grown behemoth before, so I couldn't be certain of that, but Namitaro had said they were smarter than humans and totally reasonable.

"Well, I guess we've got no choice but to trust Namitaro on this one. But tell me, Tenma... Why does that baby behemoth keep clinging to you so much? It won't even let us get close!" Gramps asked, and everyone else nodded in agreement with him.

"I dunno, maybe it's just my charming aura?" I joked. Everyone glared at me in unison. Meanwhile, the baby was rubbing its head against my hand, asking for more pets. "Seriously, though, it's probably 'cause I gave it a ton of mana. The same thing happened with Solomon. Once he hatched, he latched on to me right away but growled at Amy."

"So if Solomon bonded with Tenma and growled at Amy, then...yeah, the magic theory makes sense. If it were about his personality, that'd mean the opposite."

“All right, Kriss. Then what happens to someone who doesn’t have a charming personality or strong mana? Would the baby just eat them?” I asked.

“Biiiii!” The baby let out a cry like it was agreeing with me.

“Tenma! If that thing ate Kriss, it would get sick!” Amur jumped in to tease her, but since she was standing nearby, Kriss grabbed her immediately.

I was safe, and the baby was still snuggled up to me, so Kriss couldn’t even get close to me.

“All right, comedy act’s over! Bon, time to get back to Mama... Ow!” Namitaro reached out to get the baby but got slapped by its tail. “You can’t stay here forever, Bon. Let’s go see your... Ouch! Gaah!”

“Biiiiiiiiii!”

After whacking Namitaro with its tail a few more times, the baby let out a high-pitched shriek. Its cry was more than just loud—it was like a sonic attack. Nearby tables, chairs, and dishes shattered instantly.

“Oof...” Amur said.

“Argh, my head...” Leni groaned.

“Awoo!”

And of course we had gotten hit too. The beastfolk girls and Shiromaru were suffering the most because of their sharper hearing. They had almost been knocked unconscious.

“O-Okay, this is too much... Sorry!”

“Bii?”

If I didn’t do something, things were only gonna get worse. While the baby’s back was turned, I pulled out a spare dimension bag and shoved it inside.

“Damn... Even as a baby, a behemoth’s no joke. My head’s still spinning.” Namitaro had taken the full brunt of the shock wave, but somehow, he had come out of it with just a mild concussion. The rest of us who had only gotten hit by the aftershocks had actually fared worse.

“All right, Tenma. Hand over the bag with Bon in it and I’ll take him straight over to Hii.”

He reached for the bag, but...

"Why are you holdin' it where I can't reach?"

"If I hand it over just like that, I'm gonna get blamed too. And I don't want that. One scapegoat's enough, and that's your job, Namitaro."

There was no way I was going to let that baby hate me for handing it off.

"You two can work it out between yourselves," I said.

"Wait, huh? What?!"

The second Namitaro froze, I used Guardian Giganto to shove him into the dimension bag with the baby.

"There. Now Namitaro can do all the convincing."

"No way! Listen!"

"If he pulls it off..."

"Tenma, he's not gonna make it."

"Yeah, there's no chance."

Just as Namitaro stuck his head back out to argue, I shoved him right back in and finished my sentence. Jeanne and Kriss immediately shot me down with zero hesitation.

"Tenma, it's no use! Bon's not budging at a—"

Namitaro popped his head out of the bag again, so I shoved him right back in.

"Hey, Tenma..."

Shoved him back in again.

"Tenma..."

And again.

"Peekaboo!"

That one might've been some kind of joke, but I ignored it. "Cut it out already!" I said.

But this time, Namitaro was pissed. "At least acknowledge that I'm funny, man!"

Or maybe he wasn't angry?

"So? Did you convince him?"

"Nope, he just keeps sayin' he doesn't wanna go back and that's that! I'm out! It's your turn! Later!"

"Wait, hold o—"

He flipped on me before I could even get a word in and shoved me into the damn dimension bag.

"Biii! Biiii!"

At first, the baby mistook me for Namitaro and started growling, but once it realized who I was, it ran over to me, looking thrilled. I guess it wasn't mad about being stuffed in here.

"Look, I get that you hate Namitaro and you don't wanna go with him, but your mom's waiting for you," I told it. "You can't just stay here."

"Biiii!"

I tried reasoning with it, but the little guy let out a squawk like *Nope! Not happening!* No matter what I said, it kept refusing. I buried my face in my hands, totally at a loss. It really looked like it had no intention of leaving. Maybe, since it had come here while it was still in the egg and had been born here, it saw this place as home, caring about that more than a mother it hadn't even met.

"If that's the case, this one's my fault, I guess."

Well, technically, it was on Namitaro. But now wasn't the time to point that out, not really.

This baby had a mother. A real, living mother... One who was probably dying to see her child.

That meant...

"Listen to me."

"Biii!"

I steadied myself—I needed to send this baby home, no matter what. "You don't belong here. All you'd do is get in the way," I said, adding a firm hostility to my voice...just enough to make the message clear.

"Bii..."

Even though it had only just been born, the baby instantly picked up on my tone and shrank back, taking a few steps away from me.

"I lost my parents, and so did Rocket and Shiromaru. Solomon doesn't even know who his are."

I doubted a newborn could understand all that, but this was the only way I knew how to talk about it.

"But you have a mom, and she's waiting for you to come back. I

can’t keep a kid like that here. So go back with Namitaro!”

“Bii, bii, bii!”

It probably didn’t understand what I was saying, but I could tell my intent and tone had gotten through.

The baby looked down dejectedly.

“Biiiiiiiiiii!”

And then, it rubbed its head against my leg.

I had failed.

I’d figured if it came to this, I’d just have to seal the bag tight and force Namitaro to haul it back. But then...

“Biii!” The baby turned and started waddling towards the exit on its own.

“So you’re going?” I asked.

It gave me a short little squawk in reply.

I felt bad for the way I’d treated it, but at least the big issue was resolved. Or so I thought...

“Tenma! You did it, huh?”

Namitaro suddenly stuck his head into the bag like he knew we were finished here.

“Biiiiiiiii!”

“Bon! No, don’t bite! No, no, no! Not the nose! Argghhh!”

The baby immediately chomped down on his face and started thrashing about. I wondered why Namitaro had known the exact moment things had been settled, but I decided to let it slide. They seemed to be bonding in their own weird way.

So I stepped outside, and everyone was looking at me with a strange gentleness in their eyes. I had a really bad feeling about that. I didn’t want to know what they’d heard.

Maybe I can just sneak off...

“Tenma, even if Ricardo and Celia are gone, I’ll always be here for you,” Gramps said.

“That’s right, Tenma. If you’re ever lonely, you can call on us anytime,” Kriss said.

Both of them had tears in their eyes, and their voices broke with emotion as they spoke.

“You...heard that?”

I asked the four standing behind those two, barely managing to get the words out.

They all nodded.

"Tenma, we may not be like your real mom and dad, but I'll do my best to be a part of your family!" Amur said.

"Yeah! I may be a slave, but I'll do my best to be your family!"

"That's the spirit, Jeanne!" Aura agreed.

"Lady Amur! Let's work hard to practice cooking and sewing too!" Leni said.

Honestly, my brain just shut down. I had no idea what to say. I tried to keep calm and just breathe, but the embarrassment I was feeling was too much.

"Aaaaaghhhhhh!!!" I screamed and then bolted from the dining hall. I sprinted to my room, slammed the door, locked it, shoved my dresser in front of it, then dove under the covers of my bed and wrapped myself up like a burrito.

I wasn't even tired, but I stayed there, ignoring knocks and the voices of Gramps and the others who were trying to coax me out. That just made me even more mortified.

At some point, Gramps and Amur gave up on the door and tried sneaking in through the window, only to get chased off screaming by the anti-intruder golems I'd posted there.

"It's morning already...? Yeah, this is getting bad."

I'd been holed up not just overnight, but for more than half a day on top of that. It was probably time for me to give up and face the music.

"Okay, just take a deep breath. Let's do this."

I threw off the blankets, moved the barricade, and stepped into the hallway...only to find Gramps and the others grilling fish and meat right outside my door.

"Tenma's out! Get him!"

Namitaro pointed at me with a skewer like it was some kind of weapon. Gramps and the others were too busy grilling and fanning the smoke to actually make a move on me, so I had more than enough time to shut the door again.

"What the hell are they doing?"

My embarrassment had disappeared in an instant. If this was some kind of distraction tactic, I had to admit that it worked perfectly. But instead of being impressed, I just kinda felt drained.

Why should I even engage with this?

As I sat there with my head in my hands, thinking about Gramps and the others' nonsense, I heard someone yelling at them from outside.

"Tenma, open up, would you?"

I also heard Queen Maria's voice calling for me.

"You look better than I expected. I heard you were holed up in your room, so I was worried."

I opened the door to find Queen Maria standing there, looking visibly relieved. Behind her were Gramps, the king, Lord Ernest, and Prince Lyle, all sitting formally on their knees. A little further back stood Prince Zane, looking at the four of them in exasperation. And Namitaro was dangling upside down out the window, courtesy of Rocket and the others.

Queen Maria glared at the king. "Last night, Kriss came running to me in a panic, saying, 'Tenma won't come out of his room!' so I figured I'd let him handle it since he said he'd talk to you, but that clearly didn't work out," she said.

Apparently, when I hadn't come out the night before, Kriss had gotten worried I'd been having some kind of emotional breakdown and had gone to report it to Queen Maria. Since it had already been late and there'd been a chance that I just needed space, they had decided to wait until the morning.

The king and Lord Ernest had thought I might open up more easily to a man, and Prince Lyle had agreed to come too, so all the older male royals who could leave on short notice had come over. But when I didn't respond even after they called to me through the door, they resorted to a bright idea of Namitaro's that'd been inspired by Japanese mythology—Operation Lure Tenma out of His Cave.

That meant they had set up a barbecue right outside my room.

Once Prince Zane had realized this plan was about to get

dangerously out of hand, he'd run off to get Queen Maria.

The rest of the women had been told to kill time in town, based on His Majesty's bold claim that "This'll go smoother without the ladies around."

"Seriously, everyone. Just because he wouldn't come out doesn't mean you have to try to lure him out with food. Anyway, Tenma. Why didn't you react to them at all?" the queen asked.

The answer was simple: I had fallen asleep and hadn't noticed. Even though they said they'd been shouting pretty loud, I'd been up so late I'd fallen into a deep sleep, and on top of that, I'd been wearing earplugs too.

When I explained all that, Queen Maria laughed. "Well, no wonder you didn't hear them, then."

The others groaned about all their efforts going to waste.

"I'm starving. Might as well use this stuff and whip up some breakfast," I said.

"Could you make some for me too? And Zane as well, please."

I had been just muttering out loud to myself while looking at the grilled fish, but Queen Maria said she hadn't eaten either, so we decided to cook together. Meanwhile, Gramps and the others were still stuck sitting formally, shooting me desperate looks to beg for help, but I ignored them while we took the grilled fish and meat for ourselves. While I was at it, I also grabbed the rest of the barbecue gear and ingredients.

"Oh, Master Tenma. Done with your little shut-in phase, are we?" Cruyff was preparing tea when I got to the dining room and started teasing me. I wanted to clap back at him, but since I couldn't come up with anything good, I just ignored him. He took one look at the food I was carrying and headed straight into the kitchen.

"What are we making today?" he asked.

I told Cruyff I was going to make an SAR-style breakfast. He started prepping rice, but since that would take time, I pulled a slightly cooled batch out of my bag that I'd cooked earlier.

Now that we had rice, the rest came together fast. The meal consisted of miso soup, pickled veggies, the grilled fish I'd confiscated from Gramps and company, simmered root vegetables,

and natto. I gave the meat to Rocket and the others as a peace offering for making them worry about me. I let them eat in my room too.

Queen Maria and Prince Zane said they rarely got to eat Southern-style meals, but aside from the natto, they seemed to enjoy it. That made sense because natto was hit or miss, even in the SAR—it wasn't strange that they didn't like it.

But then, there was Cruyff.

Despite claiming he'd never eaten natto before, he stirred it over a hundred times like a pro, corrected my own mixing technique, and polished off a bowl of natto rice with perfect chopstick control.

Yeah, there's no way this is his first natto rodeo.

Queen Maria and Prince Zane struggled with the chopsticks and ended up eating with forks.

"Queen Maria, do you think we might be able to come join you now?" Just as we were finishing up our meal, Gramps finally broke the silence. His face looked half numb from sitting too long.

"Oh? Why would Master Merlin be asking me for permission? Don't tell me you got dragged into this mess and were stuck sitting on your knees this whole time?" Queen Maria said with feigned innocence.

Gramps immediately latched on to that excuse and scrambled to sit next to me. "Y-Yes, that's exactly it! Alex and the others forced me into it!"

The three men left behind glared at him like he'd stabbed them in the back, but Gramps ignored them and begged for breakfast.

"Tenma, we're hungry too. Please talk to Queen Ma— Tenma, help! Hurry!"

Cruyff had started prepping Gramps's food—the smell must've broken the king's willpower. He turned to me for help, practically groveling to have me mediate.

I thought it was pretty pathetic, considering she was his wife, but then again, this was the queen we were talking about, so I figured it wasn't totally unreasonable.

I looked over to Queen Maria...

"Your Majesty, please give it up," I began, but the moment our

eyes met, she gave me this sly little smile and shut me down instantly.

Yeah, I'm not going to win this one.

"Queen Maria, if they don't eat something, they won't have the energy to work this afternoon," Cruyff said, swooping in to the rescue.

That finally got the queen to reconsider. "Fine," she said, "but only because I can't have them skipping out on work."

And so she allowed them to eat, except for...

"My apologies, Your Majesty, Lord Ernest, Prince Lyle. This is all we have left."

Cruyff set down a bowl of natto for them—the very stuff Maria and Zane hadn't been able to stomach.

The three of them started asking for miso soup or anything else, but Queen Maria backed Cruyff by making a comment about not wasting food. The three had no other choice but to plug their noses and down the fermented beans.

Prince Lyle, though, either got used to the smell or his senses just gave up, because not only did he finish it, but he went back for seconds and stuffed himself full.

And that was how Operation: Lure Tenma Out of His Cave came to an end.

Except...not quite.

"Tenmaaaaa! I'm sorry! I messed up! Let me iiiiiiin!!!"

We'd completely forgotten about Namitaro, who was still hanging outside the window. And that was where he remained until the girls got back.

Part Nine

"Are you sure I can have this?"

"Biii!"

The baby gave me what was left of its eggshell. According to Namitaro, dragon hatchlings usually ate their shells right after they hatched, but there were rare ones, like this baby behemoth, who didn't feel like eating them.

"I don't know what I'd even use it for, but I'll take it." I couldn't think of any practical use for it right now, but considering these were the remnants of some ancient dragon's egg, they'd probably fetch a ridiculous price.

Suddenly, I realized I had no clue what had happened to Solomon's shell. Knowing him, he probably hadn't left so much as a crumb.

"All right, then. I'll be borrowing your dimension bag. Bon, say goodbye. Gyaaah!"

Chomp!

Just when Namitaro reached out to pat the baby on the head with his pectoral fin, the baby bit down hard on it. It looked like the baby really didn't want someone he didn't like to touch him.

