

# ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

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Story by Kenichi  
Illustrations by Nem

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# Chapter Eight

## Part One

I was sitting in the driver's seat, and Blanca opened the window to call out to me.

"Tenma, we should see the river soon," he said. "And if we follow it, we'll come to a place that's good for camping. It's a little early, but I think we should pack it in for the day there."

I looked up at the sky; it was still light out, but there didn't seem to be anywhere else that would be better to camp, so I decided to follow Blanca's advice.

"Tenma, it's over there. Up on that hill."

"Got it."

Just as Blanca had said, there was a big hill near the river, so I directed Thunderbolt towards it. Once we reached it, I looked around to see a field with short grass. We'd be able to sense anything approaching us right away. And not only that, but there was a full moon tonight, which would make it even easier.

"There's fresh water nearby, so this is the perfect camping spot," I said.

"Yeah. The only drawback is that although it'll be easy to spot an enemy, there's not a lot of cover for us," Blanca answered.

"Save the chitchat for later, you two. Let's finish getting ready."

After saying that, Gramps climbed out of the carriage and started looking for a place to build a campfire. A place like this was sure to have remnants from previous campers around, so that's what he was looking for.

"Master Merlin, I think there's a spot behind the carriage," Blanca said.

"Ahh, there it is."

Blanca was right again; there was a small hole dug in the earth behind where the carriage was parked with wet coals and cinders lying around it.

Amur emerged from the carriage with a big yawn. “Phew... Are we there yet?”

I’d just finished using Detection on our surroundings when she’d come out. Trailing close behind her were Shiromaru and Solomon, who’d also been snoozing.

“You slept way too much, little lady. Go on and wash your face.”

“Nngh...”

Amur’s eyes were only half-open as she turned and went back into the carriage. A few minutes later, she came out looking wide awake without a trace of grogginess on her face.

“There’s still some time until sunset, so let’s look for kindling,” I said. “Oh, and something to eat too.”

Everyone nodded at my suggestion, so we decided to search the area we could see from the carriage. Thunderbolt was nearby, and we had Rocket and the others on standby just in case, so I gave him instructions to send Shiromaru or Solomon in the event anyone got too far from the carriage or anything came too close to it.

“I think I’ll go look down by the river,” I said.

“I’m coming with you,” Amur said.

Gramps and Blanca went to search the fields, but I wanted to go towards the river, which was the most likely place we’d find some food. Since Amur wanted to come along, she followed behind me.

“All right, here we are at the river. And yep, we can still see the carriage.” I confirmed that I could spot the carriage from where we were, but it was a needless worry—we’d only gone about a hundred meters.

I took a quick look at the riverbed and saw driftwood and rocks, so I thought it’d be easy to find things that would be useful, including items that weren’t ingredients.

“Amur, I’m going to look here. You search on the other side.”

“Okay.”

Amur and I split up and we gathered driftwood and smaller rocks. While we did that, I saw fish jumping up out of the water. I didn’t have a fishing pole or a net, so I couldn’t try to catch them that way, but I thought I might manage to get a few with the rocks or Lightning magic. I decided to observe the river for a bit.

“This reminds me of when I first met Namitaro...” I muttered, and just then, something huge approached me from the water. “Don’t tell me I spoke it into existence!”

I regretted saying that a bit as the possibly Namitaro-shaped creature jumped out of the water towards me.

“That’s not Namitaro at all!”

In fact, it was a huge salmon that was easily over two meters long. It leaped out of the water with its mouth open wide, intending to eat me, but thankfully, I’d armed myself with the Guardian Giganto hands in preparation for Namitaro. I caught the salmon with those.

“Got some food!” I cried out. “All right, let’s wrap it up.”

It would have been best to gut it there, but the fish was so huge that it was too much of a pain. Instead, I used the Guardian Giganto hands to break off its head and dispose of it. Deciding I’d gut it a bit later, I put the rest of the fish’s body in my magic bag and then used Detection on the water.

“Hm, another big ping among a bunch of small ones...”

I used Identify and discovered that the fish was called a tyrant salmon, which I assumed was the same type I’d just killed. I figured I’d take the opportunity to catch that one too.

“Now, should I try throwing rocks or shocking it?”

I knew there were techniques like that in my previous world, but I’d never actually tried them. After all, those two methods of fishing were outlawed in Japan. But since those laws didn’t exist in this world, I decided to just take the

plunge and give it a try.

“I’ll just shoot some electric currents in the water and... Zap!”

I used Lightning magic in the spot where the salmon was swimming. The electrical current spread a little, and then suddenly, the salmon floated on top of the surface just as I expected. A few dozen smaller fish did the same, but it was too much trouble to collect all of them. I left all the ones smaller than a carp there. They’d come back to life if they were lucky, but if not, they could be food for other fish or birds.

“I’ve never seen salmon in this world before. I’d love to make sashimi from it, but I guess that might be tough.”

I’d come across trout before, but never salmon, so I was looking forward to seeing how it tasted. I really liked salmon sashimi and sushi, so I thought about trying it, but I decided against it because I was afraid of parasites. Freezing the fish would probably make it safe, but I remembered it had to be frozen for two to three days, so I gave up on that idea. Those guidelines were also for normal-sized salmon; since I didn’t know how long it would take for a fish this big to freeze properly and I wasn’t familiar with the parasites of this world, I figured I ought to put safety first.

I quickly gutted the salmon and carp by the river and then decided to return to the carriage. With this catch, we wouldn’t run out of food for several days.

“I used Identify so I know there’s no poison, but how does it taste?” I wondered out loud to myself.

Just then, I saw Amur heading towards me from downstream, carrying a bulging sack of fish over her shoulder. She was absolutely soaked.

“Tenma! I hit the jackpot! All these fish just started flowing towards me!” Amur exclaimed joyfully as she opened the sack, revealing the smaller fish I’d left behind earlier.

“Wow. That’s...great.”

I felt a bit conflicted when I saw the small fish twitching inside the sack, but she was so happy that I just went along with it and chatted with her as we went back to the carriage together.

Once we got there, Rocket, who had been keeping watch from the carriage's roof, looked like he wanted to say something. I could tell that he knew why Amur had caught those fish so easily. But since he was a sensitive slime, Rocket greeted her with a look of surprise as she excitedly showed off the contents of her sack.

“Wow, you got a lot! Unfortunately, I came up rather empty.”

“Same here. It seems like the small animals and monsters around here know that this area is too dangerous for them.”

Despite what Blanca and Gramps had said, they seemed to have gathered quite a few edible wild plants like wild onions, lily bulbs, dandelions, and wild parsley. Just to be safe, I confirmed with Identify that they were all free of poison.

“I got a big catch too, so let's make a dish with Amur's fish and the plants you collected today.”

Amur's fish were mostly minnow and crucian carp. I filleted the crucian carp, soaked them in water to remove any muddy taste, coated them in flour and spices, and fried them *meunière* style. Since we had so many minnows, I gutted them, lightly sprinkled them with salt, skewered them on sticks, and grilled them up.

I gave everyone instructions as I continued cooking. “Gramps, make sure you wash the lily bulbs and wild onions well. Blanca and Amur, can you set up two hearths and start the fires? Once they're ready, heat up some oil in a frying pan on one, and boil some water in a pot on the other.”

There wouldn't be any meat tonight, so Shiromaru and Solomon might not be satisfied, but I'd give them pieces of salmon and the carp we'd caught today. That would have to be enough.

“There, all done!”

I managed to prepare several dishes within an hour. Although they were simple, Blanca was amazed that they weren't typical camping foods.

“Oh, and I have a bit of alcohol too. I only made enough for one glass per person, just in case.”

In my mind, I called it sake, but it was actually distilled alcohol cut with plenty of water. Unless you were a total lightweight, you wouldn't get drunk on it. At the very least, I made sure it was diluted enough so Gramps and Blanca wouldn't get drunk too easily.

I placed the bottle of alcohol next to the food and both Gramps and Blanca poured themselves some, almost like they were racing each other. I couldn't blame them, since the dishes in front of them were perfect complements for the alcohol.

They ended up drinking our share of the booze too, and they only ate the richer foods.

"Blanca, you take the first watch tonight. I'll take a shift after you, and then Gramps and Amur, you can do the third shift, okay?"

Although it was usually common practice to assign the most experienced person the second watch since it was the toughest one, I'd decided to put Blanca first since he'd spent the longest time driving. He deserved the most sleep, after all. The reason I had put Gramps and Amur on the third watch was because she had the least amount of experience.

After I explained those reasons and they agreed, each of us began to prepare for the night. By the way, I'd made several screen dividers for this trip so I could create separate sleeping spaces for the men and Amur. They were just makeshift spaces, of course, and one still had to be careful, but it significantly reduced the mental burden—mainly mine. That was because Amur had a nasty habit of trying to undress in front of me or peep at me while I was changing. I tried to escape to the bathroom whenever that happened, but of course that always happened to be when Gramps or Blanca were using it, so I'd end up trapped. In other words, the screens had already come in clutch several times, making them my newest prized possession.

"I think I'll hit the hay. How about you two?" Gramps asked.

"I want to stay up a bit longer to ask Blanca something," I said.

"I'll come too," Amur said.

"No, little lady. You need to go to sleep," Blanca said, scolding her. "You're

not used to camping, so you need to go get settled.”

Amur was about to sit back down with us, but he grabbed her by the scruff and turned her around towards the carriage. She relented, but she looked back several times on the way there hoping someone would stop her. Each time she did that, Blanca just glared at her and urged her to keep walking.

“Well? What do you want to talk to me about, Tenma?” Blanca asked a short while later. “I suppose I can guess, though...” He seemed to have an idea already, which was probably why he’d chased away Amur so harshly.

“I think your guess is probably right. I wanted to ask you about Amur’s family,” I said. “She keeps saying she wants to marry me. Even though it’s an honorary title, she’s still a viscount’s daughter, so it can’t be that simple, right? One wrong move and I could upset her father, Viscount Lobo.”

Personally, I didn’t really care if someone I’d never met before didn’t like me, even if it was an honorary viscount who happened to be Amur’s father. But since I was going on this journey as an official envoy of the royal family, upsetting the viscount could strain relations between them. If he were just an ordinary viscount it probably wouldn’t be that big of a deal, but he was the leader of the SAR. That meant he was way more powerful than average.

“Honestly, I think my brother-in-law will probably be pretty hostile towards you. He adores Amur, and he hasn’t really let go of her yet. Once he sees her showing you affection, he’ll most likely treat you pretty harshly, so just be prepared for that. But I can say one thing for sure: the SAR will never oppose the royal family.”

I was surprised that Blanca was so blunt, but hearing that the viscount wouldn’t outright oppose me was a relief.

“How can you be so sure of that?” I asked.

“It’s simple. I won’t allow it. If it came down to it, I’d stop my brother-in-law, even if it meant fighting him to the death. There’s no question in my mind as to whether my brother-in-law’s selfishness or the lives of the residents of the SAR are more important. Well...I think his wife would stop him before it ever came to that. She’s stronger than my brother-in-law and he respects her. Besides, although he’s the one who holds the title of viscount, *she’s* the direct

descendant by blood. He married into the family.”

So even if Viscount Lobo were to rebel against the royal family, the people would side with his wife. I thought it was highly unlikely that he’d go against Amur to that extent.

“As for my sister-in-law, she’s more like Amur’s sister than her mother,” Blanca continued. “That’s how similar they are in terms of personality.”

I had a bad feeling when I heard that, but this lady sounded like she had some common sense. I probably didn’t need to worry too much.

“I’m relieved to hear Amur’s mother has common sense. Oh, and there’s another thing I wanted to ask. What kind of person is Amur’s great-grandfather, Grampy Kei?”

When I thought of the stories I’d heard about Grampy Kei, I could only think of the most famous eccentric samurai from the Warring States era in Japan. It was possible he was a fan of that person, but either way, there was a high chance he had also been reincarnated into this world like me.

I was curious how this man from another world who’d been reincarnated here before me had led his life. As far as I’d heard, he hadn’t outright admitted he was from another world, but if there were any commonalities between us or if I could learn from him in any way, I wanted to know. By the way, although Namitaro had also been reincarnated here before me, I didn’t think he had anything to teach me, and I didn’t plan on asking him either.

“Well, to put it simply, he’s the strongest man in SAR’s history. This is just my opinion, but I think he’s probably the strongest beastfolk who ever lived too. Even if there were two, no, three of me, I probably couldn’t beat him at his peak. That’s the kind of man he is.”

I could tell that Blanca was serious just by the look on his face. It didn’t seem like he was exaggerating. There was nothing absolute when it came to battle, and there was always compatibility to consider, so although I didn’t think he was *really* three times as strong as Blanca, he was probably incredibly strong.

“Okay, I have another question,” I said. “If Grampy Kei and I got into a fight, who do you think would win?”

I knew it was a ridiculous question, but Blanca pondered it seriously with a complicated expression on his face.

“It depends on the situation... If it were a one-on-one fight at close range, I’d give Grampy Kei nine-to-one odds at winning. A long-range fight would probably be seven-to-three in your favor. But again, that’s just my opinion.”

In other words, Blanca thought Grampy Kei was stronger than me. Of course I knew I wasn’t the strongest person in history, but I found his assessment a little hard to believe. I didn’t think he was biased, and I considered Blanca to be a good authority on these matters since he was a powerful person who knew both of us. He had thought about it carefully before answering too. But it was a fact that I had the most talent out of anyone in this world. After all, the gods had personally given my abilities to me, and they had given me so many of them that I was so powerful they were actually worried about it as a result.

Taking that into account, I tried to consider it from a slightly different angle. Physical abilities in this world were definitely bestowed by the gods, but perhaps mine were slightly inferior to Grampy Kei’s simply because I was a human and he was a beastfolk. But I thought talent itself might be enough to surpass that, and in that case, our overall abilities should be pretty close. So, maybe the reason for the difference wasn’t because of this world, but due to our past lives.

If I was right about Grampy Kei being from another world, it was understandable that there would be a gap between us. After all, although I’d been trained by various masters in my previous life, that had been during a time of peace. And if Grampy Kei really had lived during the Warring States era, that was a time when human life hadn’t been valued as much—just like in this world. If he willingly threw himself into battles and conflicts, it wouldn’t be strange if that experience was the invisible factor that made a difference between us.

“Did I offend you?” Blanca asked when he saw me lost in thought.

Once I organized my thoughts, everything seemed to make sense. “No. If that’s what you say, then it must be true,” I said. “But if Grampy Kei is at his peak and I’m still growing, then there’s still a chance for me to beat him, right?”

Maybe it was silly to compare myself to someone from the past, but it was frustrating to think that someone could beat me in Blanca's imagined scenario.

"Ha ha ha! That's right. I know Grampy Kei has hit his prime, but I've yet to see yours, Tenma!"

Blanca had burst out laughing so loudly that he had woken up Amur. She leaned out of the carriage window, still half asleep, and launched a spear right at his forehead.

Blanca caught Amur's spear and calmly stuck it into the ground. "Phew, that was a close one. She's half asleep and nearly struck me in the forehead! Maybe being in that state improves her accuracy..." Despite his words, Blanca had done all that without breaking a sweat. "It's about time to change shifts. I'll leave this to you now, Tenma."

After Amur had thrown her spear, I had continued talking to Blanca for some time. Now, it was time for my shift. I was only responsible for three hours, so I could easily stay awake for it. In fact, this was better than only getting a couple of hours of sleep and then having to go on watch afterwards.

"My body's a bit stiff from sitting here for so long. Maybe I'll get some exercise..." I didn't want to make too much noise or do anything too strenuous, so I passed the time by doing radio exercises like I had done as a kid in Japan. I also walked in circles around the carriage.

I was just about to start another round of radio exercises when Gramps and Amur woke up. It must have been time for the next shift change already.

"What are you doing, Tenma?"

Gramps didn't know about radio exercises, so he probably thought I was doing something weird again. But once I showed him how they were supposed to loosen up the body, he asked me to show him how to do them and began participating with me.

Gramps had just finished his radio exercises when Amur, who had still been half asleep, suddenly woke up. It was at that moment that she noticed her spear sticking in the ground right where Blanca had left it.

"Hm? What's my spear doing here?" she asked, looking confused.

“Tenma, we’re going to head for the village in front of that mountain today. There’s still a lot of time before sunset, but once we get there, all we have to do is camp out,” Blanca said, pointing in the direction of the village.

It had taken more than two weeks to get to where we were, and I was hoping we could find somewhere safe for us to take a break. We were about two-thirds of the way through our journey from Sagan to our destination, and we had already entered the SAR at this point.

The village we were heading to wasn’t very big, but since it was located near the mountains, it had access to a ton of resources. It also had an adventurers guild—unusual for a small village—but it seemed as though most of the adventurers who frequented it were beginners or low-ranking ones. For that reason, the building itself was pretty small comparatively. But since most people traveled to the guild via carriage, it was on a big plot of land.

“That’s the entrance to the village, huh... Hey, Blanca. It looks like there are heavily armored guards standing at the gates. Did you do something?”

“That’s got nothing to do with me! Though, hmm, you’re right. It does look pretty serious. I’ll go talk to ’em and see what they have to say. Stop the carriage near the gates.”

I wondered if perhaps they were being wary of Thunderbolt, so I parked him about a hundred meters from the gates. Once we came to a halt, Blanca got out of the carriage and ran over to the gate, but the guards seemed startled to see him and aimed their weapons at him. However, they must’ve recognized him soon after because they put down their weapons as he got closer.

Blanca bowed his head to them and then seemed to talk to them, pointing over in our direction occasionally. Shortly after, several people who had been standing near the gate ran inside the village and Blanca came back to the carriage.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“It seems like there’s some kinda trouble going on in this village, so the guards are really cautious. And then when they saw this carriage rolling up with a horse that looks like a monster attached to it, well...can you blame ’em for being a little nervous?”

I wondered exactly what kind of troubles were going on, but Blanca said we could still stay here and rest as we'd planned. It must not have been anything too dangerous if he'd made that decision with Amur among us.

"So is it okay to take Thunderbolt inside, then?"

"Yeah," he said. "As soon as we get through the gates, keep going straight and head for a building with a red roof."

"Got it."

I followed Blanca's directions and urged Thunderbolt onwards. I spotted the building with the red roof right away. It looked like a log cabin and had a sign hanging over the entrance that said "Adventurers Guild."

"Go ahead and park the carriage over by the stakes in the ground. The mayor and the guildmaster want to talk to you."

"They're going to ask us to deal with whatever issues they're facing, aren't they?" Gramps asked.

"Sorry..." Blanca said.

"It's fine," I said. "I guess they trust us because we're with you, Blanca?"

Amur had to chime in too. "I'm so sorry about my Blanca here. He's such a naughty boy. Forgive hi— Ugyaaah!"

"I'm sorry about this, Tenma. And this isn't about you, little lady, so stop getting carried away! You and I have to ask Tenma for help!"

Amur was messing around while Blanca apologized to us, and as expected, she received a swift bonk on her head. Even though I should've been used to the sight by now, it really struck me how she never seemed to learn her lesson.

After their little comedy routine was done, the four of us went inside the guild. There were two men sitting at the largest table inside. Once they noticed us, they immediately stood up and bowed their heads.

"This is the mayor of this town, and next to him is the guildmaster," Blanca explained.

The mayor was balding but had a sturdy physique. On the other hand, the

guildmaster was scrawny and had a pretty unreliable vibe to him. If Blanca hadn't said anything to me, I would've assumed their roles were reversed.

"I'm sorry to cut straight to the point, but could you explain what's going on?" Blanca then asked. "I heard from the guards at the gate that a large group of monsters was spotted in the mountains?"

Blanca had said that, but this was the first I'd heard of it. There was no point in me bringing that up now, so I stayed quiet, but once Blanca noticed Gramps and me staring at him, he bowed his head again. Amur opened her mouth to say something, but Blanca gagged her with his hand.

"I'm sorry. The entire village is in utter chaos right now. There's been a massive number of goblins spotted nearby."

"Goblins?" Blanca said with surprise. He was probably panicking and wondering more why goblins were appearing here than why there were so many of them.

It made sense that ordinary villagers would find trouble trying to deal with a large group of goblins. A group of Rank C adventurers and a team of five or six villagers who knew how to handle a sword could probably deal with one or two hundred goblins on their own, though. But this village was near a mountain, which meant there were probably a lot of people here who hunted in the mountains or acted as guards. They should've been able to fight a lot better than the average villager.

The guildmaster seemed to sense the doubts we had, so he spoke up in the mayor's place.

"I know this might seem like we're making a big deal out of goblins, but this isn't your run-of-the-mill group of them," he said. "We've confirmed that there are over five hundred of them. But the biggest problem is that there's a goblin king leading the group. We've identified other higher-ranking goblins as well. That makes the degree of difficulty fighting them jump exponentially, so we need a party of Rank B adventurers, at least."

The mayor had sent a request for help to the village where Viscount Lobo lived, but it would still be several days before backup would arrive. Until then, he wanted us to stay here in the village and assist.

“All right, I understand the situation. But wouldn’t it be faster if we went to slay the goblins ourselves?”

Regardless of whether there were over five hundred of them or not, at the end of the day, they were still goblins. The four of us could easily take them on, including the king. We could drive the entire group to extinction. And even if they ran away, I could just use Detection to sniff them out again.

“That’s true, but who will protect the village in the meantime? Even if you’re able to slay the entire group, if there are survivors and they somehow infiltrate the village, there will definitely be casualties,” the mayor said.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Gramps explained. “Tenma has several dozen golems, and we have Rocket and Shiromaru. We could have the villagers take shelter together just in case and position the golems around them. They’d be perfectly safe that way.”

“Yep, and if I leave Rocket here to command the golems along with Thunderbolt, they can at least buy time until the four of us return,” I added.

“That should be fine. Mayor, Guildmaster, is there any place in this village that can fit all the villagers at once?” Blanca asked.

The mayor and guildmaster looked baffled at how fast the conversation was proceeding. Once Blanca continued explaining things, they looked even more speechless for a moment, but then they said that there was a meeting hall nearby where all the villagers would fit.

“All right, go ahead and evacuate everyone to that location. We’ll get everything ready in the meantime. Once we’re finished, we’ll go right away to slay the goblins,” I said.

And with that, we left the guild and headed for the carriage. Once outside, we saw some villagers whom we hadn’t seen before. They’d come out to try to get a peek at Thunderbolt and Shiromaru.

“I know this is the SAR so I shouldn’t be surprised, but all the people in this village really are beastfolk, huh?” I mused.

“Yeah, they sure are. If we were to go to a larger village or city, it wouldn’t be unusual to see nonbeastfolk, but a tiny place like this would just have residents

who have lived here forever and not many others.”

Once the villagers spotted us, they bowed slightly. It seemed that Blanca was known throughout the village, and after he told them what was going on, he let them know they should evacuate to the shelter. He also asked them to tell the other villagers to do the same.

“All right, let’s go over our plan,” I said. “Like I said before, I think we should leave Rocket and Thunderbolt behind in the village. Goldie and Silvie can stay in my dimension bag in the carriage on standby. Everyone else will come with us to slay the goblins. What do you think, everyone?”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Blanca said.

“I agree,” Gramps said.

“It’s fine,” Amur said.

That meant we would stick with the original plan. As for the golems, I took ten large ones, twenty medium, and forty small ones out. I would station most of them around the evacuation center and put the remaining ones around the perimeter of the village. That way, even if some straggler goblins did make it down to the village, the golems outside would see them and hopefully scare them off. And if not, they would definitely avoid the evacuation center due to its tight security.

I registered the golems’ line of command as myself first and then Rocket as second. But since I would be absent in order to deal with the goblins, Rocket was basically first anyway. I wouldn’t have minded giving him first command, but if I did that, it would just take too long when it came time to collect them or add additional orders. That was why I always registered them in this fashion.

Once I explained everything to Rocket, he climbed up on top of the adventurers guild and started to scout out his surroundings. This was the tallest building around, so it was the perfect vantage point for him.

“Looks like the evacuation is almost complete. I’ll station the golems and brief the mayor now, and then we can head out to the forest. Are you all ready?”

“Of course,” Gramps said.

“Yeah!” Blanca said.

“Ready when you are!” Amur said.

Gramps was wearing his usual clothing and wielded his beloved staff. He carried the heaviest weapon out of the group, which was a little funny considering his age, but he still had the strength to twirl it around a few times. Since he also had the ability to use Flying magic, he never fell behind anyone else.

Blanca was wearing his usual light armor and carried a shorter spear than usual to make it easier for him to move around the forest. One of the short swords I had given him hung at his waist. It was emblazoned with the Otori family crest (the version without Namitaro) to let everyone know that he was associated with me. If anyone used my crest without permission, or obtained it and misused it, they could face a severe penalty.

Amur wore her usual tiger armor and was armed with a short sword and a machete I'd loaned her. It would be too difficult for her to maneuver with her usual spear in the forest, and all her backup spears were too long, so she wasn't using one this time.

Finally, I wasn't wearing my usual armor. Instead, I had the vestlike jacket I'd made in Sagan on over my clothes. At first glance, the vest might've seemed less durable, but it was actually tougher than regular armor since it was made with bicorn skin throughout. It was also reinforced with thin mythril plates on the chest and back. There were numerous pockets inside and out where I kept my throwing stars. I also wore pouches on my belt and waist where I stored even more throwing stars and throwing knives. Since I'd be serving as the vanguard this time, I had to be prepared to adapt to any style, but I'd primarily use the throwing weapons and magic. Honestly, I just wanted an excuse to test out the throwing stars and throwing knives in real combat.

“All right, everyone. Let's go,” I said, and began to give everyone their orders. “You remember your positions, right? Shiromaru and I will circle around to the back of the group. Gramps and Solomon will ambush the goblins from above while Blanca and Amur take them on directly. Gramps's group will attack first, then Blanca's. Once your two groups have attacked, the goblins' leader will

either instruct them to run or fight. If they fight, Shiromaru and I will focus on getting rid of the small fries. If they run, we'll attack the leader, and while we do that, you all work on getting rid of the weaker ones. But keep in mind once the leader is knocked off, most of the small fries will try to run away. We can't avoid that, but make sure that we don't let the leader get away, no matter what. Also, Gramps and Solomon—make sure not to accidentally use magic outside of the scope of the battle. It won't be good if we cause destruction in place of the goblins, after all."

"Got it," Gramps said.

"Squee!" Solomon said.

Both of them sounded a little disappointed—maybe they'd hoped they could put on a show during the battle.

I ignored the two of them as we went over final checks, and then Shiromaru and I headed out to the forest before the others. We'd confirmed the location of the goblins back at the guild. They'd told us the goblins were about five kilometers away from the village, but when I checked using Detection, they were actually a kilometer closer than the guild had thought. Not only that, but they'd chopped down a bunch of trees to make a camp. I had a feeling they were planning on making that their base until they attacked the village sometime today or tomorrow.

"Shiromaru, this'll be a bit of a detour, but let's go around the mountains and get close to them. If we follow the route we originally planned, we might end up running into goblin scouts."

"Woof!"

I did as I'd said and we hid in a spot with a good vantage point. I used Detection again, and according to my skill, I saw that the king and the other higher-ranking goblins were stationed in the center of the horde. The farther away from the center of the horde, the weaker the goblins were.

"There," I muttered, right as Gramps and Solomon came down from the sky. Since this was a forest fight, Gramps was using Wind magic instead of Fire magic. Solomon targeted goblins within the scope of Gramps's spells, suddenly diving down from the sky to attack them over and over again.

Once the goblins' attention was fixed on Gramps and Solomon, Blanca and Amur attacked them head-on. The dozens of goblins that had been in their path were torn to pieces in the blink of an eye.

But just when I thought Gramps and the others could finish them off, Blanca and Amur stopped moving. Gramps suddenly found himself surrounded too.

"The leaders made a move," I commented. "I don't think that'll do anything more than buy the goblins time, but oh well. Shiromaru, it's your turn."

"Wuff?" Shiromaru had been restless with nothing to do, but now he stood up with a silly look on his face.

I lightly patted him on the back and then pointed to the goblin horde.

"The king is taking a few guards and running. He must be pretty smart if he's using the other group to try to divert our attention."

The moment I said that, several high-ranking goblins suddenly appeared from the bushes with the biggest one in front.

"Go say hello, Shiromaru," I said. "But don't do it here, do it—"

"Grrr... Graaaaaaaar!"

Shiromaru's greeting probably could've been heard all the way from the village. It startled the goblin king and his guard so much that they nearly fell over. The king actually did end up falling down and started scrambling to run away, but all of them bumped into one another and got tangled up in tree vines in the process. However, the one who had the most damage inflicted by Shiromaru's howl was definitely me since I had been standing right next to him. My ears were ringing and I was so dizzy I couldn't even stay on my feet.

"Oof, I can't walk... Shiromaru, you howled before I could tell you to do it right in front of them and not by me..."

"Awoooo..." Shiromaru flopped down in front of me and showed me his belly. He was apologizing for acting before listening to my full command.

"You're gonna get punished when we get home, Shiromaru. But not if you manage to slay more goblins than me!"

"Garrrr!"

Once I regained my balance, I told Shiromaru the new rules and then charged towards the king. Shiromaru lost out on a head start since he was still on his back, and he fell behind quite a bit. He made panicked noises as he started to run and try to catch up.

“The first one! And the second!”

I sent my throwing stars flying at the goblins that were still paralyzed on the ground, killing one leader after another. Shiromaru belatedly arrived and attacked with his front legs, slicing them in half with his claws as he went by.

“All right. One more left... Oof!”

I was checking the progress of Shiromaru’s attacks, and I was about to kill another one when I leaped back. The spot where I had just been standing had been struck by a large club, and there was a gaping hole in the earth.

The culprit had been the goblin king. He was clearly different from the others because he regained his balance faster than them.

“Guess that’s why you’re the king. But still...”

The king yanked his club out of the ground and was about to swing it again, but I was faster. I pulled out my sword and cut off his arm that had held the club, and my returning blow lopped off his head while I was at it.

“There, all done.”

Our biggest target had been the goblin king, and since we’d already defeated his other high-ranking cronies, this horde was about to collapse. Even if we missed some stragglers, the remaining ones wouldn’t be strong enough to form another horde.

“Shiromaru, you killed three, huh?”

“Woof!”

“Then it’s a tie,” I said. “Too bad for you.”

“Wuff?” He seemed to say, “But why?” but the rule had been that if I lost, he could avoid punishment. A tie wasn’t a loss, so that meant that he hadn’t escaped his fate.

“Awwooooooo!!!” Shiromaru just realized the same thing and then charged off into the forest. I had a feeling he was heading towards the group of goblins by Gramps and the others so he could kill some more of them.

I collected the bodies of the king and the others and then hurried to rejoin the rest of my group. I found a seemingly devastated Shiromaru there, three people looking satisfied from rampaging, and Solomon. There were scattered piles of goblin corpses all around.

Amur trotted over to me, pointing at Shiromaru. “Tenma, why’s Shiromaru so depressed?”

I explained the circumstances to them all. Gramps and Blanca said they felt sorry for Shiromaru, but Amur and Solomon laughed at him.

“Awoo? Awoo...?” Shiromaru glared at them, but all of a sudden, he seemed to notice something and went running off again.

He came back a while later, dragging along the body of a goblin who had vines wrapped around it. That put him one above me in the tally, but the fact that he’d wrapped the body up in vines and had used them to drag it over showed that not even Shiromaru wanted a dirty goblin in his mouth.

“Hm, so that noise was Shiromaru? I was startled and thought another monster had appeared, but it seemed the goblins were even more surprised than us. They were really scared,” Blanca told me with amusement. After that, he began recounting their battle.

“I want to hear about your battle too, Tenma, but maybe we should gather up the bodies first. If we just leave them here, they’ll attract other monsters,” Gramps pointed out.

“Let’s get to work!”

Heeding Gramps’s suggestion, Amur immediately sprang into action and started collecting the bodies. We all chuckled dryly at her and decided to join in, but as expected, there were just too many of them. I brought out some golems to help.

However, many of the goblins’ bodies had been dismembered, so it was a huge hassle to collect them all. I decided to focus on collecting only the torsos

and ears instead. The torsos contained the magic cores—the only usable material—and these parts would be used as proof that we had slain them. Then, we dug a hole and tossed the rest into it. That alone made things a lot easier and allowed the work to go faster.

“I think it’s time to burn it.”

“Go ahead,” Gramps said.

After we had finished collecting what we needed, I used Fire magic to burn the goblin parts in the hole. Once they’d been reduced to ashes, we carefully covered it all with dirt so that there would be no sparks reignited, and we wet the surrounding area with Water magic, just in case. We did this to prevent a forest fire from occurring from anything smoldering in the hole.

We had nothing else left to do, so we decided to go back to the village. But we never could’ve expected what occurred on the way home.

“Survivors, huh?”

That’s right—we ran into a group of goblins that had survived. I noticed them first and immediately took them out in seconds with my throwing stars. There had been ten of them in all, which meant I’d now topped Shiromaru’s number and he would have to kill ten more of them to beat me.

Naturally, he was now in a state of shock and started frantically sniffing all around. When I used Detection again, there were no more goblins, so it seemed this really was the final group.

I kept telling him there were no more goblins after that, but he just wouldn’t stop looking. In the end, I took pity on him and said that the last group was an overtime score and I wouldn’t count it. Only then did he finally stop looking.

## Part Two

“Are you sure about this, Tenma?” Blanca asked. He was talking about the cores of the goblins who had attacked the village.

After we returned, we went straight to the mayor and the guildmaster. We reported that we’d eradicated the goblins and that there was no more danger. The villagers were thrilled and threw a banquet in our honor.

“They gave us so much food that the goblin cores are nothing in comparison. Just thinking about how much Shiromaru and the others ate alone—I’d never be able to repay them for that,” I said. “Anyway, they wouldn’t accept the king or the higher-ranking goblin cores, so it’s not like we’re walking away with nothing.”

“Yeah, I guess you have a point. Who knows how many portions the little lady had, for that matter.” Blanca sighed when he recalled Amur gorging herself.

Shiromaru, Solomon, and Amur had eaten close to half of the food the villagers prepared for us alone.

The villagers had watched them with warm smiles on their faces, but Blanca and I had just been irritated. Gramps had been doing something obnoxious in a different way—he’d had drinking contests with the villagers and drank them all under the table. Well, I had made the people who’d collapsed drink water and had cast Recovery magic on them, so luckily none of them had gotten alcohol poisoning, but one wrong move and something disastrous could’ve happened.

As a result, we decided to punish Shiromaru and Solomon by making them keep watch around the carriage for monsters, and Gramps and Amur took shifts driving the carriage for the rest of the day. It might not have sounded like a very big punishment, but Blanca and I at least wanted to do *something* in response.

“I hope they reflect on their behavior today.”

“Even a little bit would— Whoa!”

The moment Blanca was about to agree with me, the carriage suddenly charged forward. Thanks to various modifications, we wouldn’t feel any

vibrations or shocks under normal circumstances, so this was unusual.

“Did something happen?”

“Gramps, Amur!” I called out. “What happened?”

The moment I opened the window and tried to ask further, I was struck speechless.

Amur grumbled. “Grr, I can’t catch up with Shiromaru.”

“Not even Thunderbolt can when he’s pulling the carriage.”

Those two idiots had started to race Shiromaru. Even though we were on flat ground, if we kept going at this speed, even this carriage would lose a wheel.

“Let’s see if we can catch up once we get down this hill!” Amur said.

“All right, let’s go!” Gramps agreed.

“Hey!”

“Whoa!”

Blanca and I both sprang into action at once, grabbing both of them by the collars. They knew they’d been caught and suddenly slammed the brakes on Thunderbolt. And as a result...

“Nooooo!”

“Whooooa!”

The two of them were flung out of the carriage and landed on the ground in front of it. Meanwhile, Blanca and I both slammed into the window.

“Ugh...”

“Ouch...”

Blanca and I both held our heads from the impact, but it seemed like Gramps and Amur had suffered way more damage. They were both writhing on the ground, holding their faces.

“Blanca?”

“Thanks.”

After I cast Recovery magic on my face, I did the same for Blanca. We got off easily with bruises and nosebleeds, so a light healing spell was enough to do the trick.

“Now, do the two of you have anything to say for yourselves?! Especially you, Gramps. You should know better than to push the limits of this carriage!” I yelled.

Blanca scolded Amur in return. “Little lady, this time you’ve gone way too far! Don’t you know the meaning of the word shame?! Why can’t you ever learn your lesson?!”

Gramps and Amur sat formally on the ground in front of Blanca and me while we lectured them. They both knew better than to talk back, so they quietly took it all. Amur’s legs went numb halfway through the lecture and she wasn’t able to concentrate, but she still managed to tough it out through the end.

“I can’t walk... Eep! Shiromaru, stop! Solomon, knock it off!”

Amur’s legs were asleep, so she couldn’t walk. She used her spear as a cane and hobbled back to the carriage little by little, but Shiromaru and Solomon thought she was playing a game and kept poking their noses against her legs. Since she couldn’t fight back against them like she usually did, they got carried away, and she fell several times.

“Phew... I still got it in me!” Gramps said triumphantly. With Amur in such a sorry state, he was beating her back to the carriage.

“Shiromaru, Solomon! Gramps says he wants to play with you! And he’ll give you snacks too!” I called.

“Wh-What are you saying, Tenma?! H-Hey, get away from me! Nooooooooo!”

I knew that Gramps’s legs were also numb and that he was barely able to stand. The reason he wasn’t hobbling like Amur was because he’d secretly used magic on himself. He’d thought Recovery magic would be too easy to spot, so he had used Flying magic instead. He had made himself float a little bit above the ground and was casually using his cane to move himself along.

“Gramps, you never learn. You might as well have just used Recovery magic at

this point.”

“I feel bad about what I did, so call these two off!”

There was no point in staying here forever, so I called Shiromaru and Solomon back with some treats. I then cast Recovery magic on Gramps’s and Amur’s legs.

“This time, as punishment, you two will have to drive and keep watch all night until we get to Viscount Lobo’s city,” I said.

We still had a week until we got there, so they were facing quite harsh consequences for their actions.

Back in his days as an adventurer, Gramps would’ve done this many times, but since he had to support Amur, it would be a lot more trouble. It went without saying that she lacked experience.

“I’m sorry...” the two of them said in unison while they trudged to the driver’s seat.

Shiromaru and Solomon started moving towards the front of the carriage again, but I told them to slow down and come to me if Gramps and Amur tried to make them race again. I didn’t think Shiromaru would do it on purpose after seeing them get in trouble, but it was possible that he would speed up naturally due to his competitive spirit. I wanted to say something just in case.

Three days after that happened, the carriage suddenly stopped again. They’d been driving safely this whole time, so I figured something must’ve *really* happened this time.

“What’s the matter, Gramps?”

“There’s a group of armed men heading towards us,” he said. “They’re still far ahead, so they probably haven’t spotted us yet.”

Gramps had formed a telescope-like shape with his right hand and placed it over one of his eyes to look in this distance. I’d never seen that magic used before, but I figured it was probably a spell for seeing far away.

I used Detection and saw there was a group of about fifty people roughly three kilometers away. I used Identify on one of them and discovered the person was a regular beastfolk soldier who belonged to the city we were

heading to.

“I see something else... By the way, teach me that spell!”

Since I was keeping my abilities of Identify and Detection a secret, the telescope magic Gramps had used seemed to be a perfect cover for it. Plus, the fact that he could see targets with his own eyes was an advantage over Detection. I thought it would be a good idea if he taught me how to do it, if it was easy enough. Still, I thought Gramps probably knew I could use Detection and Identify, or at least something similar. He was called a sage, and although magic like that existed in this world, it was very rare.

Well, it was said that everyone who could use that kind of magic—even those with very low precision—was either a noble or a member of the underworld. And their existence was rarely disclosed or acknowledged. After all, even if it wasn't very precise, it could easily be used for crimes or to exploit others' weaknesses. That information could be used to secretly ambush people and eliminate them. By the way, the reason no one knew when I was using those two abilities was because of my Conceal ability. If it were to be discovered that I had used Detection and Identify, I could be labeled a criminal.

Delving into secret passages in the royal castle or looking up personal information about the king and others (like their age or abilities) without permission fell squarely into the realm of hacking into someone's most vital secrets. Well, maybe the royal family might let it slide with just small complaints, but other people surely would make a fuss—especially the reformists.

I went off on a tangent there, but at any rate, that was why I hadn't even told Gramps.

“Well, it's not a difficult spell once you get the hang of it. You put a barrier on both sides of your hand after you make the shape of a cylinder, like so. That's the trick to it.”