"Naawwr, my beautiful fin! My gorgeous fin is all chipped now! Eh...whatever. I'm sure it'll grow back soon."

While Namitaro freaked out at first, he then shrugged it off like it was nothing. He stuffed the baby into the dimension bag and climbed aboard the carriage with Cruyff taking the reins. They were headed for a river not far from the capital. I'd prepped some food for their journey just in case, but Namitaro was so fired up about foraging on the way since we had no idea how much the baby would eat.

"Well then, I'll see y'all later! C'mon now, Bon."

"Biiiiiiii!"

The baby let out another ultrasonic screech as a farewell, right on cue. Jeanne, Amur, and even Queen Maria and the others who'd

come out to see them off all clapped their hands over their ears in pain. Honestly, the ones who suffered the most were Namitaro and Cruyff, but the real victims were the two horses pulling the wagon. They were big, sturdy animals, but they passed out on the spot while still standing up from the noise.

Luckily, they went down peacefully, so there were no injuries or damage. I commanded my golems to rush in and support them, which probably saved us some chaos. Still, now we were left without any horses to pull the carriage.

"Well, guess I've got no choice. I'll take you there myself with Thunderbolt."

And that was how I got roped into going along. I probably should've just done that from the start, but I'd asked Cruyff to handle it because there was a chance the baby would get fussy if I tagged along.

"I'm sorry it turned out like this after I'd said I'd handle things..." Cruyff said, but he was still wobbling from the aftershocks and couldn't drive. He seemed very apologetic about it.

The baby, however, was so thrilled it could stay with me longer and let out another joyful supersonic screech. Namitaro quickly shoved it deeper into the bag and clamped its mouth shut, though, so it wasn't as bad this time.

"Well then, I'm off for a bit," I said. "Rocket, Shiromaru, Solomon, how about we take a walk while we're at it?"

Those three hopped into the carriage one after the other. Amur and Jeanne tried to follow, but the baby stuck its head out of the bag and snarled at them, so they backed off.

"Tama, Mary, Aries, Jubei, Hiro—you guys wanna come too?"

I figured it'd be a good change of pace for them, and surprisingly, Tama and the others seemed eager to get some fresh air. Jubei and his family couldn't fit in the carriage, though, so I packed them into a dimension bag instead.

"All right, I can just swim to the ocean from here. I'll be back!"

"Biiiiiiiii!"

After one last screech from the baby, Namitaro dove into the river

and disappeared downstream.

"Every time Namitaro shows up, it's nothing but chaos..." I remarked. "Anyway, I need to get those fish."

Thanks to the baby's last screech, the river's surface was now covered with stunned, floating fish.

"Solomon, keep watch from above. Shiromaru, stay close and guard Jubei and his family. And Rocket, you're with me. Now let's start gathering the fish."

I gave out orders and let the animals out of the bag. I wasn't too worried about monsters or other wild animals because Jubei could handle them. Adventurers, however, would be another story. To the untrained eye, Jubei's group looked like prime exotic game. Even with hunting restrictions in place near the capital, all it would take would be one greedy fool who thought they could get away with it.

I made sure my livestock wore collars to show they were domesticated, but someone could still claim they didn't see them or make some excuse about them being invasive species.

"Shiromaru, you stay alert, and I'll be careful too. But don't wander too far! If anything seems off, make some noise and run to me or Jubei," I said.

I wasn't sure if Tama, Mary, and Aries understood, but all three of them let out cries in response and bounded off into the bushes. I watched them go and then summoned a few golems for extra protection.

"All right, Jubei. I'm counting on you, but don't overdo it. There's no point in getting stressed."

"Mrrooo." Jubei let out a confident grunt as if to say *Leave it to me!*

And with that, I turned my attention to the river.

"Looks like some of them managed to recover and swam off. Rocket, let the muddy-looking ones go and just collect the tastiest ones!"

I floated up into the air while Rocket perched on a nearby rock.

"Those look like trout. Maybe they're dace? Release the crucian carp, but keep the regular carp, just in case."

I used Water magic to fill the dimension bag and started storing

the fish.

"Got a catfish. Next up is... Ooh, eel jackpot! Rocket, if you see more of those long ones, grab 'em first!"

Rocket waved a tentacle in a circle to signal that he understood and then went to work catching fish from the rock. As I watched him, I couldn't help but think of a certain lasso-wielding archaeologist from an old movie I'd once seen...

After a while, he had caught most of the good ones. Rocket and I went through the haul and sorted the fish. The ones that needed to have the mud cleaned off, like carp, catfish, and eels, went into a water-filled dimension bag. The cleaner ones, like the trout and dace, were rinsed off and stored in a magic bag with ice water.

"That should be the last of them. Now I can just kick back and keep an eye on things... Huh?"

Just as I was about to climb onto the roof of the wagon to check on Tama and the others, I heard hoofbeats in the distance. Shiromaru noticed them before I did and was already standing alert. We were ready to fight if we had to, but it was also possible that someone was just passing by.

I used Identify to see who it was, just in case.

"Hm, looks like someone we know. Still, we'd better play it safe. Jubei, bring everyone over here!"

"Mooo!"

I didn't think things would go awry, but I didn't want Jubei or the others getting caught up in any kind of commotion. I had them retreat into the dimension bag, just in case.

"You over there! What are you— Oh, our apologies!"

"We'll call for the captain right away!"

The knights who approached us started off all stern and demanding, but the moment they realized who I was, they scrambled off to fetch their superior officer. A short while later, the one in charge finally arrived.

"Long time no see, Primera," I said.

"It has been a while. But what are you doing all the way out here, Tenma?" she asked.

“I’m based out of the capital and Sagan these days, so really I should be asking you that.”

I wasn’t trying to dodge the question or anything, but come on! Me being in the plains near the capital was way less strange than Primera, a knight who worked in Gunjo City, showing up here with her whole unit.

“True, but... You know that as a knight, I’m bound by confidentiality.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “I was just seeing Namitaro off and figured I’d let the livestock stretch their legs a bit.”

Since Primera wasn’t a threat, I let the animals out again. Tama, Mary, and Aries bounded around freely while Jubei and Hiro kept watch over them. The latter two positioned themselves between the three animals and Primera’s knights, just in case.

“Anyway, we’re on official duty en route to the capital, so we’ll be on our way,” Primera said.

After a quick chat, she gave Jubei and Hiro a smile, backed her horse up, and carefully steered her knights away from the rambunctious animals.

“See? They’re gone now, so you guys can relax,” I called once Primera and her knights were out of sight.

Jubei and Hiro finally dropped their guard and started to graze while keeping watch over the trio.

“Might as well take a little stroll and see if there’s anything interesting in this area,” I said. I wandered around for a bit on a whim. “Yep, nothing’s out here. I guess we already hit the jackpot with all those fish earlier.” I hadn’t been expecting much anyway.

I then figured it was time to head back, but...

“Tama and Mary are way too energetic for their own good.”

The two of them refused to come and kept darting around, playing a game of chase. In the end, Rocket had to wrap his tentacles around Mary while Tama got scolded by Jubei and Hiro before finally crawling back into the bag. Incidentally, Aries had come right over the moment I’d called. He’d been napping peacefully, but when Mary got caught, she took her frustration out on Aries with a surprise headbutt.

“You finally made it back. It took you long enough! I was starting to worry!” Gramps said.

By the time I returned to the mansion, Queen Maria and the others had already left. Gramps claimed that he was worried, but he was just lounging around in the dining room.

“Oh yeah, I ran into Primera by the plains. She didn’t go into detail about why she was there, but she did say it was confidential. I guess she’s heading to the capital on knight business,” I said.

“I see. In that case, she might show up with the duke or Albert soon. By the way, what are you going to do now, Tenma?” Gramps asked. He followed me into the kitchen and watched as I started to rinse off some small fish in the sink.

I explained why I had all these fish. “The baby let out another supersonic blast just as it was leaving with Namitaro. It knocked a ton of fish out, and they just floated to the surface. I got a huge haul without even having to do anything. I stored most of them in a magic bag to keep them fresh, but I figured I’d try prepping them a bit differently too.”

Gramps clearly had no intention of helping. Instead, he just snagged a few fish I’d already cleaned and started making a snack with them to go along with his drink.

“Mm, it smells amazing.”

“It really does... Oh, Tenma’s back!”

The women, except for Kriss, had just returned from a trip out. The moment they entered the dining room, they were drawn in by the smell of Gramps’s grilled fish. Jeanne noticed me right away, but Amur only realized I was there after Jeanne said something. She’d just followed the scent straight to Gramps.

“Master Tenma, what are you making?” Aura asked.

“Need a hand with anything?” Leni offered.

The two of them came in a little later and offered to help. Unlike Leni, who was focused on what I was doing, Aura started letting her eyes drift towards the grilled fish. She was being so obvious...

Jeanne and Amur also asked if there was anything for them to do. Since the urgent stuff was already handled, I had them help out

by grilling up some fish for dinner. While I explained what needed to be done, Aura and Leni washed up and put on aprons.

"Aura, can you clean and gut these small fish and then soak them in this salt water? Leni, I'll have you fillet this trout into thirds."

They both nodded and got to work. Aura muttered something about her task being the stinkier one.

"Wonder what Aina would say if she found out Leni got the tougher job...?" I said casually.

"All right, let's do this!" she said.

That shut her up fast. Total deflection.

Jeanne didn't want the filleting job because Leni was just better at it, plain and simple.

"Better whip up the brine for the smoked batch before Leni finishes up."

This was my first time smoking fish, so I kept the brine simple. No herbs—just the basics.

"Water, sake, salt, sugar, and pepper... That should do the trick."

Even if it didn't turn out perfectly, it certainly wouldn't be inedible.

"Tenma, I'm done with the trout. I'll help with the small fish now."

Leni smoothly moved to help Aura before the brine even cooled. She was incredibly efficient. More than half the pile of small fish was cleaned in no time.

"We're all done."

In the end, Leni had handled more than half the pile by herself. I stepped in after putting the slices of trout into the cooled brine using magic, but I barely managed a fifth myself.

"We'll leave the dried ones in salt water for now. They'll be done after drying out again. As for the smoked fish, they should be ready the day after tomorrow, if all goes well. Jeanne, Amur, bring over the grilled fish, would you?"

They brought them over, and I stored everything in the magic bag. Gramps had a few he didn't want to give up because he had claimed them as his personal snacks. I told him that was fine, but I'd skip the dried and smoked fish for him in exchange. He handed everything back over instead.

"All right. That's dinner settled," I said. "I just need some rice, miso soup, and pickles now."

The rest was easy enough to handle on my own, so I told everyone to go do whatever they wanted. However...

"Tenma, is it ready yet?" Amur asked.

"Come on, it's too soon. Master Tenma, do you think it'll be about another hour?" Aura asked.

"An hour? No way, the food'll need more time than that," Jeanne said.

Leni agreed. "Yeah, that makes sense. The dried fish was originally made to be stored, after all. Gotta let it air out a bit."

No one had any intention of leaving the dining room—not since the tray of drying fish had caught everyone's attention, anyway. Gramps was no exception. When Amur asked if the fish was ready, I could practically see his ears twitch as he listened in.

"I can't promise it'll taste amazing, but I guess I can use a bit of magic to speed-dry some for dinner."

Amur, Aura, and Gramps were all staring at me, so I caved. I decided I'd use Wind and Fire magic to try making dried fish on the spot.

"It's too risky to use Fire magic indoors, though. Let's head out to the yard."

I didn't want to accidentally start a bonfire inside the house, so I led everyone outside. By the time we got there, our group had grown to more than just the original four and Gramps. Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon had tagged along too. Then, Tama showed up. And since she was there, of course Jubei and Hiro came by to keep an eye on things. Finally, Mary showed up with a half asleep Aries—he looked like he hadn't wanted to come but had lost the argument.

"Nguh! Cough, cough..."

The first thing Mary did when she arrived was slam right into Aura's stomach. That was her version of a greeting.

"Mary, Tama. Just a heads-up, but I'm about to start drying some fish, so try not to kick up too much dust, okay?"

"T-Tenma... Wh-What about me...?"

I could hear Aura muttering something in the background, but I just tuned her out. At this point, this was a regular occurrence. Besides, it was more important to make sure that Tama and Mary didn't ruin the fish.

"All right, this spot will do. Let's set up a base and a barrier with some rocks. Actually, no, we want a drying rack, so let's stretch a casting net over the base instead. That should work."

Once we were done setting things up, I sprinkled water around the area to keep the dust down and started casting my Wind and Fire spells.

"I hope this works..."

Realistically, natural air-drying would be better, but I treated this as a training session. It was more about technique and testing than efficiency. I was going to use a method involving a gentle flow of warm air. You could call it a kind of warm Wind magic, I guess.

It wouldn't be easy to get it right. Too much wind and it wouldn't stay warm. And if there was too much force, the fish would just blow away. If I used too much fire, I'd end up with steam-roasted fish instead of dried. Any little imbalance and I wouldn't be creating a warm breeze—I'd make a gust of wind, or even worse, a scorching blast. I could even cast a full-on flamethrower if I really messed things up.

"Maybe I should teach this technique to Amy and Tida."

As long as you didn't hit flamethrower territory, it was actually a solid way to do some magical training. Gramps agreed with that, so I decided I'd call them over sometime soon.

"You really are something, Tenma. Keeping a steady temperature like that while chatting is tough. I can do it, but most people'd lose focus," Gramps observed about an hour into the spellcasting.

"It's just muscle memory once you get the hang of it. Doesn't drain much mana either. Honestly, it's kind of like jogging and chatting at the same time," I explained.

It'd be tough if I were on a complex trail, but lots of people could hold a conversation while jogging along a route they'd traveled plenty of times.

"It doesn't sound so bad when you put it that way. It might even

be harder for someone doing it in total silence."

"Yeah, but let's be real. Even if Aura was a magic prodigy, she'd definitely screw it up," Amur said.

"She'd get distracted talking and stop casting, or she'd launch the fish into the sky...or just set the whole yard on fire," Jeanne agreed.

Aura fumed at that. "Grr... I want to deny it, but I really can't!"

Jeanne and Amur weren't holding back. Aura pouted at their comments, but even she had to admit they weren't wrong. Out of the three of them, she was definitely the least suited for this kind of multitasking magic.

"All right, I think we're good..."

Once the laughter died down, I stopped the spell and checked the fish. Visually, they looked fine. I grilled one up with a quick burst of magic to test it. It tasted fine too.

"Yup, we're all set."

I shared a sample, and it was gone in an instant. Shiromaru and Solomon fought over the leftover bones. Shiromaru won the head, and Solomon got the rest.

"Rocket, have one of the smaller ones."

He'd missed out earlier, so I gave him a dried fish. Shiromaru and Solomon lined up behind him like it was their turn again, but I made them wait. We wouldn't have enough left for dinner otherwise.

"That's not bad."

"It's a bit more bland than the dried fish I got from the SAR."

"Maybe it's the kind of fish we used?"

"I think it's fine, considering the ingredients and the method. But yeah, it's not on the same level as the stuff they sell in the SAR," Leni said.

Amur and the others were being polite, but Leni gave her honest opinion without sugarcoating it. Still, everyone agreed this would be perfectly fine for dinner tonight.

"Hey, it looks like we've got company."