“Ah, I did it. Thanks, Gramps!”

From Gramps's explanation, I came up with the idea of using a magical barrier to make the telescope-like shape of my hand more like a tube. Basically, I thought of the two barriers as being like glass, with one shaped like a convex

lens and one shaped like a concave lens, and fitting them into the ends of the hand-shaped cylinder. At first, the accuracy was pretty poor, but I made fine adjustments until I got the focus just right.

“What?!” he cried. “Do you know how many *years* it took for me to master this spell?!”

“You can tell me all about it later,” I said. “Oh, Blanca, Amur, I think they might be friends of yours.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Really?”

“Maybe. There’s a lot of tiger beastfolk, and I can see the armor they’re wearing. But most of all, the woman in front looks like you, Amur. She could be your older sister or something.”

“Sister...?”

Both of them looked puzzled, so maybe it was just a coincidental resemblance. At any rate, there were a bunch of people ahead, traveling in an orderly fashion. They were most likely the backup the village had requested to deal with the goblin horde. And if I was wrong and they were soldiers from a different city, all I had to do was show them the letter with Queen Maria’s seal on it and they’d leave us alone.

I immediately took the reins from Gramps so I could show them the letter and prove my identity as soon as possible. Then, I wondered if it would be easier to get them to listen to me if a fellow beastfolk spoke to them. I was about to ask Blanca about it, but Amur stubbornly refused to give up her place next to me. In the end, Amur and I sat side by side as I led Thunderbolt towards the group of soldiers.

“Stop that carriage! Are you the ones who just came from the last village?”

“If so, there’s something we want to ask you.”

From the group of soldiers, two young tiger beastfolk rushed over to us. They seemingly wanted to ascertain our identities.

“That’s right,” I said. “I’ve come here on official business from Sagan City. I’m

Tenma Otori, an adventurer. I'd like you to call over your leader."

The two beastfolk looked suspicious, but I showed them my family crest, along with the Sanga and Sammons family crests, just in case. Thanks to that, one of them ran off to let their leader know what I'd said. I gave him the Otori family crest to show, but I had refused to also hand over the duke's and marquis's family crests. That had given them pause and was why the other one stayed behind. He seemed blatantly wary of us, but I had to wonder why he had a confused look on his face when he saw Amur.

"They look pretty intimidating from this angle," I said as I watched the group of beastfolk making their way towards us. The majority of them were tiger beastfolk, and they all looked pretty fierce. They almost looked like a gang on their way to raid a rival's headquarters or something—so intimidating I felt the color drain from my face and got the urge to move out of their way.

"You say you're an adventurer named Tenma? I've never heard of the Otoris, and I don't recognize this crest... Hm?"

The tiger beastfolk in front tossed my crest back to me, but then he suddenly froze for some reason. His eyes were glued to Amur standing next to me, and then he glanced at Blanca, who was peeking out the carriage window behind us.

"What are you doing with Amur and Blanca, you brat? Get away from her!" He bared his fangs angrily, which only made Amur cling to me.

I peeled her off of me and pushed her away, but that apparently didn't help.

Now, the man said, "What problem do you have with Amur, brat?!" which seemed pretty contradictory to the last thing he said.

"I'm sorry, Tenma," said Blanca. "This is my brother-in-law Lobo, Amur's father. And the one you thought was Amur's sister is actually..."

"Get away from Amuuuuuur!!!"

Since I showed no signs of backing away from Amur (because I physically couldn't, as she had latched on to my shirt and wouldn't let go), Viscount Lobo snapped and tried to lunge at me.

"Be quiet!"

But the woman behind him whacked him on the head with her spear to stop him. She looked really strong...

“Oof!”



After being hit on the head from behind, Viscount Lobo fell forward. His face smashed into the ground. But even though their leader had suffered from some quite cruel treatment, none of the other soldiers blinked an eye.

“I’m so sorry about that,” the woman apologized.

Gramps appeared from beside Blanca. “Are you Amur’s sister?”

An awkward look came over Blanca’s face, and Amur burst out laughing.

“That’s a good one, Gramps!” Amur gave him a thumbs-up, but this woman’s face looked a bit tense.

Blanca must’ve noticed how she was gripping her spear a bit more tightly now, because he quietly pulled his head back inside the carriage.

Meanwhile, Amur seemed completely oblivious to everyone’s reactions. “She just makes herself look young,” she said. “Actually, she looks like a total old la— Oof!”

Amur cracked up laughing and didn’t even finish her sentence as the woman whacked her on the forehead with her spear. The blow was so intense that I could feel the impact of it just standing next to Amur. If it had been aimed at me, I probably would’ve stumbled backwards and hit the back of my head on something. That’s how powerful it was. The only saving grace was that she was hit with the butt end of the spear and it was a quick jab. Otherwise, Amur would’ve died a painful death. Still, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had a crack in her skull after that hit.

“Turn towards me and I’ll cast Recovery magic on you, Amur,” I told her.

“Tenma... Heal me with a kiss. Eek!”

In lieu of a kiss, I flicked her forehead instead. It seemed like her head wasn’t in as bad shape as I’d thought (her brain was working fine, after all), so I took out some ointment instead of casting a spell on her.

“Tenma, you bully. I still love you, though,” Amur said.

“Let’s just be friends.”

“I’ll never let you have Amu— Argh!”

“You two seem awfully close!”

Viscount Lobo made a sudden recovery only to have the woman stomp on his head and smoosh his face back into the ground. This time, he went even deeper than the last time.

“Well, if this lady here isn’t Amur’s sister, then...”

“I’m Amur’s mother!” she said.

“If you think about her age— Ahh!”

“Tch, I missed.”

Personally, I felt like Amur’s mother’s actions were a bit intentional, but since she looked so young, it didn’t seem odd to me. The same couldn’t be said for Amur, however, as she once again tried to make a joke. She narrowly avoided the butt end of her mother’s spear by quickly lunging to the side.

Amur emerged unscathed, but the same couldn’t be said for Viscount Lobo, who once again had his head stomped on by Amur’s mother...

“Is Dad dead?”

“No, he’s fine. His biggest strength is his sturdiness, after all,” Amur’s mother said as she glanced down at Viscount Lobo.

His face was still smashed into the ground. It seemed like his position within the family was at rock bottom.

“Well, putting that matter aside, you must be the man Amur’s chosen. Shall we fight?” she said to me, and then happily began preparing herself for battle for some odd reason.

“Why did this happen...” I mumbled.

Gramps was the only one who responded to my mutterings. “Give it up, Tenma. It’s a kind of obsession they have. Many beastfolk just want to test their own strength.”

Everyone else was watching on with great interest and cheering as I faced off with Amur’s mother, whose name was apparently Hana.

Hana ignored her surroundings and swung the spear she'd whacked Viscount Lobo and Amur with. It seemed like she was just warming up and was eager and ready to go. Meanwhile, I took out the wooden stick I always used for practice and did some light stretching exercises myself.

Honestly, I didn't want to do this at all. It seemed like it would be a hassle whether I won or lost. But when I watched Hana move, I could tell that if I kept up that attitude, I'd lose easily. Amur and Blanca had said that she was the strongest among their people. I needed the same kind of determination I'd had when I fought against Blanca in the tournament, or else this time I might walk away with more than just a broken arm.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yes."

"All right. Let's begin. Blanca, will you give us the signal?"

"Sure. But first, let's go over the rules. Weapons must either have their blades covered or have no sharp edges. Biting, eye gouging, and attacking vital points are prohibited. And if your opponent is KO'd, no more attacking them. The fight will end when one of you surrenders or when I decide that one of you is incapacitated and can't continue. If both parties agree to these rules, take your positions," Blanca said.

He'd had an apologetic look on his face as he explained the rules. He was probably hoping to find some way we could call off this fight, but I knew we wouldn't be that lucky this time.

"Aaaand begin!" he called out.

"Take that!"

The moment Blanca's hand dropped, Hana thrust her spear forward. She only let out one battle cry but delivered three spear strikes in quick succession, all in one breath.

This was my third time seeing this fighting style now, the first two being with Amur, so I had anticipated her doing that from the start. However, I didn't expect *three* strikes at once, so I missed my chance to counter.

“Oops, I missed... Just kidding!” she said.

“Tch.”

Hana hadn’t expected me to dodge her first strike, so she let up for a moment. But that was just a trap—she tried to counter my attempt to close the distance between us by swinging her spear sideways.

I instinctively raised my wooden stick to block a direct hit, but I was forcefully knocked back. I’d expected her to be quite strong since she was Amur’s mother, but I hadn’t thought she’d be at *this* level.

“I might be in trouble,” I said.

“Really? You look like you’re having an easy time!”

Hana bantered with me while continuing to thrust her spear in my direction and keeping her distance. She varied the speed of her movements, making it hard for me to find a chance to get close.

Her attacks were so fierce that she gradually pushed me back until I had no choice but to assume a defensive position.

“What’s the matter, huh? Getting scared?” called a voice from afar. “You won’t earn any respect if you fight like that!”

Right now, the most excited one here was Viscount Lobo. He was jeering at me from the sidelines when he saw I couldn’t fight back. It made it sound like he was the one sparring with me.

“Shut up!”

“Ugh!” he cried out.

A stone suddenly struck him in the face and he fell backwards, motionless. The blow had come from Hana, who apparently found him just as annoying as I did.

Now that he was down for the count...

“This is my chance!” Amur cried out. She quickly grabbed a rope from somewhere and tied him up. She wound it around him a bunch of times so he couldn’t get loose and then tossed him far away like she was throwing out the

trash.

“Hm? You could’ve attacked me just now, you know,” Hana said to me.

“I was afraid of taking that kind of opportunity, so I hesitated. And Viscount Lobo was bothering me too.”

I had stopped moving and waited for everything to settle amid the commotion. Hana seemed amused by my actions and words, and she laughed out loud before readjusting her grip on her spear.

Despite the unexpected interruption, we then got right back into it. But I knew things would play out the same way if I still wasn’t able to move in closer.

*She’s as powerful as Blanca but with more explosive strength. She’s just as agile as Amur, maybe even more so. This is going to be difficult...*

After I analyzed her moves, I decided to take a gamble.

So far, her attacks had either been thrusts from a distance or wide swings whenever I tried to get close. I could dodge her thrusts, but I had to block her swings with my stick, which led to me being knocked back in the process.

That’s why I decided I’d focus on the thrusts I could avoid instead of the swings, which kept increasing in power due to centrifugal force. I held my stick high and baited her to strike at me. For a moment, she seemed confused by my change in stance, but then she quickly aimed for my torso.

“Take this!” I cried out.

I swung my stick down but missed her spear. Rather, she made me miss. And not only that, but since I’d attacked with such force, my stick slammed into the ground and snapped right in two.

“Better luck next time!” she yelled. She seemed to have anticipated that I’d target her spear and had pulled it back before quickly jabbing with it again.

However, I was waiting for that.

“Haah! Hi-yah!” I sidestepped her thrust to avoid it and then threw my broken stick towards Hana. Since it had snapped in two, its tip was so sharp she couldn’t block it with her arm. Hana had no choice but to twist her body to dodge it, and that gave me my first real opening of the fight.

“Here I come!” I stepped on Hana’s spear and used the momentum to deliver a spinning kick. But since she quickly let go of her spear, my kick only grazed her cheek.

“Looks like we’re on even ground now, huh?”

That was the outcome I’d anticipated too. Ideally, I’d hoped my kick would end the fight, but of course, things didn’t go that smoothly. I tossed the spear away as far as I could, making sure it would be out of her reach for the rest of the fight. Unfortunately, it ended up hitting Viscount Lobo, but since its tip was covered and it had bounced a few times, he wasn’t injured. Plus, Hana herself had mentioned how sturdy he was.

“So you saw that coming, huh? Well, I like fighting at a close range too!” Hana then closed the distance and initiated close combat. It was no wonder she liked fighting this way—she was skilled and had sharp, powerful attacks, but I’d seen those same moves a lot lately, so handling them wasn’t too challenging.

“Just like Amur,” I commented.

The similarity to Amur’s fighting style was obvious. Although Hana’s attacks were superior, I had already expected that much. And I had consistently defeated Amur in our training sessions. Close combat was way easier for me to handle than going up against a spear too.

“How about this?” Hana grabbed the front of my shirt and my opposite sleeve, attempting some kind of judo throw, but... “Huh?!”

I braced my arm and pulled my leg away to stop Hana from lifting me, which resulted in me flipping her over instead. It was a perfect reversal of her move.

I placed my fingers gently against her neck as she lay on the ground.

She gave in immediately. “I surrender.”

“The match is over! The winner is...Tenma!”

Blanca declared my victory, but relief that nothing major had happened was clear on his face.

“Are we done now?” I asked.

“Yes. You’ve shown me your strength.”

I held out a hand to Hana to help her up, and she flashed me a meaningful smile.

“Tennnmaaaa!” Seeing this, Amur rushed over and tried to get between us. I leaned over, not wanting to get in the way of this reunion between a mother and her child, and pushed Amur towards her mother instead.

“Oh, what a passionate hug. But that hurts, Amur.”

“I-I surrender!” cried Amur.

Amur had thrown her arms around her mother at full force, thinking she’d be hugging me instead. Hana had lightly accepted the embrace but then squeezed her into a huge bear hug. Amur was trying to tap out, but Hana still wouldn’t let her go.

A few minutes after being released, Amur lay on the ground. “My insides... They’re squashed...” she muttered, but no one else besides Hana and I seemed to hear her.

“All right, I’m next. I’m going to avenge Hana!” Viscount Lobo declared.

“Will you knock it off already, Brother?”

“Lemme go, Blanca!”

He tried to charge forward, but Blanca quickly stopped him. I was grateful for that—I didn’t want a weird battle going on that might lead to him holding a grudge against me as that could interfere with Queen Maria’s request. My duties would be over as soon as I presented the letter, though. I didn’t know what was written in it, so I wanted to remain quiet at least until I received a reply.

However, I had to admit that even though Hana had thrown rocks at him, Amur had tossed him into the air, he’d been hit by a spear, and he was currently tied up, the fact that Viscount Lobo still showed fighting spirit was quite impressive. Should I say that was what I expected from the leader of the SAR...? Well, he definitely was one of the sturdiest people I’d ever met—that was for certain.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I noticed Amur and Hana talking

quite animatedly. I had a bad feeling about it, so I turned away from them and started walking back towards the carriage. I noticed that Blanca looked equally unsettled as he left Viscount Lobo and joined me.

“It’s decided!” Hana yelled. “Tenma, you’re going to marry Amur!”

“I love you, Mom!”

“What?!” I cried out.

It seemed like I should’ve walked away sooner. I was so shocked at Hana’s declaration that I made a weird noise. I wasn’t the only one who was surprised—Gramps, Blanca, and Viscount Lobo all reacted similarly.

“The two of you are about the same age, and you’re definitely strong enough to be worthy of our Amur. You have no qualms about being with her, correct?”

“He doesn’t!” Amur answered.

The two of them were quite excited, but the color had drained from Blanca’s face. Conversely, Viscount Lobo’s face was now bright red. Gramps was counting something on his fingers, and the guards around us seemed to be making bets. Meanwhile...

“That just makes me wanna fight even more...brat.”

Viscount Lobo came up from behind me and slipped his bloody arm around my shoulder with a grin. Apparently, he’d found his way out of the ropes by brute force. His face was smeared with red, and his eyes were bloodshot too.

“Darling, get that scary face away from Amur’s future husband.”

“I won’t accept it!” he shouted, and he dug his fingers into my shoulder.

It hurt so much and I was so pissed at having been dragged into this crap that I impulsively grabbed his hand and twisted it up. I squeezed the acupressure point at the base of his thumb and he screamed, falling to his knees.

“Whoa, Tenma defeated Dad too! Ha! He eliminated the obstacle!” Amur cried.

“Amazing. I can’t believe you took him out so quickly!” Hana said.

“No, that doesn’t matter,” Blanca said. “Sis, Amur... I’m against Tenma

marrying into the family too.”

“Th-Thanks, Blanca...” said Viscount Lobo as he got up again.

It looked like it was Amur and Hana versus Blanca and Viscount Lobo here, and now there were sparks flying on both sides. Now that the guards could see the clear division here, the betting heated up even more.

“Gramps, it seems a lot of tiger beastfolk have bad tempers...”

“I’m surprised it’s to this extent, though...” Gramps said.

Gramps and I pulled back and watched the two groups start to fight and the tiger beastfolk soldiers clamor about. The match itself was quite fierce but was well worth watching since everyone involved was so skilled. I wouldn’t have been surprised if someone told me I was watching the final round of the pairs event in the tournament.

Among the four of them, Hana was the strongest. She was followed by Blanca, Viscount Lobo, and then Amur. Because of that, the two groups were balanced well. However, compared to the other three, Amur was outmatched in physical abilities, team fighting, and technique, so overall, it seemed like Amur and Hana were at a disadvantage.

“Take that!”

“Oof!”

Blanca took advantage of a brief opening and launched himself at Amur, sending her flying with a powerful tackle. This created a situation where Hana momentarily had to face Blanca and Viscount Lobo on her own. In just a few seconds, the two men managed to surround her; Blanca distracted her while the viscount successfully immobilized her from behind... Frankly, it looked rather suspicious from an outsider’s perspective...



Now that Hana had been seized, Blanca was able to defeat Amur as she returned, effectively ending the match. Hana fiercely resisted until the very end, causing considerable damage to the viscount as he held tightly onto her in a bear hug. Basically, she repeatedly kicked his legs, stomped on his feet, and headbutted him, leaving him bleeding from the mouth and nose. He ended up with two black eyes too. But despite all that, he showed incredible determination and never let go of her. He was clearly adamantly opposed to Amur getting married.

“Blanca! I know why he’s against it, but what about you?” Hana asked.

“Sister... When it comes to marriage, it’s important to consider Tenma’s wishes too,” he said. “Plus, he’s just been given a family name directly from the royal family. You can’t just up and decide that he’s going to marry into our family, and I doubt the royal family will like that idea either. Plus, the queen seems to have her own ideas about Tenma’s match. So, if you make the wrong move, you could create a rift between the SAR and the royal family. We should avoid that at all costs.”

A smirk appeared on Viscount Lobo’s battered face as he listened to Blanca’s explanation. I couldn’t help but think that he would make the perfect yakuza villain.

*Honestly, Amur should be thankful that she inherited Hana’s looks and not his...*

“Tenma, you received a family name from the royal family? Are you a noble?” Hana asked.

I shook my head.

Blanca explained the situation further. “That’s only because he didn’t want a title of nobility. There are rumors in the capital saying that if he wanted a title, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he were made a count. That’s what the royal family wants. By the way, Tenma’s parents were close friends with the king and queen, and Tenma’s grandfather over there is the famous Master Merlin the Sage. And Tenma himself won both the individual and team competitions at the last tournament in the capital. On top of that, he defeated an earth dragon that appeared near the capital, helped thwart a coup d’état, once saved the king’s

life, and slew an ancient dragon that had turned into a zombie all by himself. In fact, it's downright absurd that he *doesn't* have a title of nobility by now! To be blunt, he's more important to the royal family than you are, Brother."

I hadn't heard anything directly about me being a count, but knowing them, I was certain that if I asked for it, they'd give it to me. Even I was well aware I'd done more than enough to deserve it. Once Hana saw that I didn't deny what Blanca had said, she realized he had been telling the truth. She pondered this information for a while.

But then, she said something outrageous.

"Well, if you don't want to marry into our family, how about we send Amur away to marry into yours instead? If you're basically a noble, then you can have multiple wives," Hana reasoned.

Blanca seemed to agree. "Hm, I think that should be acceptable."

Amur cheered, and Viscount Lobo looked like he was on the verge of despair.

"Good. As long as Amur has more than two children, our family won't have a problem with it," Hana said.

The conversation then began to escalate as everyone completely ignored me. The viscount's expression grew more grim by the second. He seemed to be hanging onto his sense of reason, probably because he'd learned of my ties to the royal family, but it was likely only a matter of time before he'd snap.

"Now, let's go back home... Oh, wait—we have some business to take care of in that village first," Hana said.

"If you're talking about the goblins, there's no need," Blanca said. "We slew them all on our way through town. I'm sure it'll be a good idea to send a few people there to check in just in case, but we took out the goblin boss and I don't think any got away. Even if there are still some stragglers, the villagers should be able to take care of them."

"I see. In that case, I'll send half of the squad to deal with the aftermath and investigate the surrounding area. I'm sure it's fine if you say so, Blanca, but it's better to be safe than sorry. Everyone else, come with me. Let's go back home."

As soon as Hana heard Blanca's explanation, she divided the squad into two and sent half to the village. The others were supposed to go home with us, but they wanted to see the king and other high-ranking goblins first. I took them out of my magic bag and showed them to Hana and the others.

"It's really amazing that you're able to beat so many high-ranked monsters."

But as soon as Hana began to praise my accomplishments, the viscount pushed back.

"Hmph! These guys are nothing. I could take 'em down easily too! It's nothing to be proud of!"

Hana glared at him, which led him to quickly fall quiet. "You can't be serious. I'm sure you *could* defeat them, but could you do it this cleanly?"

"Probably not. Brother likes to fight with brute force, like me and Amur. Maybe he could in a one-on-one battle, but if he had to face many at once, the materials from the leaders would probably be unusable when he was finished with them," Blanca said.

Viscount Lobo glared at me after getting an earful from the two of them. I had a feeling he was doing that because Amur was right by my side again. Of course, he only shot daggers at me when she was looking away, and if she was about to make eye contact again, he would avert his gaze.

"Viscount Lobo," I said.

"Y-Yes? What is it?" He stammered a little, probably not expecting me to speak to him.

I took out the letter Queen Maria had entrusted to me. "This letter is from the royal family for you."

"Hmph, what a pain. I'll write you a letter certifying that I received it. Hang on a minute." The viscount had one of his subordinates bring him over a paper and pen and was about to write something down, but...

"Wait!"

Suddenly, Hana grabbed the paper from him and crumpled it up. "You've received the letter, but you shouldn't write the certification here. You have to

read it first, and in some cases, you need to write a reply. It would be wrong to do it now, and it would be more convenient to send it along with someone who was on their way to the capital anyway.”

And with that, both my and the viscount’s plans were foiled. He had wanted to separate me and Amur, and I had wanted to travel freely around the SAR. Well, it would have been easier if his plan succeeded so it didn’t matter to me either way, but he appeared to be quite serious about it and now seemed clearly depressed.

“Anyway, I want you to come back to our house, Tenma,” Hana said before making her way into my carriage.

And since Viscount Lobo needed to lead the soldiers back home, he had to travel on horseback separately.

## Part Three

“I see it! Look, Tenma. That’s Nanao over there,” Amur said.

“That’s the city in the center of the SAR. It was built by Amur’s great-grandfather, Grampy Kei, and her grandfather, Crow,” Blanca explained.

Four days had passed since we had met up with Viscount Lobo and his party, and we’d finally arrived at the city of Nanao. My first impression was that it didn’t look that big for a place that was supposedly the central city of the SAR, but I realized that was because it was built up on a hill, it might not have looked that big from our vantage point. In reality, it was about two-thirds the size of Sagan.

One reason Nanao had been built on top of a hill was that they’d predicted a war between them and the kingdom of Krastin.

Around a century ago, the SAR had practically forced itself away from the kingdom to become independent; back then, they had called it the Southern Republic. But since it had originally been a domain belonging to the kingdom, conflicts had broken out several times between the two—in the end, it was handed to the kingdom in the form of an autonomous region.

Nanao had been built shortly before that time. There were steep mountains to the east, a deep forest where monsters roamed to the west, and long, gentle slopes to the north and south of it. Apparently, Grampy Kei and his son Crow laid the foundation for the city. However, even though the battle had ended before the royal army even reached Nanao, they had still continued constructing the city.

The reason the SAR was recognized as an autonomous region was that one thing that had led to the war in the first place was discrimination against beastfolk. There had also been fears from the king at the time that the country’s power would decline if they clashed with the south. Beastfolk were generally stronger than humans on average, so even though they could have won by fighting with all their might, the resulting damage would have been enormous due to the power imbalance between them and the kingdom.

Once the soldiers at the gate saw that the party who had left to slay the goblins was back much earlier than anticipated, they seemed surprised. Viscount Lobo quickly told them the problem had been dealt with, and we were welcomed with cheers.

We proceeded to the center of the city as people praised us. The buildings here almost seemed Japanese-style, which was rare—the vast majority of the buildings in this world were constructed in Western styles. I saw a two-story building that resembled a fort in front of us, and according to Amur, it was her family's manor.

Hana explained something to the soldiers who had greeted us, and they came over to Thunderbolt and began to guide us onwards. I followed their directions and saw something that looked like a horse barn. I stopped the carriage there and unhooked Thunderbolt. Then, some women who appeared to be maids appeared and led us inside the grounds.

Besides the main residence, there were several other buildings on these grounds, such as a soldiers' barracks and a dormitory for the servants.

We were led into the foyer of the largest building, and Gramps was about to go inside with his shoes on.

Amur stopped us. "Tenma, go ahead and take your shoes off here," she said.

She explained that when entering most of the buildings in the SAR, it was required that you take off your shoes or change into indoor shoes. In some places, you had to wash your feet after removing your shoes to avoid getting the floors dirty. There were various other detailed rules too, and all of them were close to what we had back in Japan.

"It's a pain to have to change your shoes every time you enter a building... You don't seem to mind too much, though, Tenma," Gramps commented.

"I always took them off back in Kukuri Village and at your mansion in the capital too. It's annoying to clean the floors if you walk around with dirty shoes," I said.

"Hrm, now that you mention it, you *did* do that..."

There were many unusual rules in this world, but I just couldn't bring myself

to wear outside shoes inside. I always took my shoes off or changed to indoor ones. I'd never forced anyone else to do so, and Aina was the only one who had seemed to wonder if she should also adopt the practice.

"We always have indoor shoes for guests, so you can use those," Amur said, taking out a pair of large slippers from the shoe box. If Grampy Kei really had been the man I thought he was, from what I recalled, I didn't think they had slippers in that era. But then again, I thought that perhaps things people needed tended to naturally take similar forms, even across different worlds and eras.

"Hm, these indoor shoes are quite comfortable. They're not tight, so they're very easy to wear," Gramps said. He seemed to like the slippers and even asked Blanca where he could buy a pair.

After being in a room that looked like a waiting area for a while, Blanca eventually came back to fetch us.

"Amur's parents are waiting for you," he said, stopping in front of a room in the back of the mansion.

I looked at the flowers painted on the sliding doors and the Japanese-style garden visible from the veranda. I was now almost certain that a person who had been reincarnated from Japan had been involved here.

*This is definitely an isekai version of Japan...* I thought.

Amur called into the room with the closed doors. "Tenma and Master Merlin are here with me. May we come in?"

"Yes," Viscount Lobo responded from inside.

Once she received permission, Amur somewhat roughly slid the door open and walked inside. We followed her and I saw Viscount Lobo and Hana sitting at the far end of the room. Two rows of their subordinates were sitting on the floor as if to create a path towards them. It was like a scene out of a historical drama or something.

I was about to bow before entering, but Blanca stopped me.

"Tenma, you don't have to bow your head. Just walk straight to the center of

the room and take a seat. You don't have to show them respect when you sit down," he whispered. After that quick explanation, Blanca walked past the other subordinates and took a seat close to Viscount Lobo.

Gramps and I entered the room, following Blanca's instructions. Some of the subordinates were glaring at us, but they quickly got elbowed by the others. Once we reached the center of the room, I sat down cross-legged and Gramps did the same to my right. Amur sat on my left side for some reason.

"Amur, you need to sit over here," Hana admonished her, and Amur reluctantly stood up and sat down next to her mother.

Viscount Lobo watched that with a sour look on his face but said nothing about it. Instead, he addressed me. "Tenma, you did well delivering the letter from the royal family. Now..."

"Before you do that, if you have any followers, you can bring them out now," said Hana, interrupting him. "I feel bad that they've been inside your bag for so long."

On the way to Nanao, I had told them I was a Tamer, but I hadn't told them what kind of followers I had. I had wanted to save that information in case I could use it to my advantage later. However, they might've already been aware of Rocket and the others due to Blanca or Amur saying something.

Viscount Lobo didn't react at the mention of my followers, but more than half of his subordinates began making a fuss. They might've realized that I could use my followers to launch a surprise attack on them here if I wanted to. I certainly had no intention of doing such a thing, but I was counting on my followers to boost my military force if I were to be on the receiving end of an attack.

"If you insist," I said.

First, I took Rocket out and placed him behind me. A few of the subordinates rolled their eyes at the sight, clearly underestimating him. But their faces tensed up when I brought out Shiromaru, and they were so shocked they nearly fell over when I took out Solomon after that.

"In addition to these followers, I have Thunderbolt—meaning the horse who pulled my carriage—and two spiders. This room is too small for Thunderbolt,

and unfortunately, my spiders are shy,” I said, sending a clear message to those who looked down on Rocket that I still had plenty of backup. I couldn’t share that I had even more on top of that—meaning the golems. I would let Blanca or Hana tell them about those later to give them a proper scare.

“Ah, so you are the one the merchants from the capital were gossiping about,” Hana said. She must’ve had a feeling those rumors had been about me because she didn’t look that surprised, but Viscount Lobo did.

Since Hana had ridden in my carriage, she had probably picked up on their scent. The viscount hadn’t gotten close to the carriage at all, though, which was probably why he’d had no idea.

“Hey... May I touch them?” Hana asked as she stared at Shiromaru and Solomon. I could see her hands twitching. I told her to ask them herself, so she happily walked up and got their permission. Then, she said, “This one feels the best!”

She seemed to have really taken a liking to Rocket’s squishy, cold texture. It was funny to see how Shiromaru and Solomon looked jealous. If this were happening in a manga, their speech bubbles would say, “Hey! We’re always the ones who get all the attention!”

“Phew... Okay, please continue.” Looking satisfied, Hana instructed the viscount to go on, and she plopped back down holding Rocket in her arms. Now, she could enjoy him to her heart’s content since her husband was taking over the discussion.

“R-Right...” Viscount Lobo said. “A-Anyway, I’ve read the letter and we’ll be having a discussion about the contents. I will need some time before I can write a reply, so I’d like for you to tell the royal family...”

“...That you’ve completed your mission and you’ll stay in Nanao for a while!” Hana interjected. “I’ll arrange your accommodations, and we’ll take care of all the expenses, of course. Honestly, I’d love for you to stay here at the mansion, but I think you probably wouldn’t get the freedom you’re used to here. There are a lot of short-tempered people around, after all...”

“Is that a formal request?” I asked, and she nodded.

“All he has to do is deliver the response! We can ask one of the adventurers at the guild to do that!” Viscount Lobo protested.

“Darling, we would need to pay the quest fee in addition to covering the journey to the capital and back. There would be a hazard fee as well, since it’s a dangerous journey. When you think about all that, it’s much cheaper to have Tenma do it. And not only that, but considering his skills, he would do it in much less time too,” Hana pointed out.

“But won’t Tenma have to bring back proof that he delivered it?”

“It would be best to entrust it to someone in Sagan or to a merchant caravan operating in the royal capital. You couldn’t entrust a reply addressed to the royal family to them, but you *can* entrust one of them with proof that such a letter has been delivered. Besides, you’re the honorary viscount of the SAR, so there shouldn’t be a problem,” Hana said.

“Hrm...”

It seemed like Hana had won the argument. She had a triumphant smile on her face, and after whispering something into the ear of one of her subordinates, that subordinate went outside.

“Now, about the payment for our request. The base fee would be 50,000G with hazard pay of 10,000G, making for a total of 60,000G. We’ll also pay for your lodging and food at the inn while staying here,” Hana told me.

I did some quick calculations in my head and decided that since I had Thunderbolt now, this would be a pretty good job. I decided to accept. Just to be sure, I checked with Gramps, and he didn’t have any objections to it either.

“In a little while... Oh, there he is,” Hana said, noticing her subordinate’s return. “Amur, will you take Tenma to the usual place?”

“Okay!”

“Wha—?!” the viscount exclaimed.

“Darling, Blanca. Will you two stay here so we can discuss something?”

The two of them didn’t look thrilled but sat back down anyway. Meanwhile, the subordinates all filed out of the room, discussing their plans.

“I’ll show you to the inn, Tenma,” Amur said.

“Okay, thanks. Rocket, Shiromaru, Solomon, go ahead and get back into the bag.”

The three of them returned to my bag one by one. When Rocket slipped out of Hana’s arms, she looked extremely sad.

Amur ignored Hana’s reaction and took me by the hand. She started to head out of the room, but...

Gramps was on his hands and knees, unable to move. “Tenma... My legs fell asleep. Can you wait a little while?”

I went over to him and was about to cast Recovery magic, but for some reason, Shiromaru and Solomon leaped out of my bag and began poking Gramps’s legs. Apparently, they remembered that Gramps’d had a very funny reaction when they had done that on the journey here. Of course, that just ended with him getting mad at them again.

“There’s somewhere I want to stop by before we go to the inn,” Amur said after we left the mansion.

I wondered where we were going, but it turned out that our destination was another large residence a short distance away. She said we were going somewhere *before* heading to the inn, so I knew this wasn’t the inn. Even so, I wasn’t sure why we were here.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Amur went straight through the gates.

“Sana! I’m here!” she called loudly as she opened the front door.

“Is she your sister, Amur? No, wait...Hana’s sister?” I asked.

A woman who looked a lot like Amur and Hana appeared. However, she looked older than both of them, so I thought maybe she was Hana’s older sister. It turned out I was wrong.

“No,” Amur said. “This is mom’s younger sister—Blanca’s wife.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Sana.”

Amur and Hana both had childish streaks to them, but Sana elegantly bowed her head. Seeing her do that, Gramps and I hastily introduced ourselves.

“Is this your boyfriend, Amur?” she asked.

“Yes!”

“No,” I interjected.

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

Even though this was our first time meeting, Sana believed me instead of her niece. She invited us in with a smile on her face, but Amur said that she’d just dropped by to say hello and she had to show us to our inn now. The woman looked disappointed at that, but when Sana told us that Blanca was home with her right now, her cheeks flushed happily.

“Are you sure Sana is Hana’s younger sister? Not her older sister?”

“Yes, Mom’s older than her... Probably.”

It really seemed like Sana was the older one, considering her calm personality and mannerisms. Amur narrowed her eyes as if she were trying hard to remember, but her answer hadn’t sounded very confident.

Thinking about their heights, Amur was the tallest, followed by Hana and Sana. The difference between them wasn’t very much, though, because they basically all had the same body type. Hana and Amur seemed to favor clothes that emphasized comfort, but Sana was wearing a garment that resembled a kimono. Maybe that was why she looked older to me. However, if a stranger were to see the three ladies together, they might mistake them all for sisters.

“All right, I’ll take you to the inn now.”

“Thanks.”

After we’d walked away, Gramps had a question. “By the way, does Sana run some kind of shop out of her house? I heard a bunch of noise coming from the back.”

I had actually been wondering the same thing as I’d noticed the noise too. It had sounded like some kind of weaving loom, but I had missed my chance to ask about it because Amur was talking.

“Sana is like...the head of Nanao’s craft workshop or something. Honestly, I’m not that interested in it, so I don’t know much.”

I thought it was a bit unusual to not know what your close relative who lived nearby did for work, but this was Amur, after all. If it wasn’t food or weapons, she wasn’t interested in it.

“Maybe I can ask Blanca if I can visit the workshop sometime,” I said.

“I think asking him is a good idea. Anyway, we’re here. This is the inn.”

Amur had led us to a three-story building that looked more like a traditional Japanese inn than a Western-style hotel. It was just past Sana and Blanca’s estate and less than a kilometer away from Amur’s house. I didn’t know much about other inns in Nanao, but since this one was recommended by the viscount, it was probably one of the top ones here.

As soon as Amur spoke to the person at the front desk, someone who appeared to be the owner came out and led us to a separate building out back. I learned that this building was designed to be secluded from the rest of the property and was exclusively reserved for the viscount’s family. Not even outside nobles were normally allowed to stay there. In fact, it had been three years since it was last used, and its previous guest had been Archduke Ernest.

“This is a nice place.”

“This inn is called Ryusaiken, and it’s the finest inn in Nanao. It was originally started by Grampy Kei, but after a while, he thought it was too much of a pain to run. He handed it over to his subordinates instead,” Amur explained.

*Hmm.* I wasn’t sure what kanji would be used for the “ryusai” part, but “ken” was definitely the reading for the kanji used to write “building.” And judging by the design and architecture in this town, it seemed safe to assume that Grampy Kei had been in charge of it all—though his son Crow was also said to have played a part.

“Excuse me, miss, but someone has come to take you back to the mansion.”

“No!” Amur cried out. “I refuse!”

A woman who seemed to be a maid had informed Amur that an escort had

arrived for her, but she immediately refused to go with them.

“Oh no, I don’t think so.”

Blanca must’ve anticipated that because he suddenly appeared and grabbed Amur by the scruff of her neck, lifting her off the ground.

“Stop! Let go! I’m being kidnapped!”

“Sorry for the disturbance. Tenma, Merlin, your reservations are for a week, so feel free to make yourself at home.” Blanca then turned to the maid, ignoring the struggling Amur in his grasp. “You can explain the rest to them.”

With that, Blanca left with Amur.

“Yes, allow me to tell you about the inn,” the maid said as if Amur had never even been there. She told us that breakfast and dinner were served daily, but lunch had to be requested in advance at an extra cost. Otherwise, we could prepare it ourselves.

Then, she explained the baths to us. Our building had its own bath, but the one in the main building was larger. However, that one could get quite noisy at times since it was free for all the guests at the inn to use. It also closed late at night. While the bath in our building wasn’t as large, it could be used at any time. By the way, there weren’t any mixed-gender baths at Ryusaiken’s main building, so using that one could help me avoid any surprise attacks from Amur.

There were some other minor things that the maid mentioned, but as long as we didn’t intentionally dirty or damage the room, it would be fine. I could even let my followers (except Thunderbolt, of course) stay in the room. Thunderbolt wasn’t allowed inside because he was too big and heavy, but it would be fine for me to take him outside in the garden. I tried to bring him out, but he seemed reluctant because it was too cramped.

“Gramps, I’m going to take a look around since we’re here. Want to come along?” I asked.

“No, I think I’ll try the bath. The maid said the one in the main building isn’t too crowded at this time of day.”

Gramps and I decided to go our separate ways. Shiromaru and Solomon came

with me while Rocket stayed behind with Goldie and Silvie. The two spiders hadn't been outside in a while.

"Okay, I'm going to take a walk, then. I'll tell the inn staff about Rocket and the others staying behind," I said. "And Rocket, make sure not to go to the main building on your own."

Rocket extended a feeler in response.

"Don't forget to bring me a treat too!" Gramps said. He picked up the change of clothes and towel the inn had provided and started to head to the bath, but he paused. "By the way, Tenma, do you know how to wear this outfit?"

He held up what looked like a yukata and seemed confused. I knew how to wear one, but I recognized that the way I knew might not be how they wore them in this world. Also, it would seem odd to others if I *did* know, so I called the maid to have her teach the two of us. As it turned out, yukata were worn the same way here as they were back in Japan.

After I said bye to Gramps, I headed to Nanao's adventurers guild. I wanted to gather information about the local monsters and their risk levels, and also to let them know in advance that I would be walking around with Shiromaru and my other followers. I wasn't intending to take on any quests.

When I told the guild staff all that, they said they'd already heard about Shiromaru and my followers from Hana. Instead, they just gave me the standard advice about making it clear that they were my followers and that I had to take responsibility for them. As for the local monsters, there were bears in the forest and wolves in the plains. The most dangerous things around here were the occasional wyverns in the mountains. Besides those, there weren't many high-ranking monsters around. However, there had been occasional sightings every few years of earth dragons and running dragons. The latter were a lower-class dragon-type monster that had less defense and attack power than earth dragons, but they surpassed them in speed and stamina. It looked like we couldn't let down our guard completely.

The guild staff also shared a concerning story with me. Apparently, there had been people impersonating me and appearing at other adventurers guilds.

None of them looked anything like me and were using my name fraudulently. The majority of the scams were minor, like dining and dashing or flirting with women, but they were still causing trouble. Most of the time, people immediately realized these people were frauds, so the incidents were brushed off as a joke. But there were also cases where people had been swindled out of large sums of money, leading to wanted posters and warnings being distributed to cities and guilds.

As I was leaving, several staff members asked to shake my hand. It seemed like my name was becoming very well-known due to my winning the tournament in the capital and because of the recent impersonation incidents. When I asked why they didn't suspect I was a fraud, they said they'd already heard about me from the viscount's family, specifically Sana, so they knew I was the real deal. Not only that, but the viscount's subordinates had provided them with a portrait and a detailed description of my appearance, so they had recognized me the moment I walked into the guild.

That made me feel a little embarrassed, but since I had made Solomon my follower and won two championships in the tournaments, it didn't come as a complete surprise. I'd expected something like this.

After I left the guild, I decided to walk around the city of Nanao. I asked Solomon to wait inside my bag while we were in town. He didn't like that idea, but I didn't want to deal with him attracting an eager crowd of onlookers just yet. I told him that I'd buy him some tasty treats in town, and as soon as we got outside of the city, he could fly around as much as he wanted.

The bustling atmosphere of Nanao was a bit different from other places I'd visited. Most cities just had food stalls, but Nanao had other stalls too, offering games like you'd see at a festival. Most of them were aimed towards children with things like target shooting, ring toss, lotteries, fish scooping, and colored chicks. Those were all similar to things I had seen in my previous life, but it seemed like they didn't treat the fish and chicks as pets here.

That became clear when I overheard certain comments...

"Mom, please fry up this fish once it grows big enough!"

"I promise to raise the chick so it'll be big and strong. Will you cook it up then,

Mom?”

The fish used in the fish-scooping game looked like Crucian carp, which could grow to the size of a fan. The chicks would probably grow to the size of slightly larger chickens. There were adult versions of both types of animals on display as examples. The colored chicks had white feathers decorated with various patterns in red, blue, yellow, black, or pink. The dyes had been made from natural materials that were safe for both the birds and humans.

There were many families and children crowding the stalls, making me hesitant to let Shiromaru out and about. I ended up keeping both him and Solomon inside my bag.

As I walked around and browsed, a nostalgic aroma tickled my nose and my stomach began to growl.

“I think it’s this way...”

My feet naturally guided me to the source of the aroma, speeding up as I got closer.

The stall I arrived at was selling grilled onigiri. And they weren’t just any old grilled onigiri—they had used proper soy sauce for grilling them. They also had some onigiri that had been brushed with miso before being grilled.

“I’ll take seven of each.”

I ultimately bought seven of the regular soy sauce flavor, seven of the miso, and seven that had been mixed with chopped green onions and brushed with miso. I gave one of each kind to Shiromaru and Solomon, and then I enjoyed one of each as well. They were so good we each ate three. Shiromaru and Solomon eyed the remaining onigiri, but I convinced them to give it up—the rest were a treat for Gramps and the others who were waiting back at the inn.

“Okay, I definitely need to buy soy sauce and miso now.” I decided that was my number one objective for the day now and immediately started searching. I asked some people walking around where I should go.

“J Market...?” That was a shop I was familiar with back in Sagan. Maybe I should’ve asked them for miso and soy sauce back then...

At any rate, I managed to convince myself that buying directly from the source would be cheaper, anyway. The shop's manager was a boar beastfolk and seemingly not one of Jaiman's relatives.

I bought the maximum amount they would sell to an individual—two hundred liters of soy sauce and one hundred kilograms of miso. Buying any more than that wouldn't leave any for other customers, so I had to look around at other shops as well. Eventually, I had amassed over five hundred kilograms each of soy sauce and miso. I also found and bought sake, mirin, and grain vinegar, which completed my set of essential seasonings for Japanese cooking. These ingredients would allow me to cook meals that tasted much closer to Japanese cuisine. I also found some spices and medicinal herbs that I hadn't seen before. After asking about their effects and uses, I bought them.

Once I was done shopping, I wandered around town, buying some more street food before heading outside the city walls.

I walked through the fields, and once I reached a spot a short distance away, I let Shiromaru and Solomon out. They stretched out and immediately began running about and flying freely. They occasionally caught some horned rabbits, so I passed the time by butchering them.

The sun began to set and we returned to the inn before nightfall. Blanca came to pick us up, saying that the viscount was holding a welcome banquet for us. I unfortunately didn't have time to take a bath before we headed over to Viscount Lobo's estate.

Once we arrived, we were taken to a room with food laid out on the table. I was seated at the head of the table, next to the viscount. The four seats at the head were taken by me, Gramps, the viscount, and Hana. Amur, Blanca, and Sana sat near us, and the subordinates sat farther down the table on either side.

"Let's begin the banquet welcoming the royal family's emissaries to Nanao! Let's eat, drink, and be merry!"

"Yeaaaah!"

And so the banquet began.

The food that was served was...

“Natto, wasabi pickles, raw fish, simmered insects...”

Well, it was a menu full of...strong flavors. Even Amur seemed concerned by the menu. Hana, Blanca, and Sana looked worried, but the viscount had a grin on his face.

“I wanted you to experience the local flavors of Nanao, Tenma,” he said.

Hearing that made it clear that he had planned the menu to embarrass me. The other four glared at him in accusation.

“I think we need to have a chat,” Hana said.

“I’m disappointed in you, Brother,” Blanca said.

“Damned old man,” Amur said.

Hana and the viscount seemed to be ready to go head-to-head, but Gramps and I were enjoying our meal.

“May we have another serving, please?”

Sana took our rice bowls. “Do you like the food?”

“Yes, very much,” I said.

“They’re distinct flavors to be sure, but not too bothersome,” Gramps said.

We were both adventurers, so we’d experienced even stronger foods than these. I had actually been craving a meal like this, so I appreciated it very much.

The four beastfolk looked surprised, and then everyone but the viscount burst out laughing. The subordinates weren’t paying attention and continued chattering among themselves, but their clamor grew louder once they heard the laughter.

The viscount was not amused and began to pout.

Hana, instead, was relieved. “Well, since Tenma is enjoying the meal, you should finish yours too. Oh, speaking of which, you don’t have any natto or simmered insects on your plate. Sana, will you give him a large helping of both?” Hana asked.

“Of course.” Sana stood up.

“Wait, hold on! No, Blanca! Let go!”

“It’s not good to be picky, Brother.” Blanca quickly restrained the viscount, who was trying to escape in fear.

“Here you go. You take care of him, Sister,” Sana said.

“Thanks, Sana. Look, darling. Your favorite dishes have arrived!”

“Blaaargh!”

“Just give it up already.”

The viscount tried to protest. “Someone! Help me...! Nghh!”

Hana had brought a bowl filled with a mixture of natto and simmered insects over and pushed it towards the viscount while Blanca immobilized him. He clamped his jaw shut, but Amur pinched his nose. He opened his jaw slightly to breathe, and the others shoved an iron bar into his mouth to prevent him from closing it.

The viscount pleaded for help from his subordinates, but they ignored him and continued to party. I had a feeling they didn’t want to anger Hana.

Hana seized the opportunity when the viscount opened his mouth wide to cry for help. She poured the bowl’s contents inside. Once his mouth was filled with food, Hana, Amur, and Blanca all held his mouth and jaw shut, forcing the viscount to swallow.

I was suddenly reminded of the way geese would be force-fed in order to become foie gras...

Sana stayed away from the commotion and continued to serve us. “Tenma, Master Merlin, please try these dishes as well. Oh, and Master Merlin—we’ve prepared some hot sake for you.”

She had offered us salted fish made with river fish.

“Oh, this is good.”

“The sake is nice.”

As Gramps and I enjoyed the fish, the viscount was enduring a second round

of force-feeding. His subordinates were completely unbothered and continued partying—I had to wonder if this happened regularly.

The banquet continued late into the night, and it was almost dawn when it finally wrapped up. The room was filled with piles of sleeping people. Most of them were drunk, but some had simply overeaten—most notable among those were the viscount and his daughter, whose bellies were large and full.

Blanca and Sana had left early. After they had gone, Amur had told me that Sana was stronger than Blanca, but she wasn't talking about physical strength. Instead, she had meant the power dynamic in their marriage. Apparently, Blanca was head over heels for Sana, and she had him completely wrapped around her finger.

Gramps was even drunker than usual, so I carried him on my back as I made my way back to the inn. A sober subordinate led us there. Ryusaiken normally kept its doors locked at night, but they had kept the entrance open for us thanks to Hana's advance request.

Amur had invited me to stay at the mansion, but I politely declined in fear that she might take advantage of me if she were drunk. I didn't want her to attack me in my sleep.

Back in my room, I went straight to sleep without even changing clothes. Gramps snored away on the futon next to me, but since Shiromaru slept between us with his tail covering Gramps's face, the sound didn't bother me too much.

"Ahhh... The water feels incredible."

The next morning, I started my day with a bath. Gramps was here with me doing the same thing. Even though he'd been falling down drunk the night before, he seemed to have completely sobered up overnight and had woken up on his own to follow me to the baths.

There were several other guests enjoying a morning bath as well, but there was still plenty of space for everyone.

We made sure not to stay in the water so long that we'd overheat and went back to our room just in time for breakfast. The maid brought our food in

shortly after we returned. While we leisurely ate our breakfast, Blanca and Amur suddenly showed up at our door in a bit of a panic.

“I’m sorry, Tenma. We might have some trouble,” Blanca said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My idiot father really went and did it now!”

Amur then told us that a representative from a nearby village had dropped by the day before on an errand, and her father had mentioned I was in Nanao. The village representative had said, “If you *really* have someone that strong visiting, send them to my village to fight!”

At first, Hana had thought he was just saying that and hadn’t really meant it, but after she’d left the room for a bit, they had started talking specifics. Then, this morning, she’d caught wind that several letters had arrived from people asking when they could fight me.

Since the messages had come early in the morning, Hana had jumped out of bed.

“Is something strange happening in the neighboring village?!” she’d asked.

And that had been when Viscount Lobo, the one reading the letters, had confessed to her what happened. That had made her furious. So furious in fact, that she’d captured the viscount and had thrown him into the dungeon as punishment. Amur had been so frightened of Hana that she evacuated with Blanca and came to see me.

“So we need you to come to the mansion right now. The matter has gotten so out of hand that I don’t think you’ll be able to get out of it, but Hana wants to apologize. Under normal circumstances, my sister and brother-in-law would come to tell you that themselves, but right now, he’s useless and my sister is busy dealing with the fallout from his incompetence. She can’t leave the mansion,” Blanca said.

“Well, I guess I have no choice...or do I?”

“Tenma, my idiot father is going to owe you big-time,” Amur said. “Even though he’s totally stupid, that could come in handy somehow. Maybe...?”

“That’s right. Hana wanted us to tell you, ‘I don’t care how you use this idiot, but please cooperate.’ She’ll pay you a proper quest fee, and there may be extra rewards paid on top of that. So please,” Blanca said, and both of them bowed their heads.

I talked it over with Gramps and decided I’d take it on as a formal request from the viscount after going through the proper channels at the guild. After all, I’d get official paperwork if we went through the guild rather than taking the request directly from the viscount, so if something went awry, they would have my back.

Blanca didn’t seem surprised when he heard my and Gramps’s answer, so we headed directly to the guild to fill out the paperwork before going to the mansion.

It seemed like the guild had been notified beforehand because they already had the forms ready for me. They were all simple ones, so all I had to do was write my name on the contract that had already been signed by Viscount Lobo (the contract had been written by Hana).

However, the last part of the contract stated that “If an agreement cannot be reached after discussions, Tenma may unilaterally terminate this contract and there shall be no penalty. In that case, the formal request fee shall be paid to him as compensation.” These were very favorable conditions for me. Basically, I would be given full control over this situation. If I said no, I’d still receive the request fee. And if I accepted, I’d receive the request fee plus an additional payment.

After I signed the contract, we headed for the viscount’s estate. The moment we got there, I could hear a commotion. It seemed things were even more hectic here than I’d heard.

As we watched subordinates rush around, we were led to the same room the banquet had been held in the night before. Hana was seated at the head of the table, giving instructions to a group of people who seemed to be bureaucrats.

“Hana, I’ve brought Tenma,” Blanca said. “He signed the contract at the guild.”

“Wonderful, Blanca. Everyone else, please leave the room for a moment,”

Hana said.

“Yes, ma’am!” they all replied in unison.

The bureaucrats scooped up documents from the table and excused themselves. They all gave me apologetic looks as they walked past.

“First of all, please take a seat,” Hana said. “And once again, I sincerely apologize for that fool causing so much trouble.”

“I’m very sorry,” Blanca echoed.

“Sorry,” Amur said.

All three of them had apologized to me the moment we sat down, planting their faces against the floor.

“We take complete blame for the incident, and all responsibility falls on Viscount Lobo and myself. That said, I *would* appreciate it if you took on our request,” Hana said, still bowing her head.

I asked them all to please raise their heads and give me more details.

Hana then explained to me that the SAR wasn’t a unified region. In reality, there were many people in other villages who hoped to overthrow Viscount Lobo and take his place.

Thanks to Grampy Kei, Viscount Lobo’s—or, more specifically, Nanao’s—military strength was exceptionally high among the people in the SAR, so they were confident they could win against anyone who sought to overthrow him. And even if it were to be a tough battle, they could hold out until villages and cities that were friendly with them could join in and provide aid.

But if a situation arose where they had to take back an offer Viscount Lobo had made, even if it was unilateral on his part, they risked losing the trust of those friendly towns. So rather than risk a petty conflict, they thought a reasonable course of action would be to bow down to me and ask for help.

“I don’t mind taking part in a contest, but what’s the format?” I said.

Hana and Blanca looked relieved that I had agreed, but Amur seemed unusually happy.

“For right now, we’re planning on holding a tournament where anyone who wants to challenge you can fight one another first. Then, the winner will face you in a match...” Hana said.

“In that case, why not hold an open tournament like the one in the capital?” I suggested. “Participants can fight in group matches for the preliminaries and then compete in a tournament format for the finals.”

“Well, we can’t have you compete in the preliminaries,” Hana countered. “It’d of course be unthinkable, but if some fluke happened and you lost, people would make excuses and say it was because it was a melee, or because it was up against a villager they didn’t like, or that we had no intention of having you make it to the finals. Hmm... So let’s make you a seed for the final tournament and hold a drawing in front of everyone to determine the preliminary groups.”

We didn’t know how many participants would join the tournament, but once that had been decided, we could figure out how many people would advance to the finals.

“Let’s immediately notify the villages that sent letters and ask them to send participants. If we’re going to do this, we might as well go all out! That way, there will be no room for excuses.”

Hana chuckled quietly as she spoke, and it was so creepy that it sent chills down everyone’s spines, including mine. Amur was so terrified that she quickly hid behind me.

“All right, so Blanca and Amur, I’m counting on you as the representatives of Nanao,” Hana added.

Hana decided to have those two be Nanao’s representatives because they would represent the viscount’s family while being likely to make it through the preliminaries. I was concerned that the two of them would end up in the same preliminary group or that other stronger challengers from the SAR would be placed in their group, but Hana said the chances of that seemed low. Another reason for this was to prevent Nanao’s representatives from losing to contestants from other villages or towns in the preliminaries.

“In that case, maybe I’ll participate too,” Gramps said.

“I’m very sorry, but I’d ask that you please refrain from doing so, Master Merlin,” Hana said.

Gramps seemed puzzled when Hana immediately turned him down. “Why?”

“Because if you were to participate, it would decrease our number of entrants. And if you faced Blanca or Amur in the preliminaries, they would surely lose. I’m very sorry, but I appreciate your understanding.”

“Hmph. Well, since this is a request from the viscount’s family, I suppose it can’t be helped.” Gramps reluctantly gave up on the idea in the end, but he still looked grumpy about it.

“I apologize for the trouble,” Hana said.

“That’s fine. Tenma’s the main character, after all. I’ll just continue being his sidekick, supporting him from behind the scenes...”

Hana bowed her head deeply again to him in apology. Seeing this, Gramps decided to change his mindset and the discussion moved forward.

“Let’s go ahead with the things we’ve discussed and then we can decide on the tournament’s rules,” Hana said. “It will take less than a month to prepare for the event, so in the meantime, I’ll arrange for Tenma and Master Merlin’s stay at the inn to be extended. Also, Tenma, Blanca, and Amur, please make sure you’re adequately prepared for the tournament.”

“Understood!” all three of us said in unison.

“All right, then you’re dismissed!” The moment Hana said that, the bureaucrats who had been waiting outside immediately ran back in to prepare letters to send out to the various villages.

“Shouldn’t Viscount Lobo be in charge of this?” I asked.

“If that idiot tried to, he’d just mess things up, Tenma. Everyone has their own role to play. The only thing he can do is be a figurehead. Nanao will be fine as long as we have my mother!” Amur said.

“It’s true,” Blanca said, chiming in. “My brother-in-law shines when it comes to battle or festivities, but he just causes more trouble when it comes to politics. But for some reason, the people of Nanao still hold him in high regard.”

So the viscount wasn't *completely* useless, but he wasn't exactly helpful in political matters either. Still, he seemed to possess a certain amount of charisma that made him a challenging person to go up against.

"All right, what should we do until the tournament, then?" I asked. Since the timeline was uncertain, there wasn't that much else I could do now. I mainly needed to check my weapons and armor and stay in shape, but focusing on all of that immediately didn't really feel right either.

"Why not visit the guild? Even just checking to see what quests are available may be a good way to pass the time," Gramps suggested.

"That's a good idea. Maybe we can find something interesting to do."

I decided to follow Gramps's advice and headed to the guild with Rocket and the others. Gramps had wanted to go enjoy another bath and Amur and Blanca were going to prepare for the tournament, so I just had Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon come with me. Goldie and Silvie stayed in my bag like usual. Hana had also asked me to avoid visiting the viscount's estate too much before the tournament since it could lead to people questioning the fairness of the event.

"I'm glad we came, but...why are there so many people here?" I wondered aloud.

The guild had nearly twice as many adventurers there as last time. As I listened to their conversations, it seemed like a lot of them had come to Nanao after hearing rumors about the upcoming tournament. Word had gotten around so quickly that it seemed it was being deliberately spread far and wide by those who wanted to overthrow Viscount Lobo.

The adventurers in the guild were mostly beastfolk who were active in the SAR, but I also saw a few humans and elves. A few of them seemed to recognize me too. Some pointed fingers my way, but no one approached me. I ignored them and made my way to the bulletin board where the quests were posted. A crowd had gathered around the higher-ranked quests, but there were fewer people in front of the Rank C quests.

It was still too crowded for me to take my time looking at the bulletin board in too much detail, so I just picked the first one that caught my eye and headed to the counter. The quest I decided to take was to do a survey of deer-type

monsters and thin out their numbers.

Apparently, there were a lot of these deer monsters about and they had voracious appetites. If left unchecked, they could venture into nearby fields and destroy crops. Rank D adventurers were strong enough to deal with the monsters, but since they were quick to escape and it was difficult to find them in the forest, it was posted on the Rank C board instead.

After I accepted the quest, I made my way to the forest. Then, something unexpected happened.

“I never thought you two could get so excited, Goldie and Silvie!”

Goldie and Silvie had been hiding in my bag until now, but suddenly, they jumped out of it and started climbing trees. They hopped from one to another, running along the branches, and they wouldn’t come back down. Luckily they stayed fairly close to me, but I nearly had a heart attack when a rockbird almost snatched Goldie from the tree.

I quickly shot the bird down with magic, so nothing happened and Goldie and Silvie continued to play. I guessed they just needed to stretch their many legs in the forest occasionally to relieve some stress. After about an hour of this, they finally returned to the bag. Their default nature was to be reclusive, after all.

After they returned to the bag, I resumed my search for the deer monsters, but I was having trouble finding them. I used Detection multiple times, but all I could find were regular deer that weren’t monsters. Some considered ordinary deer to be pests, so I did thin out that herd a bit and secured their meat, but I was feeling a little disappointed that I hadn’t found my targets.

I moved around, continuing to use Detection, and suddenly...

“Hm?”

“Grrrr...”

I sensed something and stopped in my tracks. At the same moment, Shiromaru let out a low growl and assumed a battle stance. As both of us stared into the brush, a large deer appeared as if relenting after realizing Shiromaru and I had spotted it.

“So that’s our target, huh? It’s huge. There’s no way a Rank D adventurer could handle this monster,” I muttered to myself as I kept my eyes fixed on the deer.

I was ready to cast a spell at any moment. The deer was only slightly smaller than Thunderbolt and had large, impressive antlers. It reminded me of a moose in size, but its sharp antlers and the way its body subtly shifted to blend into its surroundings confirmed that it was a monster.

“Ah, it has a Conceal ability. That explains why it didn’t show up when I used Detection earlier... Shiromaru, circle around it, but be careful. There might be others nearby. Rocket, back up Shiromaru. And Solomon, scout from the air to see if there are more hiding nearby. Let’s go!”

“Grrar!”

“Squee!”

My followers sprang into action. The deer tried to flee, but since it was so large, it was too slow to turn around before Shiromaru could get behind it. It must’ve resigned itself then because it crouched low and pointed its antlers at Shiromaru. Either it forgot I was there, or maybe it just viewed Shiromaru as a bigger threat, but either way, now it had exposed its back to me. Now that its body was lowered and antlers aimed at Shiromaru, that left the deer’s neck completely exposed.

I decided to attack it from behind. “Gotcha!”

It bleated, but I swiftly struck it with my halberd and sliced its head clean off. I didn’t know if it was just trying to intimidate Shiromaru instead of attacking, but it lost its life before it even finished doing so.

“Graar? Grr?”

“Squee! Squee!”

“Graaar!”

At first, Shiromaru seemed disappointed that he hadn’t gotten in on the action, but then he noticed Solomon urgently trying to signal to us. Shiromaru then charged in that direction.

“Looks like there are other deer out there. Rocket, let’s go get the materials from this deer first.” I collected the deer monster which lay in front of me, and then Rocket and I followed Shiromaru’s tracks. We ran for a bit and then came across a deer carcass that Shiromaru must’ve left behind. I collected it too and then looked around to spot another dead deer several meters ahead, then another, and another. We had downed six of them in total, including the one I had killed first. Shiromaru was sitting next to the final one, looking very pleased with himself.

“Good boy, Shiromaru.”

“Woof!”

“Was that all the deer?”

Even though Shiromaru had charged off on his own without waiting for my instructions, it was a wise move on his part because otherwise, the deer might’ve escaped. I had praised him and asked if there were more, but judging from his body language, there were either none left or he couldn’t find them.

Even though these deer could use Conceal, that wouldn’t mask their scent from a Fenrir. I decided to trust Shiromaru’s nose and we headed back to Nanao.

I had Shiromaru mark a bunch of trees to indicate that there was a strong creature nearby. That might deter deer and weaker monsters from the area, at least temporarily.

On the way back, I carefully investigated the surroundings for any other hidden threats, but all I found were regular deer. One intimidating growl from Shiromaru sent them running away in panic, so I let them be.

“Excuse me. I have a report regarding this quest.”

“Welcome back. Did something happen?”

Once I entered the guild, I headed straight to the counter and began my report. Luckily, the same receptionist was still there and she remembered me from before. She picked up on the fact that something unusual had happened.

“The quest stated that it was a monster a Rank D adventurer could handle, but since they were difficult to find in the forest, it was a Rank C quest. However, the deer monsters I encountered in the forest were way more powerful than what a Rank D adventurer could handle,” I explained.

I told her I wanted to show her a defeated monster and asked if there was a suitable place to do so. She directed me to the area in the back of the guild used for processing monsters and suggested calling in a high-ranking guild member for verification.

I waited for a few minutes and then headed to the designated room. I found a slender tiger beastfolk man there already. He introduced himself as the vice guildmaster. There were a few other staff members there too who seemed to be very curious about my findings.

The moment I took out one of the deer monsters, the vice guildmaster and the other staff members raised their voices in shock.

That was because the deer monsters we had killed were actually called spear elk—and they were Rank B monsters. That meant there was no possible way a Rank D adventurer could’ve handled them. And not only that, but since they traveled in herds, this was the type of quest meant for a party of multiple Rank A or Rank B adventurers or above.

“We sincerely apologize! This is entirely our fault!” The vice guildmaster quickly bowed his head after he reread the quest posting and looked at the spear elk in front of him. He said that in order to compensate me, the guild would butcher the spear elk and the regular deer I had hunted free of charge. On top of that, they would buy any materials I wanted to sell at a twenty percent upcharge from their standard rate.

I was startled by his actions and generous offer, and it made me wonder if there was some ulterior motive at play.

He noticed my skeptical expression and began to explain. “Lady Hana was the one who appointed me to this guild post...”

It turned out that he was a distant relative of Hana’s and had always found it difficult to oppose her since he feared her greatly. In fact, it seemed as though she treated him like one of her minions... At any rate, he looked relieved when I

accepted his conditions.

But then...

“Hmph!”

A sudden voice rang out, making him freeze as if he had turned to stone.

“I recommended you for the vice guildmaster post to *prevent* issues like this. Not only did you make a terrible mistake, but you tried to cover it up?” It was Hana.

“N-No, I wasn’t trying to cover it up! But wh-what are you doing here?” the vice guildmaster stammered back.

Hana smiled. “Do you really think I wouldn’t have more of my people besides you in an organization like the adventurers guild?”

I wasn’t sure who it would’ve been, but it seemed like Hana had a spy in the guild. They must’ve rushed to the estate to inform her about the situation, and that was how she’d found out.

“Anyway, it seems we need to have a little chat. Luckily Tenma was the one who accepted the quest so there were no issues, but if a regular Rank C adventurer had taken it, people could’ve died,” Hana said. “Oh, and don’t worry about the punishment. The guildmaster has already given me permission to use my discretion. Let’s go.”

“Noooooooo!” The vice guildmaster screamed as Hana dragged him out of the room.

“Master Tenma, would you like us to process the monsters now?” a staff member asked. “Do you have enough time for that? Also, do you have any preferences on which parts you’d like to keep?”

“Yes, I have time now. Spear elk aren’t that tasty, so I’ll just keep the magic cores and three of their hides and sell the rest. Oh, and please process the regular deer for me too,” I told them.

They didn’t seem to be bothered at all by the fact that their vice guildmaster had been taken away. They simply went about their business as usual. They were all very skilled, and the large spear elks were butchered in no time. They

were so good, in fact, that they managed to process the ordinary deer in just ten minutes, laying all the parts out neatly on a table.

In the end, they had butchered six spear elk in just over an hour and ten ordinary deer in under thirty minutes.

“Here’s your payment. In addition, you may take the Rank B promotion exam as early as tomorrow, if you want. We can offer significant concessions as an apology...” a woman who was filling in for the vice guildmaster offered.

I considered it for a moment but declined. She looked startled and asked why, so I explained my reasoning.

“I’m affiliated with the royalist faction, so I’d like to take my promotion exam in the capital. Because of my current quest and my past achievements, I think I’ll be eligible to take the exam there when I return,” I said.

Under ordinary circumstances, they would consider me lacking in experience. But thanks to my achievements—including winning the martial arts tournament, slaying an earth dragon, and preventing a coup—that wasn’t an issue. The capital’s guild would definitely agree to let me take the exam. Besides, the royal family (probably Queen Maria) would likely give me a recommendation if they hadn’t already.

The woman nodded once I explained. She looked like she remembered that I was connected to the royal family.

There wouldn’t have been a problem taking it here, but I thought informing the royal family first and taking it there instead would strengthen my ties to the royalists. And more importantly, I wouldn’t have to listen to Queen Maria complain about it later...

## Part Four

“Sounds like a disaster!” Gramps said sympathetically after I returned to the inn and told him about the quest. He also stifled a laugh. Honestly, if I were in his position, I’d probably have a similar reaction.

I also told him about the offer to take the promotion exam and how I’d declined. A serious look came over his face at that, and he told me I had made the right decision. I had a feeling he could also imagine Queen Maria and the king complaining about it. After all, he used to be the king’s tutor—while he could stand up to him, it wasn’t as easy to stand up to Queen Maria.

As we were talking, a maid called out to us from the other side of the door. “I’m terribly sorry to interrupt, but a messenger from Lady Hana is here to see you. May I let them in?” I thought it was strange that Hana would send a messenger, but I let them in.

Just as I thought, it wasn’t Blanca. If it were, then he would’ve just come straight inside instead of bothering with a maid. Instead, the person who came was one of Hana’s subordinates I had seen before but hadn’t yet spoken to. They handed me an apology from Hana and an invitation to dinner. Even though she had originally advised against me coming to the estate until the end of the tournament, word of the guild incident had already spread among the adventurers and she wanted to formally apologize. Gramps and I talked it over and told the messenger we would attend. They left once we confirmed the time.

“Only two hours until dinner. That’s pretty short notice. What do you think we should do about Rocket and the other followers, Gramps?” I asked.

“Hrm... Well, normally it would be safer to leave them behind, but they were victims in this case too, so it should be fine to bring them along. Keep them in your bag until you get permission, though.”

Considering the circumstances, we all decided to go together. I knew that Amur wouldn’t care if I brought along my followers, Hana seemed fond of Rocket, and I doubted the viscount would have any objections either. In fact,

since Hana was hosting the dinner, she even might've complained if I hadn't brought Rocket and the others along.

Hana would send a carriage from the estate to pick us up. I had suggested walking, but the messenger said she had insisted on a carriage for visibility's sake, even though it only took a few minutes to walk there.

With that in mind, I quickly took a bath with Shiromaru and Solomon. After that, I got dressed, and then Gramps and I relaxed until it was time to leave.

Blanca apologized to us again in the carriage on the way to the viscount's estate. "Tenma, Master Merlin. I'm sorry to spring this on you so suddenly," he said. He then explained that tonight's banquet had been a spur-of-the-moment decision and Hana had been so busy preparing for it that she only realized she'd forgotten to confirm my plans for the night when she was almost done.

The viscount wasn't thrilled that I was having yet another banquet in my honor either. "I'm sure my brother-in-law will try to rile you up, but just hang in there and try to ignore him," Blanca warned.

Since I was invited to this event, there was a possibility that I might be seen as a representative of the royal family this time. That meant that if the viscount and I were to get into an altercation, people might say the SAR was trying to pick a fight with the royal family.

Now, if it was just a personal beef between me and the viscount there wouldn't be a problem—the viscount's reputation would just take more of a hit than mine. But on the other hand, since I was considered a royal emissary and he was the head of the SAR, it could be construed as there being a direct conflict between the royal family and the viscount.

That's why Blanca went on to say, "Just let Hana and me deal with the viscount." After that, he also added, "My brother-in-law might die in the process, but there's nothing I can do about that."

I was positive that if that happened, it'd be Hana's fault.

"I'll keep that in mind. But if it gets to be too much, I'll just go ahead and leave," I said. "In that case, I'd probably get out of the SAR altogether."

"Please do that. In fact, that might be best. That way, in the worst-case

scenario, only my brother-in-law will have to be sacrificed.”

It was a harsh way of putting it, but if you had to weigh the life of the viscount against the lives of many people in the SAR (including Sana), I couldn’t blame Blanca for putting it like that. I really needed to be careful since I knew I had a short temper too.

After we had chatted for a bit, Blanca seemed to remember his original purpose.

“Anyway, sorry for keeping you. Follow me. I’ll show you to the venue.”

He then began to show us the way. He didn’t take us to the room we’d gone to the previous time. Instead, we went to one that was much larger. This room was apparently often used to host larger banquets and celebrations. Its floor was covered with tatami mats which would be removed to reveal a wooden floor for buffet-style parties.

“The empty seats in the very front are reserved for you and Master Merlin, Tenma,” Blanca said, pointing to the table up at the front of the room. Viscount Lobo and Hana were already seated at the table, with Sana and Amur at the table next to them. Once Gramps and I were seated, Blanca went to sit down next to Sana.

After the viscount saw that, he and Hana stood up.

Hana began to speak. “As I’m sure all of you have heard, due to my clumsiness, we have ended up causing trouble for the royal family’s emissary, Master Tenma Otori, and his grandfather, Master Merlin—er, Master Merlin Otori. So, the purpose of this banquet is to formally apologize to them both. Under normal circumstances, I would tell you all to let loose and enjoy yourselves, but let this be a lesson that we should all be careful not to cause trouble for others!” she said.

“Well, let’s start the banquet now,” the viscount added. “Cheers.”

And so the banquet began. The speech had made me a little uncomfortable, though, to be honest. The reason Hana had corrected herself on Gramps’s name was because he had glared at her. He denied doing it afterwards, but I’d seen him give her a pretty harsh glare, so harsh that it must’ve shaken Hana to

the point where she just started rambling and couldn't give the viscount much room to say anything. And when Hana had said the thing about remembering not to cause trouble for others, she had glared at Viscount Lobo. She'd probably deny that too, but the daggers she'd shot at him with her eyes were so sharp it felt like the temperature in the room had dropped by several degrees.

In other words, Viscount Lobo was probably plotting something, but since Hana had nipped it in the bud, he'd just made a quick one-liner speech.

I wasn't sure what exactly he'd been plotting, but I decided to just try to enjoy myself at this event. As long as the food was good, that was all that mattered. At the very least, I didn't want any blood to be spilled. That would ruin my appetite, after all.

"How is the food?" Hana asked.

"It's delicious."

"I'm glad to hear that," Sana said.

Once the banquet had begun and I'd tried a few dishes, Hana and Sana came by. It really should've been the viscount who came to check in on me, but he gave some excuse so Hana had no choice but to come over with her sister. Amur had wanted to go in Sana's place, but the viscount had put a stop to that. I'd heard him mutter, "You shouldn't be fraternizing with someone you might go up against in the tournament." Of course, Amur hadn't liked that, but the viscount had been so stubborn about it that she'd had no choice but to let her aunt go instead.

"I know we served some even more peculiar foods this time than last time, but it seems you don't have a problem with them. In fact, we've served foods that even some SAR natives have trouble eating, so it's a wonder you like it so much!" Hana said, pointing to the brined mackerel next to the sashimi. They'd served sashimi last time too, but today, they only served a small amount of the brined mackerel at first. Once I ate it with no problem, they put more on the table.

"I have no problem with eating raw fish," I said. "I just had some the other day and had similar experiences outside of the SAR. As for the brined mackerel, I've tried stronger and smellier things than this before."

Of course, those times had been in my past life. After I had left Kukuri Village, Namitaro had taught me about fish that could be eaten raw here, so I had caught, frozen, and eaten some several times for vitamin intake. As for the brined mackerel, I'd eaten similar preserved foods in a rural village, such as meat from animals that hadn't been completely drained of blood but were salted or pickled in liquids with antiseptic herbs instead. The preserved foods were primarily for sustenance and nutrition (and long-term storage) over taste, so they weren't very good. So compared to those, this brined mackerel was no big deal.

Both Hana and Sana showed interest in the foods I had told them about.

"It's natural to encounter unfamiliar foods when you travel to a new place. But the idea that there's something even smellier than this out there is unbelievable."

"I'm curious, but I don't think I'd try it if it was actually placed in front of me."

We then chatted for a while about the tastiest things I'd ever eaten.

"Well, probably the most delicious things I've had were white buffalo, followed by the bicorn."

I spoke in terms of ingredients because the cooking methods used in my past life and this life were different. The foods I could make were tastier than usual because I had that experience, but it would be a little embarrassing to say that things were so delicious because I cooked them. Apart from that, my mother's cooking was the best I'd ever tasted, but saying that would be even more embarrassing. Otherwise, I'd have to say the best foods I'd eaten would be dishes from the Full Belly Inn back in Gunjo City.

"Oh, those are both extremely high-end meats. I've never tried them before."

"I heard from Amur that you defeated a bicorn back in Sagan and she landed a hit on it. Is that when you ate it?" Sana then asked, causing Amur and Blanca to tremble in response.

"Yes, after we defeated it, we grilled it up and ate it together. Both of them tried it too," I said. "They ate the meat clean off the bone."

There was no point in lying, so I told them that Amur and Blanca had eaten

the bicorn as well. Hana and Sana looked incredibly jealous. There seemed to be a hint of some kind of dark emotion mixed in there too, but that was probably just my imagination.

“I still have some white buffalo and bicorn left. I could share some with you if you’d like.”

Hana and Sana eagerly said, “Yes, please!”

It would be weird to just pull a hunk of raw meat out in the middle of a party, so I promised to portion some out and give it to them later on.

“Hm, shall we have the main dish brought out as a little thank-you, then?” Sana suggested.

“Ah, yes, the fish. You’re going to be so surprised, Tenma!” Hana had a mischievous look on her face as she signaled to the server.

“The main dish?” Amur had finally escaped the viscount and was reacting to their words. She had told him it would be embarrassing not to greet their guests, so she’d go say hello. The viscount had tried to stop her, but since they had been in front of his subordinates, he’d had no choice.

“Yes, there was a huge fish caught in a river near a village we’re friendly with. The fish struggled in the net, but the village’s chief whacked it in the head and finished it off while it was stunned. He brought it here this morning as a thank-you gift.”

“It’s huge!” Sana cried. “Three meters long! Normally, they’re about half that size, or even a third.”

Hana and Sana excitedly told me the story, but Amur, Blanca, Gramps, and I all froze at the same time.

“A three-meter fish...” Blanca said.

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Gramps said.

“Could it be Nami—”

“Don’t say it, Amur!” I quickly covered her mouth to avoid speaking the thought into existence. But I felt the same as Gramps; I’d had a really bad feeling from the moment I heard the story.

Oh, and Viscount Lobo was about to lunge towards me when he saw me touch Amur, but Blanca slapped him. The viscount fell down onto the tatami mats instead.

“Everyone seems very interested in the fish!” Hana said.

“Um, Sister... I actually think they seem worried.”

“You’re imagining things, Sana. Oh, here it comes! Let’s reveal it on the count of three!”

“Got it!”

Hana and Sana essentially ignored us and then stood on either side of the huge fish, which was covered with a cloth.

“One, two...three!”

They yanked off the cloth, revealing...

“Thank goodness! It’s not Namitaro!”

“Whew!”

The huge fish had been roasted whole, and some parts of it were charred. At first glance, I was afraid it was Namitaro, but its shape was very different. It looked like some sort of salmon instead of a carp like Namitaro. It was probably the same type of fish I’d caught on the way here.



Gramps, Blanca, and I all sat back in our seats, limp with relief, and for some reason, Amur waved both her hands like a baseball referee declaring a player safe. I wondered who had taught her that gesture, but I figured it must've been someone else who'd been reincarnated here.

Hana and Sana looked thoroughly puzzled when all of us collapsed. "Hm? What's wrong, everyone?"

"Actually..." Amur spoke up and told them about Namitaro.

Once the two of them heard the tale, they said, "Oh, come to think of it, we did hear about Tenma having a monster like that on his team..."

"The only kind of person who could handle Namitaro is one who would join the tournament," Amur said.

"Actually, when I reunited with Namitaro, he'd been captured by an ordinary fisherman and put up for sale. He can actually be quite a dimwit sometimes..." I said.

Amur agreed with me. "Hm. Well, I can't deny that..." She crossed her arms and nodded, perhaps thinking of many other examples.

"Well, putting that matter aside, let's eat before the food gets cold! This fish is best eaten when it's piping hot," Sana said.

The servants standing by quickly cut portions of the giant fish for everyone. I felt a bit hesitant to eat it at first, maybe because I had been thinking about Namitaro. But once I took a bite, it was quite delicious. They also served rice with fish bone broth poured over it, and that was also excellent.

"Tenma, let's talk about the tournament," Hana began. "It's going to start in five days. The finals will have sixteen participants, including you. The rules will be that weapons must be blunt or covered, and projectile weapons must have special safety covers. No biting, eye gouging, or other low blows will be allowed. The tournament will mostly have the same rules the one in the capital had, but to save time, you can only use the weapons you bring in. Matches will be decided either when an opponent crosses the boundary or by a referee's call. We'll have one head referee, two assistants, and three backups who will keep records."

She went on to say that no equipment other than weapons or armor would be allowed. Backup referees would only provide additional opinions when the main referee and the assistants couldn't come to a consensus. The registration desk would have more detailed rules available the day before the preliminary rounds.

There were roughly eighty participants currently registered, but they expected that number to grow to over two hundred as the date drew nearer. That didn't really affect me since I only had to fight in the finals, but Blanca and Amur seemed to be worried about the turnout.

Five days later...

"What a piece of cake!"

"That was rough..."

Amur had dominated the preliminaries easily, but it seemed Blanca had really struggled.

"Why did all the strongest competitors have to be in *my* bracket?" he complained.

Blanca had said he'd been in a formidable group. If those opponents had been in other groups, they all would've made it to the finals instead of losing to him. He said there were even some whom Amur might've had a hard time beating. To back this up, Amur said she had offered a silent prayer when she saw who Blanca was up against.

"Just so you know, I didn't interfere with anyone's bracket other than separating Amur and Blanca," Hana said.