Just as we were wrapping up and getting ready to head back inside, one of the golems at the gate started moving. Since acquaintances wouldn't trigger the golems, that meant someone unfamiliar had arrived.

“I’ll go check,” Aura offered and jogged off to look. She came back a few minutes later, looking out of breath. “Master Tenma, it’s a letter from Duke Sanga. He’s asking for a reply as soon as possible, so his butler is here, waiting.”

“Okay.”

I took the letter and opened it right away. It was a formal request to arrange a visit, and he was asking what day would work. He usually wasn’t this formal about stuff, so I wondered if something had happened. I told the butler that tomorrow was too soon, but the day afterward in the afternoon would be fine.

“Hm, that’s odd... He’s never sent a message like this before. I wonder if something’s up. But why do you want to wait until the day after tomorrow?” Gramps asked. He seemed more intrigued than concerned by the letter. But when I told him the date I’d picked, he raised an eyebrow.

“Well, tomorrow’s just too short notice,” I said. “Besides, I’ve got fish to smoke tomorrow.”

At first he looked exasperated, but then he chuckled. “Fair enough. That’s important too.”

Part Ten

"Thank you very much for making time for us today."

"Sure. Come on in."

It was just past noon on the day we'd arranged to have Duke Sanga over. He arrived with Albert and Primera. But instead of their usual laid-back vibe, they were acting oddly stiff and formal. They had even brought a gift. Now, that wasn't too surprising from the duke or Primera, but Albert usually just barged in like he owned the place. For a second, I honestly thought he might be an impostor.

"So what brings you here today?" I asked. "Also, can you stop acting so formal? Albert acting so prim and proper is freaking me out." Primera burst out laughing. "Pfft!"

Albert looked like he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue, probably out of respect for the duke. Duke Sanga sighed, but that had helped shift the mood, so everyone began to act more normally.

"I figured if I was going to ask a favor, I should show some proper decorum. But clearly that plan was doomed the moment Albert came along..." he grumbled.

"Father, don't you think it's a bit unfair to blame me for that?"

"Well, you do come as a package deal with Cain and Leon. When you act quiet and serious, people will start wondering if you're a fake, or that you're scheming to do something shady... Alternatively, they'll think you're just plain guilty about something."

They all smiled at me sheepishly. Because of that, I knew I wasn't wrong to suspect that something was off.

"Well, this request just might come across as shady, depending on how you look at it," the duke admitted. "The truth is, we'd like you to evaluate the strength of the Gunjo City knights' fourth brigade. Primera's unit."

Okay, I can see why this could seem a bit sketchy.

Up until now, the duke's requests had all been small things like delivery jobs, food-related errands, and those sorts of things.

Sometimes he'd ask me to sell Goldie's and Silvie's thread under the table too. But basically, they had all been things I could handle while I was out doing my own quests. They were normal, friendly favors.

But this was about assessing military capability. It would be easy to imagine other nobles catching wind of it and saying, *"Hey, judge my knights next!"* Even worse, this could easily rub the royal family the wrong way, especially since a lot of people already assumed they were formally backing me.

"I understand why this might seem suspicious, but we did get the king's approval beforehand. He said it was up to you to decide," Duke Sanga said.

Now *that* caught me off guard. It wasn't like the king or queen to leave me out of the loop on something.

Then, the duke added, "This isn't widely known, and only the king himself and a few in our house are aware, but a monster similar to Chaos appeared in my duchy."

"What?"

I had almost shouted that, but then I remembered that Leni, our ever-observant SAR intelligence agent, might be nearby. I clamped my mouth shut and activated Detection. Leni was in the kitchen—she wasn't eavesdropping, so we were in the clear.

"I know you probably have questions, but please let me finish. The creature was dealt with before it caused any damage."

Our only point of reference so far was Chaos, so it was hard to tell how dangerous this one might have been. Still, it was impressive to hear that it'd been defeated with zero casualties.

"Now, I say 'dealt with,' but it wasn't actually defeated," the duke admitted. "According to some witnesses, it panicked and took some kind of drug, just like Chaos did, but instead of transforming and going berserk, it immediately started coughing up blood and collapsed. It never moved again. When they checked it over, it was already dead."

It seemed like there wasn't much usable data from this second case. Still, if the being had been on par with Chaos, most normal units would've been wiped out.

"So that's why you want me to evaluate how strong the knights

are," I said.

Basically, he wanted to know how well the brigade would hold up if another Chaos-level threat were to appear.

"Exactly. But if we did that in an obvious way, other nobles would jump at the chance to make similar requests. If you agree to help, I do have a plan," the duke said. "When you happen to be training with the king's guard, I'll 'coincidentally' bring the fourth brigade into the capital. Then, His Majesty and Prince Lyle will suddenly remember that the fourth brigade once caused you trouble, and they'll invite you for a mock battle—just for laughs, of course."

That explained why they all looked so awkward when they showed up. They were already acting like I'd agreed to this.

"I do train with the palace knights and guards now and then, so that part checks out. And if the king and Prince Lyle are the ones pushing it, it won't look too suspicious. But what happens when the other nobles try the same thing?" I asked. "If Marquis Sammons or Margrave Haust asks, I won't have a good reason to say no. And if it spreads to nobles I don't know, or even worse, to other powerful ducal houses tied to the royal family, it'll be even harder to refuse."

I wouldn't mind doing it for Marquis Sammons or Margrave Haust, as I knew their knights and I'd worked with them before. But beyond that? No thanks. I doubted the king could fend off every copycat request either.

"This isn't an official royal decree. It wouldn't even be doing someone a favor. It'd just be His Majesty and Prince Lyle getting carried away. The idea is that once the mock battle ends, Queen Maria and Prince Caesar will show up, realize what's going on, and haul those two away."

"So basically, it'd be like them pulling one of their usual pranks on me. You think people'll buy that?" I asked.

"They will. That's the whole point. His Majesty and Prince Lyle are willingly taking the fall here."

"'Taking the fall'? That sounds a bit dramatic, don't you think? I mean, it's all staged."

I figured the duke had just chosen his words poorly, but no. Albert and Primera looked pained too.

“No, um... Queen Maria and Prince Caesar made it clear that we should keep this quiet. They’ve been looking for a chance to make those two reflect on their usual antics, so this plan lined up perfectly.”

When I asked if they were really allowed to discuss that, I was told that the duke had been given permission to...just as long as I didn’t say anything to the king or the prince.

“Well, if that’s the case, I don’t mind. But what about the reward?” I asked.

“The royal family will pay you a kind of nuisance fee. Technically, it’s coming from both the royal family and House Sanga, but if the ducal house pays you directly, it’ll look staged. That’s why we’re handling it this way.”

Honestly, I didn’t mind. All this really meant was that my usual training partners would be swapped out for a day. If the royal family and the ducal house were taking care of the headache, that was fine by me. It’d just be a slightly different training session with a bonus paycheck attached. Nothing to complain about there.

“So when is this happening?” I asked.

“You’ll accept? Thank you! The Gunjo knights will be ready anytime, but we’ll still need to coordinate with the king’s guard and the palace knights, so the earliest it could happen would be the day after tomorrow. It shouldn’t take more than ten days at the most to arrange it. We’ll send word the day before everything’s set.”

Since this was an unofficial request, there were no contracts or paperwork—it was just a verbal agreement about the conditions and payment. I wasn’t worried, though. If the king and the duke were giving me their word, that’d be good enough for me.

“Something you said caught my attention... You mentioned stationing them in the capital as private troops. Does that mean Primera’s going to live here now?” I asked.

She was the captain of her brigade, and if they were being posted in the capital, that would mean she’d be relocating too.

“Not permanently, but yes, she’ll be spending more time here than before,” the duke answered. “The Gunjo knights have had a surge in recruits over the past few years. We’re actually reaching a

point where we have more people than we can reasonably manage. Primera will be based here, and we'll create a liaison unit, which will travel between towns in our domain and the capital. Since many of Primera's subordinates are from noble families, their identities are well-documented. That makes it easier to get them through checkpoints when delivering sensitive intel."

"Oh, so that's why you want their strength evaluated."

Now that another creature like Chaos had appeared, it wasn't unreasonable to assume a third might show up. It made sense to have couriers prepared for emergencies. But if one of them were to run into a monster like that, they'd need to be strong enough to escape, or at least stall it. This was likely a way to determine if they had that kind of strength. And that kind of intel was something the royal family would want too. It could even be an excuse to get a peek at the duke's own resources.

The duke seemed to have picked up on my concern and addressed it directly. "There's no need to worry. We've already agreed to share information with the royal family, so there's no tension between us," he said.

"Well then, that about wraps things up on the request front, yeah? So... How about you tell me what Albert's been up to lately?"

"Father!"

"You know, maybe we should call Gramps and Amur over for this," I said.

"Tenma!"

"Tenma, I'm really sorry for all the trouble my brother causes you."

"Primera!"

Albert raised his voice in protest as the three of us started piling on him.

And somehow, the duke, Primera, and I all chimed in at once.

"Are we wrong?"

"We're not wrong."

"I'm not wrong."

The effect was devastating. Albert looked visibly deflated and sulked like a scolded kid.

A little while later, we actually did bring Gramps and Amur over, and they gleefully joined in. Once Albert's most embarrassing stories were dragged out in the open, he couldn't take it anymore and bolted from the parlor.

Albert didn't get far, though. He ran straight into the barn where Jubei and the others hung out, which happened to be right where Steel was stationed on guard nearby. Primera had gone out to look for him, and once Albert had been caught red-handed, she quickly hauled him back to us.

"Ahh, today turned out great. My request was accepted, the food was delicious...and the stories about Albert were hilarious," Duke Sanga said.

"Yeah. I always thought my brother was relying on you too much, Tenma... Well, Cain and Leon do that too, but it's even worse than I thought. They're completely spoiled!" Primera said.

Once our discussion about the request had wrapped up, the three of them had stayed for dinner. The meal had mostly consisted of the dried fish, which had gained a bit of flavor from drying out naturally in the sun, and the smoked ones I'd finished earlier that morning. The food would definitely be considered plain compared to the meals served at the duke's estate, but both he and Primera seemed to have enjoyed it.

Duke Sanga seemed like he was in high spirits on the way out, probably due to all the alcohol. Primera also had a bit to drink, although the duke had stopped her after her second cup. By the time she'd listened to enough stories about Albert, her opinion of him had seemed to take a sharp nosedive.

Well, if she was going to be spending more time in the capital, that meant she'd be visiting here with Albert more often. And then, she was bound to see why Albert, Cain, and Leon had earned the nickname "the three noble idiots." Once that happened, her opinion of him might drop even further.

"I'll bring Cain and Leon next time..." Albert muttered.

Now that he'd watched his little sister's opinion of him steadily crumble in real time, he seemed determined to drag Cain and Leon down with him too. His eyes looked dark and cloudy.

"Don't hold back in the mock battle. Please go all out," Duke Sanga told me.

"Thanks, Tenma," Primera said.

"Next time, it'll be three of us," Albert mumbled.

When Albert said there'd be three of us, I wasn't sure if he meant he'd be bringing Cain and Leon along next time or if he meant that all three of them would be equally despised by Primera.

Probably the latter...

Once they left and there was nothing else to do, we kicked off our drinking party for the night earlier than usual.

"Kriss sure has a sharp nose for this stuff. She showed up right after the duke left on a day with lots of drinking and snacks. It's almost like she planned it!" Leni said as she poured Kriss a drink.

Kriss reached for some dried fish with a smug grin on her face. "Even I'll admit I was on point today. I ended up helping Jean on a whim and avoided running into the duke! I don't have a problem seeing him or anything, but with everything going on with Albert, it'd just be more of a mental load, you know? And most importantly, Jean owes me one!" she boasted.

But honestly, it just sounded like she couldn't be bothered to put up a polite front. And as for Jean owing her, I highly doubted *he* saw it that way. It was more likely that he'd been thinking something like "Of course she should help" or "I'm gonna make her help more like that from now on!"

Yeah, that sounds a lot more like Jean.

It amused me, though, so I decided to just leave Kriss in the dark about that for now and ask Aina about it later.

"Still, you guys really are spoiled if you think this dried fish is just 'okay.' The stuff regular knights eat is way below this. Even the king's guard gets stuff that's only maybe a tiny bit better," Kriss said.

Apparently, dried fish wasn't that common in the capital, so this kind of meal counted as decent rations for knights.

"Knights have to get used to rations that'll tide them over in an emergency. Sometimes, they're only given preserved foods like dried meat, dried fish, and dried vegetables. And not the stuff that's still a bit moist like this. They get the rock-hard, really dry stuff."

It felt a little unfair to compare my food to emergency rations, but I guessed that was normal for knights. Even in regular households, they would prepare similar things when stocking up for emergencies.

"Only high-ranking nobles or people with a spare magic bag can afford to eat fresh or half-dried food. You're all spoiled brats," Kriss said as she bit into another piece of dried fish and raised her cup with a grin. "So what did Duke Sanga want, anyway?" she asked, as if just remembering. "Oh, you don't have to say anything if it's classified or something."

Dodging the question would basically be the same as admitting it was classified. I didn't know how much Kriss actually knew about the situation, but it was safer to assume she didn't know anything. That was safer for both of us, anyway.

I decided to tell her the truth...but not the *whole* truth. "Oh, it's nothing major. It was more like a greeting. Primera's brigade is going to be Sanga's private guard in the capital. And since Albert's always causing trouble, he came by to formally apologize. That part was a bit awkward, but after that, he was his usual self."

Kriss nodded. "Well, it's Albert, so that makes sense. Still, Primera's getting assigned to the capital? Things might get interesting..."

A messenger from the castle showed up the next morning, just after sunrise. The duke had said it would happen in about two days or tomorrow at the earliest, but considering the personalities of both the king and Prince Lyle, I couldn't say I was surprised I'd heard back much sooner.

"So I should head out tomorrow afternoon, then?" I asked the messenger holding the letter.

"That's what I was told," he said. Then, he bowed and left.

"Is it a request, Tenma?" Aura asked. She had been the one to greet the messenger. She looked curious about the letter, but I couldn't give her the full story.

"It's an invitation to join in the knights' training tomorrow," I explained, and that much was true. I asked if she wanted to join in too, but she scrambled away, muttering how she had too much

laundry and cleaning to do.

"She's so easy to handle when it's stuff like this," I said to myself as I watched her run away. I put the letter in my magic bag, but I made a mental note to burn it later, just in case. "Guess I'll go check on Gramps and the others..."

Gramps and Kriss both had hangovers, probably because we'd started drinking earlier than usual yesterday, and also because there had been more snacks than usual. Their being in that state wasn't unusual, though. Leni had paced herself and was totally fine, and she'd kept Amur in check, so Amur hadn't drunk too much like she usually did either.

I headed back into the house, trying to remember what remedies worked best for hangovers. Today's meals would need to be gentle on the stomach...

"Well, Tenma? What do you think?" Duke Sanga asked. We'd finished the mock battle a little earlier than expected.

"Hmm... I think it'll depend on the situation, but I'd say it's better not to fight. If you go up against someone like Chaos with only one or two people, it'd be certain death, no question about it. You might be able to stall them with three people if they're good, however," I explained.