"Of course. If you'd said you manipulated the brackets with that group, that would've looked like you wanted me to lose!" Blanca said.

If I had to rank people from the SAR in terms of strength, Hana would be first and Blanca second. Viscount Lobo would be third, and Amur would rank somewhere around eighth. Blanca's bracket had contenders ranging from the fourth to seventh strongest, and there were some others there who were believed to be among the twenty strongest people in the SAR.

“The only way I lucked out was because none of them ganged up on me,” he said.

The prelims had been held battle royale-style, just like in the capital. The top contenders had targeted their rivals first, leaving only the weaker opponents for Blanca to handle.

But after the top contenders had beaten their rivals, they had attacked Blanca one-on-one melee-style without weapons. Since he’d had the most energy remaining, he emerged victorious. He just had a really swollen face now from the battle.

Amur’s group had consisted of weaker opponents who had all ganged up on her, but she had easily defeated them.

The brackets had been decided by a public drawing, and other than separating Amur and Blanca, no tampering had been possible. As a result, the audience’s reactions had shifted from excitement to disappointment and then to laughter as the strong contenders had kept popping up in Blanca’s group, making the final outcomes predictable.

“Looks like the lottery’s going to start.”

The final preliminary round had ended, and we were resting in the waiting room. Gramps then came to let us know that the lottery for finals was beginning. Gramps had acted as my manager during the prelims and watched the matches from the VIP seating area.

Once Blanca heard Gramps’s announcement, he stood up slowly. He then took some deep breaths to gather his focus before walking confidently to the lottery area. From a distance, he seemed fine, but I noticed that his legs were trembling. I figured he was trying to hide his weakened state from his future opponents.

Amur would occasionally bump into him, pretending it was by accident, but he bonked her on the head right before they entered the lottery area. Because of that, she was holding her head in pain when it was time to draw lots.

The crowd erupted in cheers when we appeared in the drawing area. Most of them were cheering for the local favorites—Blanca and Amur—for their earlier

performances, but some were cheering for me. I heard some people in the audience murmuring about whether Amur had really had such an easy victory after all since she was holding her head in pain, but as only I could hear them, I had to stifle my laughter.

I was first up in the draw since I was the guest of honor. I reached into the box (and confirmed there was no way it had been rigged) and grabbed the first wooden tile my hand touched.

“Number one!”

The tile had the number one written on it, and I showed it to the audience before walking to the far-left corner of the area as I’d been instructed to do.

After that, the prelims winners took turns drawing in order. Blanca drew fifth and pulled the number four, meaning that he and I would face each other in the second round if things went as planned. This combination surprised Hana and the audience, but Blanca seemed pumped about it.

“I picked a great number. I’m already warmed up, so I won’t have to worry about conserving my energy!”

Blanca’s opponent (who had wanted to take on Amur) didn’t seem too thrilled about Blanca’s statement and flushed with rage, but the audience found it quite amusing.

However, what surprised Hana the most was...

“Number two!”

Amur turned out to be my first opponent, much to the shock of Blanca and the audience. However, the other finalists were even more shocked. They’d been beaten by her in the past and were hoping they would have a chance against her this time. It wouldn’t help them out any if I beat Amur in the first round.

“I drew a good number too! Now I belong to Tenma, both in name and reality!” Amur declared triumphantly at my side as if to say she planned to lose to me on purpose.

This caused the other finalists—except for Blanca—to complain, which

prompted the staff to question her motives.

“If I lose, I’ll become Tenma’s wife. And if I win, Tenma will marry my family. Strong children are born from strong parents! Bye-bye, SAR!” she said.

Her incoherent reasoning left everyone speechless for a moment, but then the crowd erupted in cheers again. The loudest among them were upper-class married people from the same group as Blanca, as they were delighted by the possibility of adding more strong children to the population.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“Victo— *Hic!*”

“Huh...?”

Just as I was about to complain, Amur cheerfully threw out a victory sign before hiccupping again. Suspicious, Blanca and I approached her.

“She reeks of alcohol!”

“The girl’s drunk!”

For some reason, Amur was dead drunk. We wondered how that could’ve happened, and Blanca suddenly started patting around his waist.

“Hey, my smelling salts are missing!” he exclaimed.

Blanca gave an excuse to take Amur back to the dressing room. It turned out that what Blanca was calling his “smelling salts” was actually pure, high-proof alcohol. One had to be very careful with it because even as large as Blanca was, he could only take a third to a fourth of a small bottle at a time. We searched Amur and found a bottle that was less than half full in her pocket.

We figured she’d probably seen him using a bottle before but she didn’t know what was inside. This would’ve been dangerous under normal circumstances, but thankfully, she didn’t have alcohol poisoning. Her inherent tolerance for alcohol, plus prompt treatment, meant she’d be fine for the next day’s event.

Once she sobered up, we questioned her. She said she’d seen Blanca drink the mixture to alleviate pain—though in reality he was just numbing himself with alcohol to endure it—so she assumed that drinking some would make her pain disappear quickly.

The rest of the competitors did their lottery draws without incident, so now all we had to do was wait for the tournament to begin the next day.

The enthusiasm inside the venue was rapidly building even before the first proper match of the tournament began. This was because of the opening act: matches between competitors who had been eliminated in the preliminary rounds. Even though these people weren't competing in the tournament, they featured top-ranking fighters from the SAR who'd been defeated by Blanca. The level of these bouts was pretty high, even by main-event standards, but that also meant the bar had been raised for us.

I entered the venue with a bitter chuckle, thinking about the strange atmosphere going on around me. Then, I faced Amur, waiting just a few meters away, and warmed up as I waited for the ref's signal.

"Both competitors, get ready! The rules are as previously outlined. Severe violations will result in immediate disqualification! Give it all you've got...and begin!"

"Nngh!"

"Haah!"

The weapons we were using today had been provided by the organizers and were blunt. Amur chose a spear that was slightly longer than the one she usually used, but she wielded it without difficulty.

I had chosen a sword for this. It was slightly longer than my usual *kogarasumaru* and had a sharper curve, but it felt similar enough to the ones I had used in my past life. I had tested it a few times and decided it would be fine. But since swords were generally weaker than spears, I carried a second sword of the same length as a backup, wearing them both in a dual-wielding style. It was a little cumbersome, but I could throw away the scabbards and fight using both swords if I needed to. I didn't expect anyone here to know about the legendary duel at Ganryu Island, so I thought it should be fine...probably.

Amur made the first move due to the reach advantage of her spear over my sword, which I had expected.

“Haah! Haah! Haaah!”

Her attacks were sharp and focused more on pulling back than thrusting to keep me out of her range. She mixed in some sweeping feints, which made it difficult for me to advance.

I knew I couldn't just keep dodging, so I tried to shake things up by striking her spear with my sword. One strike wasn't enough to make a significant difference, so I did it several times to force her to pay more attention to my attacks. They started to slow her down.

“Take this!” I yelled.

“Oof!”

Once she began to lag, I moved in closer so I could attack. However, she quickly retreated while simultaneously retracting her spear to maintain her distance.

“Hmph!”

She was committed to using her spear's range to her advantage. She advanced when I retreated and vice versa. And if I tried to cast a spell, she countered it with even sharper attacks.

“Not a bad strategy, but it's kind of naive,” I said to her.

“Huh?”

I made a show of appearing relaxed and then struck at her spear with my sword like I had before. After a few rounds of that, she pulled back her spear and I threw my sword at her.

“Too easy!” She swung her spear twice, making a clanging sound each time. Moments ago, I had thrown both a sword and its scabbard, and she'd blocked both projectiles successfully and looked quite pleased with herself for outsmarting me. However...

“I still have another sword,” I said as I drew my other one and launched a diagonal slash in her direction.

She prioritized dodging the move and chose to step back instead of blocking it with her spear.

“Gah!” she cried.

My sword hit her left shoulder. She must’ve thought she’d dodged it completely because she looked shocked.

“Here’s another!”

“Argh!” She took another heavy blow that sent her rolling about three meters away.

Then...

“Amur’s out of bounds!” the referee yelled. “The winner is Tenma!”

Amur had rolled outside of the ring. This arena was smaller than the one in the capital, but not so small that three meters would’ve normally been enough to get out of bounds. But she was so focused on maintaining her distance from me that she had been overly cautious and backed up too far before I hit her that time.

I had timed throwing my first sword and scabbard perfectly so it would force her to retreat. Since she was keeping her attention on me, it’d eventually push her to the edge of the ring.

“Hmph. I messed up. But how did you make your sword grow like that?” she asked.

“I didn’t. You thought it extended, but that was actually the scabbard.”

Amur stood outside the ring and looked at me, confused, so I explained what had happened.

Typically, the scabbard and the blade of a sword were the same length, meaning that if you didn’t completely remove the sword, you could use the extra length to extend your reach.

A katana’s scabbard won’t normally fly off just from swinging it, so if you attack just right with the scabbard already loosened, you can launch the scabbard like a projectile. I had adjusted my timing so that the scabbard had hooked onto the tip of my sword as I swung it. Once I had stopped Amur in her tracks, I then launched a horizontal blow. The force of the scabbard as it hit her had been unexpected, but it had turned out to be a pleasant surprise.

“I lost...” she lamented.

She seemed pretty down as I helped her back into the ring. The audience cheered for the match, but a few hecklers booed and said it must’ve been a fixed match since it had ended so quickly. Other audience members glared at them, though, and they were soon silenced.

I was surprised to hear that the most resounding praise came from Viscount Lobo himself.

“Hmph! An excellent match!”

“I’m surprised to hear you say anything nice about Tenma,” Hana said.

“Harrumph! I don’t care what anyone says about that brat. I just won’t tolerate anyone mocking Amur!”

“Oh, I see.”

Anyone who criticized our match was either blind or lacked the ability to understand its quality, but refusing to acknowledge it completely was just the same as being stubborn.

“Well, he seems to be doing fine for now, but there’s no way he can beat Blanca. That brat’s luck will run out in his next match!” the viscount said.

He was oddly confident as he predicted the outcome of the next match, but I had to wonder if he even knew Blanca’s current state...

“How about we make a bet? I’ll bet on Tenma winning,” Hana said to Lobo.

“Fine. I’ll bet on Blanca. What’s the wager?”

“Let’s figure that out later. We don’t have time to think about it right now.”

“Fair enough. But it can’t be that he marries Amur!”

“That’s fine by me.”

In the crowd, Hana’s mind raced. *He’s clearly overestimating Blanca and underestimating Tenma. Apparently, he thinks Tenma won the capital martial arts tournament by chance and him beating Blanca was a fluke. That mindset isn’t good for Amur or the SAR, so he needs to be taught a lesson. And now, I*

*have the perfect trick hidden up my sleeve for when he throws a fit. Yes, the perfect secret weapon...*

“Hana’s got a wicked look on her face. This feels like it’s foreshadowing Viscount Lobo’s defeat...” I muttered.

“Like it’s what? Is that like an omen?” Amur asked.

The term “foreshadowing” was used in this world similarly to how it was in my past life, but mainly used in literature and not spoken. Since Amur didn’t read much, she wasn’t familiar with the word.

There were other terms being used here that must’ve been introduced by people like me who had been reincarnated into this world. There were also words that had started being used just before I had died (like “moe”) so I knew their origins. At first, I thought the culprit was Namitaro, but he’d reincarnated here a long time before I died, so it wouldn’t have been him after all.

“Hm, when Mom gets that scheming look on her face, something bad usually happens to the old man,” Amur said after I explained to her what I had meant. I’d noticed she didn’t like calling Viscount Lobo “Dad”—she often referred to him as “that guy” or “the old man.” I could understand why she didn’t like him due to his personality, but I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for him as a fellow man.

“Blanca’s next match is about to start.”

As I returned to the dressing room deep in thought, I noticed Blanca had taken up his starting position.

“By the way, Amur. Why don’t you call Blanca ‘Uncle Blanca’ instead?”

“Everyone calls him Blanca, and I started calling him that too before I knew he was my uncle. I actually *did* try calling him ‘Uncle’ once, but he made a face like he didn’t like it, so I decided to keep calling him Blanca,” she explained.

I thought the reason Blanca had made a face was most likely due to the fact that he was feeling bashful and not because he disliked it...but since he would never admit to that in a million years, I didn’t feel the need to call him out.

I was so lost in thought that Blanca's match had ended before I knew it. Amur and Rocket had been paying close attention, though, and according to their report, Blanca immediately defeated his opponent by charging him and delivering a fierce right punch.

The two of them acted out the scene for me, with Amur taking on the role of Blanca and Rocket playing his opponent. However, because of the way Rocket moved, the reenactment looked more like a ball being knocked over and rolling across the floor. When I told him so, Rocket seemed quite disheartened, which was unusual for him.

"You're so mean, Tenma," Amur said.

"Rocket's so good at everything that I just thought it was interesting that even *he* has a weakness," I said.

That seemed to cheer Rocket up a bit and he started stretching and wobbling in the corner of the room instead. I wondered if he was practicing his acting skills.

"What's all the commotion about?" Now that he was done with his match, Blanca poked his head through the door of the waiting room.

If this had been an official tournament at the capital, that would've been seen as breaking the rules, but since it wasn't that formal, the officials didn't mind as long as we weren't cheating.

"Just a mom being overbearing, an old man hanging on by a thread, and Rocket being a ham actor."

"O-Oh, I see..." Blanca seemed oblivious to the casual insult towards Rocket in Amur's explanation.

Rocket, however, clearly noticed and looked dejected again.

Blanca looked at me for an explanation. I didn't want to make Rocket's mood worse, so I just smiled awkwardly and declined to say anything further. That only deepened Blanca's confusion, but it was a small price to pay compared to possibly hurting Rocket's feelings more.

"Anyway, I'm looking forward to the next match, Blanca," I said.

“R-Right.”

He was still confused, but I forced him into a quick handshake and ushered him and Amur out of my waiting room. Amur resisted, of course, but Blanca sensed something was up and led her away.

After they left, I wasn't able to watch the other matches because I was busy helping Rocket. He was training rigorously, fueled by a burning desire for revenge.

“I'm sure it's fine, as long as I beat Blanca,” I muttered under my breath.

“Did you say something?” Blanca asked.

Thanks to Rocket's training, time had flown by and it was time to face Blanca in the arena. He'd heard me mumble to myself as I waited for the match to start, but when I told him it wasn't anything important, he just adjusted his grip on his spear. He didn't really seem interested anyway.

The referee glanced at the two of us and then signaled that the match was about to begin. I drew my sword and removed the sheath from my waist, holding it in my left hand and the sword in my right in a dual-wielding style as I stood behind the starting line.

“Start!”

The moment the match started, Blanca roared.

“Hah!”

“Take that!”

I threw my sword at him in return. The blade flew straight towards his forehead, but he deflected it with his spear just in time.

“Hah! Hah! Take this! And this!”

I took advantage of his moment of distraction and closed the distance between us. I struck his arm, which forced him to drop his spear. Now that he was without a weapon, I unleashed a barrage of attacks with my sword's sheath.

At first, Blanca countered them with kicks and punches, but I evaded his

attacks while I kept up my relentless assault. Before long, he had his hands full just defending against me.

“There!” I yelled as I landed a clean hit on Blanca’s jaw.

I was just about to take advantage of my opportunity, but suddenly, Blanca let out a fierce roar.

“Raaaaaaawr!!!”

I instinctively leaped backwards, sensing danger, but he remained in a fighting stance and glared at me without moving a muscle.

At first, I thought he was waiting for me to make a move, but then I noticed that he wasn’t even blinking. I thought something was off, so I cautiously approached him and poked his arm with my sheath.

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, his right hand shot out at an incredible speed. I thought he’d tricked me and had fallen into a defensive stance, but he remained frozen otherwise with his arm still outstretched.

The ref cautiously approached and confirmed that even though Blanca was still standing, he had fainted. The right punch must’ve been a reflexive response to the shock he’d felt just before losing consciousness.

“The winner is...Tenma!” the ref cried, declaring my victory.

Our match would be talked about for a long time in the SAR, and it later became known as “Blanca’s Last Stand,” simply because he continued to stand even after being knocked out by my furious attacks. I was actually painted as the villain in that tale...

But in real time, the reaction to Blanca’s defeat was mixed among the other competitors and the audience. Some refused to believe he had lost and suspected foul play or cheating while others accepted it as being unavoidable. About thirty percent belonged to the former group—led by Viscount Lobo, of course—while seventy percent were led by Hana and the formidable opponents Blanca had faced in the preliminary rounds. Viscount Lobo was in a total daze, unable to accept Blanca’s defeat, and he ignored Hana’s attempts to comfort

him.

“Well, I need to get Blanca out of here,” I said.

There was such a commotion in the crowd that no one had stepped forward to carry the unconscious Blanca. I ended up being the one to carry him back to the waiting room myself. Although he had frozen when he had fallen unconscious, he immediately slumped over once I lifted him up. I did have to occasionally drag his feet along the way since he was so much larger than me.

Halfway to the waiting room, an attendant finally took over and carried Blanca to the infirmary. Unfortunately, his toes had incurred unnecessary damage on the way there, though...

“Welcome back!”

Back in my waiting room, I found that Amur had barged in there already and was relaxing with onigiri and hot tea.

“Well, my match with Blanca is over, but...don’t you think you made yourself a little too much at home here?”

“Not really,” she said. “Blanca was really unlucky, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She casually ignored my gripes, but it was clear that she had observed the match closely. She was right; the only reason I had been able to defeat him so easily was because of his bad luck. During the preliminary round, his group had consisted of the highest-ranking fighters and had ended in a chaotic free-for-all. Blanca was strong, but not even he could recover from such intense bouts in just a few days. And, as a result, he had been almost taken out by a lower-ranking opponent in the first round.

He had been so weak at that point that my victory had been guaranteed the moment I had gotten the first strike on him. But since he was such a strong man and had a high defense, the match had required more effort than I’d expected.

“We’d still be fighting if Blanca was in his usual condition,” I said.

I meant it—unless I had used magic to knock him out of the ring, the battle might’ve still been going on. Blanca was one of the toughest opponents I’d ever

faced, even in a smaller arena where he couldn't unleash his full strength.

"Anyway, congrats on winning, Tenma," Amur said.

"I still have two matches left, but thanks."

It was a bit too early to celebrate, but now that I'd beaten both Amur and Blanca, I figured I should be able to win the remaining matches without too much effort. There was a significant difference between those two and the remaining opponents, after all.

And sure enough...

"It's over! The winner is...Tenma!"

I ended my semifinal match with a counter to my opponent's face. Then...

"That's it! The champion is Tenma!"

The final match ended with a quick strike from me as I dodged my opponent's spear. The audience booed my opponents for losing so quickly to me, but there wasn't much jeering directed at me at all.

The more observant spectators said the preliminaries had been the real highlight of the tournament, which might've been why they didn't boo me at the end.

At the award ceremony after that, Hana gave me the prize of 100,000G, and the tournament was over. However, I couldn't help but notice that I hadn't spotted the viscount at the arena after I had won...

Later that night, at the viscount's estate...

"All right, are we all here?" I—Hana—asked.

Although we should have been celebrating the end of the tournament and Tenma's victory, preparing for a banquet took time, so we decided to have a family meeting first.

Those present were myself, Lobo, Amur, Sana, and Blanca.

Amur and Blanca didn't seem to have a clue why we were having this meeting, but Lobo and Sana seemed to figure out that it had to do with the bet

placed about the tournament. The fact that Lobo had kept trying to come up with excuses to get out of this had proved as much, but Sana, along with Blanca and Amur's help, had managed to keep him here.

"So what's this all about?" Amur asked impatiently. She was obviously eager to go see Tenma. I took the chance to explain that this meeting concerned the future and casually mentioned the bet we had made prior to the tournament.

"You're saying you won the bet you made with my brother, and it's related to the future of our family?"

"Exactly. Lobo bet that Blanca would win, and I bet on Tenma. So I won. Although we didn't specify what the stakes were, one condition was that Tenma wouldn't marry into our family and take on our name," I said.

Amur seemed visibly upset after hearing that, but Blanca seemed to have realized something.

"Well, I can't help the fact that Blanca lost. Hana, what do you plan on doing with Amur and Tenma if they can't get married?" Lobo asked.

"My dear brother-in-law, Hana never said she wouldn't let them get married. She only said Tenma wouldn't marry into the family and take our name."

"What?!" Lobo looked dumbfounded as Sana clarified things.

Meanwhile, it looked like my plan finally had dawned on Blanca.

"As the prize for winning the bet, I'm going to have Tenma take Amur with him," I said.

"What?"

"I haven't told Tenma about this, but I've already received Master Merlin's approval. There shouldn't be any issues," I explained.

Lobo still didn't get it, but Amur's eyes lit up and she pumped her fists in excitement when I said that.

"Yesss!!!"

"Now you wait just a minute!" Lobo yelled. "I won't allow Amur to marry!"

"It's not about her getting married. It's about sending her out to gain

experience. You know the old saying. ‘If you love your children, send them on a journey.’ Besides, if Amur and Tenma end up falling in love during their travels, then it can’t be helped, can it?”

“But what about an heir?!” Lobo demanded.

“You’re just an honorary viscount. Any capable person can take over your title. You inherited it from your father.”

“Still, I’d rather have an heir be from *our* bloodline!” Lobo insisted.

“That won’t be a problem,” I said. I was now going to use one of my secret weapons to silence his objections. “Sana?”

“Yes... Actually, I’m expecting a child.”

“What?!”

“Really?!”

News of Sana and Blanca’s baby was the first secret in my arsenal. She hadn’t even told Blanca yet, so he was frozen with shock. Considering they’d long since given up hope after years of not being able to conceive, this was a total surprise. But despite those struggles, their marriage was strong due to Blanca’s unwavering love. Amur being so close to the two of them probably helped as well. After all, she was closer to Blanca than to her own father, and if I hadn’t been so attentive as a mother, she might’ve ended up being closer to Sana than me.

“Sana...is that true?” Blanca asked.

“Yes. Our baby is right here,” Sana said, guiding his hand to her belly. She wasn’t showing quite yet, but in another month, it would be more obvious. “I think it’s a boy.”

“A boy...!”

Sana was famous for her intuition on such matters. Even when everyone else had thought my baby would be a boy because of how active it was in my belly, she had correctly predicted it was a girl. After that, she’d guessed right with many other ladies and her accuracy was over ninety percent. In fact, she’d guessed incorrectly so few times that when those babies were born, there was

talk that perhaps nature had made a mistake instead.

“Well, that settles the heir issue. I’m sorry for our future nephew, but since some people still cling to the idea of a male heir, Amur isn’t suited for the role. Our nephew will just have to do his best instead.”

Now, it was time for me to reveal my second secret weapon.

“Oh, and by the way, I’ve been given the title of Viscountess,” I added.

“What?!”

That news had come in a letter from the queen that had been among the documents Tenma had delivered. It seemed the queen intended to give me a title to basically put a collar on me and make it more difficult for me to interfere with Tenma’s marriage choices. Even so, I wasn’t set on Amur being Tenma’s *official* wife. As long as she could be by his side, that was enough for me. Plus, there were too many advantages to the offer for me to turn it down. I’d already written her a letter of acceptance, so all that remained now was for Tenma to deliver it to the capital.

“So you’re officially the highest-ranking person in the SAR,” Amur said.

Lobo only realized his position after Amur had said that. He’d been doing as he pleased because he was nominally in charge here, but since I now had a higher rank as my title was not honorary like his, he would need my approval for decisions. Having decision-making power put me at a significant advantage.

“The decision about Amur’s future is final. And that’s an order from the new viscountess,” I declared.

“Noooooooo!” Lobo’s cry of despair echoed through the estate and even beyond, spreading the news of Amur’s departure and Sana’s pregnancy throughout the region.

## Part Five

The day after the tournament had ended, a luncheon was held for the competitors. I noticed that Blanca was unusually cheerful today, so as Amur was trailing behind me, I asked her what was going on. She then told me the surprising news that Sana was pregnant.

I knew that Blanca had given up on having children of his own, so he was so overjoyed that he'd been on cloud nine since the night before.

"That's great news and all, but he's acting kinda...weird."

"Yeah!"

The SAR's top warriors who'd fought fiercely against Blanca in the preliminary round were all around me, and they joined in to agree in unison. They wanted to go congratulate him, but the huge grin on Blanca's still-swollen face combined with his usually intimidating aura left them all a bit bewildered. Since they were unsure of how to approach him, they came to me first. However, as they were all older than him, they were equally intimidating.

Blanca was totally oblivious to all this and was instead following close behind Sana, making sure she was safe every step of the way.

"By the way, what about *that*?" I asked.

"Oh, don't worry about *that*," Amur answered.

*That* was referring to Viscount Lobo, who was practically drowning himself in alcohol. Since he was sobbing while drinking, everyone kept their distance from him. Honestly, Blanca's behavior was unsettling enough, but Viscount Lobo's was downright creepy.

Amur didn't say another word, but I heard that apparently Hana had been given the title of viscountess from the kingdom. And since Viscount Lobo was just an honorary viscount, she now outranked him and was the top-ranking person in the SAR. Not only that but since Hana's grandfather, Grampy Kei, had originally founded Nanao, everyone seemed to welcome the change in leadership.

“Oh, by the way, I’ve decided to follow you on your journey,” Amur said.

I didn’t understand what she meant by her casual comment. “Huh? Don’t you think it’s a bit late to tell me that? What would you call what you’ve been doing this whole time?”

“No, I’ve been *officially* allowed to accompany you on your adventures to gain experience. You’re officially my guardian from now on. Even Grandpa Merlin agreed to it.”

“Gramps!”

I called over Gramps, who was also indulging in sake, and asked why he had agreed to take Amur in.

“Simply put, it’s to secure an escape route,” he said. “I don’t doubt Alex and the others, of course, but remember that they’re royals. It’s their job to put the kingdom first. Who knows what might happen in the future? They might be pushed into a situation where we have to be eliminated. And if that happens, we would need to have strong connections to the SAR—somewhere not even Alex can easily invade. Hopefully that sort of thing will never happen, but we do have to think about the worst-case scenarios here.”

Well, I didn’t think the king would harm us, but I could possibly see something happening if the reformists were to gain more power than the royalists.

The SAR had come about because the kingdom had failed to invade the region. The SAR didn’t have any enemy countries around it either. Well, there were tiny countries here and there close to its forest, but those were made up of only a few thousand people at the most. If all of those were to band together, they might be able to raise an army of ten thousand, but the chances of that were low.

And if we became an enemy of the kingdom, the neighboring countries would probably all invade at once. That would leave the SAR as the best place to escape.

“Anyway, I gave my permission because it’s mutually beneficial for us,” Gramps said.

“I get that, but...what do you get in return?”

“I...didn’t get anything,” Gramps replied evasively. But when I kept asking him, he reluctantly admitted that he had received some sake from the SAR. Not only that, but it was a high-quality shochu aged for a hundred years, and they’d given him four kegs of it, which was the rough equivalent of twenty liters.

According to Gramps, after the agreement to take in Amur had been settled, they’d talked about specialty products from the SAR and the topic of alcohol had come up. He’d mentioned that he liked the SAR’s sake, and Hana had decided to share some specially with him. So although he had claimed it wasn’t bribery, Gramps clearly had expected to get something out of the deal.

Anyway, I agreed to take in Amur since the head of our family had made the decision. Well, when I say “family,” I don’t mean the Otori family, but the head of the estate in the capital. However, since this was going to cause a lot of trouble for me, I decided to take ownership of two of the four kegs Gramps had received. I was going to give some of it away as presents to friends so he wouldn’t drink all of it himself.

Just as the noisy banquet was about to end, an armed man suddenly rushed to Hana. The guests looked to her and the breathless man, but once they saw the stern look on her face relax, everyone resumed eating and drinking.

After we watched the man leave Hana’s side, Gramps, Amur and I went over and asked what had happened. Blanca, who was still following after Sana, and the very drunk Viscount Lobo came over too. Hana judged that Lobo was too drunk to count on, however, so she sent him back to a corner of the room to sober up.

“There was a bit of a concern, but a problem has been resolved. Basically, the unit that had just finished dealing with the goblins spotted two wyverns flying towards Nanao on their way back, but they defeated them on the spot. There were some injuries, but none were fatal. Everyone survived.”

Hana looked relieved after she’d explained that. She picked up a cup, drinking down its contents with one gulp, then immediately downed a few more refills. The scent of strong alcohol came from the cup, but she didn’t seem drunk.

“The problem is that many other people saw the wyverns,” she said.  
“Unfortunately, there was a merchant caravan from the capital and a group of

travelers near the unit. Luckily our unit defeated the wyverns so there was no damage, but if the caravan or travelers visiting Nanao are in danger, there might be fewer of them in the future.”

Of course, it wouldn't be the SAR's fault if travelers were attacked on the way by wyverns, but if there were rumors of such danger that might make others hesitant to visit, that would significantly impact their economy.

“We should take measures against that. It seems the caravan and travelers will arrive in Nanao the day after tomorrow. What should we do?” she wondered aloud.

Even if she wanted everyone's advice, Blanca wasn't much help in his state, Amur was useless, and Viscount Lobo was out of the question. Sana was the only other person who seemed reliable here, but she was currently surrounded by old ladies congratulating her on her pregnancy and seemed unable to escape anytime soon. That left Hana to glance at me and Gramps expectantly.

“Hm... If that's the case, it would be a good idea to do something to make them forget their worries. Do you have any ideas, Tenma?” Gramps pitched the ball to me.

I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Why don't you invite the caravan and travelers to celebrate the eradication of the wyverns? That should ease some of their anxiety.”

“That's a good idea, but it seems a bit weak on its own. It might work on the travelers, but I'm not sure how much it will affect the caravan,” Hana countered.

It made sense that it wouldn't be that simple.

“In that case, why not say the wyvern incident was a blessing from the heavens and hold some kind of gratitude ceremony? It could be a festival for all of Nanao. The grander it is, the more it will alleviate people's worries,” Blanca suggested.

“Hmm... I think we may need something bigger.”

Although Hana wasn't satisfied with Blanca's idea, she wrote it down in bullet points on a notepad next to her.

“By the way, what about the taxes that are required when you enter Nanao?”

Normally, when you went to a big city like Nanao, you had to pay a tax as an entrance fee. We hadn’t had to pay since Gramps and I were envoys from the royal family, but normally, the tax would be collected up front and then you’d be allowed to stay for a certain period of time.

“Why don’t we exempt the merchant caravans and travelers from the entrance fee this time and reduce the taxes on buying and selling goods?” I suggested.

“That’s a bit much...”

Sana approached unnoticed and quickly agreed with my proposal, even though Hana was reluctant. “Why not try it, Hana? Although the direct tax revenue will decrease, we can make up more if we have that festival, so we won’t lose much. Rumors will spread, and maybe merchant caravans who have never been to the SAR will become interested in coming. So incorporating them into the ritual might yield better results,” she said.

Thanks to Sana’s support, Hana decided to go ahead with my proposal and we began discussing the details. Blanca seemed to take charge of selecting participants for the ritual. As of right now, there would be three participants from their family and two guests (as they wanted me and Gramps to participate) along with three people from other places. They actually wanted to do something larger, but they didn’t have the time, so they prioritized bringing on as many strong people as possible. The other three would be chosen from those already present.

“I don’t mind participating, but what kind of ritual is it? Since you’re all so strong, I can guess it’s some kind of competition,” Gramps said.

“Oh, I should explain first,” Blanca said. “This ritual is called sumo. It’s a one-on-one battle in which you fight using only your body in a ring called a dohyo. The basic idea is that you can use your body in any way you want to get your opponent out of the ring. Moves that are forbidden are strikes with the knees, elbows, kicks, or fists, and you cannot bite, attack vital places, or use magic. Otherwise, whoever steps out of the ring first is out.”

There were other specific rules, but they were largely the same as the sumo I

was familiar with already. Blanca said he'd explain the finer details later on and went to gather up everyone to decide on the other participants. Most of the guests at the luncheon wanted to participate and began impromptu qualifier matches without waiting for Blanca's decision.

Seizing the opportunity, Gramps and I observed the sumo bouts from the sidelines. At first, I was worried someone might object to our participation, but no one did. The matches proceeded at a rapid pace. Occasionally, defeated wrestlers would fly towards us from the dohyo, and I wasn't sure if it was intentional or a coincidence.

Finally, three survived in the end.

"There aren't any top-ranking SAR warriors left."

"That's right."

All of the top contenders who were thought to be the strongest had been defeated first. Even the top contenders couldn't demonstrate their strength properly while they were drunk. The winners were a boar beastfolk, a bear beastfolk, and a tiger beastfolk who was not a warrior at all.

Blanca gave the three a stern warning. "All right. We'll see you at the festival. I'm sure you understand, but since this is a sacred ritual, any misconduct will be severely punished."

The three nodded obediently. They also shot me sharp glares from time to time, probably thinking they could beat me in a magic-free contest.

"As for who will participate from our family, I've made a decision..." Blanca said.

Amur suddenly appeared. "I'm in!" she declared.

Blanca promptly rejected her. "No."

Amur grumbled, but Blanca explained that it was prohibited for women to participate in the sumo ritual because traditionally, the participants were naked underneath their loincloths. However, since there had been a time when intentionally exposing one's business was popular, participants now wore underwear beneath.

“Well, I think it’s best to choose from the team that defeated the wyverns,” Blanca said. He was casually excluding the viscount, and no one objected. Perhaps he felt that it wasn’t appropriate to have the former leader participate in the match, but it was more likely that he had just forgotten about him.

The selected participants gathered around Hana for a brief explanation of the rules before leaving early. Apparently, there was a lot to do to prepare for the festival, including setting up the dohyo, deciding on locations for vendors, and discussing taxes. We only had two days to get ready as the caravan and travelers would arrive then, so the schedule was tight. It was decided that the festival would be held the day after their arrival.

So, Blanca sprang into action, leaving Gramps and me without anyone to teach us the rules of sumo. We considered asking Amur, but since she wasn’t allowed to participate, she couldn’t explain the rules either.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the viscount. I was reluctant to ask him for help since he was still drunk and probably still held a grudge against me due to Amur. Ultimately, I decided to put off seeking his advice for now.

We were discussing finding Blanca and asking him for help anyway as a last resort when some people approached us. They were the top-ranked SAR warriors who had been defeated in the qualifiers. They claimed they had nothing else better to do and wanted revenge against the opponents who had beaten them. While they kind of seemed like sore losers, we appreciated their help anyway.

“If I’ve got this right, we’ll enter the ring single file and line up along the dohyo at even intervals. Then, we’ll perform a clapping ritual and bow our heads, facing outwards. After that, we’ll exit the dohyo and the match’s participants will be called to the ring to fight. Is that correct?” I said.

“Yes, that’s right. Once you’re called, you grab a handful of salt and sprinkle it on the dohyo. Then, you go to the center line. You’ll probably understand better if you try it instead of us explaining it.”

And with that, we began practicing the entry procedure. They apparently weren’t good at explaining things verbally and preferred to demonstrate it. And since I had limited time, I appreciated it.

After we practiced a few times, we started to actually wrestle. Since there were four warriors, we split into two groups. Two people would spar at a time while another one watched from the sidelines, calling out any fouls or rule-breaking.

“I’m definitely at a disadvantage here...”

I kept losing against the top contenders in the practice rounds. They said that nothing was wrong with my etiquette or my understanding of the rules, but it seemed fruitless if I couldn’t win.

Meanwhile, Gramps was holding his own against the top contenders.

“Oof! Take thaaaaat!”

Gramps got fired up and tossed his higher-ranked opponent out of the ring. Apparently, that was Gramps’s sixth consecutive win. He had lost four times in a row at the beginning, but now that he was used to sumo, he’d been overwhelming his competitors with his reckless technique.

“I’ll give it my all and wreak havoc in the tournament! I’m aiming for victory!” he yelled.

“Good for you, Gramps. My goal is just to make it past the first round...”

Gramps had set some pretty lofty goals based on his practice performance, but I was more of a realist.

“The sumo tournament will now begin! Contestants, please enter the ring!”

With Hana’s announcement, the competitors began our entrance. The two representatives from the team that had defeated the wyvern led the way, followed by me and Gramps. After us were the three who had won the preliminary rounds, and then Blanca brought up the rear. Hana had decided on this order. The first two were being honored for their contributions to Nanao’s safety, Gramps and I were guests, and the next three had secured their spots with victory in the preliminary rounds. Blanca, being a family member, was last.

I mentally went over the etiquette we’d been taught earlier. We performed the greeting ceremony in the ring and then went back to the waiting room. My name was called almost immediately. The matchups had been determined by

drawing lots right after we had arrived, meaning that we'd only learned who'd we be up against at the last minute.

"I must have luck on my side! I get to make a name for myself early on," said the boar beastfolk who had won the preliminaries with a laugh. He was much larger than me and was the third-largest competitor after the bear beastfolk and Blanca.

"Maybe I'm the lucky one. Boars are known for charging in blindly, so all I have to do is dodge and you'll run straight out of the ring," I quipped, knowing full well he had underestimated me.

In reality, boars were very strong, capable of sharp turns at full speed, and could jump over one-meter-tall obstacles with ease. The idea of them charging in blindly was actually just a stereotype.

"You little brat!"

Clearly my taunts had struck a nerve—his face had turned beet red. If we weren't in public, he probably would've lunged at me right there. I covered my mouth and let out a deliberate chuckle, making him blush even more.

The audience couldn't hear what we were saying to each other, but they could tell we were exchanging words. They seemed to understand that I'd provoked the bigger guy and that he had taken the bait, which made the crowd buzz with excitement before we even threw the salt. From the looks of things, it probably seemed like a big guy had challenged a kid to a verbal sparring match and had ended up losing. And he actually *had* lost, but that didn't matter to the audience. To them, this was probably some exciting pregame entertainment.

I confidently sprinkled salt on the ring, pleased with my victory in the preliminary battle of wits. However, I might have gone a bit too far with my taunting because by the time we were in the ring, the boar beastfolk's face was so red with anger that he looked like a demon.

"Aaand...begin!"

"Hah!"

As soon as the referee called for the match to start, I quickly dashed into my opponent's range. Since I'd mocked him so much about charging blindly, I

figured he definitely wouldn't do that himself, and he fell right into my trap. And since I charged at him just as he was standing up, his stance was higher than usual. That worked in my favor.

"Damn it!"

He panicked and attempted some kind of sweeping kick, but I grabbed his thigh before he could gain momentum and tried to push him down.

"Don't underestimate me, you brat!" He tried to lean his body towards me to counterattack, making his center of gravity end up right over mine.

"Take this!" I yelled.

The moment his body pressed against mine, I lifted his legs, twisted my hips, and threw him backwards using a rear-throwing technique. Even though he was probably more than twice my weight, the combination of his high center of gravity and the momentum he'd put into his attempted counterattack had made him easy to throw. He rolled right out of the ring.

I'd taken a gamble on that move and ended up on my back. But since he hit the ground outside the ring first (and I was still inside), I won without a problem.

The audience was momentarily stunned by the quick outcome but erupted into cheers an instant later, celebrating my victory. Surprisingly, no one booed my opponent. The crowd seemed to credit my clever strategy rather than seeing him as weak. There were a few people who mocked him, but that naturally had to be expected.

"Well, I've achieved my goal for now."

Usually, the winner would be declared after the loser returned to the ring, but since the man had lost consciousness from the impact and was being carried away on a stretcher, my victory was declared immediately. I went ahead and left the ring.

"That was a good win," Blanca said, complimenting me. He was on his way to his match as I was heading back to the waiting room.

"Thanks. Wait, you're up next?"

Blanca hadn't won yet, but just looking at his opponent made me think the outcome was pretty obvious. He was up against one of the men who had slain the wyvern and also happened to be one of Blanca's subordinates. Although that might've raised suspicions that the match was fixed, the difference in their ability was too much to ignore.

Meanwhile, the color had drained from Blanca's opponent's face when he'd found out who he was up against.

"Blanca, don't accidentally kill him," I said.

"I'm not going to kill him! I think he has the potential to become one of the SAR's top warriors if he shows his true strength," Blanca told me.

But judging by the other man's demeanor, I found it hard to believe he was very strong. Blanca understood my skepticism and smiled wryly before heading to the arena. As I expected, the match ended quickly as Blanca forced his opponent out of the ring moments after the match started.

The next bout was between the last member of the wyvern-slaying team and the bear beastfolk. Although the wyvern slayer had an impressive physique, his paled in comparison to the bear beastfolk's. As I had suspected, the latter won, but he only pulled out a win at the very end. He had actually been losing for most of the match.

The bear beastfolk had relied on his superior size and had attacked the wyvern slayer relentlessly, while his opponent had used his skill to compensate for the difference in size and strength. The wyvern slayer just about had the bear beastfolk on the brink of defeat, but then in a desperate move, the bear beastfolk had shoved his opponent's shoulder with all his might, causing him to teeter off-balance. This had allowed the bear beastfolk to pursue him and push him out of the ring. Even the bear beastfolk seemed to realize it was only a fluke of a victory—despite his win, he had a bitter expression on his face when he left the ring.

It was educational for me to watch the wyvern slayer fight, but it was clear that those tactics wouldn't work against Blanca. The size difference between me and the wyvern slayer, like the one between the bear beastfolk and Blanca, was too great. Even so, it was a potential strategy to keep in mind.

“By the way, Tenma, did you see my match?” Gramps asked.

“Huh? Sorry, I missed it.”

I’d been so focused on thinking about strategies to use against Blanca that I had totally missed Gramps’s match. Blanca had watched it, though, and he said that Gramps had faced a tiger beastfolk, charged him, and sent him flying out of the ring. The match had ended when the tiger beastfolk landed on his backside out-of-bounds.

In tournaments like this where only top fighters were selected to participate, such a display of power was rare. The audience greatly admired Gramps’s strength.

“It’s a shame I missed your match, Gramps. But now it’s time for the next one.”

“Yeah. You were deep in thought earlier. Did you come up with a good strategy?”

“I thought of a few things, but I doubt any of them will work,” I said.

Blanca gave me a look as if to say, “Should you really be saying that?” but I told him I’d try whatever I could. He gave me a rather unsettling grin, one that didn’t fit a soon-to-be-father, but I decided not to mention it.

“All right. They’re calling our names, so let’s go.”

“I’m getting excited!” Blanca cheered, sounding like a true member of a warrior clan.

Blanca and I scattered salt in the ring and then took our positions.

“Ready... Fight!”

“Hey!”

As soon as the ref had made the announcement, I clapped my hands loudly right in front of Blanca’s face. It was a maneuver that I’d seen in sumo tournaments in my past life called a “fool the cat trick.”

Blanca wasn’t intimidated by a move like that, of course, but it did cause him to hesitate for a split second. He couldn’t decide whether to reflexively grab my

hands or just react to the unexpected noise. But that moment allowed my first plan to succeed.

“Gotcha!”

I seized my opening and darted in close, hooking my left leg around his. I then grabbed that same leg with my right hand and pressed my shoulder against his chest while I gripped his loincloth with my left hand. This move was a triple attack, something I’d seen in a sumo TV special in my previous life and had decided to try on the spot. Surprisingly, it worked better than I expected.

“Whoa! Oof...”

Even Blanca, an experienced sumo wrestler, wasn’t used to being grabbed so tightly by someone smaller who’d rushed into his pocket. I managed to push him to the edge of the ring, but that was all I could do. My goal had been to push him all the way out, but things wouldn’t go that easily.

Blanca skillfully regained his balance. “That was close, but I got ya now!” he said. With that, he grabbed my loincloth with his right hand and tried to turn the tables.

“Let’s finish this!”

But before he could gain the upper hand, I lifted my left leg and attempted an inner thigh throw.

“Take this!” I yelled.

Blanca didn’t even blink before countering with a powerful overarm throw. We struggled against each other for a while until we both tumbled out of the ring at the same time.

After the referee called the other officials over to discuss the situation, they announced their decision.

“The winner is Blanca!”

Some people in the crowd were unhappy with that since it looked like we had executed our moves simultaneously and had fallen out of the ring at the same time. Cries of “Rematch! Rematch!” and even a few accusations of bias in favor of the viscount’s family could be heard from the crowd.

I, however, was satisfied with the outcome and left the ring without complaining. The deciding factor in my defeat had been the bags of rice lining the edge of the sumo ring in the four cardinal directions. At those parts of the space, the ring was slightly wider. Blanca's foot had landed on a slightly wider part of the border while I stepped out of the ring first.

As I quietly left the ring, the judges provided a detailed explanation of what had happened. The audience finally calmed down when they saw the footprints left behind by Blanca and me.

"That was a close one, Tenma," Gramps said.

"I might've won with that throw if I'd been up against anyone but Blanca," I said.

Honestly, if I'd had to fight Gramps, I might've made it to the finals. But knowing Gramps, he probably would've found a way to counter before I did.

"You just had bad luck, Tenma. We ended up in a strange part of the ring, anyway." Blanca said, joining our conversation. Despite his victory, he was his usual self. There wasn't any awkwardness between us.

"Well, luck is part of the game. It's not a big deal I lost. But I'll be rooting for you to avenge me, Gramps."

"I'm looking forward to it!" Blanca said.

Even though our banter was lighthearted, Gramps's match to secure a spot in the finals was still to come, which meant...

"Don't ignore meeeee!"

The bear beastfolk, Gramps's future opponent, was also here. Gramps and Blanca apologized for their oversight, but that only seemed to increase the bear beastfolk's anger even further.

Considering the way the first match had gone, it was clear the bear beastfolk wouldn't stand a chance against Gramps. But I knew I didn't have room to say that since I hadn't even watched Gramps's earlier match.

"The winner is...Merlin!"

But just as I expected, Gramps secured an easy victory and the match ended

quickly. The bear beastfolk returned to the waiting room in a haze and pouted in the corner. The winning move had been a *tsuridashi*—Gramps had completely lifted his opponent off the ground and carried him out of the ring. No wonder the bear beastfolk was so depressed now.

“His center of gravity was so high that it wasn’t too difficult to lift him,” Gramps explained. He said the reason he won was because of a difference in strength and his ability to get under his opponent’s center of gravity. But even in those circumstances, lifting someone of that size was no small feat for anyone, let alone an elderly man.

Anyway, the final match was going to be between Blanca and Gramps, just like everyone had anticipated. There was a scheduled break before the finals would begin, so I decided to grab some food from the stalls set up around the venue. I left the waiting room thinking that I would have plenty of time, but then, something unexpected happened.

“Take this!”

“Ours are grilled fresh, the best ones you’ll ever taste!”

“Eat more and grow bigger so you can beat Blanca next time!”

For some reason, I found myself surrounded by people who’d just watched the sumo matches. It was just a few people praising me for my performance at first, but as more people recognized me, the vendors began to compete with one another, all trying to give me their best dishes.

There were so many people here that I was stuck. They were all being so nice that I couldn’t just turn them down. Thankfully, I was freed at last just moments before the final match started because one person remembered that Gramps was in the finals. They all cleared the way for me to return to the venue.

“I made it just in time...”

“That was a close call!”

As I returned to the waiting room, Gramps and Blanca were just entering the ring. The match would start in a few minutes. Amur was with me, but the reason she’d said it was a close call wasn’t because we barely made it back in time, but because she’d nearly choked on a skewer of grilled meat while we

were running back here. Despite that scare, she was now sitting down and happily munching away on her food along with two of my gluttonous followers.

“Let’s eat while we watch.”

We moved our chairs to a spot that had a good view of the ring and ate the food we’d received. Just as we settled in, the match began.

“Tenma, I’m bored,” she whined.

“Well, there hasn’t been much action so far.”

About five minutes into the match, Gramps and Blanca were locked in a stalemate in the center of the ring. It looked like they were simply holding their positions, but I could tell they were both attempting subtle feints and intricate maneuvers. But to audience members like Amur who had been expecting something more dramatic for the final match, it was understandably dull.

Another five minutes passed...

“Break! Restart the bout!”

The ref called for a break because of the prolonged stalemate, bringing a mixture of relief and excitement to the crowd. Those who had been complaining about being bored were now cheering at the ref’s decision.

“They should’ve restarted it sooner,” Amur muttered.

Many people in the crowd agreed with her, wanting to see more action. Amur wasn’t completely focused on the sumo match either. She was busy competing with Shiromaru and Solomon to devour the food from the stalls, which significantly reduced my share of the loot. I’d grabbed some skewers and other items that were easy to eat on the go, so I wasn’t starving or anything, but I knew I’d still end up hungry at this rate.

“I guess I’d better eat as much as I can before the match restarts,” I said.

“Good idea,” Amur said, though she didn’t seem to realize why I wanted to eat quickly.

I went ahead and secured some more food for myself. Shiromaru and Solomon casually positioned themselves beside me and eyed my plate, but I ignored them and concentrated on eating. I didn’t have enough to share with

them.

“Ready... Fight!” called the ref.

Despite the restart, the match seemed to fall into the same pattern and both competitors were once again stuck in the center of the ring. This time, however, there was a major difference. Blanca had managed to pull off a “morosashi,” a move where you hooked both your hands under your opponent’s armpits to take control.

Thanks to that, he began to gradually push Gramps back. Despite Gramps’s best efforts and a brief moment of resistance in the center, he was eventually forced out of the ring. The crowd erupted into support for the local favorite, with Sana cheering the loudest.

Sana was normally very composed, but she was so excited that the women around her urged her to calm down for the baby’s sake.

“Maybe the difference between Gramps and Blanca was the level of support?” I wondered.

Maybe I should’ve cheered more for him, but even if I had, I couldn’t have matched the volume and enthusiasm of Blanca’s supporters—especially Sana.

*I’ll have to remember that excuse in case Gramps complains about it later...*

“If Blanca hadn’t won with all that support, people would tease him mercilessly every time a sumo match happened,” Amur said.

Apparently, higher-ranking SAR citizens loved to banter, so it would definitely come up in conversation.

“By the way, there’s no prize money for winning the sumo tournament, right?” I asked.

“It’s officially a ritual, so the only reward is honor. Betting *is* allowed, though,” Amur told me.

It seemed a bit contradictory to let people bet on the outcome of a sacred ritual, but it *was* a festival.

“Just honor? That seems a bit unfair,” I said. “Maybe I can give Blanca something to congratulate them on the pregnancy?”

I rummaged through my magic bag, looking for something suitable. Rocket had been quiet all this time, but now he approached me and slipped into my dimension bag. I waited to see if he had any bright ideas. Shortly after, he emerged from the bag, followed by Goldie and Silvie. They spat out two round balls, one gold and one silver.

“Are those made out of your silk?” The balls had a silky texture, and I unraveled them a bit to check. They looked like they were made out of translucent gold and silver thread.

Amur looked them over too. “How much do you think those would sell for?” she asked.

“No clue,” I said. I’d never seen anything like them before, so I couldn’t even begin to guess. But if Agris was right, these balls of thread, each of which was about fifteen centimeters in diameter, were probably priceless.

“Whatever.”

Considering how much Blanca and Sana had done for me, and since I hadn’t even known these existed until now, I thought it wouldn’t hurt to give the balls away as gifts.

“Come to think of it, I still owe Hana and Sana some armor similar to yours,” I said. “I should start working on that soon.”

Since I was using Amur’s armor as a reference, I figured I wouldn’t need to ask for their measurements. If they didn’t fit, Sana could alter them.

I took out some leather made from the tanned hides of spear elk as my main material. Rocket had tanned it himself, having used his slime abilities to dissolve any unwanted flesh and fat while preserving the hides. It would be perfect for the job, and I’d be able to start on the project right away.

“Tenma! Why didn’t you cheer for me from the audience?!”

But just as I was planning my next steps, Gramps returned and immediately started griping about my lack of support. I told him the excuse I’d come up with, but he didn’t seem convinced.

I wondered how I could appease him, but just then, Blanca and Sana returned

from the award ceremony. Gramps seemed to forget about his complaints with me once he saw them, and I lost the desire to continue making excuses too.

“So annoying,” Amur muttered, echoing my thoughts.

Blanca had entered the room carrying Sana like a princess. She’d had her arms wrapped around his neck, kissing him and showering him with affection. I could almost see a lovey-dovey pink aura surrounding them.



“All right! Now that the tournament is over, let’s hit the food stalls!” I suggested.

“Yeah, let’s go! Hurry!” Amur agreed enthusiastically.

“Count me in,” Gramps said.

The three of us quickly made an escape from the obnoxiously lovey-dovey couple.

Later, I heard that Blanca and Sana had been so wrapped up in each other that they hadn’t even noticed that anyone had left the room. Their PDA continued until Hana came to the room to check on us since she wondered where everybody had gone. She’d ended up scolding them, saying, “Enough already!”

## Part Six

I had been holed up at the inn for several days, completely absorbed in making the set of Bandit King's Armor that Hana had requested. I'd enjoyed the festival the day after the sumo tournament, but I'd become so well-known around the SAR due to both tournaments that I couldn't go anywhere without being surrounded by throngs of people. So, for the sake of both my privacy and my own mental health, I decided to stay indoors.

Amur and Hana understood my situation and had kindly arranged for me to receive samples of rare and popular foods from the festival stalls, so I didn't feel deprived at all. Actually, it felt somewhat luxurious to enjoy delicious food during breaks in my work. I was able to relax in the hot springs for once too.

"This is good. It might not be suited for intense combat, but it's perfect for everyday use. As for the color, well... I guess it can't be helped," Hana said when she saw the finished armor. She seemed to be pleased, despite the set being the natural brown color of spear elk hide. She liked the tiger-inspired design I had chosen too. The size was slightly off, so she was going to have Sana do the necessary alterations.

"And this is a little extra," I said, and handed her an outfit that looked like a kigurumi onesie. It was versatile enough to be worn every day or over pajamas. I had made three of them with the leftover spear elk hides to kill some time and had already given one to Amur. And since kigurumi didn't require precise sizing, making more than one wasn't that big of a deal. I actually had several more in the works, thinking they'd make good souvenirs for anyone who wanted one.

"So, what are your plans now, Tenma?" Hana asked.

"I'm going to get some souvenirs to bring back to my friends, and then I'll start getting ready to head back to the capital." I also told her that I planned on staying for another week.

After that, she had a thoughtful look on her face. "Sorry to ask you, but could you save one of those days for me? There's somewhere I'd like to take you."

Her tone was unusually serious, so I readily agreed. I could tell it was something important. I even told her I was available today, but she said she needed to prepare something on her end first.

Instead, she suggested that we set out in the morning two days from now, and she wanted Gramps to come along too. I agreed to inform him of the plans.

“Also, if you’re looking for unique souvenirs from the SAR, I’d ask Sana. She oversees the local crafts in Nanao, so she’ll be a great help,” Hana said.

I took her suggestion and visited Sana. My only worry was that she and Blanca would still be caught up in their post-tournament honeymoon mood, but Amur was visiting them and assured me they weren’t.

“The town seems a lot calmer now,” I said as I left the viscount’s estate and made my way to Sana’s house.

The festival atmosphere had died down some. It was still a bit noisy, but at least I wasn’t getting mobbed like I had been right after the sumo tournament. I was also wearing a hood over my face as a disguise.

“Hello, Sana?” I called out. “Are you home?”

“Coming!”

I could hear Sana’s footsteps as she hurried to greet me. She was followed by a concerned-looking Blanca and an excited Amur.

I explained why I was there, and Sana led me to a room filled with various goods. Some of them were particularly rare and valuable, and Sana sternly reprimanded Amur when she tried to handle them carelessly.

“I’d recommend golden hair accessories or necklaces for women. Men tend to like these silver bracelets. But a safer gift might be something like these handkerchiefs for the ladies... Women can be quite picky,” she said, showing me different items.

None of them really struck a chord with me, though, so I decided to sort the people I was buying souvenirs for into categories.

First, I considered Jin and the others from Sagan. They’d probably like food instead of decorative items, and alcohol would be a hit with Master Gantz.

Next were my friends from the royal capital, starting with the people from Kukuri Village. Since there were so many of them, food would be a good choice. The aunties would especially like things they could use at home, such as seasonings or recipes they could recreate easily. Kelly and the others would appreciate alcohol and some sweets.

I also considered Jeanne, Aura, and Amy. For those three, I thought something with the Otori family crest would be nice since they were a part of my family. Those items could serve as proof of their identity in times of need and could be a deterrent for any potential troublemakers. I asked Sana if she could make some handkerchiefs with my family crest on them.

She said she could, but it would take some time. Handkerchiefs alone didn't seem like they'd be enough, though, so I decided to buy some accessories as well. Aina might've liked something similar too. She'd never admit to it, but I was sure she wouldn't mind a handkerchief that matched her sister's. As for Cruyff, a simple, plain handkerchief would suit him best.

Next came the nobles. Anything would be fine for Albert and his gang. I wasn't sure if Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons would be in the capital, so I didn't want to bring them anything perishable. I decided a set of various types of alcohol, including some I had gotten from Gramps, would be best. They didn't need as much as Gantz and the others, but they'd appreciate something more expensive or rare.

As for the royal family, they were likely familiar with most things from the SAR already, so something a bit different would be good. Whatever I got them had to be high-quality, though, so I decided to have something custom-made.

First, I'd have Sana make some clothing for the men. Men's clothing didn't have to be sized as precisely as women's clothing, so I gave Sana their approximate sizes. I asked her to make Tida's slightly larger to account for future growth. I also requested that she use durable, high-quality materials.

The biggest challenge was the royal women. Honestly, I had no idea what to get them. Luna would be the easiest, and I knew she'd be happy with almost anything. Queen Maria would be particularly difficult, though.

"What do you think I should get for them?"

Since I didn't know, I figured I should just ask a professional. But Sana had never given a gift to a royal, so she was at a loss too. But then, someone unexpected made an interesting suggestion.

"Why not approach it like you're giving something to a relative?" Blanca said. "From an outsider's perspective, the queen seems to be quite fond of you. I'm sure she'll like whatever you give her as long as it's nothing outrageous."

"Blanca's right! The queen is definitely sweet on you, Tenma. Even something handmade will probably delight her!" Sana agreed. This seemed to give her an idea, and she walked towards the back of the workshop. Blanca followed closely behind her.

They returned a few minutes later, carrying several pieces of fabric in various sizes and shapes.

"These are shawl samples. They're simple because they're only examples, but we can create unique ones by combining various colors and patterns!"

I was surprised as I'd thought she'd just brought out regular fabric. The pieces were in square and rectangular shapes and they had been cut into small, medium, and large sizes.

"Handmade shawls would be nice, but I can't weave them in just a day or two. But if you can specify the colors and patterns you want, I can have expert craftsmen weave them for you quickly."

Sana told me that even complex patterns could be made in a few days. Since that was the case, I decided to get five. There were only four royal women, but there was also Primera. It wouldn't be fair to exclude her when I was already bringing gifts for Duke Sanga and Albert, so I wanted to include her.

"Five shawls, then. Any thoughts on styles?"

She explained the various weaving styles to me, and I decided on a general one.

"So five large ones with a slightly thicker wave. And for colors and patterns..."

Sana wrote my specifications down on an order form. I wasn't sure what colors or patterns to get off the top of my head, so I selected some from the

samples she showed me.

“Can you embroider the person’s name on each one?”

I still feared that these would be a bit plain, though. I wanted something truly original. So, I handed over some balls of thread I had gotten from Goldie and Silvie—different from the ones I’d set aside as a gift for Sana.

“What is this thread?!” she exclaimed loudly and began to excitedly examine them from various angles.

Even though I hadn’t explained what they were yet, she seemed to recognize their value immediately. I then handed her two more balls—the ones Rocket had prepared as a gift for the new baby.

Sana was overwhelmed with emotion and hugged me, then hugged Rocket, nuzzling her cheek against him. But when Sana had hugged me, I’d noticed Blanca’s gaze had sharpened momentarily. I didn’t think it was just my imagination.

Anyway, these balls of thread were special, even among the silk that Goldie and Silvie regularly produced. They were the size of your palm and must’ve taken considerable time and energy to create.

“I’ve got your order. Each shawl will cost 3,000G, so your total will be 15,000G. We can deliver them five days from now.”

At first, Sana had offered to make them for free as a thank-you for the thread, but I insisted on paying full price to maintain the significance of my gift to her.

I had also ordered souvenirs for the male members of the royal family that were embroidered with their names using Goldie and Silvie’s silk, handkerchiefs, and accessories for Jeanne and the others. We arranged that I’d pick up everything together with the shawls. Now, all I had left to do was go shopping to buy a few more gifts.

“Well, shall we go to the liquor store next?” I suggested.

After we left Sana’s house, Amur and I headed to the liquor store and bought a bunch of alcohol. We couldn’t find any top-shelf stuff like what Gramps had, though. When we were done there, we stopped by the general store and the

grocery store.

At the general store, we picked up a few kitchen knives that had been made using the same technique as Japanese swords. After that, we focused on buying spices at the grocery store.

However, our most significant find wasn't the knives or the spices.

"I never thought we'd be able to get seeds and seedlings to grow spices that can survive in the capital's climate or in Sagan!"

We had found chili pepper seeds, turmeric seedlings, and black pepper seedlings. They were all said to be vulnerable in cold weather, but if I took proper measures to protect the turmeric from the cold or dug it up and stored it in a magic bag, I could harvest it annually unless something drastic happened. The chili and black pepper plants grew quickly, so if I saved the seeds, I could expect yearly harvests. As for the chili peppers, they could be grown indoors in pots.

"They were kind of expensive, but if things go well, I could recoup the costs in a year."

They didn't have many black pepper or turmeric plants for sale, but I was able to get plenty of chili seeds. And if I had Uncle Mark and others grow them, we should have a sustainable crop.

"Still, you'd think they'd sell chili pepper seedlings in the royal capital or Sagan if they're that easy to grow, yeah?" I asked.

"Hm... I bet it's because it's difficult to grow enough of them for commercial sale. It would just be easier for people to buy them in the SAR," Amur said.

"I guess that makes sense."

Now that I thought about it, she was probably right. Growing them for commercial purposes would require a lot of land, and you'd also have to risk losing everything if there was a cold snap. People like me might grow small amounts at home for personal use, but they wouldn't grow enough to sell to others.

"I think we have enough souvenirs now," I said.

We'd gotten several different kinds of food and other gifts, so I figured I could head back to the inn and relax now.

"What about souvenirs for Albert and the others?" Amur asked.

"Oh, you're right!"

I would've completely forgotten about those three idiots if not for Amur, so I bought a few good knives at a nearby blacksmith's shop. They were of better quality than I had expected, so I also got some for myself, Kelly, and Master Gantz too. I figured I'd gift them some food from the SAR along with the knives.

"All right! Now we're really done!"

"That wasn't very nice of you to forget about those idiots," Amur chided me, but it didn't seem like she was too serious. Actually, I thought it was even worse for her to casually call them idiots.

"Amur, you have to be careful when buying souvenirs for women. If you don't put thought into it, you'll hear about it for ages," I told her. "Men are different, though. I'm not as close to them as the others either, so these knives should be enough."

When it came to men, you could get away with saying, "I'm not sure if you'll like it, but I thought you might, so I bought this for you." But women were different. Even if they seemed pleased when you gave them a gift, who knows what they would say behind your back! You had to at least make it clear that you had put some serious consideration into it and had chosen carefully. If you didn't, you'd be hearing snide remarks for years. At least that was what both of my grandfathers from my previous and current lives had told me.

"I get it. I won't complain, so just buy me a shawl!" whined Amur.

Unfortunately I hadn't ordered any for her, just the royals and Primera, so I said no. Amur said she'd be fine with the same handkerchiefs I had gotten for Jeanne and the others, so we went back to Sana's house to order more. Since Amur was technically going to come under the Otori family's protection—well, the Sage Merlin's family, to be precise—it would serve as proof of her identity. But honestly, I gave in because she just wouldn't shut up about it.

Since we had finished shopping sooner than I'd expected, I planned to relax at

the inn until Hana's message arrived. Her messenger came later that night and said we'd be leaving as planned in two days.

Two days later, we headed to the viscount's house in the early morning. Hana and her group were already prepared and said we could leave whenever we were ready. We were going to take Thunderbolt and my carriage to the day's destination. Accompanying us from the viscount's side were Hana, Amur, and Blanca. Honorary Viscount Lobo stayed behind. In case you were wondering, since Hana was receiving a real noble title, everyone in Nanao had now started adding "Honorary" in front of Viscount Lobo's title to distinguish between them. Anyway, he wasn't coming not because he was useless, but because someone from the family needed to stay home in Nanao—not counting Sana, who was pregnant.

Our destination was quite far, although it was possible to return within a day. Hana and Blanca took turns driving the carriage since they knew the way. We took breaks at times and walked sections where the carriage couldn't pass, and it took about four hours to come close to our destination.

I didn't see any kind of village, though. There was just a clearing in the forest.

"We're supposed to meet our guide around here..." Hana said as she stepped out of the carriage. As she did that, three hooded figures emerged from the bushes in the distance. "Oh, there they are."

She went over to them and they chatted briefly before the group walked back to the carriage. I was a bit cautious at first, but since it was clear Hana had been expecting them, I went to greet them.

But when I got within a few meters of them, the leader of the group suddenly removed their hood. When I saw their faces, I instinctively jumped back because...

"A tiger..."

The person's face looked almost exactly like a tiger's. The two behind them also had faces resembling animals—one was a dog or a wolf, and the other looked like a cat.

“So that’s what this is about...” Gramps had come out to greet them as well, and he murmured that as if something had dawned on him.

Blanca got out of the carriage after Gramps and called out to me. “Tenma, I understand that you’re surprised, but there’s no need to be cautious. These people are beastfolk, just like me.”

Amur seemed a bit startled too, but not as much as I was.

“It’s only natural to be shocked if this is your first time seeing beastfolk like us. I’m just glad you didn’t react violently and try to harm us,” the tiger-faced one in the front said calmly. Apparently, he was used to reactions like this.

The two others behind him looked less pleased.

The tiger-faced beastfolk addressed them next. “That’s enough, you two. The decision to invite these adventurers and the viscount’s family to our village was made by both our lord and our village chief. Even if you’re reluctant, remember that you agreed to this.”

After he had chastised them, the two others looked away from me grumpily.

“I’m sorry about that. But please understand that there are others in this village who share the same reservations about outsiders—especially human ones.”

“No, I’m the one who should apologize,” I said. “It’s actually not my first time seeing beastfolk with animal faces. I encountered someone like that in the past.”

Since I apologized sincerely, and perhaps because they learned that this wasn’t my first encounter with their kind, their tension seemed to ease a bit. The group seemed less hostile and now were curious about my past encounter, and I briefly told them about it. In the end, they seemed apologetic towards me instead.

“As you might have guessed by now, the village we’re heading to now is inhabited by beastfolk with strong animal traits. The village’s chief will explain more, but please be careful not to look down on or speak ill of them. In all seriousness, one wrong move and your life could be in danger,” Hana warned.

I nodded and we began to follow the three beastfolk. Later, I learned that the village's location had been deliberately concealed. There were no visible roads around it to prevent outsiders, especially those from outside the SAR, from finding it too easily. The viscount's family managed this forest, so usually only those who had permission could enter. Occasionally, adventurers from the SAR seeking resources would trespass here, but they were usually driven away or captured by these villagers who normally disguised themselves with hoods or full armor.

"Still, I'm surprised that neither Gramps nor Amur seemed too shocked," I said.

"Well, I traveled to many places when I was young and encountered such beastfolk before. I've also heard rumors of a hidden village somewhere in the SAR, so I had a hunch," Gramps said.

"I've never met them directly, but my mother told me about them," Amur explained.

So essentially, Gramps had guessed this place existed due to his many years of experience, and Amur knew about it through her family's connections.

In any case, I was just relieved I hadn't drawn my sword against them without thinking. The tiger-faced man might've forgiven me, but the other two surely wouldn't have. I decided to hand over my magic bag with my weapons inside to Rocket before reaching the village in order to avoid any mishaps. At the very least, they'd be bundled up in a way that would make them harder to access.

They say good things come to those who act quickly, so I discreetly handed the bag to Rocket, making sure our three guides wouldn't notice. It wouldn't be a good idea to take my weapons out in front of the three guides, of course. At the same time, I instructed Shiromaru and Solomon not to attack or make any hostile moves unless they were directly harmed. Everything should be fine as long as Rocket was in charge and supervising them. There was no need to worry about Goldie and Silvie either. They were naturally shy around strangers, so they'd stay hidden unless absolutely necessary. Besides, Rocket and the others would protect them if anything happened, so they were in the safest place they could be. They were happily spinning more silk at the moment since I had

rewarded them with some treats.

“Is this the village?” I asked.

“Looks just like any other one,” Amur replied.

It seemed like Amur was thinking the same as me, and so was Gramps. He was nodding along silently.

“Well, aside from their appearance, their way of life isn’t much different from ours. It’s an ordinary village—just hidden,” Blanca said. He had visited this village several times before, and he explained to us that their lifestyle was centered around the forest. It wasn’t much different from how it had been back in Kukuri Village.

We walked through the village and stopped in front of an impressive building.

“This is the chief’s house,” our guide said. “You should be fine sticking with Lady Hana, but just know that if you harm the chief, the entire village will turn against you.”

And with that, the three guides left, having completed their task. As they walked away, I used Detection to make sure they had rejoined their comrades and were watching from a distance. Hana, Blanca, and Amur didn’t seem to notice them, but Gramps subtly glanced in their direction. I guessed he’d figured out their location as well.

Hana took a moment to reassure us. “The village chief is a gentle person and rarely gets angry. As long as you behave normally, you’ll be fine.” She then went inside the house without even calling out a proper greeting. “Come on, the chief is waiting for you!”

All of us, including Blanca, were hesitant to go inside, but Hana leaned out of the doorway and beckoned us in. The home had the feel of a traditional Japanese house out in the country, just like I had seen on TV.

“Come on, hurry up,” Hana said. She made herself at home and opened the sliding door, stepping into the house.

There was an elderly tiger-faced beastfolk woman sitting inside. “Don’t be shy. Please come in.” The woman had a kind voice and welcomed us to sit

across from her.

Hana explained that she was the village's chief.

We cautiously sat down. I kept an eye on our surroundings just in case, but the only presences I detected nearby were other beastfolk keeping guard and what appeared to be a few other women. The guards were waiting right outside the room.

Those other women seemed to be gathered in the kitchen and were probably family members or servants. One of them came out to bring us tea shortly after we had sat down. She looked like a completely ordinary woman, except for her catlike face.

"Is this...green tea?" I asked.

The cat-faced woman had brought us proper matcha green tea, and it was called that here as well. Green tea had been popular in the SAR for generations, and new methods of drinking, brewing, and improving the varieties of leaves were constantly being pursued. The green tea was served to us hot, but the village chief's tea had been cooled and no steam rose from it.

"Our mouths are sensitive, so it's hard for us to drink hot tea," the granny explained when she saw my curious gaze at her drink. Apparently, it was also difficult for her to chew, so it would be difficult to live in a city like Nanao when it came to food.

"But the biggest reason we don't live there is because some beastfolk discriminate against us," she said.

Apparently, some younger generations of beastfolk didn't know that beastfolk with animal faces existed. In the past, women who had given birth to animal-faced beastfolk were accused of having monstrous children and were subjected to persecution and violence. Some even had their children killed as a result. Village and town leaders such as Hana were aware of this, and the older generation had been taught about them by their elders. However, some older folks still harbored strong prejudice against them. The reason the younger generation wasn't being taught about them was apparently an old custom to avoid confusion about why some beastfolk would be treated like monsters, but recently, there had been discussions about abolishing that custom and teaching

the children that beastfolk with animal faces existed, though they were rare.

“If we start educating them about us, we’d need to show them firsthand that we exist. But that would basically turn the people living here into a spectacle, which isn’t good. Also, many of these people have experienced discrimination or attempts on their lives firsthand, so they have a strong sense of solidarity. They’d strongly oppose having their friends treated like exhibits.”

It seemed like quite a complicated situation. Even if those hurdles were cleared and they could live among other beastfolk, there would still be friction when it came to human kingdoms.

The main reason that the SAR had been established was that humans had driven away large numbers of beastfolk in the past. Humans didn’t consider beastfolk to be the same as them due to their animal ears and tails, leading to prejudice and persecution. Even now, a small number of humans, including nobles and those with similar levels of power and authority, refused to recognize beastfolk as equals. If those people learned about this hidden village, the discrimination could get worse. And it would be one thing if they banded together and made an open, organized attack on the village, but if they used guerrilla tactics, they could wipe out entire villages and towns. That could lead to a war between humans and the SAR.

“Changing people’s perceptions is difficult, especially since it involves more than just the SAR,” Hana said.

The chief nodded in agreement with Hana’s words. But while Hana seemed eager to tackle the issue immediately, the chief seemed to think it wouldn’t be so simple.

“Why did you bring us here?” I asked.

“I wanted you to learn about this village, and since Amur is a member of our family, she had to be brought here eventually,” Hana said.

Gramps, who had been quietly sipping his tea this whole time, suddenly spoke up. “So, in other words, since Tenma and I have influence with the royal family and powerful nobles, we’re expected to act as a buffer in case of emergency? Or we should subtly convey the current situation to the royal family and hope they’ll take some kind of action?”

Putting Amur aside, just learning about this village didn't seem to be a sufficient reason to bring us here. Judging by Hana's expression, Gramps's guess was spot-on.

"Exactly. I couldn't bring up such a delicate issue, so I hoped you could convey it indirectly to them instead," she admitted.

Many would see it as problematic if the leader of the SAR were to bring this up, so that's why they were taking this roundabout approach. And if it became known that they had brought me to this village, that could also become a problem. So, the story would be that while we had been collecting herbs in the viscount's forest, we had encountered villagers who then reluctantly guided us to this village and persuaded us to keep it a secret. It was far-fetched, but as long as everyone stuck to the story, it should work. The reason Hana and Blanca had come along today was to monitor us and prevent us from approaching the forbidden area near the hidden village.

"So I just need to talk to the king about it. Well, I'm sure Queen Maria will probably be eager to know what happened in the SAR, so I can let it slip then," I said. "Oh and by the way, this tea is delicious."

"I have some good tea at home," Hana told me. "I'll give you some to bring back with you."

"Can I have some tea seedlings?"

"Sure, I can get those for you."

I decided to make a request of Hana to make things even. Trading an errand with the royal family for tea seedlings was pretty modest. She realized that and bowed her head in gratitude. I felt a bit guilty for exploiting her vulnerability, but at the same time, I was excited about growing green tea on my own. If the plants grew well, I could enjoy homemade green tea whenever I wanted. If not, I could always buy more tea leaves through my connections with their family.

The village chief brought out small red fruits. "Here's some fruits from our trees, in lieu of sweets."

I wasn't sure how to eat them, so I watched Amur first. She picked a few of them up and popped them into her mouth. These fruits had large seeds inside

that took up almost half the fruit. Amur ate the flesh around the seeds and then spit them out, similar to how one might eat pomegranates or akebia.

“These fruits are sweet and tart, but don’t eat too many or you might not be able to sleep at night,” Hana warned.

*I knew it!*

As soon as I heard her say that, I realized that I had seen fruits like these, though not fresh, and not in this world. They looked identical to ones I had seen in books and on TV.

“Are these...coffee cherries?”

“I’m surprised you’ve heard of them. They’re only grown in certain parts of the SAR, so they’re not found outside this region.”

Hana, Blanca, and the chief looked impressed. Amur, on the other hand, was too busy stuffing her face full of cherries to pay attention to our conversation.

“Could I have some of those seedlings as well?” I asked.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Hana said.

I didn’t expect to harvest enough to drink coffee regularly, but I thought it might be nice to have some to use in desserts. I wondered if the coffee seedlings were very expensive since they were only grown in the SAR, but apparently, that wasn’t the case.

“They’re not particularly valuable. The problem is the climate instead.”

Hana then further explained that the coffee trees required a warm climate year-round. They could bear fruit even in slightly cooler periods, but the capital had snowy winters that would prevent the trees from growing well at all, forget bearing fruit. It was rare to see snow in the SAR, and there were no records of snow ever falling in the plains. Occasionally there would be snowfall on the peaks and slopes of the nearby mountains, though.

“In that case, I guess it’s not worth it,” I said. “I don’t want them for just decoration, and I wouldn’t have enough beans to drink coffee anyway.”

“To drink coffee? What do you mean?” Amur asked.

My comment had piqued everyone's interest, including Gramps. But since Amur was the most enthusiastic among us about food, she had reacted the most.

I'd drank coffee a lot in my previous life, though I'd never roasted the beans myself. I had only ground them a few times using a coffee grinder. Relying on my vague memories, I tried to explain the process as clearly as I could, but the others didn't seem to understand. They asked me to demonstrate instead.

I used a frying pan to roast the beans and then wrapped them in a cloth to pound them with a hammer to substitute for a coffee mill. Although it was ideal to have the beans ground evenly, I had no choice but to make do with the tools I had at hand. I sifted the grounds with a strainer, hoping that would do the trick.

I knew how to make both drip coffee and cold brew, but since cold brew took a long time, I had to choose drip coffee for the moment. I used a thin cloth as the filter paper (I'm not sure if that's what they called it here, but that's what I always called it) and made some coffee, but...

"So bitter!" Everyone exclaimed in unison after tasting it.

The village chief didn't even taste the coffee at all—her guard who had been stationed outside the room tasted it first as a precaution against poisoning.

"Is coffee *supposed* to taste like this?" Hana asked. She was now sipping tea to get the taste out of her mouth.

I wasn't sure if this was how coffee tasted in this world or if I'd just failed.

"This is how it's drunk...but it can also be diluted with water or mixed with sugar and milk," I said.

Just to be sure, I tried to dilute it and added sugar and milk to mine, but it was still too bitter to enjoy. I wondered if I had made a mistake roasting it, so I wanted to experiment more if I had the time and beans.

"I wouldn't force myself to drink coffee if it tastes like this," the village chief concluded.

Still, she began to see the potential in the coffee beans, which were usually

discarded, and said that they would do more research on the subject. Perhaps it could become a new SAR specialty if they could be sold, though it would have to be on a small scale. There were only so many seeds available, and they'd need to increase seedling production first.

"By the way, I heard you were attacked by one of our folk in the past. What happened to them?" the chief suddenly asked.

That question was followed by an uncomfortable silence. Hana looked particularly uneasy.

"I killed them," I explained bluntly.

"I see... I'm sorry. We should've handled it, but instead, you, a child, had to bear that burden." The village chief bowed deeply in apology. "If they were causing trouble in the SAR, we might've dealt with it. But since they lived outside our region, we were unaware of their activities. Beastfolk who live outside the SAR...well, those with animal faces, they lead harsh lives. They can't live normally even if they do survive out there."

I described the appearance of the beastfolk I'd killed, and the village chief confirmed that she had no knowledge of such a person ever being born in the SAR. Even so, she looked anguished over it. She seemed to be deeply saddened when she imagined the rough life they must've endured.

But for me, it had been a matter of survival. I had to kill them to protect myself and the people of Kukuri Village. I didn't regret my actions, but hearing how she spoke of them made me wonder if their life could've been different had they been born in the SAR and protected by the beastfolk here. I admitted I felt a twinge of sympathy for them.

The chief's voice brightened, trying to change the mood. "Well, shall we eat now?"

Women emerged from the kitchen, bringing out one large platter of food after the other. Unlike the meals in Nanao that had been served on individual plates, it seemed it was typical for meals to be served family style here for everyone to share. The dishes included simmered vegetables and chicken, as well as a stew that tasted like miso, once again suggesting a significant influence from someone who had reincarnated from Japan.

Once the meal was over, Han and the others led us on a walk around the village, probably to introduce us to the other people who lived there. We were planning to leave before nightfall. Before we left, the chief gave us some herbs and food as parting gifts. The herbs were to support our alibi that we had come here to gather them, and the food was because they didn't have any other special products to offer us.

Amur and my two other gluttons devoured the food before we even got back to Nanao, so we had none to share with Viscount Lobo. To be honest, we had completely forgotten he even existed.

Just as the sun had set on our way back from the village, Amur, who was lying on the roof of the carriage, noticed something.

"Tenma, look!" she called down to me as I was sitting in the driver's seat. "Is that a monster?"

"Yes, but it doesn't look like it's wild."

I followed Amur's gaze and spotted a large bird flying above us in the sky. And it looked like a *person* was dangling from its claws.

"Is that...Ted?!"

I used Detection and Identify and confirmed that it absolutely was Ted and his thunderbird follower. They might've been on their way home from some quest. It would be strange for me not to call out to a friend, so I decided to signal our presence to him.

"Close your eyes, Amur. And whatever you do, don't open them. Here goes!"

I shouted and cast a magic spell, creating a ball of light that shot into the sky. It rose about fifty meters in the air before bursting into a bright flash that illuminated our surroundings. This was an improved version of the Light spell I'd used on Ash in the martial arts tournament in the capital, which had acted like a quiet stun grenade.

There were several spells similar to this one, but the one I used this time could shine in various colors when combined with different types of magic. For example, Light magic alone gave off a white light, but if I mixed it with Fire magic, it would turn red. Combining it with other types of magic increased the

difficulty of the spell a lot, so it was simpler and more effective to use a plain white light for a signal flare.