When up against someone like Chaos, you could buy time, but there was also a chance the monster would self-destruct. That was about the only play I could see working.

"And what did you think of Primera?" he asked.

"If Primera and her second-in-command have a knight skilled in magic backing them up, they might be able to put up a decent fight against Chaos. I really do mean 'might,' though. There's still a higher chance they'll be killed."

Primera and her vice-captain were able to hold their own against the king's guard, but the rest of the brigade were only a little better than average knights. That said, their coordination and strength had clearly improved since the last time I had seen them. But even so, it wasn't enough to beat someone like Chaos.

"So you're saying we shouldn't form the special liaison squad?"

"No, I'm not saying that. With enough training, their survival chances should go up significantly. But they need to be taught that fighting should be their last resort. Their priority has to be retreating or surviving."

Even as I said it, I didn't really believe that most of the fourth brigade could hold their own in a fight. There were too many nobles among them—their skills were worse than other brigades, but their pride was far stronger.

"I see... What kind of training do you think they need?" Duke Sanga asked.

"Building stamina and then focusing on physical strength," I answered right away.

Ideally, they would build up enough endurance and speed to outrun a monster outright, but that was wishful thinking. At the very least, they needed to be able to scatter and retreat with minimal casualties.

"It might sound cold, but I think they need to train for scenarios where sacrificing someone is part of the strategy," I said.

"Yes, that's probably necessary... So what do you think it would take for them to actually win a fight?"

I figured that Duke Sanga was asking how they could win without using decoys, but the answer was a lot simpler than that.

"You'd need three people in a group. One whose skills surpass Amur's, a royal guard, and someone as good at magic as Eliza," I said. "With that formation, your odds would go way up."

That was the team that had almost defeated Chaos, after all. The reason they had lost that day had come down to carelessness and not knowing what they were up against. If Duke Sanga could form a team that outperformed those three, victory was definitely possible. That being said, Amur was one of the best frontline fighters in the entire kingdom. And when it came to knights, the royal guard was the cream of the crop. As for Eliza, she was also a gifted magic user. It wouldn't be easy to come up with a trio like that, even if you were handpicking them from the royal guard or other knights' brigades across the capital. Basically, expecting it from the fourth brigade just wasn't happening.

"Hm, well, that's not very realistic for us," Duke Sanga replied. "We might be able to form a few teams like that if we scraped together knights from across the duchy and picked only the best of the best, but there's no guarantee we'd have enough to make a full unit. And it'd seriously weaken the defenses in other regions if I had to pull them from their usual posts..."

"Your only other option is to just keep throwing in more people. But the higher the head count, the harder it will be to coordinate them, and the speed needed for the liaison squad drops off," I countered. "So maybe two or three trios moving as a unit could do the job."

"Nine people? Well, with enough training, they could pull off the coordination necessary. But it wouldn't be enough."

And having nine people on each squad meant you'd quickly run out of available liaison teams.

"We could make up the numbers with golems. Oh, actually, House Sanga has been working on securing mages capable of producing golems for the past few years. We're finally starting to get enough together," he said.

Maybe he thought I'd assume he was implying he'd want to use my golems, so he had made sure to tell me he had his own supply.

"It's not cheap using them as expendable fighters, but it's still better than losing lives," he added.

He probably didn't want to treat golems like throwaways, but when a noble died, their family would start a commotion. Sometimes, it could lead to a full-on rebellion. It was better to lose a golem than deal with all that. The duke told me all that with a sigh.

"Well, if we don't want to burn through our golem budget, I guess we'll just have to make Primera and the others train harder. Primera! Get your brigade back on its feet! They can't keep embarrassing themselves in front of the king's guard and the capital knights!" Duke Sanga barked orders at the knights still slumped on the ground.

Less than half of them reacted right away. Fewer than twenty moved.

"I-I'm sorry, Duke Sanga! Fourth brigade, form up!" Primera

frantically issued an order. The knights who'd already gotten up helped the others to their feet, and they managed to line up...though their formation was a little lopsided.

"Salute His Majesty!" Primera and her brigade saluted the king, who returned the gesture with a small wave. "At ease! Salute Duke Sanga and Master Tenma Otori!"

They turned to salute the duke and me. Duke Sanga also responded with a wave, but I wasn't sure what to do, so I just nodded to them.

With that, Primera led the brigade off to the side to take a break.

"Duke Sanga, I'm sorry for putting you in such a tough spot," the king said.

"It's all right. I'm sure it was a valuable experience for them. Even as knights from a noble house, they rarely get the chance to come to the castle, let alone draw their swords in front of the king. They'll be proud of this day," the duke said.

The king nodded in response. That much, at least, was all part of the plan. But from here on out, things the king hadn't been briefed on were going to happen.

Prince Caesar stepped forward. "May I have a moment, Your Majesty?"

Queen Maria and Prince Lyle were behind him. Prince Lyle didn't seem to know what was happening because he seemed like business as usual.

Although this wasn't part of the plan, the king didn't seem to suspect anything was out of the ordinary. He followed Prince Caesar and Queen Maria to a spot out of my view.

"I apologize for leaving you both hanging like that," Prince Caesar said when he returned alone. "His Majesty and the minister of the military had an urgent matter to attend to."

This was all for show for the people around us, of course.

"Still, at this rate, any incident is going to cause serious casualties among the liaison squads," he said.

"Yes, that's what Tenma and I were just discussing," the duke replied. "Given the current situation, our only options are increasing squad sizes or using golems as expendables."

"I see. That's rough... Well, it might be good to have them train at the castle once in a while. It'd be a healthy competition for both sides. It might be worth letting other nobles send their knights to join in as well..." Prince Caesar said. He muttered that he'd suggest it to Prince Lyle later and then walked off in the direction the king had gone.

"Honestly, I doubt that'll happen. The reformists won't want to expose their strength, and even if they do send some, they'd probably be mid-level knights at best," Duke Sanga said.

The duke had only brought the fourth brigade from Gunjo City, and that brigade had only been seen as dead weight not too long ago. No one would care if their true abilities were exposed.

"Still, it works out well for us. It'll make it easier to get our own knights involved. Hopefully they can sharpen up before the other nobles join in, but, well, I'm not going to hold my breath," he added.

He had meant two things by that. First of all, he was saying that it would take time for the fourth brigade to get stronger, and secondly, if Marquis Sammons heard about it, he'd immediately jump at the chance to get his people involved.

"If Marquis Sammons gets wind of this liaison squad idea, I bet he'll form his own version right away."

I'd assumed this world didn't have dedicated messenger units, but apparently, they had at one time. But these days, the role was usually filled by whatever knight happened to be available. It was terribly inefficient.

"They used to exist, but they couldn't really be counted on in a fight. Plus, they required a ton of horses. They mostly got phased out in the name of cost cutting. Adventurers take care of simple communications now. It's cheaper that way," the duke explained.

I thought of Ted when he mentioned that. Adventurers who used their followers to carry messages like he did might seem pricey, but since they provided their own transportation, you didn't need to budget for horses, stables, feed, or any of that. Some of them were even faster than knights on horseback. And if something happened along the way, you didn't need to worry about replacing your own people or paying death benefits.

Sure, there was always the risk of a message being intercepted, but that was easy enough to avoid by not giving out sensitive information to adventurers. The benefits of this system far outweighed the risks.

"Between the wyvern mess in Margrave Haust's domain and the invasion scare from the empire and this monster incident, I have a feeling the day we'll need our own specialized liaison squad will come soon. So it'll still be worth it if it costs a little extra."

That made sense to me. And just as I thought that, the king's guard arrived at the training grounds we'd used earlier.

"Tenma! C'mon, it's your turn to spar with us!" Jean yelled at me.

For once, the core members of the king's guard were all present, and judging by their enthusiasm, they weren't going to let me off easy. Kriss and Edgar were already circling around behind me to cut off my escape route.

"Any of you Gunjo City knights who want to join in can jump in whenever you like!" Dean shouted.

Primera was the first to respond. Her vice-captain followed right after her, and then a dozen more stood up after them. But none of the knights from noble families, aside from those first two, could manage to get back on their feet.

"I'll take care of Primera, then."

"Please do!"

Kriss immediately grabbed hold of Primera and dragged her away from me. A female knight from the king's guard followed her lead and did the same with a knight from the fourth brigade, bringing her over to join Kriss's group.

Once all the female knights from the fourth brigade were gone, the rest of the king's guard started rounding up the remaining knights one by one.

"So, Tenma, how about the usual?" Edgar asked with a smile that was way too pleasant for what he was suggesting. He started steering me over towards where Dean, Jean, and Sigurd were waiting—he was basically throwing me to the wolves.

"You say 'the usual,' but I don't remember ever fighting with this combo, am I right? I'm okay with magic being allowed, but what

about you guys?" I said.

"Too bad, Edgar. You gotta sit this one out."

"Wait, why me? Make Dean sit out!"

"Fine, then Sigurd's out too! That work for you, Tenma?"

I nodded, figuring that was fair...until I realized something right as the match was about to start.

Hang on, I've never fought this combo before either... This is gonna suck, isn't it?

It was already too late. I knew that I could maybe manage a draw on a good day when it came to fighting Dean without magic, but not when Jean was thrown into the mix too. And if it had been Dean and someone other than Jean—like Kriss, maybe—I could've had a shot using Dean's partner as a shield or a distraction. But Jean didn't leave any openings for me. Dean stuck to me like glue, and Jean hit me from behind whenever he pleased. There was no world where this wouldn't be considered just straight up bullying.

Once the beatdown from the old men had concluded, Edgar, Sigurd, Kriss, and Primera came charging at me with no break or warning. It was a full-on ambush.

Naturally, after the punishment I'd just received, my stamina was shot. All I could really do was defend myself. Still, even though I was on defense against the four of them, they never landed a decisive blow on me. I figured that made that round a draw.

But after Jean called an end to the match, Kriss grinned smugly. "We had the advantage, so I'm calling it a win," she said.

"If four of you couldn't take me down, I'd say it was your *loss,* Kriss," I shot back.

That started a standoff between the two of us, and we glared at each other from a distance.

But when I said, "If you've got a problem, go fight Dean and Jean first and then come back and complain," she was promptly dragged off by the very people I mentioned and ended up getting bullied in the same way I had.

"Sure, Kriss brought it on herself, but you're still pretty savage, Tenma," Edgar said.

"Well, she's been kind of full of herself ever since she won the

tournament. This should knock her down a peg or two," Sigurd said.

It was clear neither of them had any intention of stepping in to help. They just watched calmly as she got a beatdown.

"You all right, Tenma?" Primera asked.

"Yeah. I'm pretty tired, but no serious injuries or anything. I'm good," I said.

Minor injuries were just part of the job description for me. I told her I was fine, but she still had a guilty look on her face.

"Let me guess, Kriss dragged you into this?" I asked her.

She gave me a small, hesitant nod.

In that case, it was all Kriss's fault. There was no reason for Primera to feel bad. Edgar and Sigurd agreed and reassured her, and once the female knights of the king's guard noticed, they chimed in with similar comments.

"Why the hell is my reputation taking a hit after surviving those two monsters?!"

Yep, Kriss's stock within the group had plummeted. Not that everyone was being serious, however. They were mostly just teasing her. But as for the rest... Yeah, I suspected those feelings were real.

"All right! That's it for today!" Dean said, wrapping up the training.

The king's guard seemed even more fired up than usual—perhaps it was because the fourth brigade had joined in today. They were all smiles now as they chatted, laughed, and made plans while looking totally relaxed.

On the other hand, the fourth brigade looked like they'd barely survived a bout on the battlefield. Most of them either had collapsed or were slumped over on the ground. Only the vice-captain and a few older knights were still standing.

Once Primera saw the king's guard starting to form up, she rushed to her feet. "F-Fourth brigade, on your feet! Salute!" she said, trying to get her unit to look presentable.

The king's guard replied with waves and casual greetings. The members then started stretching or heading back into the castle once Dean dismissed them.

"How many of them do you think will still be walking tomorrow?"

I asked.

"Maybe a bit less than half? I mean, I'll be fine, of course," Edgar said with a laugh.

"I'd guess even fewer than that. But of course I'll be fine too," Sigurd said, seeming less optimistic.

I agreed with both of them. Even though the knights of the king's guard were far stronger than the average knight, both physically and in terms of skill, today's training had been unusually intense. More people had been involved than usual, and a lot of them had clearly been trying to show off in front of the fourth brigade. Honestly, they should've been just as wiped out as the others.

"Well, putting on a brave face is just another part of the job when you're a member of the king's guard," Edgar said.

Sigurd agreed. "Yeah, you can't exactly show weaknesses in front of other brigades."

"Oh, come on. Aren't you two laying it on a little thick with the whole tough-guy act?" Kriss said teasingly. She really had no room to talk, considering how clearly she was faking how much energy she had left.

She kept at it. "I mean, didn't Edgar complain about getting sore two days after a workout? And Sigurd's been worried about how much hair he's got lately. Sounds like age is catching up with you. Maybe it's time to let the younger ones take over?"

Kriss was clearly trying to rile them up by calling them old. But the truth was that she wasn't much younger herself. Honestly, the three of them were basically the same age.

But having Kriss call them old definitely didn't sit right with Edgar and Sigurd. Neither said a word, but their fists were clenched so tight I thought they might bleed, and the veins in their foreheads were bulging so much I thought they might pop.

But Kriss was totally oblivious.

"Hm?"

As I watched the three of them with mild amusement, I noticed Jean in the distance with a big smile on his face, gesturing at me to do something about Kriss. I shook my head to signal *No way.* Dean joined in making the same gesture, clearly enjoying the show.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “Let’s see... Oh, perfect! There you are! All right, get out here!”

I peeked into the dimension bag I’d stashed off to the side to answer their silent requests...and unleashed a demon.

“Meh-eh-eh! Meh-eh-eh!”

“Your target’s Kriss! This is your one and only shot to get revenge!” I said, egging on the furry devil herself... Mary.

At first, Mary tensed up like she was going to headbutt me, but I redirected her gaze to Kriss just before she launched herself. It only took her a second to realize what I’d meant. Since Kriss constantly manhandled her and smothered her in unwanted petting sessions, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“Me-eh-eh!” Mary looked up at me with an expression of admiration, let out a proud little bleat like she was saluting me, then...

“Meeh... Meh-eh-eh-eh!”

Mary got her bearings and launched herself at Kriss.

“Huh? Wh-What is Mary doing here? Wait, not now. Not now!!! Please, not now! I’m sor— Argghhhhhhh!!!”

Just as I expected, Kriss didn’t have enough energy left to dodge. Honestly, she probably had even less in the tank than Edgar and Sigurd did. She couldn’t react in time either. Mary slammed into her back with a full-force tackle, sending Kriss flying. Then, Mary pounced again as Kriss hit the ground and treated her to a lovely little taste of hell.



The nearby knights from the king's guard burst into laughter. Jean and Dean were laughing so hard they didn't even try to hold it back, and Edgar and Sigurd just watched with amused, smug smiles on their faces.

To top it all off, a few knights who'd already headed back inside the castle came running out when they heard Kriss's scream, just in time to see her get flattened by Mary. This meant every last member of the king's guard got to watch as Kriss got totally wrecked.

"Mary, it's time to come back," I said.

"Baaa!"