“What’s going on?!”

The sudden light startled Gramps and the others. They rushed outside and looked around, but the only unusual thing of note was Amur who was rolling around on the ground, claspings her face.

“My eyes, my eyes!” she screamed, like a certain colonel from an anime movie.

“Sorry. I saw Ted in the distance and used magic to signal him,” I said.

“Oh, I see. I was worried it was an enemy. What’s wrong with her, though?” Hana seemed relieved and glanced at Amur, who was still rolling around.

“She looked directly at the light even though I warned her not to. I guess her curiosity got the best of her.”

Our eyes were just adjusting to the twilight, so Amur had temporarily gone blind since she’d looked at the intense light. I didn’t think there’d be any permanent damage, but I cast a healing spell on her eyes just in case.

“Hey, Tenma!” Ted had noticed the light and approached us, waving his hands as his thunderbird carried him by his shoulders.

“Are you on a delivery job all the way out here?” I asked after introducing him to Hana.

He pulled two letters out of his magic bag and handed them to me. “I sure am. The delivery is for you, from Jeanne and the queen.”

As soon as I heard those names, I quickly grabbed the letters and read them on the spot, only to discover...

“What in the world...?” I blurted out after I read the letters.

“What’s going on? Hmm... Yes, that just about sums it up...” Gramps had the same reaction once he read the letters.

“So our neighbor’s house in the capital burnt down. I never would’ve guessed there’d be such a commotion over the land!” I said.

We'd barely had any interactions with our neighbor, but apparently, their house had burned down in an accidental fire and they had to sell the land. Many buyers had come forward since it was next door to our house. Our greedy neighbor had kept raising the price until it had reached more than ten times its actual value, so the king had to step in and halt the sale.

Apparently, the many prospective buyers were nobles and influential merchants with their own agendas, wanting to be next to us. The king intervened because the fire was an accident and we had suffered some property damage too. The fence separating our yard from theirs had been destroyed by the fire, along with some nearby trees and grass. Thankfully, our house was unharmed. The damage made it a legal matter, though, so the sale was halted until the matter was resolved, and the kingdom might end up buying the land instead.

"Well, it's a shame about the grass and trees. We can easily replace the trees and use magic to rebuild the fence, though, so it's not a big deal," Gramps said.

He was right. We could use Earth magic to dig up some good trees from the forest and transport them to the house in a magic bag. And I'd made similar fences countless times in the dungeons. Aside from the burnt grass, everything could be fixed for free.

"The problem is who will end up owning the land."

Even though we hadn't suffered much financial damage because of our unique situation, the real concern we had was who would own that land next. There could be trouble in the future depending on who the new owner was. And even if the kingdom managed it, I doubted they would leave such a valuable plot of land in the capital vacant—they'd probably build some kind of facility there, which would make the neighborhood noisier than before.

And if the kingdom sold the land normally, the buyer would just be someone who wanted to cozy up to us, or in the worst-case scenario, someone who was looking to exploit us. Direct harm was unlikely, but it could lead to a stressful living situation.

"I just hope someone like a member of the royal family or a reputable noble like Duke Sanga or Marquis Sammons buys it, but that's probably just wishful

thinking,” I said.

“Indeed. Even in the capital, if a member of the royal family or a high-ranking noble uses their influence to buy the land, they’ll surely attract criticism from certain people. Or worse yet, there could even be fools out there saying that the fire had been an intentional move by them just so they could claim it,” Gramps said.

Most people wouldn’t believe such rumors, of course, but those with reformist ties might use that as a weapon against us. It wouldn’t be a good idea for the royal family or high-ranking nobles to give their enemies such ammunition, especially when they really didn’t need the land next door to us.

“For right now, there’s no urgent need to rush back since the king is halting the sale. I’ll mention in my reply that if the land is put up for sale, I’d be interested in buying it myself,” I said.

Gramps agreed. “That’s a good idea. You could frame it as the victim requesting a priority purchase as compensation for damages, and I doubt anyone would object. It’s not like you’re asking for the land for free.”

We decided we’d hire Ted to deliver the letter, but it was already dark and the thunderbird couldn’t fly this late due to its poor night vision. He decided to leave early the next morning instead. That had been his original plan anyway, and he was going to stay at the inn Hana recommended as soon as we reached Nanao. I would give Ted the letter before he left for the capital the next day.

“Well, shall we go back to Nanao now? Ted, you’ll get in the carriage, won’t you? It’s probably getting too late for your thunderbird to be out and about,” I said.

“I’d appreciate that,” Ted replied as he climbed inside the carriage. He said he would put his thunderbird inside his dimension bag. The thunderbird was very reluctant to do so because apparently it didn’t like going in there, but once Ted got mad at it, it finally went inside.

“Many bird-type monsters hate the space inside of a dimension bag. But the one you have is larger, so I’m sure it’s not a problem. It’s a struggle for me since mine isn’t that big.”

According to Ted, bird-type monsters hated being in places where they couldn't fly around freely. Larger monsters, like thunderbirds, especially hated it. After hearing that, I became a little concerned for Rocky and Birdie. I mentioned it to Ted, but he said that since those two had been used to small spaces ever since they were chicks and still hadn't shown signs of disliking them as they grew, they would probably be fine. He said I shouldn't worry too much about it.

"Unlike my thunderbird, rockbirds don't have much problem if you keep them outside all the time," he said. "Of course, you do need to be careful that they don't get mistaken for prey, though."

If you intentionally hurt or killed someone else's follower, you would be punished accordingly, but if it wasn't clear that the monster had been someone's follower, in the worst-case scenario, the perpetrator might not even be punished. Sometimes people exploited this loophole in order to kill other people's followers to gain the monsters' materials, so it was something to be careful of.

Amy often asked Ted's advice about raising and caring for her two birds since they'd both tamed bird-type monsters. Due to interacting so much, Amy's birds had grown quite friendly with Ted's thunderbird. To an outsider, though, the group of monsters might look like a predator and its prey.

I hadn't had a lot of opportunities to chat at length with Ted before, so I got to hear some interesting stories from him that weren't just about Amy. As a courier, he'd visited a lot of different places, and in some ways, he was even more knowledgeable than Gramps. Although Gramps knew a lot about various lands from his travels, he'd last been there long ago, so his information was outdated.

"Hrm, I haven't taken any long trips since you and I reunited, Tenma. This was my first time coming to Nanao too," Gramps mused.

He'd visited the SAR before but had turned back just before reaching Nanao. He hadn't been back since.

"That's a shame. I just know you would've gotten along with my grandfather, Master Merlin," Hana said, and Blanca nodded in agreement.

If Grampy Kei had been the person I was thinking of, they probably would've hit it off.

"Grampy Kei was a heroic man, but deep down, he was serious and hardworking. I know Master Merlin struggled a lot in his youth, so I know they would've had a lot in common," Blanca said.

His description didn't quite match the image I had in mind, but my perception was just based on the stories and legends that had been passed down. He could've been a lot different in reality.

I was lost in those thoughts for a while, but we eventually arrived in Nanao and stopped by the viscount's house. Hana invited us to dinner, but I declined because of the letter. I decided to have a simple meal from my magic bag instead. Ted also turned down her offer, saying that it would be awkward without me there and he needed to take care of his thunderbird.

The next morning, I handed Ted the two letters I'd written late the night before along with the payment, and he set off.

Since we didn't have any specific stops on the way back to Sagan, we planned to get there in about two weeks. I wanted to leave as soon as possible, but I had to wait until the souvenirs I ordered from Sana were ready. I decided I'd use my free time to check the carriage, make sure we hadn't forgotten any purchases, and search for any additional items we might need like soy sauce or miso.

After that, we'd just need to say our farewells, mainly to the viscount's family and those at the inn. The higher-ups of the SAR we'd met had already returned to their respective towns after the festival.

We would say goodbye to the people at the inn on the day we left and to the viscount's family the night before at the banquet they'd be hosting for us. For now, though, I decided to start with the carriage.

At the farewell banquet the night before our departure, everyone from the viscount's family (with a few exceptions) enjoyed themselves as they celebrated Amur's send-off.

"By the way, Tenma, you fight with a katana, right? Where did you learn to

use it?” Hana suddenly asked as the banquet progressed and some people started to get drunk. “You see, outside the SAR, katanas are quite rare. It’s usually easier to find a good sword instead.”

Blanca and Gramps seemed intrigued as well and looked at me curiously.

“Basically, katanas were easier for me to use when I was younger. In Kukuri Village, most of the swords were made for adults, so they were difficult for me to handle as a child. So when I went into the forest, I usually took a big knife with me instead of a sword and I got used to single-edged blades. I’d heard about katanas and their characteristics from my father, so I thought I’d try making one myself since I could use alchemy.”

“Is there anything special about it?” she asked.

“Well, the katana I use isn’t a true katana,” I said, which made everyone look confused. “Do you know how they are made, Hana?”

She nodded, but she didn’t seem to know where I was going with this either.

“No matter how much magic I use, there’s no way I could replicate such an intricate process. It’d be more accurate to say I use a ‘katana-shaped sword’ instead,” I explained.

Due to my background in Japanese martial arts in my previous life, I knew the general process of making a katana but not the important details. My katana was basically a single-edged slender sword that had been hammered into the shape of a katana, but it would be a pain to go around calling it that, so I just called it a katana instead.

“It’s true that’s not the traditional way of making a katana, but more and more craftsmen are using methods similar to yours these days. I don’t think calling it a katana would be wrong,” Hana said.

Apparently, even skilled blacksmiths found it difficult to use traditional crafting methods with hard metals like orichalcum or solanite. They often had to cast these metals into a mold before forging something. Some craftsmen even sold polished cast katanas as affordable options to novice adventurers or for practice.

“Traditional craftsmen might frown upon those who only make cast katanas,

but there's demand for them. That's why those craftsmen exist."

Cast katanas were cheaper, and with Boost magic, they could sometimes last longer than forged katanas, which made them popular for practice and beginners.

"Plus, the definition of a katana has always been kind of ambiguous. Saying the only true katanas are those that have been forged is a bit ridiculous. Of course, forged katanas are higher quality..."

There had long been two camps in the SAR—those who had said katanas were only the kind that had been forged, and those who had simply defined them by their shape. Even now, there were still heated debates on the subject between craftsmen.

"If you're serious about learning the proper techniques, would you like me to introduce you to a craftsman I know?" Hana asked.

I ended up saying no—I didn't have the time to learn just then, but I did think it would be interesting to learn about someday.

The banquet continued late into the night and I didn't return to the inn until around midnight. Even though we were supposed to leave Nanao the next day, the viscount's subordinates were reluctant to part with Amur. That led to multiple rounds of "Just stay a bit longer?"

The next day (which was really only just a few hours later), we thanked the people at the inn and then headed to the entrance of Nanao. Hana and the others were already there waiting for us along with several SAR officials. They said that they'd been notified as soon as my departure had been confirmed and now they were here to say goodbye. Some of them had returned to their villages only to turn right back around for this occasion.

"Thank you so much for coming to see us off," I said.

"Actually, we have something we'd like you to take with you, though it's not exactly a souvenir. Wait just a moment... Oof!"

One of the officials reached into his dimension bag and a black blob suddenly shot out, hit him, and darted away. Another black blob followed that one, moving slower than the first, but it headed straight towards me, trying to slip

between my legs.

“What is that? A black sheep?”

I picked up the black mass between my legs and realized it was indeed a black lamb. It looked confused for a moment, but then it started to struggle when it realized it was no longer on the ground. Despite the creature’s best efforts, its movements were so slow that it looked more cute than threatening.

“Baaa!”

After struggling for a minute, the lamb was tired out and went limp in my arms. However, that made the first black lamb which had run away bleat angrily and charge at me. *Is that really the same kind of creature as the lamb in my arms?* I wondered as it ran with surprising speed and force. It looked like it could easily knock me over.

“Wuff!”

“Baa! Baa!”

Just as the lamb was about to hit me, Shiromaru intervened and knocked the charging lamb away. Remarkably, it bounced off the ground like a rubber ball and landed on its feet.

“Grrr!”

“Baa! Baa! Baa!”

Even more surprisingly, the lamb didn’t back down from Shiromaru growling at it. Instead, it bleated in defiance. The lamb would definitely be in danger if Shiromaru were to get serious, but it really seemed determined not to retreat.



“Get back, Shiromaru. Are you just worried about this one? There ya go.”

I checked the lamb in my arms before setting it down on the ground. The first lamb—let’s call it Lamb One from now on—bleated as if to say, “Hurry up!” The lamb I’d been holding—Lamb Two—ran over to Lamb One with tears in its eyes.

“Baa baa!”

“Baa! Baaa!”

Lamb Two rushed over to Lamb One and greeted it with a headbutt. Then, with a single bleat, Lamb One tried to run away together with the other. However, Rocket had been sneakily approaching them from behind and easily captured both of them.

“So what are these things?” I asked.

“Well, our village specializes in wool. Many lambs are born there every year. However, the sheep’s wool we sell is white, so black wool isn’t very marketable. We sell the black lambs as meat to other villages. But these two—well, rather, the one that was bleating earlier—are particularly violent. We kept them in a sheep pen but were afraid they might attack the other lambs... We thought you might want to take them along as food for your journey.”

“So...the reason you said you wouldn’t call them souvenirs is because you were getting rid of a nuisance?” I asked.

“Exactly!” The official, who’d taken a headbutt from Lamb One, didn’t sound guilty at all as he agreed. I thought it probably would’ve been better to have just brought me the meat, but I guess in that village, lamb meat was considered to be the best when it was fresh and still dripping with blood, so that was why they’d brought them alive.

These lambs were unruly enough to trouble even the officials, but they’d thought I’d be able to handle them without any issues. However, we weren’t so desperate for food that we needed to kill and eat lambs.

“Baa... Baa baa,” Lamb One began to bleat in a different tone, almost like it was trying to butter me up.

“Well, I guess we can take them along...”

I was surprised at how cunning lambs could be, and now I was starting to feel a little guilty. I decided I'd take them to Gramps's mansion in the royal capital. Jubei and the others were already there, so two lambs wouldn't be much of a concern. The only thing I was a little worried about was whether Lamb One would fight with Tama. At least Lamb Two seemed to have an easygoing personality—it probably wouldn't cause any issues. Right now, it was peacefully snoozing away next to Lamb One, who was still trying to butter me up. Lamb Two had probably given up after being captured by Rocket, or maybe it was just simply exhausted.

"And here are the items you requested," Sana said, handing me a bundle. I did a quick check and all of the shawls I'd ordered seemed to be there.

"Thanks," I said and put the shawls in my bag.

Rocket came over to me, still holding the two lambs. I told him to release them. Lamb One looked like it might've wanted to try to escape, but then gave up once it saw that Lamb Two was sound asleep.

"I don't know if you understand me, but as long as you don't try to escape, I won't harm you," I told it. "But if you do try to run away, you'll only end up as food for monsters in the wild. Well, you'd most likely end up as meat here before becoming prey out there..."

When Lamb One had shown signs of trying to escape earlier, the official who'd brought them had drawn his knife and had been ready to pounce, so I doubt it would've gotten far. I thought he had probably wanted to avoid the disgrace of letting his "souvenir" escape since he was a high-ranking official from the SAR.

"Baa!"

I didn't think Lamb One understood me, but it must have sensed something when it saw the official's hand on his knife handle because it replied with an enthusiastic bleat. Hearing that noise, Lamb Two blearily opened its eyes and then fell back asleep. Lamb One had tried to stand up to Shiromaru so it seemed like it thought it was quite the big shot, but surprisingly, Lamb Two might've been a big shot too.

I didn't want them (especially Lamb One) to escape if we kept them in the

carriage, so I decided to put them into the dimension bag where I usually kept my followers until we reached the mansion. Lamb One resisted quite a bit at first when I tried to put them into the bag, but when Lamb Two went in without a struggle, Lamb One reluctantly followed. Before I closed the bag, I heard the sound of Lamb One headbutting Lamb Two, which seemed to indicate a clear hierarchy between the two of them.

“Looks like one can’t defy the other... Just like some sisters I know.”

“Sisters? Oh, they’re not related by blood. Besides, the one doing the headbutting is the female. The other is the male.”

“Already henpecked, huh...”

I decided I’d be a bit kinder when dealing with Lamb Two in the future.

“Tenma, it’s about time we set off,” Gramps called from the driver’s seat.

Amur and I said our goodbyes and boarded the carriage. Rocket came inside with us, but Shiromaru and Solomon decided to stay outside and follow the carriage so they could get some exercise.

“You’ve helped us so much. Next time you’re in the capital, please feel free to stay at my estate there,” Gramps said to the people seeing us off. “Even if we’re not around, someone will be there to accommodate you.” And with that, he took the reins and had Thunderbolt begin pulling the carriage.

The people gathered there waved and called out to us, but out of everyone, the honorary viscount Lobo was practically in tears. He was waving his arms so emphatically I thought they might fall off.

“Come back anytime! Actually, I’ll come visit you!” he called.

Amur leaned out the window. “You don’t need to come! I’ll come back when we have kids!” she said bluntly.

*I don’t remember that being part of the plan,* I thought.

“Nooooo!!!” Honorary Viscount Lobo let out a wail of despair and dropped to his knees.

And since that *definitely* wasn’t part of my plan, I buried my face in my bag to check on the two lambs. I pretended I hadn’t heard anything.

I wanted to check on Lamb Two's condition just in case, so I looked inside the bag. Lamb One had apparently been annoying Goldie and Silvie—she was now wrapped up tightly in spider silk and rolling around on the ground. Lamb Two was also bound, but he was currently sleeping peacefully. Goldie and Silvie were performing a strange sort of dance around Lamb One that looked like some kind of ritual. They'd probably thought I'd put the lambs inside the bag as their food.

"Goldie, Silvie, they're new companions. Please don't eat them," I said. "Here, have this instead."

Goldie and Silvie looked disappointed, but they accepted the strips of spear elk meat I offered them instead and moved away from Lamb One. I was confident now that they wouldn't eat the lambs, but now that I saw that Lamb Two was continuing to snooze away despite being wrapped up in spider silk, I was convinced that he'd never survive in the wild.

"Baa, baa, baa!"

Rocket noticed the commotion and went to rescue Lamb One from the spider silk. Once freed, she seemed to understand that the only one weaker than her here was Lamb Two, so she stayed relatively calm.

## Part Seven

We safely returned to Sagan about two weeks after we'd left Nanao. The reason we had been able to get back so quickly was because we were more familiar with the route now. We also hadn't needed to make any detours, and we had traveled from early morning until late at night with a four-person rotation (well, three people and one slime) as drivers.

Thunderbolt had seemed a bit cranky from the heavy workload, but we had managed to keep him placated by regularly supplementing him with magical energy from Gramps, Rocket, and me. Although we were only planning to stay in Sagan for a day before we set off on a weeklong journey to the capital, we decided against it because we'd have to think of new ways to keep Thunderbolt happy.

"Just show the request form at the entrance and they'll let us through. After that, we can head straight to the apartment. What are you two going to do after that?" I asked the others.

Once we arrived at the apartment, I was going to head to the guild to find out what had happened in my absence and give souvenirs to my friends. Since it was still before noon, Master Gantz would be at his workshop and Karina would be home, but Jin and Agris might've been exploring the dungeons. I wanted to ask about the Dawnswords and Agris at the guild. If they weren't around, I could return in the evening, and if they still weren't back then, I could just give them their souvenirs the next time I came to Sagan.

"I'll just stay at the apartment," Gramps said. "After driving so long, I'm exhausted. I need to keep Thunderbolt in a good mood too."

"I'll come with you. Waiting around is boring," Amur said.

"Got it. Gramps, I'm counting on you to take care of Thunderbolt. Rocket, stay behind and help. Shiromaru and Solomon, you can come with me, but you'll have to behave yourselves."

Now that that'd been decided, we headed to the apartment to park the carriage in its usual spot. I greeted Karina and the others and gave them the

things I'd gotten for them. Amy had already moved to the capital, so I would give her hers in person when I got there. I chatted briefly with Karina and returned to the carriage to find Gramps and Rocket busy cleaning Thunderbolt. They were supplying him with magical energy to keep him happy.

I left Thunderbolt and the carriage in Gramps and Rocket's care, but then I remembered that I hadn't asked what Goldie, Silvie, and the two lambs wanted to do, so I peeked inside my bag. Lamb One was very stubborn and had apparently challenged Goldie and Silvie again and lost—she was getting wrapped up in spider silk again, so she was in no position to communicate. Lamb Two was quietly sleeping again. As for Goldie and Silvie, they didn't seem to care either way.

I decided to bring Goldie and Silvie along even though they had seemed content to stay in the bag. However, I needed to put Shiromaru and Solomon inside it at some point, so I just brought the bag with me. After I was done with that, Amur and I set off for the guild.

We got to the guild quickly because we had jogged part of the way to stretch our cramped legs. Several people pointed at us on the way, but no one stopped us—it was probably clear that we were in a hurry. Once we got inside, I spotted Agris and the others at their usual table. They looked up when they heard the door open and then called out to me in surprise when they saw us.

“Tenma! When did you get back?”

“Just now. I came here to come see you and the others so I could give you some souvenirs from the SAR.”

Agris and the others were having a meeting and invited me to join in on the conversation, but since I had other places to go, I declined. When I asked about Jin and the others, I was told that they'd just returned from dungeon diving the day before and they were probably wandering around town or resting at the inn today. Ted wasn't there either. I thought that maybe he hadn't returned from the capital yet, but Agris said that after having completed my request, he had taken on another job and had left Sagan a few days ago.

We chatted about recent events for a while, but there wasn't much useful information to glean. Instead, I ended up listening to them complain about how

bored they were now that Amy had left town.

I escaped the grumbling of the Tamers guild (particularly Agris), and Amur and I headed to Master Gantz's workshop. I'd figured that Jin and the others might go back to the guild later, so I had left a message with Agris to have them wait there or at the inn where Jin and the others were staying.

I wanted to save time, so we ran straight to the workshop. Unfortunately, we weren't able to see Master Gantz. One of his apprentices caught us right before we entered and explained the situation to us.

According to him, shortly after we had left, Master Gantz'd had an argument with a noble who'd made unreasonable demands and had lost his temper. Ever since then, he'd been busy dealing with the aftermath, and deadlines for several jobs he'd taken on were looming only a few days away.

The apprentice warned me that if I were to show up now and give Master Gantz alcohol, the man was so stressed that he might start drinking to escape reality and neglect his work. So, the apprentices were stationed at the door to make sure visitors like me were kept out for now.

I left a message with the apprentice and decided I'd deliver the alcohol another time. I left some food as a thank-you and quietly left the workshop before the master noticed.

"Now all that we have left to do is find Jin and the others. Hm...?"

Just as we were leaving the workshop to head back to the guild, I saw a familiar group of four walking towards us.

"There he is!" Jin said.

"Hey, Tenma!" Galatt called.

The Dawnswords waved as they approached. As we talked, they explained that they'd arrived at the guild just after I had left for Master Gantz's workshop. Agris had told them I had been looking for them, so they were on their way to the workshop to find me.

"We should've just stayed at the guild. If we'd missed one another, it would've been a total waste," Mennas said.

“Yeah, we were told you’d return to the guild later. We could’ve stayed and discussed our next dungeon dive,” Leena agreed.

But, apparently, Jin and Galatt had insisted on coming to find us.

“We heard you were bringing souvenirs, so we felt bad that you had to come back to us,” Jin explained.

“But if we’d missed one another, that would’ve just caused Tenma more trouble,” Leena pointed out.

“Well, we found each other, and that’s what’s important,” Galatt said.

“We shouldn’t have taken a gamble when we knew he was coming back anyway, especially since we’re still tired from the dungeon,” Mennas said.

The reason Mennas and Leena were so grumpy was because they were tired and Jin and Galatt had made them walk more. As experienced adventurers, they had plenty of physical stamina in general, but forcing themselves to walk when their minds and bodies wanted to rest was probably tough.

“Rest is important,” Amur said. “If you don’t rest when you can, you won’t be able to move when you need to.”

“Ugh... Sorry about that.”

Jin and Galatt both apologized sincerely after Amur lectured them. They hadn’t expected her to scold them, and they acknowledged their blunder.

Mennas and Leena seemed somewhat appeased, but they still didn’t want to walk back, so they suggested we take a carriage back to the guild. Jin and Galatt paid for the six of us, of course.

“You both look tired, Mennas and Leena,” I said.

“It’s more mental fatigue than physical.”

“Tenma, you have to listen to this,” Leena began. “Those two just kept going through the dungeon because things were going well. Sure, it was a nice surprise that we managed to get through four floors in a week, but advancing that quickly in an unfamiliar part of the dungeon is just plain reckless! Only an idiot or a crazy person would do that!”

“I know calling them reckless and idiots are the same thing, but if she thinks *that’s* crazy, then she probably thinks I’m even crazier considering the fact that I’ve cleared dungeons faster...” I mumbled.

Mennas sighed. “Yeah, but it’s normal for you to be a bit crazy. That speed isn’t realistic for ordinary people, though!”

Leena nodded in agreement.

Both of them seemed so tired that their minds weren’t working properly. Jin and Galatt had been taking the brunt of the lecture for a while now, so they quietly distanced themselves from the two of them. Even someone as “crazy” as me wouldn’t be so reckless as to use Stun inside a carriage...

“Anyway, I bought a lot of souvenirs, but you probably wouldn’t want anything from a *crazy* guy like me,” I said.

Only then did they realize their slipup. Everyone was quite flustered and apologized. I teased them for a bit and then handed over their gifts. Although some of the items wouldn’t last long, everyone had magic bags, so they should be fine.

On our way back to the guild, I asked them for a news update. They said nothing big had happened in my absence, but the price of goblin corpses, which had increased before I had gone to the SAR, had dropped significantly. Apparently, the experiment to use them as fertilizer had been successful, but too many corpses had been brought in as a result. That request had now turned into a low-paying job for novice adventurers in need of money. With the price being set so low, the job became too much of a pain for veterans and was not a good way to make money.

“In that case, I made the right decision to discard those goblins.”

“What are you talking about?”

I was referring to the goblins that had tried to attack that village on the way to Nanao. Amur had suggested that we take the bodies since they were valuable, but asking for them after I’d already taken their magic cores seemed petty and kind of lame. It also would’ve been a waste of time to have them butchered properly. We had ended up leaving them with the villagers.

“You really are a beast, Tenma,” Jin said.

“It’s one thing to wipe out a large group of goblins in an enclosed space like a cave or dungeon, but it’s nearly impossible to do so in a forest, even for an army! They’d be lucky to take out half at best,” Leena said.

“Accomplishing that with just a few people is more than unreasonable!”

“It might be possible to slay a horde by gathering a large number of sorcerers and attacking the entire mountain until their mana runs out, but it would take decades for the mountain to recover. And the ecosystem of the surrounding mountains would be thrown into chaos! Nearby villages would suffer worse than if the goblins had overrun them,” Leena explained.

Normally I’d punish Jin for calling me a monster with my Heavenly Punishment Stun, but Leena’s analysis made me decide to forgo it this time. After all, using Stun in a carriage would spook the horses and cause an accident.

We kept chatting until we reached the guild. Mennas and Leena ordered Jin and Galatt to handle their post-dungeon-exploration paperwork while they started eating their souvenirs at a table.

Jin and Galatt worked quickly to prevent Mennas and Leena from eating everything, but the guild was so crowded with adventurers returning from the dungeons that they could only go so fast.

Mennas and Leena didn’t eat everything, but the amount they left for Jin and Galatt was less than what they’d eaten already. The only saving grace was that I’d brought some gifts for the group as well as individual souvenirs.

Now that I’d delivered those, I decided to head back to the apartment. Jin and the others invited me to dinner, but I declined and told them I had to leave for the royal capital the next day because I had a request to fulfill. They seemed surprised to hear how demanding my schedule was, but they understood and sympathized once they heard my client’s name.

After we bid them all farewell—including the Tamers guild members who were still at the guild—Amur and I returned to the apartment to find Gramps and Rocket rubbing down Thunderbolt with a cloth. I could tell by how shiny he was that they had used oil.

“Oh, you’re back! We’re almost done,” Gramps said.

They continued polishing Thunderbolt thoroughly while we chatted. They’d initially planned just to wash Thunderbolt with soap and water and dry him, but that didn’t satisfy him, so they had gone all out and detailed his interior, which included Rocket’s entry and exit points. They had also oiled his entire body, including his joints. Right now, they were wiping off excess oil. Thunderbolt seemed quite pleased with how sparkling clean he was now.

“I’m all done here, so we can leave tomorrow as planned. It’s almost time for dinner too,” I said.

“All right,” Gramps replied.

I went ahead and got started cooking since I still had some preparations to make before our departure. I didn’t make anything too fancy, and although I had used barriers to keep us safe during our journey, it was nice to have a meal in a safe place again.

“Amur, you stay in the apartment after you take a bath, and Gramps and I will sleep in the carriage.”

It was obvious that was what I’d planned, but Amur wasn’t satisfied and tried to swap places with Gramps. He refused, but I did notice that his resolve wavered a few times. I made a mental note to be careful of that from now on...

The next morning, we departed for the capital as planned. Only Amy’s family saw us off this time, but that was more because they wanted us to send some messages to Amy than giving us a proper send-off. The Dawnswords and the members of the Tamers guild were probably still sleeping, likely due to the alcohol I had plied them with the day before. Master Gantz was likely busy too between his work and still being blocked in by his apprentices.

After a smooth journey with no problems along the way, we arrived at the capital. It took about five days. Although we didn’t make any major detours, we did stop by those plains where I’d first encountered Tida and Luna to see if there were any wild cattle. There had been none to be seen.

We had run into some adventurers who happened to be hunting nearby and I asked them about it. They had explained that after the incident involving the

prince and princess, the cattle that had previously roamed these grasslands had migrated elsewhere. I had been worried that their numbers might've drastically decreased, but the adventurers had assured me there were multiple herds in the plains. The disappearance of one herd wouldn't lead to extinction.

Since I was curious about the cattle's current situation, I asked if the adventurers had hunted any recently and they quickly shook their heads. They'd said that the adventurers guild had recently imposed hunting restrictions in the area. The new guidelines put hunting targets into categories like pests (rats and rabbits that harmed crops and people), invasive species (animals that had come from other lands and posed a threat of overbreeding), and native species (those originally from the plains, excluding pests). Hunting native species was generally prohibited, except for designated culling purposes led by trusted adventurers or parties who had received direct assignments from the guild. This new system had been implemented under Tida's direction and had been communicated to the guilds in and around the capital.

At the capital's gates, I presented the proof of our mission from Queen Maria to the gatekeeper. They verified our identities and let us in. I was curious about the state of Gramps's mansion, but I knew we should report straight to the queen first. We headed right to the royal castle.

They were already expecting us there. I stated my name, showed my family crest, and explained the reason for our visit. We were promptly granted entry by the gatekeeper and were guided to the carriage stables.

Cruyff and Aina were already waiting for us there, ready to take us to Queen Maria and the others. I attempted to give them their souvenirs at that time, but Aina insisted on waiting until the queen had received hers first.

They took us to a room where Queen Maria sat in the center. The king was sitting quietly next to her, even though he was supposed to be the top authority—a clear indication of where the *real* power in the kingdom lay. Most of the other key figures were present as well, except for Tida and Luna.

"Thanks for your hard work, Tenma," the queen said.

"Here is the response from Viscountess Hana," I said.

Normally, Queen Maria (or the king, technically) would receive and review the

contents of the note and make the formal announcement of the new noble herself. However, since the queen was the one who had initiated this, Hana's acceptance of the title had been a given. That's why I had deliberately used Hana's title—and the fact that the queen had smiled even before reading the letter proved that she was satisfied with the outcome.

"Again, we appreciate your efforts. Here's the proof that you have completed your task."

And with that, my mission was officially over. I still needed to take the proof to the guild, but I could do that anytime. Of course, waiting too long would annoy them, but generally, receiving a certificate meant the task was considered complete.

"So, how were things in the SAR?" the queen asked in a more relaxed manner now that that had been dealt with. She seemed eager to hear news about the southern region. The king and Lyle also seemed interested, but the queen was so enthusiastic that there was no room for them to pipe up.

I shared details of our visit with her.

"Hm, so it's different from the capital in many ways," she remarked. "By the way, does that girl Amur plan to return to the SAR in the future?"

"Hmm... If Tenma does, I'll go with him. But if he doesn't, I won't," Amur answered simply.

"Well, welcome to the capital. You're welcome here as long as you don't cause any trouble."

Queen Maria smiled warmly and welcomed Amur. It seemed like she had an inkling about the secret agreement between Hana and me, meaning for me to take care of Amur in exchange for a potential safe haven in the SAR. Amur's reluctance to leave might've given the queen some additional reassurance.

"By the way, here are some souvenirs from my trip."

I handed the shawls and other gifts to the queen, then passed out the remaining souvenirs to the others. Since Tida and Luna weren't present, I left their gifts with Princess Isabella. Princess Mizaria's was left with Zane.

The queen and Princess Isabella tried on their shawls and made favorable comments about them—they seemed to like their gifts. That was a relief. Meanwhile, the men (excluding Cruyff) couldn't change their clothes here, so they commented on the garments as they held them up against themselves. To be perfectly honest, watching older men get excited about clothes was a sight I could've done without. Well, at least it was just the king and Lyle who were doing that—the others just examined the fabric and the craftsmanship.

"Thank you for these wonderful gifts, Tenma," the king said on behalf of the queen.

I thought it was odd that he was the one to thank me, but I suppose it was understandable considering the power dynamics between the royal couple. The queen was still chattering away with Princess Isabella too.

"These are quite nice garments," the archduke said.

"Easy to change into and perfect after a bath!" added Caesar.

"They'll be useful on hot days. My thanks for Mizaria's too," Zane said.

"I'll use these as loungewear or pajamas," Lyle said.

I'd prepared two types of gifts for them. One type was a set with a long-sleeved robe and long pants that I knew as samue, and a different outfit consisting of short-sleeved robes and shorts that had been called jinbei in my old world. However, at Sana's place, the names had been mixed up for some reason. It appeared like the distinction between the two wasn't clear in this world and people called them by either name.

"Thank you for thinking of us," Cruyff and Aina both said. I'd given them handkerchiefs and knives from the SAR. Cruyff had shown an interest in weapons from the region during a conversation with the queen, so I decided to give him one of the knives I'd purchased for myself.

After a lively discussion about the gifts, I decided to return to the mansion. Aina told us that all the debris had been cleared and the broken fence had been taken away from Gramps's property, but they couldn't dispose of everything without permission. It was being stored in a magic bag that had been entrusted to Jeanne and the others.

When I mentioned my intention to purchase the land next door to the queen, she agreed that was the best solution. She assured me that the necessary documents, including the deed, would be ready in a few days.

After we left the room, the king and the others saw us off and we met with Jean, who'd been waiting outside. I realized I hadn't seen Dean and the others yet, but Jean told me they were currently training on the outskirts of the plains. The guard unit had been split into two groups for training rotations, and all my acquaintances besides Jean were in the first group.

I asked him if he'd hand out the souvenirs to the others. He was delighted to find an extra treat in his share that I'd included for his daughter. The sweets were called onsen manju. I personally found them to be not sweet enough, but Jean seemed pleased. I thought that red bean paste might not be a hit with everyone, so I told Jean he could always eat the leftovers.

After I said goodbye to Jean and headed back to the carriage stables, I asked Aina about recent events. She said the biggest talk of the town had been the land next to the mansion, but otherwise, things had been relatively peaceful during our absence. Apparently, fires were quite rare in the capital, and a fire severe enough to cause extensive property damage only happened once in a few decades. Gramps said that he himself had never heard of a major fire like that.

"But aside from that, in terms of crime, things have been quite normal," Aina said.

Even in a well-guarded city like the capital, some level of crime and trouble was inevitable due to its large population. But considering the city's size, the number of incidents here was relatively low. Compared to Sagan or Gunjo City, the capital's larger number of guards probably kept the crime rate low, even when compared to the large cities from my previous life. The presence of the slavery system and the ease with which the death penalty was applied were probably significant factors too.

Aina and the gatekeeper saw us off, and we headed towards the mansion. As we got closer, the differences from before were evident.

"Wow, it really did burn down to the ground," I said, looking at the neighbor's

estate.

Gramos agreed. "It sure did. We didn't interact much with our neighbor, but seeing it like this is quite sad."

"Tenma, it's not just the mansion. Look at the burn marks and ashes all over the street," Amur said. She pointed out the scorched remains and embers on the road in front of the house while Gramps and I were looking next door.

"It's a good thing the fire didn't spread to other buildings," I said. "If there'd been casualties, our neighbors might not have survived."

"Yes, they were lucky that only their property was affected," Gramps commented.

If the fire had caused extensive damage, the consequences could've been severe, possibly even leading to the death penalty. Although that might have seemed harsh, causing a fire in the capital was a grave crime. Fires could lead to chaos, which could potentially lead to invasions or a coup. If the penalty was just financial, it would be a cheap price to pay for causing unrest. So although our neighbor had been practically bankrupted by the incident, he had gotten off easily in that respect.

"We're back," I called out as we passed through the gate, ignoring the usual crowd of onlookers gathered there. We greeted Jeanne and Aura, who were working in the yard. They were giving instructions to the golems to clear the broken fence and the burnt wood fragments. They were also going to cut the charred grass.

"Welcome back, Tenma, Master Merlin," Jeanne said.

"Welcome back... Wait, why is Amur here?" asked Aura, puzzled.

Jeanne didn't seem to care that Amur was here, but Aura looked skeptical. I explained the arrangement we had with Hana to take Amur under our protection. Aura seemed slightly confused but accepted it given that it had been Gramps's decision.

Since there was no urgent yard work to be done, I asked Jeanne and Aura to clean up and prepare a spare room in the mansion for Amur. Although there were several vacant ones, I chose one that was near their rooms. Amur didn't

look too happy about that, but I thought it would be best if hers was far away from my and Gramps's rooms.

Once that was settled, I took a bath to freshen up after our long journey. After I gave Jeanne and Aura their souvenirs from the SAR, I had fulfilled all my objectives for the day. I could give Kelly and the three noble idiots their souvenirs tomorrow or even at another time. I just wanted to take it easy for the rest of the day.

I managed to get a good night's sleep for the first time in ages. I might've slept a little *too* much, though, since it was close to noon when I woke up, but it wasn't like I had anything urgent to do. Surely it was fine to indulge a little every once in a while.

As I enjoyed a seemingly leisurely brunch with my two gluttonous followers, Jeanne asked if I could do some work. She wanted me to repair the fence in the garden. She and Aura couldn't make up their minds about how to do it, and it needed to be fixed right away for security reasons. Although I had informed the queen that I was planning to buy the neighboring land, I still couldn't modify the property or place any golems there until it was officially mine. I wasn't too worried about anything happening since I had plenty of golems on our land, but a thief might consider a missing fence to be an invitation. I decided to put up a temporary dirt wall for now.

"There we go."

I used Earth magic to create a wall along the places where the fence was broken. It was less durable than the walls I usually made in the dungeon, but it wouldn't be easily broken unless someone used magic against it. As it was unlikely that Gramps, me, or our guard golems would miss someone using magic on our property, I figured this makeshift wall would be more than enough.

"That fire really was serious," I commented to myself.

The fence had been damaged when the neighbor's estate had collapsed. The heat of the fire hadn't helped either. Even though the broken fence was some distance away from the ruined mansion, that building had fallen towards our

property and caused damage. And since many of the trees near the fence line had been cut down by the golems to prevent the fire from spreading, I had to deal with those as well.

“Guess I’ll handle the stumps first.”

I tied ropes to the tree stumps and softened the ground with Earth magic. Then, I summoned several golems to pull on the ropes. The stumps would just be in the way when the neighboring land became ours, so I thought it was best to remove them now even if it required a bit of force.

Thanks to the softened ground, the golems easily uprooted the stumps. Now that I had seen that method worked, I repeated the process and had the golems pull out each of the remaining stumps one by one.

“That should do it. We got most of the big roots out, and the few that are left shouldn’t pose a problem. There sure are a lot of cicada larvae, though...”

I had noticed the bugs after the stumps had been uprooted. Normally, you didn’t see them like that. They weren’t particularly cute, and watching so many wriggling around as they were was quite gross.

“Well, I feel bad for them, so I’ll relocate them to other trees.”

I took a bucket out of my magic bag and collected all the larvae I could see. It was a creepy task, but I did my best. Then, I dug several holes at the bases of different trees nearby. I placed the larvae inside those holes and covered them with a thin layer of soil. I had no idea if I’d done enough or not, but either way, I figured it shouldn’t cause any real harm.

After I finished relocating the cicadas, I realized it was about time for a snack. I headed to the kitchen to whip something up. On my way there, I picked up two people and two additional gluttons who were hoping I’d share, and then another two people along the way. For the record, the people who had joined later were the younger sister of our temporary head maid and our houseguest, along with my other follower. They all had a knack for sniffing out food.

I decided to make okonomiyaki. I seasoned the batter with soy sauce and a strong dashi since I didn’t have the proper sauce to go on top. I also added mayonnaise for some extra taste. It turned out really delicious.

It was a hit with everyone, though I felt like the mayonnaise received more praise than the okonomiyaki itself. This had been the first time I'd made mayo in this world. Aura and Amur said it was rich and addictive. Jeanne, Gramps, and Rocket liked it too, so I had a feeling it would become a staple in our household...though I would likely be the one making it every time.

A few days after the mayonnaise's debut, Kriss and Aina arrived with the deed to the neighboring land in hand. They explained that the moment I signed it, the land would be officially mine. It was specifically noted that it would be "mine" and not "ours," though—that was because I was purchasing the property under the Otori family name, making me, the head of the family, the owner.

Incidentally, Gramps had also transferred the deed to his mansion to my name. He called it my inheritance, though I was sure he wouldn't pass away for several more decades at least. Anyway, from this year on, I would be responsible for the taxes on both properties. Since the two parcels of land were about the same size, taxes came to 50,000G per property per year, so 100,000G in total. Fortunately, it was possible to pay several years in advance, so I just decided to prepay for the next fifty years.

It was very rare—if not completely unheard-of—for a commoner to pay such a huge lump sum, but it was common among high-ranking nobles. The payment was approved without issue.

Kriss decided to take advantage of being done with her work so she could stay at my place and cuddle with my follower. "Well, that wraps up what I need to do today. C'mere, Shiromaru!"

"Honestly, Kriss... I'm sorry I brought her along." Aina had accompanied Kriss as a nominal member of the guard and apologized while checking on Aura's and the others' progress.

A few hours after Kriss had begun her cuddle break with Shiromaru (and Aina had begun supervising the others), Aura came into the living room for a breather. She looked exhausted. Her expression went sour when she saw how happy Kriss looked cuddling Shiromaru.

"Aura, your face looks ugly," Amur said harshly.

“How rude!” Aura exclaimed, but seeing her expression, Jeanne and I couldn’t help but agree with Amur. “That’s not very nice at all! Ahem. Kriss, we have a new fluffy little cutie here!”

“You’re just getting uglier!”

Aura ignored Amur’s repeated remarks and rubbed her hands together, approaching Kriss with a grin. She looked like some kind of sleazy street solicitor in a red-light district—not that I’d ever been to one, just that I’d seen them in passing. Seriously! I’ve only ever seen them!

“Ugh!” I felt a sharp gaze from behind me. When I quickly turned around, I saw Aina watching us from a short distance away.

*Have you really never been to one? Would you swear it to Queen Maria?* Aina mouthed.

*I swear!* I immediately mouthed my response back.

Satisfied with my answer, Aina redirected her piercing gaze towards Aura. Thankfully, Aura had been too focused on Kriss to notice any of our exchange.

“What do you mean ‘a new fluffy one’?”

“I’ll bring them out right now!”

Aura rushed out of the living room, going right past Aina without even noticing her. Actually, it was more that Aina had concealed her presence. I wondered if Cruyff had taught her his secret conceal technique... I wasn’t sure he actually had one, but it seemed quite plausible—and a bit scary too.

After a while, Aura returned. Her clothes and face were dirty and her hair was a mess, but she handed a dimension bag to Kriss. “Thanks for waiting! Here’s the cute little one you requested!”

“It’s in here? Let’s see... Whoa!” Kriss innocently opened the bag to peek inside and a black creature sprang out, hitting her right in the face.

Aura had remembered being tackled by the lambs before and had called upon that experience to introduce Kriss to Lamb One.

By the way, the only one who had taken the full brunt of Lamb One’s attack had been Aura. Gramps, Amur, and I had all dodged it, Shiromaru had deflected

it, and she had never even gotten close to Solomon. As for Rocket, he had seized Lamb One the first moment he could and immobilized the creature. Jeanne had been Lamb One's next target, but she'd been spared thanks to Rocket's intervention. Aura, however, underestimated the lamb and ended up taking the hit head-on.

"Baa? Baa!"

Lamb One let out a triumphant cry after she successfully tackled Kriss, but before she could escape, she was captured in midair.

"Fluffy! So fluffy, so fluffy!!!" Kriss was not deterred at all. Rather, she hugged Lamb One tightly and began making strange noises while she petted her fur all over. Ignoring the lamb's confusion, Kriss buried her face into her back and began to stroke the creature's belly with both hands.

"B-Baa..."

About thirty minutes later, Kriss finally let go of Lamb One. It was left to stagger away like a boxer on the verge of collapse. Meanwhile, Lamb Two had been peacefully sleeping the whole time inside the dimension bag.

Looking thoroughly satisfied, Kriss sat down in a chair and drank her now-cold green tea. "Whew, I've had my fill."

I glanced to the side and saw Aina dragging Aura to the end of the hallway, but I pretended not to notice, of course.

"By the way, Tenma. What's the lamb's name?"

"The one you were just holding is Mary, and the sleeping one is Aries."

I wasn't even done explaining that before Kriss went to retrieve the bag. Mary, now free, dashed away and abandoned Aries.

"Baa?"

Aries, awake at last, obediently came out of the bag when Kriss called him. He was immediately caught, and she proceeded to pet him. Kriss had calmed down a bit at this point, and Aries didn't seem to mind the aggressive attention. In fact, he seemed like he might just fall asleep again.

Since calling them Lamb One and Lamb Two forever would be impractical, I

had named them after the famous nursery rhyme and the constellation Aries. Mary suited the more spirited lamb, and Aries seemed to be a more dignified name for the quieter personality of the sleepy one.

“Their fur is so soft. I was thinking that as I was petting Mary too...”

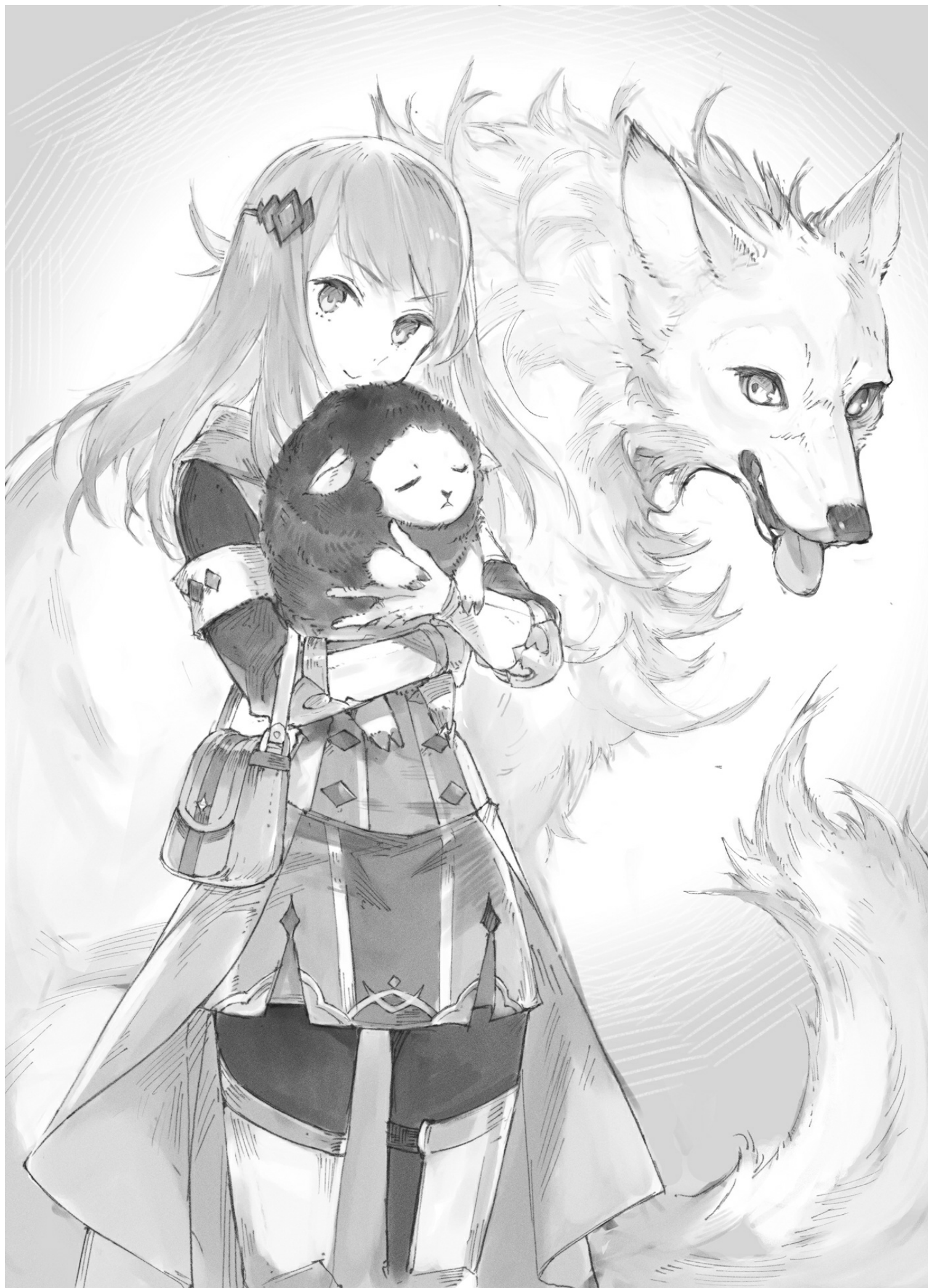
When I had first gotten the two lambs, their fur had been in rough shape and had been covered in dirt and dust. But once I had brought them home, I had washed them with shampoo and conditioned their fleece, which left them extraordinarily soft and shiny. Their faces were pale in contrast, so it looked like they were floating in the dark.

“Well, I should get to work. Make yourself at home, Kriss.”

Since we had formally acquired the land now, it was time to start leveling it. I’d planned to begin as soon as the documents arrived, but Kriss’s hijinks had delayed things.

“I’ll come along and watch,” Kriss said.

She had seemed ready to enter another round of fluffy paradise with the lambs, so I was surprised she wanted to come along. She was still holding Aries when she got up, though, and Shiromaru followed her. She was also carrying the dimension bag with Mary inside—it seemed like she was planning to continue enjoying her fluffy heaven outdoors.



“I’ll help too,” Jeanne said.

“Same,” Amur said.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Seeing that Gramps and I were going to work, Jeanne quickly offered to help. Since Amur didn’t want to be left alone, she tagged along as well.

As we headed outside together, we saw Aina scolding Aura—the latter was kneeling in the hallway. We all pretended not to notice. After all, Aina was scary when she was angry, so we were afraid of her.

“Anyway, what should we do first?” Gramps asked.

“All right. Gramps, I’d like you to carefully dismantle the fence that marks the property line. Jeanne and Amur, go ahead and guide the golems to clean up the debris from what Gramps is working on. Make sure to separate and organize the materials. I’ll go ahead and survey the new land. And Gramps, once you’re done with the fence, come find me so we can discuss the next steps together.”

“All right,” said Gramps.

“Got it,” Jeanne said.

“Roger!” Amur said.

After assigning tasks to everyone, I began inspecting my new land. At a glance, it was a square plot just like ours, so that would make the leveling process pretty straightforward. The main issues were all the debris from the burnt-down house, the cobblestones, ornamental rocks, and the trees that needed clearing.

“I could just destroy everything and bury it, but I want to create a field and exercise area for Jubei and the others. I should remove everything piece by piece.”

Luckily, I had a bunch of large-capacity magic bags, so storage wouldn’t be a problem. As I decided on my first steps, Gramps joined me. He had finished dismantling the fence.

“I’m done,” he said.

“Perfect timing. First, we need to clear out the debris from the house, the rocks, and the trees. Like I said before, most of this land will be a pasture for Jubei and the others, so I want it as clear as possible.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll summon some golems to help.”

“Good idea. Let’s start with the debris first. We’ll tackle the trees after that, then the rocks and cobblestones.”

“What about the basement?”

“I want to salvage the basement floor and walls too, and dig up the foundation if we can.”

“A complete removal, then. Let’s put all the debris in the magic bags for now and sort it later,” he said.

“Okay. Once we’re done, we can see if there’s anything reusable.”

Now that we had a plan, we began working at opposite ends of the yard. The golems collected items they could carry while Gramps and I used magic to dismantle larger items like pillars and charred walls. Occasionally, I got carried away and would punch or kick the walls, but I stopped doing that because it only created more small fragments.

“Looks like we’re mostly done,” Gramps said at last.

“Yep. Let’s move on to the basement.”

According to the floor plan we had received, the basement had two rooms that had been used as a storeroom and a pantry. The entrance and walls were thick to prevent theft and deter pests, and they also had sturdy grates for ventilation and drainage openings.

“Those barriers are pretty useless in the face of magic.”

The neighbors hadn’t considered magical defense in the basement’s construction and had simply thought no one could break into it. There wasn’t anything valuable in there, but the sturdy construction had protected it from the fire. That was a good thing, in retrospect—for them, anyway. To me, it was just an obstacle.

“The floor can stay, but let’s take apart the walls and remove them. We can

fill in the remaining holes with soil from the meadow or the forest.”

“Sounds good to me, but I’m concerned about insects in the soil. Earthworms are fine, but what if we bring in some kind of poisonous bugs and they spread? That’ll just cause more trouble for us,” Gramps said.

“Should we burn the dirt inside the dimension bag before bringing it here?” I suggested.

“Good idea. Burning it here in the capital would be too much of a hassle for many reasons.”

Although Gramps and I were both skilled enough with magic to prevent any stray sparks, nothing was ever guaranteed. Using fire at a site that had recently burned would understandably alarm the neighbors too.

I didn’t like the idea of burning things inside a bag, but it was the safest way to sterilize a large amount of soil. The bag might become damaged in the process, but I had more bags that we could use.

“Are you going to go do that right away?”

“Yes. If I leave now, I can be back by evening.”

The forest I was heading to was one where Jin and I had gone hunting before—the same place we’d had that unexpected encounter with the earth dragon. It was unlikely that something like that would happen again so soon, however. Plus, now that I was familiar with the area, it would be faster and more efficient to go there than to an unfamiliar forest.

Amur suddenly jumped out from behind me. “I’ll come along too!” According to her, her work was mostly finished and she wanted to help us out.

“I guess that’s fine,” I said.

Initially, I’d planned to use Flying magic by myself to get there and back faster. However, if I were to let Amur ride Thunderbolt and adjust my speed accordingly, it would take longer to travel, but we’d save time by having two people do work in the forest. Figuring that, the total time would end up being about the same.

“Now, as for Rocket, Solomon, and Shiromaru...” I turned towards Rocket and

the others, who were following behind Amur. Rocket and Solomon were fine, but there was an extra person on Shiromaru's back—Kriss.

And it didn't look like she was there because she wanted to ride on his back. Instead, it seemed like she had just wanted to cling to his fur and indulge in the feeling of it.

"Shiromaru obviously can't come... You stay here, okay?"

"Woof."

Shiromaru seemed sad that he couldn't tag along, but he couldn't shake off Kriss, someone who always spoiled him, so he very reluctantly gave up. Kriss was completely oblivious to what I was saying (or the fact that Shiromaru was even moving at all) and was in complete bliss on his back. His fluffy fur seemed to be like some sort of hallucinogenic drug for her.

I let Gramps handle things at home and headed straight for the forest. Apart from Amur grumbling about not being able to ride Thunderbolt along with me, the trip there went smoothly.

"All right, Amur. Take a few golems and start collecting soil. Try to fill that dimension bag I gave you at least halfway. It's fine if some grass gets mixed in, so just get as much soil as you can. Solomon, you keep watch from the air while Amur gathers soil. Rocket, you come with me."

"Got it."

"Squee!"

After I had given everyone instructions, we parted ways at the forest entrance.

"Now, let's start collecting leaf litter to use as mulch."

One of the reasons I wanted to come here was to collect mulch. Since we were going to grow bell peppers and chili peppers, I figured we might as well create a garden at home.

But I didn't want any weird insects in it. Beetles were fine, but there might be centipedes and such lurking within, so those had to be dealt with. Burning the mulch to kill the insects might have reduced its water retention properties,

though, so I decided to freeze it instead.

“I’ll gather the materials, and Rocket, you gather earthworms.”

I handed Rocket a shovel, a hand rake, and a bucket. Judging by the tools alone, it seemed like we were about to go clam digging, or maybe like we were fishermen gathering bait.

Rocket, equipped with his digging tools, led a few golems around and began digging around tree roots and under rocks. It looked like he was finding the earthworms quickly.

“Time for me to get started too.”

I moved away from Rocket and began searching for materials to use as mulch by feeling the ground with my feet. The method was simple: I would step around to find soft spots, dig in a bit with my toes, and if it was suitable, I’d have the golems collect the soil from that area. Repeating this process made things go surprisingly fast.

In fact, even though this rotational method didn’t allow for a lot of mulch to be collected from one place, it was very efficient and let me collect mulch faster than I expected.

After about an hour, the golems had collected enough mulch to fill nearly half of the dimension bag. I estimated it to weigh over a ton.

“Not bad. I finished earlier than I planned,” I said. “All right. ‘Blizzard’!”

I cast the spell I’d once used to freeze the r\*\*ches in Sagan City’s dungeon on the mulch I had collected in the dimension bag. I paused several times to let the golems turn over the soil to make sure it was frozen all over.

*That should kill any harmful pests.*

Although beneficial insects like earthworms would also die in this process, since Rocket was collecting those separately, it wasn’t an issue.

“Done for now... Let’s see how Rocket’s doing...”

Now that I was done with my work, I looked towards where Rocket had gone. I saw a golem in the distance and headed towards it. I found Rocket there with a bucketful of earthworms.

“You sure collected a lot. Even though I’m used to using earthworms for fishing bait, seeing this many all at once is a bit creepy...”

I felt a bit bad saying that since Rocket had eagerly gathered them for me, but a bucket with thousands of wriggling worms was quite a sight.

The quantity was excessive, but considering the plot of land, a few thousand earthworms wouldn’t be too many. I used Earth magic to create several boxes and divided the worms into them. I made sure to leave air holes small enough to let them breathe but not large enough that they would escape. They’d be fine until we got back to the mansion.

Our work was done here, so I put the golem cores back into my bag and carried Rocket over to where we’d left Amur and the others.

“Now, where’s Amur? I guess I can follow these tracks without using Detection.”

When we got to the place where we’d parted ways, we found tracks on the ground leading away from the spot that had clearly been made by Amur and the golems.

After we followed the tracks for a few hundred meters, Solomon spotted us and flew towards us. Literally. He was flying.

“Squee!”

“Oh, Tenma!” Amur appeared next, pushing her way through the brush.

The golems I’d given her were behind her and heading our way in a line.

“Here.” She opened the dimension bag and showed me the soil inside. The bag was about three-quarters full. I guessed there were about five tons inside.

“That’s a lot, but I think this’ll do it. Thanks.”

I thanked Amur and immediately started to disinfect the soil. Using Fire magic on it as it would only burn the surface, so I used Earth magic to create a large hole in the center of the mass first. Then, I filled it with charcoal and some dried wood chips I had collected when I was leveling the neighbor’s land. I then used Fire magic on it all.

After I did that several times, the fire grew large and the charcoal glowed red.

Soon, smoke was billowing out of the bag, so I dispersed it with Wind magic. I didn't want anyone to mistake it for a real fire.

After I used Wind magic, I also prepared myself to use Water magic at any moment just in case the bag caught fire. The dimension bag was a magical item so it wouldn't catch fire if it were closed, but I had it open to allow air in right now. There was a risk of the edges melting or burning.

We kept our distance from the bag, just to be safe, and watched for any signs of danger while passing the time.

After about two hours, the fire inside had naturally died down. Aside from some soot and discoloration, the bag was still intact. I had been prepared to sacrifice it if need be, but it seemed like it was still usable. However, it now had a strong smell of soil and smoke. Rocket and the others, especially Shiromaru, would probably refuse to enter it, and I wouldn't want to put food in it with that smell either. From now on, I could only use this bag for dirty items.

After that was done, it was time to go home. When I went to find Amur and the others again, she and Solomon were chasing horned rabbits on a gentle hill. For some reason, Thunderbolt was running alone through the meadow.

"Hey, it's time to go back!"

Solomon immediately stopped chasing the animals and flew straight towards me. Amur took a few more moments to react and followed behind Solomon.

"Tenma, I caught some horned rabbits," she said, handing me a dimension bag with ten of them inside. She looked so proud, but the sight of the rabbits' bleeding necks hanging from a rack inside the bag made me instinctively look away. I quickly closed it up, feeling sorry for my reaction as she was so happy.

"We can eat these for dinner tonight."

Now that we were done there, I started preparing for our trip home. I didn't have to do much beyond a quick check for any items I had left behind and rounding up Thunderbolt. As soon as I called out loudly, he came rumbling towards us. However, his face was strangely stained red.

"Thunderbolt?"

When he reached me, he turned and stomped at the ground like he wanted to show me something.

“Okay, okay, hang on. Rocket, can you handle this?”

As I tried to mount Thunderbolt, something red got on my hand. I sniffed it and confirmed it was blood. I realized I would get soaked with it if I rode him in his current state, so I asked Rocket to clean Thunderbolt’s face and body first.

“Okay, ready. Lead the way.”

“Let’s go!”

Once I mounted Thunderbolt, Amur hopped on behind me. She was small, and Thunderbolt was large enough that it wasn’t a problem to have her riding double, but the saddle was only designed for one person. It would be dangerous if he ran at full speed. He set off at a light trot, though—it seemed like our destination was quite close.

After a few minutes, he slowed down, indicating we were nearing our destination.

“There it is. No wonder you got covered in blood, boy.”

I saw several lizards, all split in half. They weren’t the small kind either. Each half was over a meter long.

I dismounted Thunderbolt and used Identify on them. They were giant prairie lizards, which were Rank C monsters. They had sharp claws, large fangs, and thick tails, which they probably used to attack. Their bodies were over two meters long and were covered with rough, brown skin.

“Can we eat them?” Amur asked.

Judging by their texture, they seemed tough but edible. Their skin seemed durable and could be useful. As I began collecting them, Thunderbolt reared up excitedly, nearly causing Amur to fall off him. Luckily, she regained her balance before she did.

“Hey, that’s dangerous, Thunderbolt!” Amur whacked Thunderbolt’s neck in protest, but she only ended up hurting her hand. It became red, and she rubbed it with her other one.

Thunderbolt hadn't felt a thing and was unfazed.

"Anyway, let's head back."

We needed to hurry to avoid returning too late. I could finish the soil tomorrow, but I wanted to at least finish processing the horned rabbits and the giant prairie lizards before dinner.

We went at a faster speed on the way back on Thunderbolt and Solomon kept up without any issue. Amur managed to hold on by gripping the saddle's handle. We reached the capital just before sunset, and Aina and the others were about to start dinner prep. I quickly processed two of the horned rabbits and joined everyone else cooking.

We decided to make fried rabbit, which was quick and easy. All you had to do was season the meat a bit, coat it in flour, and fry it.

"Let's eat!"

The first to dig in was Kriss, who was quickly followed by Amur and then Aura. However, Aina immediately scolded Aura, making her the second to last to actually taste the fried rabbit. Aina ended up being the last.

The fried rabbit was gone in no time, and both Kriss and Amur asked for seconds. Unfortunately, since we'd used up all the horned rabbits I'd processed, I couldn't fulfill their requests.

After dinner, I finished processing the remaining horned rabbits and stored the pieces in a magic bag to fry up at a later time. I took a break before starting on the giant prairie lizards, and that was when I saw Aina dragging Kriss towards the entrance.

Kriss was tied up with rope and had a gag in her mouth, rendering her completely immobile and unable to speak. If I hadn't known about their relationship already, I surely would've thought there was a kidnapping going on.

"Aina, what did Kriss do?"

Aina turned and noticed me, then bowed her head. "She was spouting nonsense in her sleep about moving in here and creating a 'fluffy kingdom,' so I'm taking her home. She seemed like she might resist, so I decided to tie her up

just to be safe. And to make it easier to carry her. Don't worry about it."

I looked at Kriss—her eyes were darting around nervously. Given the circumstances, it was clear what I needed to do.

"I'll lend you a carriage and a golem to make the transport easier," I said. "Be careful on your way back and tell Dean I said hi."

I would ensure that Kriss was delivered swiftly back to the castle and Aina would report today's events to Dean, of course.

"Thank you. I will make sure to report everything to Sir Dean properly," Aina replied with a hint of satisfaction in her voice. She seemed to understand exactly what I had meant and promised to report to Dean.

Naturally, Kriss got the gist too and started shaking her head violently. So intensely, in fact, that I was worried she might pull a muscle in her neck.

I followed them to the gate and then saw them off. After that, I quickly got started processing the giant prairie lizards.

There were a lot of them, but fortunately, they were already chopped in half so I didn't need to focus too hard on being precise. I simply lopped off their heads and legs, yanked out their innards, and made quick cuts on their bodies so I could skin them. Doing that much took care of the basic processing. I stored the innards in a bag after removing the lizards' magic cores. However, later on, I discovered the innards were useless for both consumption and medicine, so I just burned them all in the end.

On another note, Kriss didn't show up again for about ten days after that incident. I had found it strange since we had some new fluffy followers that she liked so much, but apparently, Aina had told Dean what had gone on that very day and he had subjected Kriss to such rigorous training that she couldn't come visit. And when she did finally show up again, she experienced the horror of Aries completely forgetting her, even though he'd been fond of her at first.

## Part Eight

“I want to plant grass on most of the neighboring lot,” I said to Gramps. “Do you know how to do that?”

“Hm, I’ve never planted grass before. Everything at my estate has always been handled by the people Alex arranged. It’s always been kept neat despite me not doing anything,” he answered.

The day after I had collected the soil, I finished leveling the land and realized I didn’t know what to do next. Although I’d collected as much sod as possible from the previous owner’s yard, it wasn’t enough for such a large area. And I didn’t know if the grass would wither if I just planted it as is.

I asked Gramps, but he didn’t seem to know anything about planting grass either. Apparently, he had just left everything to the king. I was thinking of going to the royal castle to ask Cruyff about it when a group suddenly entered through the gate.

“Hm? Oh, it’s Mark and the others,” Gramps said.

It was Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha, along with some other people from Kukuri Village. They were allowed to come and go from our property as they pleased, because they’d been taking care of Gramps since he moved to the capital until I reunited with him, even though he had denied needing care.

“We heard you and Master Merlin returned, so we thought we’d drop by.” Aunt Martha said.

But when I glanced at Uncle Mark and the others behind her, it seemed like more than just a casual visit. They were carrying cooking ingredients and alcohol, clearly ready for a party. This was perfect, though, since I still had to give out souvenirs to everyone, so no one seemed to mind.

“Great timing. Hey, does anyone here know how to plant grass?” I asked.

“I can help if you’d like.”

Hugo, one of the men from Kukuri Village who had raised goats and had often shared goat’s milk with us when I was a baby, was the one who spoke up. He

had also taken care of planting flowers and such in the village square. Even Shiromaru, who was also raised on goat's milk, still wagged his tail when he saw goats.

Hugo immediately examined the soil where I wanted to plant the grass and pointed out some issues. He said the soil there had high water retention, which would lead to poor drainage and could even cause root rot. He suggested mixing in some sand to improve drainage. He also recommended adding a slight incline to prevent water from pooling.

He said he knew someone who handled seeds and could get them for us. If we planted them now, they would set root just before the snowfall. However, he advised against letting Jubei and the others roam freely there until the roots were well established. Creating an incline would take about an hour, but if we wanted to order enough sand from his friend to cover the whole property, it would take too much time. I decided it'd just be quicker to get some ourselves.

"Let's build a small hill in the middle. That'll give Jubei and the others more exercise."

I planned to make it less than a meter high. That much would be easy to build while also improving water flow. A visible incline would be easier to create anyway.

I sketched a simple layout on the ground with a stick and showed it to everyone. Surprisingly, Aunt Martha and the other ladies from Kukuri Village reacted positively. I asked why they were excited, and they said it was because I planned to turn nearly a quarter of the new land into a vegetable garden.

In Kukuri Village, we had all been self-sufficient, and each household had a small vegetable garden. Since they had moved to the capital, they had fewer opportunities to garden and had only been able to grow flowers in small pots, which was frustrating for them. This project seemed to resolve all the problems that were stressing them in that area.

I was mainly thinking of planting things to use as seasonings like chili peppers along with seasonal produce like bell peppers, so I agreed to let them have access to the vegetable garden. The trade-off would be that they would take care of the crops for me.

Aunt Martha and the others immediately pulled the men over to the garden area, and they began to prepare the field so they could begin planting immediately. The men looked annoyed but obeyed without an argument—they were clearly intimidated by the determination of the village women.

Gramps and I didn't want to get involved, so we started crushing stones with magic to create sand. Before we knew it, the garden area had expanded from the planned quarter of the land to a third. I asked Aunt Martha why, and she explained that after calculating the minimum amount of space each person needed, a quarter wasn't enough.

But even if they used a third of the land, there would still be plenty of space for Jubei and the others to graze, so we quietly went along with it...mainly because we were afraid to argue with the women.

Gramps and I left the fieldwork to the men and set about reworking the soil. What I meant by that was I had golems gather up the current soil and mix it with the sand and mulch we'd prepared earlier. By adding a large amount of sand, we'd significantly improve the drainage, so we replaced almost half of the soil with sand. We temporarily stored the excess soil in a magic bag, and we'd take that back to the forest or grasslands later to discard.

It took about two hours for us to remove the old soil and lay down the new, but thanks to the numerous golems, it wasn't that exhausting. The men working on the fields finished at about the same time as us, but they'd had to do everything by hand, so they looked pretty beat. However, the women who were giving directions didn't seem tired and were already discussing what to plant.

Aina came over with wet towels just as the work was wrapping up. "Why don't we take a break, everyone?"

The fact that she'd brought exactly the right number of towels and that they were all perfectly chilled made me realize just how much more skilled she was compared to her sister as a maid. Well, considering her innate abilities and experience, it was only natural.

"It's truly sad that there's such a basis for comparison, but thank you," she said to me.

*She casually read my mind again... Am I really that easy to read?*

Later on, Aina said that she had noticed my gaze moving between her and Aura several times before I had looked at Aura with a sympathetic expression. I thought it was strange for a maid to have skills similar to a martial arts master, but serving royalty probably requires such abilities. Fortunately, only Aina and Cruyff possessed those skills. If there were more people like them, visiting the royal castle would be terrifying. I'd fear that more of my secrets would be exposed.

We had a late barbecue lunch together. When you think about barbecue, you might think of simple meat and vegetable skewers, but preparing all that for twenty people was a huge task. The meat and veggies were prepped and seasoned, showcasing the skill of our provisional head maid. I would have liked her to become our official head maid, but I couldn't imagine that the queen would let her go. And even if we did manage to poach her, it would mean that Aura and I would have less time to relax. I had no idea how long it would be before Jeanne and Aura grew enough to be accepted by Aina. Considering that, Aina handling things perfectly on the side wasn't a problem for me.

As I was enjoying my barbecue, the gate opened again, letting in more guests.

"Solom— Oof!"

It was a trio of our younger friends from the capital, their guard (the vice-captain of the royal guard), and Aina's boss, the butler. Luna hadn't managed to get Solomon's name out because Tida had grabbed her by the collar and choked her just as she had started running towards the dragon. It was a dangerous move, but Tida was skilled enough to do it with perfect control and had stopped Luna in her tracks.

"Pardon our intrusion, Master!"

Amy, the last member of the trio, came in carrying Rocky and Birdie with Spidey clinging to her back. The two rockbirds had grown since I last saw them, and it looked like Amy was having a bit of trouble holding on to them now. They fluttered over to Shiromaru as he approached and hopped on his back. Once Spidey spotted Goldie and Silvie, it excitedly charged at them and raised its front legs. Goldie and Silvie responded by raising their front legs in a welcoming gesture as well.

Amy stretched her arms, relieved of the heavy burden of Rocky and Birdie.

“Long time no see, Amy. Here’s a souvenir from the SAR.”

I handed her the handkerchief I’d asked Sana to make and explained its significance. Amy looked puzzled at first, but she folded it neatly and put it in her pocket after studying it for a moment.

“I’ve got some gifts for Rocky and Birdie too.”

The two birds knew their names by now and hopped off Shiromaru to come over to me. Shiromaru trailed along, curious because he heard me mention gifts.

“Here, I caught some earthworms in the forest.”

Shiromaru immediately lost interest once he heard what I actually had and went off to beg someone for some barbecued meat. Meanwhile, the birds pecked happily at the worms. Though I hadn’t released the worms into the field yet, I figured that Rocky and Birdie eating a few probably wouldn’t make a dent in the number Rocket caught...probably.

Amy didn’t seem bothered by the worms because she smiled as she watched the birds gulp them down. Compared to the grated caterpillars, watching them eat live worms must’ve been nothing. It was a common sight when feeding birds, after all, and all she had to do was watch.

Afterwards, the five new arrivals joined us for the meal, although Cruyff spent most of his time serving. This made it an even livelier lunch than usual.

“By the way, Master, the lessons at the academy are way too easy,” Amy said. She told me they were now learning things Agris and the others had taught her long ago, so she was rather bored.

“Really? That’s weird,” I said.

“I think it might be due to a misunderstanding on Master Tenma’s part,” Cruyff whispered into my ear.

At some point, Cruyff had somehow moved behind me without me noticing, as usual, and he was right next to my ear. I almost jumped out of my skin, but thankfully, I managed to hold it together since Amy was right there too. His

doing that was bad for my heart.

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. He could probably tell that I was quite startled, though, judging by the satisfied look on his face.

“It’s simple,” he began. “When Queen Maria asked you about Miss Amy’s academic abilities, you said she was at an average level. However, you had only observed the upper levels of the academy, and Miss Amy attends the junior high division. So while Queen Maria had asked about the junior high division, you had replied based on your observations of the senior division instead. Although there may be some discrepancies, there is a significant difference in academic level between the two.”

I was surprised to hear that. Although I hadn’t seen anyone other than the lower-ranked students in the upper division, I hadn’t realized Amy’s academic level was that high. After all, I’d only taught her basic multiplication and division as I had taught her magic on the side.

“Most likely,” Cruyff continued, “by you teaching her the basics and having the members of the Sagan Tamers guild teach her more advanced topics individually, her studies progressed far beyond the junior high division without anyone realizing.”

His explanation made sense. There had most likely been a cycle of “Have you learned this already? Let’s move on to the next topic, then.” Or “If you can do this, let’s try something more advanced,” or “This might be too difficult, but if you can solve this problem, you can solve the next one too.”

That loop had likely continued, causing Amy’s knowledge to accumulate and surpass her estimated academic level.

Agris wasn’t the only member of the Sagan Tamers who was surprisingly smart. The other members were quite intelligent too. Since they all ran their own businesses or had specialized jobs, each one had their own unique experiences. And whenever they were in trouble, they relied on Agris and gained even more knowledge from him. Agris didn’t just help them out—he taught them why they couldn’t do something by sharing his own experiences. In a way, it was like having a private tutor, which was common among nobility.

Amy surely had her own talents, but having the Tamers there to teach her had clearly increased her knowledge beyond the junior high school academy level.

“Well, being good at school is a good thing! It’s never a waste! So just consider it a review and go over the basics again!” I said.

“Is that really okay?”

“Probably.”

I wasn’t very confident in my answer, but I wasn’t sure I was wrong either. Cruyff and Aina kept giving me cold looks, but I ignored them.

“Review is important!” I repeated.

In reality, Amy was just finding the academy’s curriculum too easy—there were no other problems there.

“Well, the studying part is fine, but how about magic?”

“Magic is more fun!” she said.

At the academy, she got to see all sorts of spells, so just watching them was enjoyable for her. Plus, unlike studying, there was always something to do. She never felt it was lacking.

“But the practical training is tough...”

“Well, Tenma, at the academy they have training that involves weapons, and Amy’s grades are low in that area. Rather, that’s how it is if you compare them to the experienced students, but if you include magic, she’s definitely one of the top students in her class, if not her entire grade!” Tida explained on Amy’s behalf, but it seemed like the practical training wasn’t tough just for her.

“Are there classmates who don’t like Amy?” I asked.

Amy’s eyes went wide.

“And are those classmates ignoring their own poor performance and gossiping about Amy being bad at practical training?”

And wider.

“And are they not happy that Amy has ties to the royal family?” I added.

Wider still.

“Huh?” Tida asked.

I had thrown out some cliché scenarios, but it seemed like I had hit the mark every time. And although Tida didn’t understand the last one, I knew it was another common situation.

“Well, I can understand them being jealous of a talented newcomer, but for Amy, it must be tough. The quickest way would be to improve her practical training skills.”

“Then perhaps Prince Tida could stop associating with Am—er, never mind,” Jean began, but Tida glared at him so fiercely that he quickly retracted his comment.

“Well, it’s an option, but probably a bad one.”

The moment I acknowledged it as a possibility, Tida’s face turned pale, but when I called it a bad move, he looked relieved.

“Why’s that?” Jean asked.

“Well, if Tida distances himself from Amy, the bullies will just think Tida abandoned her,” I said. “Their bullying will get worse.”

“Oh, that’s true,” Jean nodded in agreement.

The bullies—probably girls—were likely interested in Tida or saw him as a means to gain power in the future. They’d take them growing apart as an opportunity to completely crush Amy, who was already down. They wouldn’t consider the long-term consequences. If the bullies were capable of realizing that, they wouldn’t be harassing Amy in the first place. After all, she was connected to both me and Gramps along with Tida.

“So, the best solution is for Amy to become stronger herself. The other part of that is to make it clear that harassing Amy will backfire on them.”

“I get the first part, but how do we accomplish the second?” Jean asked on behalf of the anxious Amy and Tida.

I smiled. “There’s someone in the capital who, although indirectly connected to Amy, is from a high-ranking noble family, well-known at the academy, and

very useful. If asked, they'll very likely help out."

Amy and Tida didn't seem to know who I was talking about, but those eavesdropping around us seemed to catch my drift.

"Ooh, him!"

"The demon leader of the three idiots!"

"Cain? What if Amy remembers him as a demon?"

"It's fine. She'll figure it out eventually!" Amur said confidently.

*Sure, she'll figure it out, but let's let her make her own opinions about him, for Cain's sake.*

"By the way, Albert is bland, Leon is a wimpy musclehead. Together with Cain, they're the three idiots! And they're the idols of fangirls who ship them together," Amur added.

"Um..."

Amy looked confused by Amur's enthusiastic explanation, which I thought was quite apt. As for Albert, it was more that he didn't stand out compared to those around him. He was good-looking, but since he resembled Duke Sanga, he didn't catch much attention. And yeah, maybe he was bland, but I wouldn't comment on the fangirl part or the bit about Leon.

"Anyway, first we need to improve Amy's physical strength, focusing mainly on building stamina. Technique comes second," I said.

"Wouldn't it be better to focus on her technique, even if it's basic?"

"In the short term maybe, but since Amy is a Tamer and can use magic, and since she hasn't yet established a style of teamwork with Rocky and Birdie, it's better to prioritize stamina. Teaching various combat techniques to an amateur could actually make them weaker."

"Yeah, I guess that does seem safer," Jean agreed. He was probably recalling his experiences as the vice-captain of the royal guard. He often mentored new recruits and saw many failures.

"As for magic, we'll focus on Boost magic," I said. "Being able to use it

effectively will significantly increase her strength. In the long run, physical training will make her stronger, and in the short term, Boost magic will shut up the people harassing her. Plus, practicing Boost magic will increase her overall magical power. Introducing her to Cain and the others will act as a deterrent too.”

I had a slight concern that Amy might end up like the protagonist of an otome game, but ensuring her safety was part of my job. Besides, I needed to meet with the three idiots to give them their souvenirs anyway, and as a member of the Sagan Tamers under Marquis Sammons, she needed to meet them eventually. My only worry was whether or not she’d get on the bad side of their fangirls...but knowing the age difference between her and them and our connections, the fangirls were unlikely to harm her. Even though the group was a bit rotten, they were well-behaved young ladies, after all.