While Kriss had tried to scramble away from Mary, the lamb had been pouncing on her over and over, headbutting her, and stomping on her. Kriss was getting the works. And when she finally stopped moving and lay there like she was dead, Mary looked downright pleased and plopped down triumphantly on top of her body.

I honestly felt bad calling Mary back when she looked so satisfied, but it really was time to head home. So I called for her, and surprisingly, she came right back without any protests. Mary climbed into the dimension bag on her own.

"Tenma, I never said she should go *that* far," Dean muttered.

"Me either. Why'd you even bring her?" Jean asked.

The two of them looked a little dismayed by Mary's rampage, but I told them it couldn't be helped, considering that Kriss had kind of brought it upon herself. That seemed to make sense to them, and Jean turned to one of the nearby female knights and told her to drag Kriss's limp body off to the side.

"I brought Mary because she trashed the laundry at home. Jeanne and the others got fed up with her and kicked her out."

Well, to say that she'd been kicked out might've been an exaggeration—it was more like they had stuffed her in the bag and shoved her at me since I'd been heading to the castle anyway. They had probably just wanted her out of the way while they redid the laundry and cleaned up.

When I explained all that to the others, Dean sighed. "You should've told us you had her with you, but since no one got hurt aside from Kriss, we'll let it slide," he said.

Yeah, keeping it a secret probably hadn't been the best call. But since Mary wasn't a monster and hadn't caused any damage, they let it go.

One of the knights who'd moved Kriss came over to Jean and whispered something in his ear.

"But we do have a condition," Jean added.

"It's a petting session with Shiromaru, right? As long as he gets treats, that can be arranged."

Cheers broke out from a few of the female knights, and even some of the guys were excited. Only a select group of royal guards ever got assigned to Queen Maria's security detail when she came to Gramps's and my house, and they were mostly the same ones who'd been to Kukuri Village in the past, like Dean, Jean, and Kriss. Even when someone outside that group got the job, they usually ended up just waiting outside or having to head back to the castle early.

So, naturally, the knights who were just as obsessed with animals as Kriss was were jealous of how often she got to be around Shiromaru and Mary. Kriss was fully aware of this and had made a habit of bragging about Shiromaru's silky fur and how great it felt to hug Aries.

The knight whispered something else to Dean.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. I'll let him know," Dean said. "Tenma, they want Kriss to be officially banned from the petting session. That okay with you?"

I nodded without hesitation. Of course, I added my own conditions that they'd be responsible for keeping Kriss restrained, managing the event, and handling security. They agreed without any issue.

The petting event with Shiromaru, Mary, and Aries was held a few days after the training session. The knights working security reported that an unidentified masked figure attempted to sneak into the venue. They spotted the intruder and chased them around, but they managed to get away. Their whereabouts were still unknown.

Later, Edgar told me that Kriss was supposed to have been doing paperwork in the knights' office alone during the event, but when they had returned to the office, there'd been a mountain of

documents still sitting on her desk.

"Guess this'll have to do for a prototype."

I was doing a test-drive of the modified wheelchair I'd made a bit ago, shifting around to see how it felt. "Still not as good as the kind from my previous life, but it's a world of difference compared to the one I used before."

I had modeled it after the ones I could remember in my previous world, using springboards for the seat and frog skin on the wheels for shock absorption. Those modifications worked surprisingly well. But there were no brakes, so hills were a hazard. I'd added hand rims so it could be self-propelled, which was great in theory, but it made the thing pretty heavy. Someone who wasn't very strong would have a hard time moving.

"Well, it's just a prototype. The next step is to make it lighter."

Eventually, I wanted to embed a golem in the wheelchair so it would be fully automated, but for now, I was focusing on building something closer to what I remembered from my past life.

"You're plotting something weird again, aren't you?"

"Can't you at least knock first, Gramps?"

The door swung open out of nowhere, and Gramps strolled in with an exasperated look on his face. He told me he *had* knocked, but I just hadn't noticed.

"So this is a wheelchair, huh? Doesn't look too different from the ones on the market, but I see you've made a few modifications." He plopped himself down into the seat and pushed himself around like it was nothing.

"Well, you might need one in a few years, Gramps, so it won't hurt to get used to it now," I said.

"I'll walk on my own two feet till the day I die, thank you very much!" he countered. "Still, I have to admit it's pretty comfortable. It's a bit on the heavy side, though. Not ideal for someone sick or injured."

Hmm. He'd noticed the weight issue too. Nevertheless, he was zipping around the room like it was weightless.

"Yeah, making it lighter is my first order of business. After that,

I'll make it more durable." I told him.

"That sounds like a solid plan. Why are you working on a wheelchair all of a sudden, though?"

"Well, things have been pretty hectic lately, and I haven't had much time to myself. I figured I'd take a day or two to relax, but then I started spacing out. Before I knew it, I was thinking about Russell City again."

"You remembered something you meant to improve and wanted to work on it again, huh?" Gramps said.

"I had the time, so yeah."

Technically, I was supposed to be resting now. But when I had a thought stuck in my head, ignoring it just stressed me out more. It was actually kind of therapeutic to throw myself into a project like this.

"Well, I guess it served its purpose if it helped you recharge. So, who's the prototype for?" Gramps asked.

"I was thinking about showing it to Prince Zane. He's talked about starting a medical school, but I thought this could really help Princess Mizaria. I think he'll be enthusiastic about it and handle the details for me," I said.

"Some might say using royalty for your own purposes is rude, but Prince Zane seems like the type who'd jump at the opportunity. And it's not like the royal family wouldn't benefit from what you make in the long run, even if it's just a hobby for you."

I knew he was teasing me a little, but he had a point. It'd be a waste to just make something like this for fun and then let it rot. If someone else could put it to good use, then I might as well let them have it.

"Tenma, you have guests... What the heck?!"

Jeanne had come to get me but stopped in the doorway. Gramps was zooming around the room in the wheelchair like a kid with a new toy. Apparently, the sight of an old man doing doughnuts in a wheelchair was enough to get her to lose her train of thought.

"Who's here, Jeanne?" I asked.

"Oh, right! Sorry. Lord Albert, Lord Cain, Lord Leon, and Lady Primera are here for a visit. They're in the dining room waiting for

you."

"Got it."

I started heading in that direction, but Gramps seemed to be so fond of the wheelchair that he tried to follow me in it. I wasn't going to let that happen, so I yanked it away from him. The look he gave me after that said, *You better make me one of these when you're done!*

"Sorry to keep you wa— Hm? You guys seem weirdly quiet today."

I walked into the dining room to find the usual trio there. However, they weren't lounging around or stealing food like they normally would. Instead, they were sitting stiffly in their chairs like they were in the middle of a lecture.

"Yo. We, uh, came to hang out."

"Listen carefully, Albert," Primera began. "No matter how close you are, wandering into someone's estate without being properly invited first isn't behavior fitting of a future duke! It's exactly *because* you're close that you should be mindful of appearances. You need to avoid giving others an excuse to gossip. There are plenty of nobles who'd love to cozy up to Tenma in place of the Sanga family. If you consider him a friend, then you should stop doing things that cause trouble for him. And Cain, Leon? That goes for you two as well. Understood?"

From Primera's perspective, the way the three of them had acted must've been totally unacceptable. Even though Albert and the others were used to Gramps and me letting them off the hook, they couldn't really argue with what she was saying.

She was too focused on scolding them to notice, but during her lecture, the door to the dining room flung open, and a tall man stepped inside the room.

"Prince Lyle, don't just stand in the doorway. Please go inside. Today's the day I promised myself I'd dedicate solely to petting Shiromaru, so if you could please... Huh?"

Kriss had been behind Prince Lyle, but stopped speaking when she saw the lecture going on.

Primera, however, kept going on and on. She hadn't noticed

either of them. “I mean, you brought me here because I had the day off, but days off for knights are supposed to be used for actual resting so we can perform when it counts. And I’m a captain. I have responsibilities, even when I’m off the clock. And not to mention that I could’ve worn something more appropriate had you told me where we were going in advance! My hair’s a mess! I haven’t had time to take care of it lately...”

“You two are in the way. Don’t just stand there, go in already!”

“Whoa!”

“Ack!”

When Luna showed up, she shoved both Prince Lyle and Kriss, making them tumble into the dining room.

“Whoops...”

“Huh?”

“Ah...”

Primera finally turned at their clumsy, loud entrances. Her eyes widened as she realized there were three new guests behind her, all of whom were frozen with dumbfounded looks on their faces.

Prince Lyle stuttered out an excuse. “Uh, well... I did technically get permission...a while ago... And we did say something on the way in... And it’s part of the whole ‘We’re close friends!’ image too...”

“Yeah, Tenma and I go way back. And hanging out here with Shiromaru and the others is how I recharge. Besides, I only come by after finishing up what I need to do...” Kriss added.

“Wait, what? No! I wasn’t talking to you two. I was talking to my brother, Cain, and Leon! From an outside perspective, their behavior could easily come off as being disrespectful to Tenma, or worse! Acting like it’s okay to treat him like that!”

Prince Lyle and Kriss were scrambling to explain themselves, but Primera’s lecture hadn’t even been meant for them in the first place. She looked totally lost at their reactions until she realized what they were trying to say and rushed to explain she wasn’t talking about them.

“Primera, it sounds like what you’re saying doesn’t apply to those two with the answers they’re giving!”

“Argh!”

Amur cut in at the perfect time, leaving Primera speechless.

"Well, that's just kind of how it is around here, so don't worry too much about it," I said, trying to smooth things over.

Lyle, Kriss, and even Albert nodded in agreement to reassure her.

"Mm-hmm. I do agree, though. Close friends or not, a little courtesy goes a long way. You need to teach that to Alex!" Gramps teased.

"No way! I'd drop dead on the spot!"

Just in case, when Primera had said "drop dead," she hadn't meant that she'd get executed for treason or something. It'd been more like her heart would give out from the shock and anxiety of it all.

"By the way, where'd Luna go? She was here just before those two walked in."

Knowing her, she'd probably picked up on the tense atmosphere and had slipped away. Honestly, she was getting sneakier by the year. I knew I could find her instantly with Detection, but I figured that Prince Caesar and Tida were still struggling to keep up with her.

I activated my skill. *There you are.* I could see right where Luna was, and if you knew her, it was exactly the kind of spot you'd never think to check.

"Anyway, it's not like she'll come out if I call, and I'm too lazy to go look for her, so... Luna! If you don't come out right now, there'll be no snacks for you!" I shouted into the hallway before turning to head back inside.

And sure enough, I could hear frantic footsteps as she scurried out of her hiding place.

She burst into the dining room less than a minute later. "That's not fair, Tenma!"

"It's perfectly fair," I said. "There aren't any snacks in this house for people who don't show up. And even if there were, Shiromaru, Solomon, Amur, and Aura would probably just eat them anyway!"

"You can't prove that would happen!" Amur and Aura declared, but my two followers simply drooled with smug looks on their faces.

"If you want snacks, the first thing you should do when you visit this house is to say hello to everyone. Understood?" I said.

“Yep! Hi, everyone! Snacks, please!” Luna answered enthusiastically, and she flopped into her usual seat, begging for treats.

Primera just stared at her, looking stunned.

“That’s nothing unusual around here,” Gramps said.

Jeanne agreed. “Yep, it’s pretty standard.”

Primera’s eyes only grew wider.

“Yeah, I get why you’re surprised, but that’s just how it is here,” I told her. “That goes for Albert, Cain, and Leon too, by the way. And if you think Luna’s behavior is bad, wait until you meet the king. He’s even worse. You’ll get used to it eventually, though. Or, well...you’ll have to. Oh, and the person who’s the scari— I mean, the one with the most authority in this kingdom also drops by sometimes, so you should brace yourself for that.”

“Tenmaaaa, my snaaaacks...”

Primera looked at Luna again and finally gave her a resigned nod. Albert and the others visibly relaxed, thinking they were out of the woods at last.

But then...

“That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook,” Primera reminded them. “The royal family has their own way of doing things, and the Sanga family has ours. From now on, I expect you three to carry yourselves like proper noble heirs!”

Primera hadn’t given up after all. She was just compartmentalizing things. The three noble idiots were now worried that she’d make things even harder on them to make up for how easy she’d gone on the others.

“Wait, hang on! Shouldn’t Albert be the only one Primera’s lecturing? I mean, I’m technically the heir of a different noble house!”

“Y-Yeah! We can’t keep putting all this pressure on Primera! We’ll take responsibility for ourselves!”

“You’re literally being lectured because you don’t do that,” Amur muttered under her breath.

They both froze for a second but quickly decided to pretend they hadn’t heard her.

"You're abandoning me?!" Albert shouted at them.

Primera shot Albert a look that shut him right up before addressing the other two. "Cain, Leon. You three are a package deal. Don't you think it's unfair to leave Albert to take the blame alone?"

Something felt off about her tone. Then, it made sense—Primera sounded just like Albert when he was dragging Cain and Leon into something. Yeah, she'd definitely been forced to come here without any warning, and now she was getting her payback.

I wasn't sure how serious she was about all this, but I doubted she'd go too far. After all, scolding those three while Prince Lyle and Luna were here could be interpreted as criticizing the royal family by extension. But since Prince Lyle was smirking off to the side, I figured it wasn't a problem.

I decided to let Primera get her fill of stress relief and headed back to the kitchen to whip up Luna's snack. Jeanne, Aura, and Leni came to help me, but Amur and Kriss tagged along too. However, they weren't helping so much as they were fleeing from the scene.

Even with a few deadbeats in the mix, we had more than enough helpers to knock out enough pancakes for everyone to have seconds in under half an hour. We took our time on purpose, however, and we finished nearly an hour later. Luna had actually dozed off while waiting, so she stormed the kitchen in protest once she woke up. She easily forgave us when we told her we'd made a huge batch so everyone could eat as much as they wanted.

We carried a bunch of plates stacked high with pancakes into the dining room. At that point, Prince Lyle was chatting with Primera. She looked a little flustered, but he seemed in high spirits—he was probably just enjoying himself.

Now that Albert and the others had been released from Primera's wrath, they were finally free. Even so, they were eating more politely during snack time than I'd ever seen them do before. Leon wasn't a fan of pancakes and struggled to finish two, but Albert and Cain made it about halfway through their third helping when we ran out.

The rest of us ate the usual four or five apiece, though Jeanne and Primera tapped out after two. They just looked satisfied as they enjoyed their tea.

“Thanks for putting up with us today,” Primera said as she got ready to leave.

After she had vented and gotten all her stress out on the three noble idiots, enjoyed dinner, and soaked in the bath, she was in a great mood. The complete opposite could be said for Albert, Leon, and Cain—they looked completely exhausted. That was understandable, considering they’d been under the watchful gaze of Primera all day. But...they also kind of deserved it, so I didn’t feel sorry for them.

They left the estate like they were Primera’s personal entourage, and since they were all riding in the same carriage, they were probably about to get another lecture.

A few days later...

“Tenma, Luna’s gotten way better at running off and hiding. I can’t catch her at all anymore.” Tida had come over to hang out, and that had been the first thing he said when he showed up.

“You should probably start with the library or study,” I suggested. “You probably assume that Luna wouldn’t go near a place like that, so you skip it during your search. But if she sneaks into a spot you’ve already checked, finding her is going to get really tricky.”

When I’d used snacks to lure Luna out, she’d been hiding in the library, and anyone who actually knew her would’ve saved that spot for last, which was why I had brought it up. Tida looked totally frustrated when I told him that.

“Honestly, I underestimated her. I figured she was just acting on instinct, and we were overthinking things when we tried to catch her.”

That was harsh but fair. With the way Luna usually acted, it was hard to believe she was capable of thinking ahead like that. Then again, maybe she was just moving instinctively this time too. I couldn’t really fault Tida for that assumption, given that he was her brother.

After that day, the Luna-catching success rate jumped up, but it didn’t take long for her to level up her hiding game too. Before long, it was back to a fifty-fifty toss-up.

Anyway, once I showed the wheelchair prototype to Prince Zane, he was all in on it and said he *had* to be involved. He and I met every single day until I completed my first improved version. As a result, he ended up setting a new personal record for the number of tasks he left unfinished after taking office as the minister of finance. I eventually sent the upgraded wheelchair off to Princess Mizaria, and afterward, I began seeing her around the castle a lot more often.

Extra Story: Nothing Out of the Ordinary

"All right, now start by using one hand to create wind and the other to create fire."

A few days had passed since I'd come up with the idea for a warm air spell, which I'd named Thermabreeze. I had called Amy and Tida over to try out a new training method I'd come up with too.

We were starting later than I'd planned, but with good reason. Gramps and I had tested it out ourselves to figure out the best way to explain it before I was going to teach it to them. We had used Aura as our test subject, er, volunteer...and let's just say that things hadn't gone very smoothly.

We'd actually had three people helping with the trial run, including Aura, Jeanne, and Amur. Amur went first, but she'd never been great with magic, so she couldn't get it to activate at all. Jeanne went next, but seeing Amur mess up had made her nervous, so she failed to get both spells going at once.

Aura was fired up after seeing the two of them flub it, and she decided she'd show them how it was done. But she ended up pumping way too much mana into the spell. Instead of a Thermabreeze, she shot off a full-on Flamethrower. And not only that, but she blew through her mana so fast that she collapsed with something that could only be described as magical anemia.

Thankfully, we'd picked a spot by the river where we'd split up from Namitaro just in case something went wrong, so there was very minimal damage. And thanks to that experiment, Gramps and I caught a problem we'd totally missed and spent some time working on a solution. We also had to wait for Aura to recover, explain everything, and apologize to the king, which had delayed our

training session.

"Don't worry if it doesn't go perfectly. We're out here so no one gets hurt, and I already gave the knights' brigade a heads-up. No one's gonna yell at us, even if a pillar of fire shoots up into the sky," I told Amy and Tida.

Back when Aura had unleashed her Flamethrower, the city knights had been nearby and had seen the whole thing. It'd caused a bit of a panic, so they'd rushed over to check it out. I'd had to explain to them that it was just a failed spell, and they had bought my story. Still, since they had officially been on duty, they'd had to report it to Prince Lyle, which had led to a whole round of apologies. No one had been mad at us, but they had made fun of us a little. Magical misfires weren't that unusual, and nothing had been damaged.

Anyway, this time, the plan was to get people used to casting two types of magic at the same time first. And once someone could do that, we'd work on adjusting their power levels while casting them separately. Once they had that down pat, we'd move on to actually practicing Thermabreeze.

Gramps and I were good with magic, so we had nailed it on our first tries. Jeanne and Aura...not so much. Jeanne hadn't had enough mana to manage it, and Aura had gotten the balance of the spells wrong and cast another Flamethrower.

"I'll do my best!" Amy said brightly.

"Um, just to be safe, maybe we should stand back farther than usual," Tida said.

"Okay. Amy's over here, so I'll take this spot, and Amur can stand next to me. Tida, you stay over there!" Luna said. She was already trying to boss everyone around.

"Time for revenge!"

Amy was so overenthusiastic that Tida was worried something might happen to her. Originally, it was just going to be Amy and Tida today, but Luna had insisted on joining in too. Now, she was trying to force her way into the formation. For the record, Amur had signed up voluntarily as well, even though she thought she was the worst at it. She'd said that she just wanted to cast the spell before Luna did, at the very least.

"That setup makes it hard for me to coach Amy and Tida. Luna and Amur, you two go train with Gramps. Is that okay with you, Gramps?"

"Sure. Over here, you two," he said.

Honestly, Luna and Amur would've just gotten in the way of Amy and Tida's practice, so I had already discussed splitting them all into two groups with Gramps supervising one group.

Neither of them was likely to do anything too crazy with him in charge. Hopefully not, anyway. There was a solid chance they'd just end up goofing off together, but we'd already made it clear during setup that today wasn't the day for that. Essentially, they wouldn't interfere for now, and if they tried to, Gramps would stop them.

Luna looked pretty annoyed, probably because she'd been planning to pull a prank on Tida. Even so, she followed Gramps without complaint.

"All right," I began, "just like I said before, start by casting both types of magic. Face the river, and if it gets hard to keep the spell stable, just release it into the water. Don't force it."

"Got it!"

"Okay!"

I didn't expect them to struggle too much given their skill levels, but it was better to be safe than sorry. *Speaking of sorry, river fish...if something does go wrong, odds are you'll end up on our dinner table anyway.*

"I did it, Master!" Amy exclaimed.

"Me too!"

I was lost in my own silly thoughts, and before I knew it, both of them had already succeeded on their first try.

"Hold it right there and keep the magic going until I give the signal. Then, gradually let it fade out," I instructed.

I had planned on having them cast the spells, cancel them, and then reactivate the magic over and over again. But since they had pulled it off so easily, I upped the difficulty. Now, they had to maintain the spell and then carefully end it. That brought us closer to stage two, which would be output control. The idea was to slip in a little extra practice for the next phase while they were still working

on the first. The more comfortable they got with the process, the better.

"Okay, cancel it now."

At first, I gave them the signal to cancel the spells after about a minute or so, but both of them were so focused on my cue that instead of easing off, they ended it all at once.

"Ah!"

"Huh?"

"Well, it's just the first time, so it's not a big deal," I told them. "All right, let's go again... Start!"

Amy flinched at her magic's sudden disappearance while Tida seemed confused. I didn't give them any time to dwell on their mistakes, though, and quickly kicked off the second round of training right away.

Despite the rush, they managed to activate both spells again and tried to hold them steady like before. But then...

"Okay, deactivate them."

This time, I gave the signal after just a few seconds. Instead of stopping the spells, they cranked them up by accident.

"Don't panic, just bring it down from there."

Their spells had intensified, but they weren't out of control or anything. I calmly prompted them to start scaling the magic down.

Maybe I'd been a little mean with the timing and tripped them up a bit again, but once they calmed down, they were able to start reducing their mana output bit by bit. It still disappeared all at once as it dwindled, but they were almost there, so I could call that a success.

"That was basically a win besides the power spike at the start. All right, next round."

We kept going and did a third round, a fourth, and a fifth. Before long, both of them were getting the hang of it. Their accuracy was increasing, and they didn't even flinch when I threw in some curveballs.

But then...

"I'm getting kinda hungry, Master."

"Can we take a break, please?"

About an hour into the session, the number of small mistakes increased. And after two hours, their errors were pretty noticeable. I was just starting to think it was time for a break when they asked for one.

"It's about lunchtime anyway, so let's eat. Jeanne, Aura. Get things going!" I called out.

Jeanne and Aura had been waiting a short distance away. They quickly began setting up tables and chairs. I'd asked them ahead of time to prepare lunch while I trained Amy and Tida so we'd be able to eat right away once it was all set up.

I looked around to see where Gramps's group had gone. They'd headed farther away, but once they noticed we were done, they started making their way back towards us. They were carrying buckets and fishing rods—just as I'd expected, training had turned into playtime.

"Tenma! We caught a baby Namitaro!" Luna said.

"A whole bucketful of 'em!"

The bucket was full. There were over a dozen small carp inside, each one maybe ten to twenty centimeters long.

"They're technically edible, but they'll need to be purged for a few days to get all the mud out," I said. "They're not gonna taste great at that size either. I think you should release them while they're still alive."

"Okay!" Luna chirped.

"That's fair," Amur said.

Neither of them argued with me, and they trotted off to let the fish go. They had probably only caught them for fun, anyway.

"We didn't see any big ones, probably because of that fishing trip of yours a while back," Gramps muttered.

I almost blamed it on the baby behemoth, but then I remembered that I had been the one who'd scooped up all the zapped fish that had floated to the surface. So yeah, it probably had been my fault.

"The big ones ended up in your belly, Gramps. Anyway, how did Luna and Amur's training go?"

"I'm sure you can guess, considering they came back with fishing

gear," he said. "Amur's not really cut out for magic to begin with. She tried a few times, but she realized it wasn't working out, so she opted to fish instead. Luna probably could've pulled off the spell by the end of the day if she'd kept going, but she couldn't stay focused."

Luna had put in some effort at first, but once she saw Amur ditch practice and head to the river with a fishing pole, she decided to go fishing too.

"That's not ideal, but to be fair, Amur and Luna were just tagalongs today. It's not a big deal if they bailed halfway through, although I bet Queen Maria and Princess Isabella are gonna have headaches over it."

Luna had insisted on coming, but before we left, her grandma and mom made it very clear that she would get in trouble if she was a burden and didn't take practice seriously.

"Well, it's not our job to discipline the child, Tenma. And even if we stay quiet, you know Tida's just going to report everything, anyway. There's no point in covering for her," Gramps said.

If Luna had tried hard, I might've let her join Tida and Amy's afternoon training, but judging by how things had gone so far, I doubted she'd take it seriously. Worst-case scenario, she might end up messing with Tida. It was probably better to just let her keep hanging out with Amur, like she had in the morning.

Luna and Amur had come back from releasing the fish while we were talking, and right after that, Jeanne and Aura let us know lunch was ready.

"Master, you said that if someone fails to cast Thermabreeze properly, it can come out as Flamethrower, right? But doesn't that make it a pretty solid offensive spell?" Amy asked during lunch. Apparently, she was still thinking about Aura's botched Thermabreeze-turned-Flamethrower spell.

"Sure, you can use it as an attack spell, but it's not that practical. I'd recommend learning Firestorm instead if you want an offensive spell," I said.

"I agree. Flamethrower can work in the right situation, but

Firestorm's easier to handle overall," Gramps said.

Firestorm was considered a mid-to higher-tier spell, so it took a lot of mana and was tougher to learn. In comparison, Thermabreeze was a combo of beginner spells, so it was way easier to pick up. But because it used two different elements at once, the mana cost was on the high side for a basic spell.

"But once it turns into Flamethrower, it's a whole different story. Flamethrower burns through mana like crazy. And if you're not careful, you'll bottom out fast with that thing."

The reason Aura had collapsed afterward was simple: She'd used too much mana. That was the risk with any spell that had to be cast continuously, not just this kind of warm air magic. The longer you maintained it, the more it drained you. Meanwhile, spells like Firestorm might cost a lot to cast, but once they were they didn't use any extra mana.

"Someone like me or Gramps can use Flamethrower because we've got a ton of mana. We could use it more than once. If you're after efficiency, it's better to stick with Fireball or Firestorm."

Even if they couldn't manage to cast Firestorm, they were better off with simpler attack spells like varieties of Bullet or Arrow. Amy and Tida seemed to understand that.

But...

"Flamethrower looks so much cooler, though! Like, *blam, blam, blam*! Right from your hand!"

Luna clearly thought Flamethrower was the better option. I understood where she was coming from, but I had a strong feeling she didn't get what we had meant by efficiency.

If I left things there, she'd probably try to teach herself how to cast Flamethrower and start using it without thinking. I had to make sure she understood how dangerous it was.

Although...when I thought about it, she hated studying, so the chances weren't great that she'd do it on her own. Still, Luna had a weird knack for pulling things off if she was genuinely interested, so I figured it was better to play it safe.

"Listen, Luna," I began. "If you mess up and drain all your mana, you could literally pass out. And if you collapse after firing off

Flamethrower and the fire spreads while you're lying there unconscious, you could end up getting burned by your own spell."

"That sounds scary. But if I'm careful, it should be fine, right?"

She was clearly assuming she'd be in control the whole time. She wasn't really hearing what I was saying—she was only pretending to listen.

Before I could decide if I should give her a good scare or not, Gramps piped in. "Hmm... Yeah, sure. *If* you're careful," he said. "But you see, Luna, sometimes even master spellcasters mess up when it comes to controlling their spells."

And with that, Gramps launched into some stories he knew, which were mostly about me. Sure, he slipped in one or two of his own screwups, but more than half of the tales he was regaling Luna with were of my failures.

"So yeah, a long time ago, Tenma used to try all sorts of things and would mess up. Then, he'd be lectured by Celia and Ricardo. Also, this is a bit of a tangent, but you know how he took down a dragon zombie with Tempest? Well, at that time, he exhausted all of his mana and blacked out."

"Well, that is true," I admitted.

He'd been going on and on about my failures for a while, and I was just about to complain, but then his tone suddenly shifted to a more serious one. It caught me off guard, so I missed my chance.

"Luckily, Rocket and Shiromaru grabbed him and got him out of there. But if those two hadn't been around? Tenma would've ended up as monster chow."

He wasn't wrong. I really could've died that day. Luna must've realized I was agreeing with Gramps because she didn't say anything back.

"Now, Flamethrower may sound flashy, but mess it up, and you'll be out of mana after one shot. It's way more fun to cast a bunch of smaller spells, even if they're not as strong, than to empty your tank in one go, right?"

After thinking about it for a second, Luna's face lit up and she nodded. "Yeah, that's right!"

Tida looked exasperated, and Amur and Aura were nodding along

like it all made perfect sense.

"All right, time to get back to practice."

Lunch was over, so I called out to Amy, Tida, and Luna...just in case.

"Luna's sleeping."

Apparently, her morning hyperactivity had caught up to her. She was now curled up next to Amur, who was also fast asleep.

Tida looked embarrassed as he stared at Luna, and he apologized to Gramps and me right away. "Sorry about that," he said.

"It's not your fault. Jeanne, Aura, can you take those two to the carriage so they can nap?"

Gramps and I didn't mind. Luna was just being Luna, but since the queen and Princess Isabella were involved, Tida probably felt like he had to be the responsible one.

"Let her sleep," I said. "We'll leave the rest to the queen and princess when we get back. All right. This afternoon, we're actually going to try to cast Thermabreeze. Now stay sharp. One mistake and it's Flamethrower time. I'm gonna be stricter than I was this morning too."

Amy and Tida gave it their all right up until the last minute. They didn't totally master the spell, but they did manage to produce a slight, lukewarm breeze, so they were almost there.

While we were doing that, Luna woke up from her nap and went straight back to fishing with Amur, completely forgetting about training. And when Queen Maria and Princess Isabella suddenly showed up to check on her, she was caught red-handed. They lectured her nonstop until it was time to go home for the day.

"She's definitely getting another lecture when she gets home," Amur said confidently as she watched Queen Maria and Princess Isabella take Luna home early.

Extra Story: Scheming

"Steel, what did you think of Tenma's match against the fourth knights' brigade today?" I asked.

"Well, I've already seen him fight during the incident with Regir, but you can't even compare them now. Tenma's much stronger these days. Hypothetically, if we were to go up against him even with everything we have, we'd definitely lose, my lord. We'd give it our all, of course, and I'd make sure every last soldier did the same, but his strength is probably equal to the combined might of the ducal knights and our shadow division. If someone like that were to target you and Albert... Well, I wouldn't be able to protect you no matter what we tried. Surrendering early and joining his forces would be the wisest choice at that point," Steel said.

Honestly, he might've been right. That could be the best way to preserve House Sanga. But judging from how Tenma had been acting lately, I doubted he'd suddenly turn hostile. The fact that he was friendly with both Albert and Primera was a huge relief.

"My lord, Albert has arrived."

"I see. Back to work now, Steel," I commanded.

"Yes, sir!"

Albert stepped into the room just as Steel left. He looked noticeably uneasy.

"Why are you so anxious? Don't worry, I didn't call you here to scold you. Sit down," I said.

"Y-Yes, Father."

I told him I wasn't going to lecture him, but from the look on his face, I wondered if it might end up that way regardless. I asked what was bothering him.

Albert sighed. "Ugh... I don't know if I should be happy that I'm getting along with Tenma or mad at myself for letting things get out of hand..." he said.

Apparently, when he had heard that I wanted to talk about Tenma, he panicked and thought I'd tell him to stop causing trouble. But Tenma hadn't complained to me directly about him, so all I could really do was give him a light warning. Albert had enough experience to know if he were to push Tenma too far over the edge.

"As I'm sure you're aware, I had Tenma test the strength of the fourth knights' brigade," I said.

"And we didn't stand a chance?"

"More or less. He said in order to fight someone like Chaos, we'll need a team with someone like Primera, a person like the vice-captain of the fourth brigade, and then maybe a knight skilled in magic. It would only be then that we'd even have a shot," I explained.

Primera and the vice-captains of the fourth brigade were some of the strongest fighters belonging to House Sanga. We did have stronger ones who I believed could hold their own against that monster, but they'd have to be nearby when it appeared, of course. If it were to show up while they were away, I couldn't even begin to guess how much damage there'd be.

"So here's what I'm thinking. I'm going to have our dispatch teams carry golems. I'll reassign some of the knights as well."

If we couldn't prevent a disaster, our only choice was to minimize the damage. In an ideal situation, I'd want to equip all of our knights' brigades with golems, but we didn't have enough. Right now, our best option was to give them to the fourth brigade stationed in Gunjo City, as the chances of an encounter were highest there. And if worse came to worst, we could send the fourth brigade to another region as reinforcements. If they were killed in action, they would be honorable deaths, and no one would complain as long as we paid their families compensation.

"I wouldn't have to think so hard about all this if they were just regular knights," I muttered.

"Did you say something?" Albert asked.

I hadn't meant to voice that, so I told him it was nothing. He didn't press me further.

"Albert, you've seen Tenma's golems before, haven't you?" I

asked.

"Yeah. He uses them for routine tasks too. And when we visited Haust, I saw one stationed on lookout duty. It went straight into battle right in front of me."

"And what did you think about them?" I really wanted to learn more about the golems. If I went straight to Tenma, he might've even been willing to explain a few tricks to me, but my doing that could raise suspicions within the royal family. And once the other nobles got wind of it, they'd all start demanding he teach them too. It'd be a mess.

But if I were just getting Albert's impressions of them, I doubted anyone would care. In fact, that kind of indirect access to Tenma was an advantage for House Sanga. It was one that we shared with the royal family, as well as House Sammons and House Haust.

"Tell me whatever you can remember. Their shape, how they moved, your impressions watching them... Anything," I said.

Albert hesitated, unsure if it was okay to share such information about Tenma's golems behind his back. But if Tenma were the type to get angry over something like that, the king and queen wouldn't adore him like they did. Still, I couldn't let any of my retainers hear about this. For now, this would have to stay between Albert and me.

"So you're telling me that Tenma has two types of golems. There are ones like Thunderbolt, which have a core fused to their bodies, and then ones that are made on the spot from nearby materials," I summarized after Albert's explanation. "Are there any other major differences between the two?"

"Thunderbolt's an outlier, but there isn't much of a performance gap between the other kinds of golems. The fused golems are easier to build, maintain, and upgrade, though. The kind that assembles their bodies from surrounding materials is tougher to make and harder to maintain or enhance, but they're way easier to carry around. And as long as the core survives and there are materials nearby, they can rebuild themselves on the spot. Oh, and they can be used to quickly set up temporary outposts, like when we built that front by the border in Haust."

Now that could actually be valuable, I thought. If the golems

were made of earth, for example, then you'd end up with a hole in the ground and a golem-shaped wall in its place.

"I bet no one's ever even thought of using golems like that before, but then again, there probably hasn't been someone with enough of them to try it," I mused.

I had a better understanding of them now, thanks to Albert, but no technical details. I just knew what they looked like and what he thought about them, which was enough for me to speculate a bit. The only real detail I had gotten was that the cores had tiny inscriptions, like markings, etched into them.

"I suppose you couldn't make out what the markings said, but based on the structure, do you think they're the same as ours?"

"As far as I can tell, I think Tenma's hidden his own enhancements in them," he said. "That's what makes up the difference in performance."

I knew just mimicking the shape wouldn't be enough, but even that might help advance our own technology and maybe even give us a clue about the secret behind Tenma's golems. I wasn't counting on making a breakthrough with that, though.

"We really do need to accelerate our golem development so we can boost our forces, though. But rushing things could backfire on us. We'll focus on ramping up production and gradually improving their performance for now," I said. "I suppose that means we'll have to give the engineers a raise."

The balance between carrot and stick was important, and there was a chance that someone might run off to another noble house with our technology.

"So that's why you're going to help out with the budget cuts, Albert," I continued. "First things first—let's start with entertainment expenses, shall we?"

"Right..."

For nobles like us, entertainment expenses were pretty much just glorified pocket money anyway. Those things were easy to remove from the budget.

"What about Mother's? And my sisters'?" he asked.

"Do you think I can say something to them, or are you

volunteering to do it for me?”

They’d probably understand if I sat them down and explained it to them properly, but who knew what they’d say if we didn’t trim the fat on our end first?

“Cut out any pointless spending from now on, got it? Also, keep a close eye on Tenma’s golems if you get the chance to see one again. Even closer than before. But don’t ask him about it, or Queen Maria might lecture you.”

This felt a little underhanded, like I was sending a spy over there, but I thought it couldn’t hurt.

Still, maybe I should give Tenma a heads-up?

Albert’s eyes flashed suspiciously for a moment when I said we’d restore entertainment funding once our golem production hit its mark.

However, Albert wasn’t the type to spend frivolously. And when he did go out with someone, it was usually just with Tenma, Cain, or Leon—the same group as always. It was hard to imagine money being a real issue for him unless he was keeping a mistress or something.

No, there’s no way...

I knew that Albert was totally smitten with Eliza. At best, he needed cash to smooth things over with her. She lectured him a lot, after all. That was partly his fault, but it was also thanks to Cain and Leon dragging him into trouble.

“Albert, if something comes up and you need money, just let me know,” I told him. “I can give you some extra cash, depending on what you need it for.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks...” He seemed a little startled by my offer, but the quicker you fixed things with women, the better. I had made all kinds of rookie mistakes when I was younger. The second you upset one woman, there was a decent chance another two would start sulking out of solidarity. It wasn’t fun.

Albert only had Eliza to deal with, so it wouldn’t be nearly as bad as what I had gone through. Still, she was a feisty one. He’d probably have his own kind of troubles...

Extra Story: A Spy

"Tenma, mind lending me a golem?"

Albert asked me that question out of the blue during one of our usual hangouts.

"That's fine, but what do you need it for?" I replied. I'd used my golems in front of him before, and I had even let him borrow one as a bodyguard when we'd traveled. His request to use one here in the capital got my attention, however.

"Well, I've been stuck at my desk lately. Drowning in paperwork is making me get a little rusty, so I thought about maybe using one to spar with."

That made sense. As I was thinking about which golem to give him...

"In that case, I can spar with you!" Leon interrupted, clearly thinking a golem wasn't necessary, but...

"I don't want to spar with you, Leon!" Albert said in an unusually harsh voice.

"Hey, what's with the attitude?"

Albert sputtered a bit. "Oh. Um. It's just, you tend to get carried away and forget to hold back, you know? But a golem will obey exactly what I tell it to do. It's better for easing back into training," he reasoned.

Cain gave Albert a suspicious look but didn't press him any further. I already knew why Albert was so intent on using a golem—I'd talked to Duke Sanga earlier.

Apparently, the duke was planning to put a heavy focus on golem development, and Albert was going to act as his "spy." I hadn't expected Albert to ask me about it so soon, but it sounded entertaining, so I decided to play along and pretend like I didn't know anything. I wanted to see what he'd do. Honestly, I was looking forward to his reaction when I'd tell him I had known what

was going on the whole time.

Duke Sanga had told Albert his plans the other day. Then, the day after that, which was yesterday, Albert had plans to go somewhere with Eliza that he couldn't get out of. That was when the duke had rushed over to let me know what was going on. I'd even offered to provide some basic golem specs to him as a favor, but he had turned me down and said he had a deal with the royal family. More important than that, however, he wanted to enjoy watching Albert crash out.

"The wooden golems are probably your best bet for sparring. Stone or earth ones could seriously hurt you if you're not careful," I warned.

I turned to grab one of the wooden golems I usually used for chores, but...

"Wait. I'd prefer one of the combat types. Is that...okay?" he asked.

"It's fine, but...don't you think that's a bit dangerous for someone who's 'rusty'? Just stick with a wooden one."

Wooden ones weren't completely useless for observation, but Albert clearly had his eye on the combat model I normally used.

He started trying to justify it by saying things like "I'd probably break a wooden one, and that would just stress me out!" and "I need a little tension to stay sharp, so the combat model would be better!"

By that point, even Cain seemed to catch on that Albert had some hidden motive. He glanced over at me several times, clearly suspecting Albert was up to something.

Meanwhile, Leon was as oblivious as ever. "If Albert wants a combat golem, why not give him one?" he said. "Cain and I can back him up as witnesses if he gets hurt. And Duke Sanga won't get mad if we explain what happened. Oh, and can I try it after Albert?"

Leon probably didn't realize it, but he was actually helping Albert out.

"Fine. If you really wanna try out the combat models, you can. But not one of the big ones. Still, a single hit from one of those can really pack a punch, so you gotta be careful," I warned.

Once they both nodded, I summoned a golem that was roughly Leon's size. After I set its parameters to move more slowly, not punch as hard, and told it to obey Albert, the golem was ready.

"How exactly do you give it commands, Tenma?" Albert asked.

"I can't tell you exactly, but basically, I've engraved commands onto the golem's core that let it follow verbal orders," I said. There was also a separate command for *whose* orders I wanted it to follow, but there was no need to mention that part yet.

"And when you're engraving those commands into the core..."

"Come on, let's just get started already! I'll go first if Albert isn't gonna do it," Leon said impatiently.

Albert was trying to get more answers out of me, but Leon was annoyed. The latter grabbed a training sword and dropped into a combat stance.

"Go ahead and start, then. I'll warm up while I wait!" Albert said.

"O-Okay. I'll do that." Leon looked surprised that Albert backed off so easily, since he'd only been bluffing. But after that, he started stretching and then stepped up to face the golem.

Albert muttered to himself as he watched. "Mm-hmm... Smooth movements..." He jotted something onto a small notepad.

"Hey...Tenma? Is it just me, or is Albert totally trying to rip off your golem design?" Cain leaned in to whisper to me. It seemed like he was finally catching on.

"Pretty much," I said. "Duke Sanga visited the other day and told me that Albert might be acting as a spy. He also told me to teach him a bit of a lesson and report back on how it went."

"Pfft! You and Duke Sanga are so mean! You're totally gonna make a clown out of Albert!" Cain tried to keep it down, but he couldn't and burst out laughing. Luckily, Albert was too busy scribbling down notes and giving Leon instructions to notice any of it.

At first, I thought his calling Albert a clown was a bit uncalled for, but as I watched Albert obsess over his notes, I started to think that maybe Cain wasn't entirely wrong. After all, the duke was going to hear all about this later—he'd probably think it was hilarious.

"Care to share your golem intel with me too?" Cain asked

hopefully.

"Sure, if you're planning on getting permission from Queen Maria or if you wanna be a clown like Albert."

"A clown, huh?" he muttered, and he acted like he was seriously considering it.

Honestly, I didn't think it'd be that big of a deal if he didn't get the queen's permission, but she was the type who'd be bothered by that kind of thing, so it was probably best to run it by her first. Otherwise, she might be a little frosty the next time I saw her...even to me.

Albert's POV

"Leon! Move your legs more! Get control of the golem!"

"Right!"

Hmm... Once they get that big, it's harder to maneuver them. Then again, its power is being suppressed right now, so once it's operating at full strength, it might be able to bulldoze its way through no matter what. Maybe I should've asked to see a wooden golem first after all...

"Go all in now, Leon! Hit it with a full combo! Golem, focus on defense only!"

"Huh? Oh, r-right! Got it!"

Leon was easy to deal with in situations like this. Even if he had doubts, he'd usually forget all about them once he started moving. Anyway, thanks to Leon's attacks, the golem's stone body had started chipping all over. If he had been using his regular weapon, it might've fallen apart in just a few hits.

"Tenma said his golem got taken down in a few hits by Chaos too. Maybe it'd be better to use an iron for the body. Well, we should probably master the wood and stone golems first..."

I thought I should probably write down anything that came to mind, and that was why I'd already filled up nearly half my notepad. But that was still better than forgetting something important, and even if I ran out of space, I could always flip it over and use the

back. It'd be a pain to read later, but I could take my time decoding everything when I got home. The bigger issue was that at this pace, I'd fill both sides before Leon keeled over. But if that happened, I'd just call for a break and go find some more paper.

"Leon, it's the golem's turn to attack now. But don't fight back, just dodge!" I called out.

"Huh? Wait, hold o— Whoooa!"

Hmm, it transitioned from a defensive stance to an offensive attack quite smoothly... Father's golem would be a beat or two slower. And that's even while this one's abilities are suppressed...

I didn't even want to think about how much difference there was between Tenma's and my father's.

"Maybe it's not just a difference in technology... It could be something more fundamental."

Just as I was thinking that aloud...

"Oh, I'm out of space. Leon, let's take a—"

"Ngh...!"

I had run out of paper. I looked up to call for a break just in time to see Leon take a blow to his stomach and collapse. I guess he hadn't dodged in time.

"Tenma! Leon's down!" I called out and looked around...

Oh, there he is.

I found Tenma right away, but I also noticed a bunch of cold, accusatory glares aimed right at me.

(End of Albert's POV)

A carriage pulled up in front of the gate just as Cain was mulling over whether he should make a fool out of himself.

"A guest? No, it looks familiar..."

I'd seen that carriage plenty of times coming to visit, so there was no mistaking it. But more importantly, since Aina was driving it, it wasn't hard to guess who was inside.

"Excuse us, Tenma."

Aina brought the carriage around, hopped down from her seat, and greeted me politely. She reached for the door, but it swung open before she had a chance to do it herself.

“Hope we’re not intruding, Tenma. After you, Princess Luna,” Kriss said.

“Thanks for having us, Tenma!” Luna chirped as she stepped down with Kriss’s help.

“Thanks for having us, Tenma. Go ahead, Amy,” Tida jumped down next, helping Amy out of the carriage.

“Thanks, Tida. Sorry for the sudden visit, Master.”

I was about to say hello to Amy because I thought she was the last one in the carriage, but Kriss reached out again. I thought it might be Queen Maria inside. I got a little excited since Cain and I had just been talking about her...

“No need. I can get down myself.”

However, the voice that came definitely wasn’t the queen’s.

“Sorry to drop by unannounced, Tenma.”

Primera was the last one to come out of the carriage. She looked a little uncomfortable about showing up without an invitation and apologized the moment she saw me. Kriss gave her a sharp look for that.

“Primera, the way you said that makes it sound like Prince Tida and Princess Luna have no manners. You should be careful of that in the future,” she said.

Primera immediately apologized to Tida and Luna, but both of them brushed it off with a laugh. Tida even joked that Kriss was right and offered me an apology for his rudeness.

He was clearly trying to lighten the mood, and I thought that would be the end of it, but Kriss was soon led away by Aina, who scolded her quietly out of earshot. Tida and Luna looked puzzled, but they didn’t seem to catch what was being said.

I, however, could hear it just fine, and I had to agree with Aina, who was telling Kriss that *she* was the rude one. Her correction was technically right, but since neither Tida nor Luna seemed bothered, pointing out Primera’s behavior in front of everyone else was like telling the whole world the royals were being rude.

“Anyway, Tenma. I see that Leon’s training with a golem, but what exactly is Albert doing?”

“Oh, well... He seems really curious about my golems.”

“Since Leon’s dumb, Albert’s using him to try to gather intel on the golems,” Cain blurted out, immediately ratting out Albert to Tida and making sure no one thought that he was involved.

“Um, Tenma, don’t you think this could be a problem?” Tida asked. He looked worried, but not for Albert’s sake. He was probably more concerned about Queen Maria losing her temper.

“Yeah, it could be, but I doubt she’ll say anything outright. Because if she did, she’d also be calling out the royal family,” I countered.

There was no way Queen Maria or Prince Lyle hadn’t already examined the golems I’d made for the royal family. Tida looked surprised, but Cain and Kriss just nodded like it was common sense.

“You guys take your golems out every once in a while to check them and do maintenance on them, right? This is the same kind of deal. Albert’s just physically using Leon to observe one in action. And if I’m okay with it, then it’s not a problem,” I said, sticking up for Albert.

“That’s only true if my brother actually asked for your permission. But he didn’t even tell you that was what he was doing, right? Isn’t this the same as stealing?” Primera asked.

Well, she wasn’t wrong. I glanced towards her but locked eyes with Cain instead.

“Tenma, Primera’s over there.”

A moment ago, he’d been staring straight ahead, but now...

“Hostile intent! Wait... Primera?!”

Amur had popped up out of nowhere but suddenly recoiled from the sheer force of the vibe Primera was putting out. Honestly, I was just glad that fury wasn’t directed at me. She’d just secured the number two spot on the list of Scariest Women When Angry.

“Does my father know about this, Tenma?” Primera asked.

“Yes, the duke knows. Actually, he was the one who asked me to keep an eye on Albert for him.” I could tell that my tone of voice sounded a bit awkward when I replied to Primera, but thankfully, no one commented on it.

“So he’s an accomplice... Or the ringleader, rather. I guess I should tell my mother about this.”

"He did say I could punish Albert as long as I didn't go overboard. What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"I'd actually like to handle that, if that's all right with you," she said.

"Sure, go ahead. Consider it your job now." I jumped at the offer—I wasn't about to hesitate to throw Albert under the bus. At least that eased Primera's hostility a bit.

And then...

"Tenma! Leon's down again!" Albert shouted across the yard.

I had a few things I wanted to say to him for ruining the mood, but it wasn't like it was Leon's fault, so I ran over to help. But not long after I started moving, I felt Primera's anger swelling again behind me.

I guess it wasn't my imagination after all...

Extra Story: A One-Quarter Sentence

"So what brings you all here today?"

"Well, it's kinda awkward to say this after what happened with Albert...but we had some questions about the golems too," Tida said.

I was surprised to hear that was why they'd come here as well.

He glanced hesitantly over at Albert, who was currently sitting formally on his knees as Primera scolded him. Then, Tida gave Luna a little nudge and began to explain the reason for their visit.

"It wasn't a part of the curriculum until last year, but after the headmaster saw you using a golem, he decided to incorporate golem studies into our classes."

Since it was a new subject, there weren't any good existing resources, and they couldn't ask the upperclassmen for advice either. That's why they'd come to me first.

Tida and Amy seemed genuinely interested in learning more. But Luna, on the other hand...

"I'll stand out if you tutor me, Tenma! I might even score higher on my tests!" she exclaimed.

Well, if she was willing to actually study for once, I wouldn't complain about her motivations.

"So you want me to teach you the basics of golems?" I asked. I figured I should give them a heads-up first. "Just to warn you, most of what I know is self-taught, so depending on how they're grading this stuff, it might actually cost you points."

Tida shook his head. "I'm sure the academy wants to know the fundamentals of your golems. They might even give us bonus points instead of a deduction."

"Okay then, let's go."

I turned towards the dining room, but Amy suddenly said, “Wait, what about Albert and Primera?”

“We shouldn’t interrupt their heartwarming sibling bonding session!” Cain interrupted before I could answer.

Amur gave Amy a little shove and got her moving. As we walked away, I saw a golem carry Leon off to a guest room. He’d taken that hit full on, but thanks to the golem holding back and Leon’s freakish stamina, he’d come out of it mostly fine.

We reached the dining room and started setting everything up.

“I expected this from Cain, but even Aina’s excited!”

Cain and Aina were the first ones to get ready. They already had their notepads out and were eagerly awaiting my golem lecture.

Tida and Amy seemed pretty motivated too, just not as much. As for Luna, even though she had been so enthusiastic earlier, she was already spacing out, distracted by the sweet aroma drifting through the room.

“All right, let’s get started,” I said.

I wasn’t exactly qualified to be a teacher, and most of what I’d learned was through trial and error, so I decided to just explain how I usually built a golem. I paused every now and then to answer questions.

Aina had the most questions, followed by Cain. Tida and Amy didn’t ask much, but not because they weren’t interested. They just couldn’t get a word in edgewise—those first two just wouldn’t stop asking questions.

Luna’s enthusiasm was now long gone. “Aura, more tea!” she called out. “Oh, and snacks too!”

“I want the sweet bean jelly from the second drawer from the back of the top shelf. It’s hidden under a false bottom!” Amur yelled.

Luna had already given up on studying and was enjoying teatime with Amur. And Amur was giving ridiculously specific instructions to Aura just to give her trouble. I knew for a fact there wasn’t any sweet bean jelly hidden in that spot, and Aura was beside herself trying to find it. Luna and Amur just laughed their heads off watching her search furiously.

Normally, Aina or Tida would’ve scolded Luna for slacking off, but

they were way into the lecture...or maybe they were just choosing to ignore her this time.

"Why aren't golems more common, Master?" Amy asked once I had finished covering the basics. The moment she said that, I thought I saw Cain's and Amur's eyes light up.

"Well, building a golem requires specialized skills and multiple types of magic. Not many people have all that. And if you try to build them with a team, you'll run into differences in skill levels and mana output, which makes creating a golem really tough. That's why very few people actually use them," I said.

Come to think of it, introducing golem studies at the academy might actually help the kingdom advance. I had no idea when those results would start showing, however.

"Tenma, what exactly are those required skills and types of magic?" Aina asked.

Looking flustered, Tida jumped in to stop her. "Aina, don't!"

Aina blinked and then snapped back to reality. She quickly apologized.

I waved it off. "Eh, it's not like it's classified info or anything. You've gotta know smithing, stoneworking techniques for processing metal and magic cores, mana manipulation... And then there's the magic know-how. You'll need to know Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth spells to help with the crafting. Oh, and alchemy."

"Alchemy? I see..."

Honestly, besides the alchemy part, making golems didn't really require any advanced spells or skills.

Alchemy was tricky, though. A lot of it came down to intuition, and not many people were that skilled at it. But if you wanted to make high performance golems, you couldn't avoid it. That was exactly why even big noble houses like Duke Sanga's family struggled with golem production.

"I mean, it's technically possible to make one without alchemy, but it'd be really hard," I said.

"Hrm, so learning alchemy is difficult, but avoiding using it for golems is even harder," Aina muttered as she jotted down notes. Just like I'd expect from one of Queen Maria's top agents.

The spy from House Sammons was diligently scribbling away just as intently. Honestly, I wasn't even sure who I was actually teaching at this point.

I decided to stop catering to the spies and focus on the actual students now that I'd covered the basics. "So, are you two following along okay, Amy and Tida?" I asked.

"I get why it's so hard to make one now," Amy said.

"I think I understand in theory, but I'm not sure I'd know where to start if I actually tried to make one. Especially since I couldn't process a golem core," Tida said.

They both seemed to have accepted that making golems was beyond them for now, but they weren't giving up. They were excited to learn alchemy and give it a shot. And since goblin cores were good enough for practice, they said they'd gather some while leveling up their magic through adventuring. That was smart.

Afterward, the two spies cross-checked their notes to make sure they hadn't missed anything, while the two students started quizzing each other and sharing their thoughts. Then...

"That was rough..." Leon muttered.

"I'm really sorry, Leon..."

Leon and Primera had walked into the dining room.

"That's classic Leon for you! He's not bright, but he's tough as nails!"

"Yeah! Wait, that's not a compliment, is it?!"

Their little comedy act got a laugh out of everyone.

Primera looked genuinely sorry, though. "Tenma, I really need to apologize. My father and brother have betrayed your trust."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "First of all, I never felt betrayed. It didn't even bother me. Duke Sanga talked to me about it beforehand, and I told him it was okay. And I just let Albert's behavior slide, so I guess that counts as him having permission. Leon's the only one who got hurt, so as long as he's not mad, it's fine."

I glanced over at Leon. He just shrugged and said it didn't bother him.

That should've been the end of it all. *Should've* being the

operative word.

"I'm glad to hear that, but I don't think you should go so easy on them," Primera stressed. "That's why even though you and Leon were gracious enough to forgive them, I have a duty to make sure my father and brother are punished for what they did."

And with that, Primera turned and left the dining room, saying she was taking Albert and going home.

"I wonder what she'll do to punish them when she gets home."

"I have no clue. By the way, has anyone seen Kriss?"

No one had. There were only two likely places she'd be, though—either with Shiromaru or with Mary and Aries.

When we found her, she was actually with all three of them, snuggling with Mary and Aries, looking over the moon. Shiromaru was by her side.

I heard about Primera's punishment later.

"So the duke's punishment was a total ban on sharing any of the golem intel I gave Tida and the others, and the duke and Albert both had their allowances reduced by a quarter? Yeesh, that's pretty harsh."

The moment Primera had gotten home, she had immediately sent letters to Duke Sanga's wife. A few days later, the duke and Albert had been summoned back to their duchy. The duchess had decided on that punishment for them, and her decision had been final.

"Losing your spending money *and* all that sweet golem info? That's tough."

I heard that even Queen Maria felt bad for them. But just a little.

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Afterword

I've got a bit less space for the afterword this time around because of page constraints, so I'll get the important things out of the way first.

I had mentioned that the cherry blossoms were blooming early this year, but they'll probably be long gone by the time this volume hits the shelves. They were still buds when I wrote that, so don't hold it against me! (I'm mostly joking.)

This time around, I actually sent the manuscript to my editor ahead of schedule for once, but I got an email back saying I was thirty pages short!

I started panicking, and I even considered borrowing a chapter from the beginning of the next volume to fill the gap. I almost went through with it too, but I heard a little voice telling me, "That's lazy!"

In the end, I buckled down and wrote an extra thirty pages from scratch. Did I regret it because I had zero ideas? Absolutely, and more than once.

Still, I hope all that struggling led to something that was at least a bit fun for you to read.

And finally, if this story could be even a small part of how you spent all your extra time at home during the pandemic, and if you came away from it feeling satisfied, then I couldn't ask for more as an author.

Thanks again, and see you next time!

—Kenichi

Bonus Story: The Temptation of Yuzu

"Yuzu bath! Yuzu bath!"

"Hey, Amur? Are you sure it's okay to take a bath with fruit in it?"

Tenma had bought a huge amount of yuzu from Lani-tan, so I decided to take a yuzu bath today. It was earlier than I'd usually do bathtime, but I was heading there anyway in order to take the first yuzu bath when Jeanne said something ridiculous.

"You're such an amateur, Jeanne."

"Well, I've never seen yuzu before, and it's not like people usually toss a whole mandarin into the bathtub."

"They're not mandarins! They're yuzu!" I protested.

Sure, it might be nice to take a bath with mandarins in the water, but yuzu had a special fragrance. Amateurs just didn't understand!

"I'll show you!" I said.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Her reaction was just as I expected.

"Ahh... This is so warm... And the smell is so lovely."

I mercilessly shoved her down into the bathwater, but she seemed satisfied.

"If it smells this nice with them whole, then I bet it'd smell even better if we opened them up..."

"Stop! You can't do that!"

Opening up a yuzu in the bath was forbidden.

"The water will get dirty, and it'd be a huge pain to clean it! We'll get in trouble!"

A long time ago, I had decided to totally destroy a yuzu in the tub just for kicks, and I'd ended up with a goose egg on my head. Letting yuzu float in the bathtub had a tendency to stir up people's destructive instincts.

Even though I told Jeanne all of that, she said, “Yeah, but Aura’s on cleaning duty tomorrow.”

That was enough for me. “Oh, let’s do it, then! No problem at all! Of course it’ll smell better if we split one open in the tub!”

If Aura was going to clean it up, it was fine. But Jeanne was pretty naughty. I loved how she never hesitated to throw someone under the bus for her own pleasure, even if it was an old friend of hers! And if Aura’s sacrifice could make us feel good right now, then I’d take the fall for it!

“Well, here goes, then...”

“Oof!”

I grabbed a yuzu with both hands and split it open, just as Jeanne opened up two large ones. The strong fragrance of yuzu floated around us, and the juice squirted out into the water, making it cloudy.

But we didn’t care. We just kept destroying one yuzu after another. As a result...

“Okay, we went way too far.”

“Yeah... Now we’re out of yuzu...”

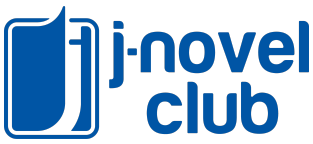
The round yuzu that’d been floating in the bathtub were all gone and had been replaced instead by rinds and battered insides. That was no good, so we used a net to scoop up the remnants of the yuzu and gathered them up.

“Jeanne, Amur... You’re on bathtub cleaning duty the day after any yuzu baths from now on until the yuzu runs out.”

We hadn’t been able to clean out all the bits and pieces, but most of all, the water was totally cloudy. Once Aina found out, we got punished. And when Aura saw it, she laughed her head off.

I lost all desire to have another yuzu bath—I didn’t want to have to clean it up again...


ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD
11
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