“...And so that’s why I asked to meet you,” I said.

“I don’t get it!” the three of them answered in unison—because they were a trio, naturally.

“Tenma, I’m surprised you could round them all up on such short notice,” Tida remarked.

I silently pointed to the superhuman butler.

“It was tough, but I have connections, so finding them was a piece of cake,” Cruyff said. “By the way, Master Tenma, even though I *am* a butler, it’s still impolite to point.”

I was quite curious about these “connections” he had spoken of, but I had a feeling I’d regret it if I asked him about it, so I let that go. Also, I ignored his other advice—despite him being a butler, I felt like he might’ve had some kind of ulterior motive.

“Tenma, please don’t ignore us,” Albert pleaded in a serious voice, perhaps sensing I might forget about him.

I went ahead and finished explaining everything.

“All right, I get the gist of it, but... Tenma, I think you’re about the only person who would treat the future heads of noble families like this,” Albert said with an

exasperated sigh.

Cain, who was the subject of this whole thing, chuckled sheepishly in response. Leon had apparently let the other two take care of everything, though, because he was currently enjoying the barbecue with Uncle Mark and the others.

“I don’t mind keeping pests away from Amy. My dad’s already told me about her, and he said to lend a hand if she was ever in trouble,” Cain said, patting Amy on the head.

Although Amy was surprised to have an older man suddenly do that, it didn’t seem like it made her uncomfortable. However, once Tida saw her reaction, he began to panic. He looked in my direction for some reason.

At that same time, the incompetent musclehead Leon happened to come over. “Cain, why are you patting her on the head? Don’t tell me she’s your type?”

Tida and I silently cheered, “Thanks for asking so we didn’t have to!” and we eagerly awaited Cain’s answer.

“Of course not! I don’t have much opportunity to be around younger kids, and I was just thinking how she’s like a little sister. I mean, you know how my *real* little sister is.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that,” Leon apologized.

Cain seemed irritated by Leon’s questioning. “Honestly! You know I’m planning on having an arranged marriage meeting soon, so if I did lay a hand on Amy, it would ruin the whole thing! Not to mention my reputation...”

I, however, couldn’t ignore that tidbit of information that he had supplied.

“Huh? You’re gonna have an arranged marriage, Cain?” Leon asked, once again voicing my thoughts.

“Yep,” Cain answered immediately.

It seemed like none of us had expected that, but Cruyff was the most surprised out of all of us. In fact, he was so shocked that it looked like his eyeballs might fall out of his head. I had a feeling that he might have collected

information about nobles both as a hobby and for profit, so he wasn't expecting info this juicy to come out in a place like this.

Seeing him like that was so unusual. I wished I could take a picture with my smartphone, save it, and then back up that save. If only...

"It's about time I start thinking of the future," Cain said. "Ideally, I want several children when it's time for the next generation to take over, but that means I need to get married first. And if something happens where I suddenly become the head of my household, I'll have a lot of problems if I don't have a wife at that point."

"You're already off to a late start..." Leon said very seriously in his usual tone of voice.

"So you've finally come around, Cain," Albert replied.

I wondered why he had said that, but then Cruyff whispered in my ear, "Lord Albert already has a fiancée, Master Tenma. I believe she's the daughter of a count."

I wondered if Albert was trying to save his reputation in my eyes. It was true that I wouldn't be surprised if he had a fiancée or two, but the fact that he was engaged and still goofing around with these two idiots made me feel a little sorry for his bride-to-be, even though I'd never met her.

"Let's set aside talk of your future plans for now. So is it safe to say that your meeting with Amy was a success and you'll support her if she needs it?" I asked.

It was tedious to beat around the bush with these three, so I decided to ask them directly. Although it concerned me a bit that Leon hadn't said a word since earlier, I'd achieved my goal of bringing them here, and that was the most important thing.

To my surprise, both Albert and Cain nodded.

"Both as an individual and as the future Duke Sanga, I promise to support your apprentice, Tenma—as long as it doesn't result in actions that might harm the duchy."

"The future Marquis Sammons will also support Amy since she's my friend's

apprentice. And given that my father is the head of the Tamers guild that she belongs to, she's part of the royalist faction, in a way."

Despite the exceptions they stated, both of them promised to back Amy. This was obviously conditional upon my remaining in the royalist faction, but it also provided an excuse for them to support Amy even though she was a commoner. That way, if other royalist nobles questioned it, they could just say it was to keep the Dragonslayer Tenma and the Sage Merlin in the royalists' camp. And if nobles from other factions questioned it, they could tell them, "If you want those two so badly, why don't you try to win them over?"

"What about you, Leon?"

Leon had remained motionless, but now he slowly spoke, uttering words of denial. "Unacceptable..."

"Well, I'm not forcing you or anything, but don't you think it'd be beneficial for your house as well?" Albert asked.

Leon stared at both Albert and Cain with wide eyes. "That's not it at all! Given our relationship with Tenma, *we* should be the ones begging to support *her*! But what I want to know is why Albert's already engaged and Cain is getting marriage proposals while I haven't received a single one!" he yelled.

I couldn't help but speak up when I heard his heartfelt outburst. "*That's* what you're upset about?!"

It was true that considering the way our relationship was perceived by the public, it would be strange from Leon's perspective to refuse to support Amy since it could improve his standing. Still, I wondered if Leon was really getting so few marriage proposals that he wanted to scream.

Suddenly Amur stepped in front of Leon. "Well, it's no wonder. These two can just stay quiet and not cause any problems, but when Leon's quiet, he seems too intense. If a woman had to choose between the three of you without knowing anything more, the choice would be obvious." She jabbed a finger at him as she told him the harsh truth.

Leon was so shocked that he froze like a statue...but Cain doubled over with laughter. Albert was doing his best to try not to laugh as well. Naturally,

everyone who overheard the conversation, including Uncle Mark and the others, was cracking up. Cruyff and Aina didn't laugh out loud, but I could tell they were stifling it. Uncle Mark and the others probably saw Leon more as my friend and less as the heir to a great aristocratic family. Maybe that was because he was the son of their former lord, or maybe it was simply because Leon wasn't very noble.

"Well, setting aside Leon's lack of popularity, we need to figure out how to connect the three of you with Amy," I said. "It'd be pointless if the people harassing her don't understand the relationship there."

I forced the conversation back on track, ignoring the still-frozen Leon in favor of Albert and Cain. Although they were still struggling to contain their laughter, they began to seriously consider the issue.

"Let's visit the academy and say we're just scouting future colleagues and vassals. We'll need to tell the headmaster the truth, but the other staff will be fooled by that excuse. During the visit, we can pretend to stumble upon Tida's class during an outdoor lesson and 'notice' Amy," Albert suggested.

"And at that point, I'll mention my father's instructions to help her out. We'll imply that we want to recruit Tenma through her too. Then, Albert and Leon can pretend to try to stop us because they want to recruit Amy themselves. That way, we'll come to a three-way tie and show that ultimately, all three of our families support Amy. And we can get Tenma's gratitude in the process!" Cain said.

Despite not having discussed it in detail beforehand, they quickly outlined a plan. They'd need to work it out a bit more, but it seemed doable.

"But won't that seem a little too obvious if we suddenly appear and start competing for Amy and then just resolve it among ourselves?" Albert asked.

The goal was to show that Amy had powerful allies, so even if the students who had been bullying her figured it out, it would still be okay. But since some of them might become actual colleagues or subordinates in the future, if they were to report back to their families that the three of them had been hostile or had quarreled in front of students, it could be used as evidence to undermine the royalist faction. Close associates of theirs might not mind, but those further

down the line might buy it and defect to the reformists, thinking that the royalists were too unstable.

After we discussed that possibility, the two of them realized the problem and began to consider alternative plans.

Surprisingly, Luna had a suggestion. “Why not just show that the three of you are friendly with Amy instead of fighting?”

She had a point—if they could simply show they were already close to Amy, there’d be no need for conflict. The problem was how to achieve that.

Luna seemed to have a solution as well. “Why not have my brother intervene? Since it’s his fault to begin with, he should take responsibility.”

If anyone could stop the three of them, it would be the king’s grandson, Tida.

The three of them considered her suggestion aloud.

“That’s not a bad idea. If Tida intervenes at the right moment, it’ll just look like a typical, minor argument among nobles rather than a real fight. It’d also show the students that Tida has the ability to keep three very influential members of the royalist faction in check.”

“Not only that, but it’ll give the impression that Amy is backed by Tida, someone who has the influence to control those trying to curry favor with Tenma. Even if the students don’t understand that, they’ll report it to their families, and they might then advise their children to either not lay a hand on Amy or try to befriend her.”

“Students will likely try to be friends with Amy, and those harassing her will mostly stop unless they have a particularly nasty personality. Just to clarify, not everyone in the class is bullying her, right?” Cain asked.

“Right. I do have some friends in class,” Amy said.

That meant those friends of hers and Tida could help intervene, preventing any malicious students from reaching her. I wondered if her friends actually had that kind of influence, though. But the fact that they were already trying to befriend Amy either meant they genuinely wanted to be her friend, or they were aware that I was her guardian and they wanted to try to take advantage of

that. I wasn't about to tell her that, though. She would probably figure it out eventually, but it wasn't my place to say something about it now.

In any case, our business with Leon and the others was finished, so I thought I'd give them their souvenirs and send them on their way. However, they decided to stick around since they were free and could enjoy some delicious food at the same time. Amy and others were able to stay until their dormitory's curfew, so they joined Uncle Mark and the others at the barbecue. After they finished eating, they played in the yard.

"Baaa!"

"Eek!"

Mary and the other animals were joining in as playmates, and Mary had just headbutted Luna, knocking her over and onto the ground. As soon as Mary spotted Amy, Tida, and Luna, she charged right at the latter for some reason. Maybe she had judged Luna to be the weakest. Despite getting knocked over, Luna laughed happily and charged right back at Mary as if to return the favor.

*Maybe they're actually getting along well...?*

"Oof!"

But that time, Luna took a headbutt straight to the face...

"Master! We got a lot of milk!"

After I watched Luna and Mary for a while, Amy and Tida came over with buckets full of milk. They had been over by Jubei and the others and had asked Aunt Martha to help them milk Teru.

Normally cows wouldn't produce milk unless the cow had given birth. However, cows in this world seemed to store nutrients from the food they ate, and they would naturally expel them when they exceeded their body's storage capacity. As a result, cows either fasted so they'd consume those nutrients or the undigested parts would leave their bodies as waste. Female cows would expel those excess nutrients through milk.

"Good job. That milk needs to be pasteurized first," I said. "If you want to drink some, Aina can bring it to you when it's ready."

Even though Purification magic could pasteurize it, it wasn't foolproof. There was still a risk, so I wouldn't let them drink unpasteurized milk. Gramps and I could drink raw milk without problems, though, since we'd done it before and had built up a tolerance.

"If you train your body, you can naturally build up a resistance so you can drink raw milk. It's way more delicious. You could also learn Purification magic instead, but that's at your own risk."

Amy and Tida looked envious when they heard raw milk tasted better, so they were determined to learn Purification magic rather than wait. It might've been faster for them to learn the spell than to train their bodies to get used to drinking raw milk.

"I should be fine, then. I've been training, and a little thing like that won't upset my stomach!" Leon piped up.

"No way. I just said no to them, so you shouldn't show off and try it in front of them," I said.

"Yeah, Leon," Cain said.

Albert agreed. "That'd be immature."

It seemed like they were also interested in the white buffalo milk and had been eavesdropping on us.

"Aina, Aura, can you please bring the pasteurized milk here?"

Once they heard that Albert and the others could drink the milk now, they started hovering near me. Luna saw that everyone had gathered and came over too, holding a struggling Mary in her arms. But once she heard about the milk, she let go of the lamb. Mary fell onto the ground and bounced a few times before coming to a stop in front of Leon.

"Oh!" he said. "This is Tenma's new livestock, huh? Its fur is surprisingly clean!"

But just as Leon squatted down to pet Mary...tragedy struck.

"Baaaa!"

"Arghhh!!!"

There were a few reasons it happened as it did. Mary was stressed from having been forcibly held for most of the past two days, and Leon had squatted down with his legs apart. His crotch was at the exact same height as Mary's head. In other words, she'd headbutted him right in the groin.

"Oof!"

All the men present—including myself, Tida, Albert, and Cain—instinctively protected our own crotches and moved to a safe distance away from Mary. None of us wanted to be her next victim.

"Baa! Baa! Baaa!"

Mary continued her assault on Leon, oblivious to us leaving the area. Fortunately, Leon was lying face down now, so he avoided further hits to his crotch.

"Oof, I'm having sympathy pains..."

"We have to help Leon!" Tida said.

"Don't worry, Prince Tida! He's tough, and he's so dumb that he can't get much worse! If we get too close, we might put ourselves—and our groins—in danger!"

Tida wanted to help Leon, but Albert explained the danger in doing that while insulting Leon in the process. Meanwhile, Cain subtly took cover behind me.

"Baa! Baa!"

After a while, Mary stepped on Leon's head as if to say, "That's enough!" After that, she walked away.

"Is she gone...?"

"Are you okay, Leon?"

"Um, are you still alive?"

"Shall I pour a potion on you just in case?"

After confirming that Mary had left, we all checked on Leon. He wasn't moving at all. I touched his neck to confirm he was alive and poured an old potion I'd taken from my magic bag over his head and crotch.

“Ugh... My...my balls...”

“Did they get crushed?”

The chilliness of the potion brought Leon back to his senses. He tried to get up, but then he felt the pain. He hastily checked his crotch and sighed in relief when he found that everything was still intact.

“Now that the adrenaline has worn off, it hurts again...” he grumbled.

“Here.” I handed the rest of the potion to Leon since he was still suffering.

He asked me for healing magic instead, but I refused, not wanting to touch his balls. Leon was hesitant to pour the potion on himself too, so he drank it instead.

“Ahh... I think it’s working...”

Although the potion was old, it hadn’t lost its effectiveness thanks to being stored in a magic bag. But since it was so old, I just gave the rest to Leon as a consolation.

“There’s quite a bit more if you need them,” I said.

I had around twenty more doses of this formula of this old potion and had been storing them in small bottles, like energy drinks. Leon drank five of them in one go, thinking it would speed up his recovery. Drinking a lot of potions wouldn’t make you recover faster, but they say the mind is a powerful thing. Maybe if Leon thought the more he drank, the faster he would recover, and that would help ease the pain a little.

“Master Tenma, we’ve brought the milk and cheese.”

Just then, Aina and Aura returned with Teru’s milk and cheese. The cheese was a prototype product made by Uncle Mark’s friend, and since I had provided the ingredients, he’d given me a share of it. It wasn’t aged much, of course, but since the milk was very high quality, the cheese tasted amazing.

“This is delicious, Master!” Amy exclaimed.

“This milk is much better than what we have at home, probably because it’s better preserved.”

“Wow, I want a refill! Hot this time!” Luna said.

“Seconds!” Amur said.

Aina checked with me before going to get more. Meanwhile, Amy and Tida also seemed eager for more hot milk, so when Aina came over to confirm, I told her to bring enough for everyone. The two of them looked delighted when they heard that.

“This cheese makes me want some wine.”

“The cheese is good, but this milk is on another level. I can believe it came from a white-haired buffalo!”

Unlike Amy and the others, the three idiots were slowly savoring the milk and cheese. However, only Albert and Cain voiced their opinions. Leon merely nodded every now and then with a somewhat dissatisfied look on his face. That didn’t change even after he drank the hot milk Aina brought. The reason being...

“My stomach is so full that I can’t taste anything...” he said.

Due to the side effects of having drunk too many potions and overeating at the barbecue, Leon couldn’t even tell the difference between regular milk and cheese and this gourmet milk and cheese from the buffalo.

*Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.*

Once Albert and Cain were finished, they asked if they could buy as much of the milk and cheese as possible. I told them I wasn’t willing to sell the cheese because there wasn’t much of it. Leon, not realizing its value, only bought a small amount of milk to drink later. Later, once he had gotten home, he regretted that decision.

The next day, Leon came to buy more milk, but Albert and Cain had already bought everything that had been left the day before. And since Aunt Martha said Teru hadn’t produced any new milk yet and it would take a few more days, Leon had to give up and go home empty-handed.

## Part Nine

Several months had passed since I had bought the land next door, and we'd just had our first snowfall in the royal capital. The grass seeds I'd planted had sprouted and grown, but they had stopped now due to the cold. We couldn't walk on them or else it would damage their roots. The garden was accessible from Gramps's original property, so that wasn't a problem, but since we started the crops halfway through the season—or perhaps because we hadn't prepared the soil properly—there weren't many crops to speak of.

"They sure have a lot of energy," I muttered.

Even though only a few centimeters of snow had fallen, Amy, Tida, and Luna were gathering it up and having a snowball fight. It wasn't much a fight—they were more throwing snowballs *to* one another instead of at each other. Occasionally, Shiromaru darted between them, skillfully dodging the snowballs with his Fenrir abilities and causing a frenzy of excitement whenever he came close. It was like he was a bonus target to try and hit.

The bullying at Amy's school had ceased once the three idiots had become her allies. That was partly due to the fact that those three were idolized at the academy, but it was mostly because the school officials had subtly informed the students' parents who were causing trouble for Amy's new allies.

Most of the parents hadn't thought their children would engage in such behavior, and even if they had, they'd thought it was just a disagreement among the commoner students. However, a few of them had even come to apologize to me directly. But some students had actually been acting on their parents' orders, including the main culprit.

That parent had noticed others apologizing and came to apologize out of pure obligation. They'd had an incredibly bad attitude, though, as if to say, "I've apologized, so we're done here."

It hadn't taken long for karma to catch up with them, though.

Unbeknownst to them, the king and Queen Maria came to visit me incognito because they'd heard about the number of nobles visiting my house and were

concerned. They didn't confront any parents directly but shared the story with Caesar and the prime minister after they had returned.

The news spread, reaching half the royal castle staff the next day, followed by their outside associates.

Eventually, a high-ranking noble informed the bully's parent and they rushed to apologize to me, but since I'd been instructed by the queen to turn them away, they were sent home at the gate. The king and queen hadn't imposed any direct punishments on them, but it was said that the royal family wouldn't take any official stances until Tida became king.

Albert and the others happened to be visiting at that time and assured me that this would put an end to Amy's bullying. However, they also mentioned that some parents had recognized her newfound influence and might try to propose a marriage between her and their children.

Incidentally, Amy's bully's parent was a viscount who worked at the castle. Apparently both he and his family members were average or below average ability, so if they were to remain in the royal family's disfavor for many years, it might be difficult for them to maintain their noble title.

I reflected upon those events as I watched the children playing in the yard. I hadn't taken on any quests from the adventurers guild lately. It wasn't just me either. Most adventurers based in the capital were practically out of work during this season. No one wanted to take on jobs that required braving the cold, and most monsters—adventurers' prey—rarely showed themselves in such weather.

However, dungeon cities like Sagan saw an influx of people when it was cold, causing more than twice the normal number of adventurers to gather there compared to other times of the year. Most of those adventurers were short on money, leading to a rise in crimes—especially financial ones.

During this season, a significant number of adventurers heading to Sagan would give up halfway, because those who were short on money only had about the bare minimum amount of gear they'd need. That made them easy targets for bandits and thieves.

Also, adventurers traveling on less frequented roads were prime targets for

hungry monsters who had nothing else to eat. New adventurers had to be cautious of fellow adventurers who had ill intent too. It was said that the majority of rookie adventurer deaths in the winter were due to human or monster attacks while traveling. In other words, the journey to the dungeon city was more dangerous than dungeon diving itself.

Anyway, that was why Gramps and I decided to just spend our time leisurely in the capital. We weren't in need of money, so there was no reason to take unnecessary risks during this dangerous and harsh season. We planned to spend this winter as cozy, lazy bums.

Until last year, I hadn't even been an adventurer, so before that, I had raised a lot of suspicion spending long periods of time cooped up in an inn, even if I had paid in advance. The only place I'd found to relax was the Full Belly Inn, but even the owner and his wife had been suspicious at first. They had thought I might've run away from home and had stolen some money.

Dozle, the owner, had used his old connections to gather information about me and learned I had made a living by selling wild game at the guild. It had only been then that they started treating me like a regular guest. I'd asked if they had thought I'd gotten the money through crime, and he had said, "You were polite and well-dressed, so I thought you were a noble's child who'd run away."

"Hey, it's about time to stop and come back inside! You'll catch a cold!" I called out.

I realized the three kids had been playing for quite a while, so I told them to take a break and warm up. They weren't happy about it at first, but once I had broken their concentration, they seemed to realize how cold it really was and hurriedly returned to the mansion. Shiromaru rushed inside too, thinking he'd miss out on something if he didn't follow along.

"All right, dry off and change clothes, you three. Shiromaru, have Jeanne and Aura dry you off."

The four of them were soaked from playing in the snow. Although Aina and the others were waiting at the entrance to dry them off, since their clothes were soaked, I decided it would be best if they changed completely so they wouldn't catch a cold.

Now, the three of them were in their rooms in the mansion. Since Amy was staying in the capital over winter break, I had offered her a room here at the mansion instead of the dormitory. Once that had been decided, Tida and Luna had also asked to stay here. In reality, they just used their rooms during the day and didn't sleep there since the castle was so close, but having their own personal spaces here helped them visit almost every day.

Those rooms had originally been prepared for the king and queen to use when they came to check on Gramps. One room was set up for men and one for women.

Still, Tida and Luna were happy to have another room they could use whenever they wanted. Tida in particular was happy for any excuse to see Amy during the break.

Because of this, Tida and Luna had planned to stay late again today, but since they were members of the royal family, they had duties to attend to.

After they had changed clothes and had warmed up with some hot milk, Aina had some news for them. "Prince Tida, Princess Luna. Queen Maria instructed me to tell you that you have royal duties to attend to tomorrow, so you need to go home earlier than usual today."

Even they wouldn't disobey the queen, so they reluctantly got ready to leave, Tida being the most reluctant one of all.

Luna and Tida were getting ready to leave, and Jeanne returned from the foyer.

"Tenma, you have a visitor. They seem to have business with Amur," she said. Since Jeanne wasn't sure if she should let them in, she had come to ask me.

"Go ahead and tell Amur about them. I don't think it'll be a problem, but I'll be there just in case," I said.

"All right," Jeanne replied before heading towards Amur's room, which was next to Jeanne and Aura's and in the opposite direction of my and Gramps's rooms.

Aina had been watching us, and she whispered something to Jeanne. Jeanne then bowed repeatedly and apologized.

“What did you say to her, Aina?” I asked.

“Nothing important. I just reminded her that as a slave and a maid, she shouldn’t speak so casually to her master,” she said. “Of course, I’m aware you’ve allowed it so far, but if she continues to do so outside the estate, it could be detrimental to her.”

She looked at Jeanne as she spoke, so I sensed she might’ve actually said something more than that. She did have a point that if Jeanne developed a bad habit of speaking casually to nobles, especially ones she didn’t know, it could result in some serious trouble.

“You’re right. We won’t always be around, so she needs to be careful. Thanks, Aina,” I said. I hadn’t really paid much attention to it before, but I appreciated her pointing it out.

“Of course. Educating these girls is part of my job,” she replied.

For some reason, Aina was blushing. I didn’t understand why, but I decided to appreciate the rare sight.

“Tenma, who’s the guest?” Aina asked.

“I don’t know. I asked Jeanne to get Amur to come down to see them... Hey, are you still half asleep?”

Just then, Amur came downstairs, looking drowsy. Since Jeanne had just been scolded by Aina, I figured she probably hadn’t forgotten to explain things to her, so Amur must not have been paying attention. It was well past noon, and if she still seemed this sleepy, she must’ve gone back to sleep after breakfast. I’d seen her at breakfast but not at lunch. At Gramps’s house, people usually ate breakfast and dinner together when we were home, but everyone did their own thing for lunch. That was because we were usually all busy with our own tasks during the day.

For example, Amur and I might be out on a quest for the adventurers guild, Gramps might be out wandering (never call him a senile old man, though), and Jeanne and Aura could be doing maid training at the castle. Since we all had such different schedules, it was more efficient for everyone to have lunch on their own.

We usually always tried to have someone home at the estate. In addition to the golems' added security, we could always ask someone from Kukuri Village to watch over the house if we needed them to. That hadn't been necessary since I'd moved in, though.

So, if Amur were to spend the entire afternoon napping, no one would notice. If she napped too much during the daytime, though, sometimes she'd struggle to sleep at night...

"Anyway, we have a guest waiting outside," I told her. "Let's hurry up."

"Okaay... Gah!" Amur was staggering groggily but had been following me closely. As soon as we stepped outside, the cold air quickly woke her up, causing her to let out a strange sound.

"They're over there."

"Um... Oh! Lani-tan!" The moment Amur spotted the visitor at the gate, a look of recognition came over her face and she called out a cutesy nickname.

I was surprised to see that the subject of said cutesy nickname was, in fact, a rather portly man.

"Miss Amur, as I've said many times, my name is Lani Tantan."

That was apparently his real name, and "Lani-tan" was just a nickname that Amur had given him. Honestly, though, the extra "tan" didn't change much in my eyes...

"So why are you here, Lani-tan?"

"Lani *Tantan*," he stressed. "I stopped by on my way back from a business trip to the capital. Going forward, Lady Hana and Miss Amur will communicate through me, plus I thought it would be a good chance for me to develop some new business clients."

It seemed like Amur and Lani were acquaintances. Since he had mentioned Hana, I figured they must've been close. Lani had apparently visited here before, but we hadn't met since we had been in the SAR at the time.

"Let's invite him in, Amur. It's rude to keep him waiting out in the cold. I'm freezing too," I said.

“Okay.”

“Thank you very much,” Lani said.

We led Lani to the parlor. I thought I would leave them alone for privacy, but Lani said he had business with me too and asked if I could spare some time to listen.

He took off his overcoat and long scarf, which had been wrapped around his head and neck and had covered his face. *I wonder if that's why they call him Tantan*, I thought, but it would be rude to say that out loud, so I kept quiet.

“The main reason for my visit is to introduce myself. Secondly, Lady Hana asked me to check on Miss Amur's well-being and see if she needed anything. I also wanted to introduce you to some products from the SAR and other regions, Master Tenma.”

“So you're here to act as a liaison for Hana and Amur while also selling products?”

“Exactly! This isn't my only job, so I can't bring you what you want immediately, but I *can* bring you items that are hard to find in the capital at relatively low prices!”

Lani seemed to mainly deal in goods from the SAR. Delivery could take a while. He knew that I liked food from the SAR and was confident that I wouldn't refuse. And even if I did, his main goal was to serve as a liaison between Hana and Amur so he wouldn't be at a loss.

His line of thinking was spot-on. I had no reason to refuse to do business with him, and if Hana trusted him enough to make him her go-between, he was probably the most reliable person to bring in products from the SAR. Of course, I knew that he was ultimately loyal to Hana so I couldn't let down my guard entirely, but as long as we didn't end up on opposite sides, there was no harm in this arrangement.

“I think you'll find this item quite interesting,” Lani said, taking out an object from his magic bag. It looked like a block of something white.

“Are those sake lees?” I asked, recognizing it immediately.

“Oh, you’ve seen this before? It’s not a rare sight in the SAR, but it is uncommon in other regions. Ah, right, I did hear you bought a significant amount of sake from us.”

I nodded and explained that a shopkeeper in the SAR had told me about it. After all, I couldn’t exactly tell him I knew about sake lees because of my past life. Anyway, I hadn’t been able to purchase any when I had seen it, though, because they were out of stock.

“In that case, would you like to buy some now? I can’t sell you all of my stock because another customer has placed an order, but I can spare a bit.”

Lani pulled out five one-kilogram slabs of sake lees and said the price was 200G per slab.

Amur, who had been watching quietly, suddenly spoke up. “Lani-tan, you can’t fool me. That isn’t all you have. No one outside the SAR would buy this. Show us everything you got!” She glared at him and slammed her hands down on the table for emphasis.

Every time he tried to speak to make an excuse, she silenced him with another slam. Eventually, he gave in and produced the remaining stock.

“I have four and a half slabs left. As Miss Amur pointed out, I did bring around ten kilograms as samples for my new product and let people taste some as a novelty, but no one wanted to buy any.”

“Ha! You can’t deceive my eyes! I’ll take all of them for 1,000G!” Amur declared, handing over the money with a triumphant look.

Now that had been settled, Amur carried off nearly ten kilograms of sake lees to the kitchen. Once she left, I turned towards Lani.

“You know, the shopkeeper told me that the sake lees usually cost no more than 100G per kilogram. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. “It typically sells for 50G to 80G per kilogram. So, with the additional handling fees, 100G would be sufficient.”

It was just as I had suspected. When Amur had forced Lani to reveal his stock, he’d admitted to bringing only ten kilograms, which hadn’t seemed like enough

for a merchant to carry. Even though it might not have sold well outside the SAR, he could've preserved it in his magic bag. Here in the capital, it should've attracted interest from wealthy people on the hunt for something unique, so it should've been easy to sell several dozen kilograms. And if he were to pitch it correctly to rich people and say that it was a rarity, they'd probably buy it just for bragging rights.

"You're just as sharp as everyone has said, Master Tenma. I'll have to report Miss Amur's conduct to Lady Hana, though," he said. "By the way, I have about forty more kilograms of sake lees. Would you like to buy them? I'll give them to you at a discount compared to what Miss Amur paid."

I agreed to buy his remaining stock at 80G per kilogram—Lani explained this was my first-time customer discount.

As I paid, I said, "Are you reporting Amur's behavior for some kind of revenge since she called you Lani-tan?"

He smiled at me, making it clear Amur's nickname annoyed him. By the time she returned, the additional sake lees had already been put away in my magic bag, so she was unaware of the bargain I'd struck. She simply continued bragging about her own deal.

The atmosphere in the parlor was unusually pleasant with each of us in a good mood for our own reasons. I was happy with my purchase, Lani was happy he'd sold off his stock, and Amur was proud of her "negotiation skills."

Lani asked if I needed anything else, so I told him next time I'd like miso and soy sauce. He promised to bring a variety of samples with him on his next visit.

Just as our discussion with Lani was coming to a close, Aina entered the room. "Another guest has arrived, Master Tenma."

"Another visitor? Wait, Luna hasn't left yet? Did she throw a tantrum?"

I had assumed Tida and the others had left already, so I was a little surprised to see her with Aina.

"Not exactly. She did drag her feet and forget things on purpose. She even locked herself in the bathroom for a while."

Luna really was the king's granddaughter, after all. Although Aina was maintaining a calm exterior, I could tell she was irritated. The temperature in the room seemed to drop momentarily as she explained Luna's antics.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who sensed it either—both Amur and Lani edged towards the far end of the sofa, trying to put as much distance between themselves and Aina as possible.

"All right, I guess I should go greet our guests."

"They're waiting in the foyer right now."

Since Aina had let them into the property, I knew they must be people I was close to. Anyone from Kukuri Village or the royal family would've come straight to me, so it had to be someone else.

"Could it be Albert and the others?" I asked.

"No, it's not Lord Albert. It's his father, Duke Sanga."

This unexpected visit surprised me. I hurried to the entrance and found Duke Sanga and his bodyguard Steel there. They had already removed their cloaks.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"No need to apologize. We came unannounced, after all. We haven't been waiting that long," Duke Sanga said.

Since Lani was already in the parlor, I considered showing them to another room. However, I noticed Amur and Lani heading towards us.

"Tenma, Lani-tan is leaving," Amur said.

"It's *Lani Tantan!*" he exclaimed.

As they engaged in their usual banter, Steel, who had been quietly blending into the background, suddenly reacted. "Lani Tantan? The eyes and ears of the SAR is here?!" His voice was filled with anger and a hint of malice.

"And you're Duke Sanga's shadow!"

Lani took up a fighting stance, but...

"Steel!"

“Lani-tan!”

Both men were restrained by their respective masters, but they remained ready to leap at each other at any moment. Duke Sanga had blocked Steel, and Amur had restrained Lani by punching him.

“Damn tanuki from the SAR...”

“Damn pet dog of the duke...”

Even though they had backed down, the two of them continued to exchange insults. It seemed like they were more alike than they cared to admit. By the way, just as Steel had mentioned, Lani was indeed a tanuki beastfolk. The reason I had thought his name Tantan made sense was because it had reminded me of the song “Tantan Tanuki Balls” from my past world. On the other hand, Steel was just a regular human, so Lani had run out of other insults in his frustration after Amur punched him.

We returned to the parlor, making sure not to let the two spies get too close to each other. I had Duke Sanga and Amur sit across from each other at the table, and I sat where I could see both of them and act as a neutral arbitrator.

“I apologize for Steel’s behavior,” Duke Sanga said.

“I’m sorry for Lani-tan’s conduct too,” Amur said.

“My lady...” Lani quietly muttered.

It seemed like he was still annoyed by that nickname, but he couldn’t voice his frustrations too loudly in front of the duke. Steel noticed that and quietly chuckled, which just reignited their glaring contest. I put an end to that by rapping on the table. It suddenly felt like I was a judge or something.

“Anyway, let’s just agree that the earlier actions of these two were personal and not a feud between houses,” I said, and both Duke Sanga and Amur nodded in agreement.

“Why do these two hate each other so much anyway? I get that they’re both spies for their respective houses, but there seems to be more to it than just a rivalry,” I then asked Amur and Duke Sanga curiously.

Amur shook her head, saying she didn’t know. Lani reported to Hana, so it

made sense that Amur wouldn't know all the details.

I turned to Duke Sanga and saw a troubled expression on his face. Wondering if there was something confidential here, I waited for him to speak instead of asking directly.

He must've realized what I was thinking because he said, "It's not exactly a secret, but it's something we'd prefer to keep quiet. About ten years ago, there was a conflict between my ducal house and the SAR, so I believe it's related to that."

Duke Sanga told me that at the time, nobles hadn't entirely trusted the SAR (they still didn't, but the relationship had improved considerably thanks to the royal family and Hana), so they had regularly performed joint military exercises near the region as a form of deterrence. When Duke Sanga, someone from one of the most powerful noble families in the kingdom, had participated for the first time, the SAR had considered it to be a serious threat and heightened their security to unprecedented levels. This had led to increased tension on both sides and brought them to the brink of war.

One night, several spies from the SAR had infiltrated Duke Sanga's camp and had stolen some information. Although a fight had ensued, no fatalities had occurred and no key figures from Duke Sanga's camp had been harmed.

"So, basically, these two fought each other then," the duke explained.

The two sides had been almost evenly matched, and Lani had escaped just as Steel's reinforcements had arrived. Duke Sanga believed both would have taken down their opponent if not for the interference, and that had left them both with a lingering grudge.

It sounded like a simple draw to me, but neither of them saw it that way. Steel felt humiliated for having let the spies get in and escape, and Lani regretted not having learned anything significant and being forced to flee.

Duke Sanga had used the stolen information as a reason to call off the exercises. He had even been reluctant about them happening from the start since he had harbored no resentment against the SAR. He had advised the king to stop the operations near the SAR, and the king had immediately agreed.

Their skirmish had actually indirectly prevented a larger conflict between the kingdom and the SAR. However, both of them saw it as a blemish upon their records and directed their frustrations at each other.

“If a problem arises with the SAR, I won’t hesitate to dismiss Steel,” Duke Sanga said.

“Then we’ll also discard Lani-tan. We have enough capable reinforcements anyway,” Amur said.

The implication here was that they’d both abandon their spies if it meant avoiding a feud, sending a clear message to the men that their masters were serious. Now that both of them realized this, they apologized to their masters, then to me, and then reluctantly to each other.

Just as Duke Sanga was about to end that discussion, Amur said something to Lani.

“Next time you cause trouble, I’ll have Leni-tan replace you.”

Lani visibly panicked at the mention of that other person’s name. Duke Sanga seemed intrigued.

She explained further. “Tenma, if Lani-tan becomes a problem, we can work with his sister, Leni-tan, instead. She’s more capable than him anyway, so we could replace him at any time.”

Amur was revealing personal information about her household. Fearing Hana’s wrath, I warned her to not go around broadcasting sensitive information about the viscount’s family like that. Amur brushed it off, however, and said this was common knowledge in Nanao.

The person most shocked by this information wasn’t Duke Sanga, but Steel. He seemed taken aback that someone more talented than Lani, his equal, even existed, and that that person was Lani’s younger sister. Despite everything, it seemed like Steel had a certain level of respect for Lani.

Aina came back at that moment. “Master Tenma, Princess Luna is finally ready. If you’ll excuse us,” she announced.

Before I could even react to her sudden appearance, she bowed and left the

parlor. Duke Sanga looked startled by her abrupt entrance, but Steel's and Lani's reactions were even more surprised.

After Aina left, they both muttered comments.

"I couldn't sense her at all."

"I didn't hear her footsteps or even the door opening!"

Aina had managed to spook two professional spies, making me wonder once again if she was really just a maid.

Luna was being shoved out the door by Aina, so I said goodbye to her and Tida. The latter seemed sad to be apart from Amy.

I returned to the parlor to find Lani sporting a new bump on his head. I asked Duke Sanga about it, and he said that during my absence, Lani and Steel had held another glaring contest, which had resulted in Amur delivering some ironfisted justice. Steel had also received a punishment from Duke Sanga and was crouching down in pain, nursing his shin.

Duke Sanga ignored the two spies, and he and Amur apologized once again. I could understand why Amur would abandon Lani, but I began to wonder if Duke Sanga might really push Steel aside at this rate. I doubted he would let go of someone so useful, though, so I decided it was better that I didn't try to recruit Steel for myself. Even if I could pull it off, it would only cause trouble when he and Lani inevitably crossed paths since Lani would be visiting frequently from now on.

When things finally calmed down, I asked Duke Sanga why he had come to visit. Apparently, there was no particular reason—he just happened to be in the capital and had some free time. He had learned that I was home, so he'd decided to drop by.

We continued chatting about various trivial matters. Once evening came, Lani announced he was leaving. He grumbled about not being ready to depart for the SAR tomorrow, probably because he couldn't leave in a timely manner. He'd been having that glaring contest with Steel, after all.

After we said goodbye to Lani, Duke Sanga also prepared to leave, but I invited him to dinner and he decided to stay.

Our meal featured dishes made with ingredients from the SAR. The duke was delighted while Steel occasionally had conflicted looks on his face. It seemed like he was unable to fully enjoy the meal due to lingering concerns about Lani.

Duke Sanga didn't spend the night, but he did stay over quite late, drinking with Gramps. During their conversation, he repeatedly expressed his desire to have Primera stay in the capital. That made sense since he spent most of his time in the capital with Albert instead of in Gunjo City.

Duke Sanga wasn't worried about Albert, though. Gramps mentioned that I occasionally pushed him around, but Duke Sanga just laughed and said it was a good experience for him. He enjoyed hearing about the various antics Albert and his friends got up to, seemingly very amused by them.

As they wrapped up their drinking session and Duke Sanga prepared to go, he noticed Mary near the entrance. He went over to pet her, but Mary tensed up like she was about to charge.

"Not on my watch!"

Just as Mary was about to release her energy, Steel quickly stepped in to protect Duke Sanga. Unfortunately, Mary had an unexpected move up her sleeve.

"Baaa!"

"Whoa!"

Thinking that Mary would aim for the duke's stomach, Steel had positioned himself to catch her. However, Mary feinted a jump, which caused Steel to look up for a split second. She then slipped between his legs and aimed a kick at his groin from behind. Steel managed to block it, but Mary dashed towards Duke Sanga. I intervened just in time to prevent her from attacking him too, but seeing how Mary's skills had advanced left me slightly uneasy.

"I apologize, Duke Sanga," I said.

"No, it's my fault for approaching her carelessly. She might've mistaken me for an intruder." Duke Sanga was forgiving, but I was certain Mary had just been trying to greet him with a headbutt.

I held Mary. She was displeased but remained still. Steel, on the other hand, seemed depressed, probably never having expected to be outsmarted by a lamb. I told him that Leon had suffered a worse fate, and Steel acknowledged his mistake and seemed to recover a bit. Duke Sanga laughed heartily when he heard the story about Leon and expressed his sympathy.

“There might be another victim soon...” I muttered to myself.

After I said goodbye to Duke Sanga, I took Mary back to her quarters. For some reason, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that more trouble was on the horizon.

That night as I lay in bed, a thought crossed my mind: Mary seemed to act particularly harsh when it came to men. I realized that she had attacked me, Leon, and other men with all her might but had seemed to go easier on Aura, Kriss, and Luna.

Mary’s attacks were powerful enough to have knocked out Leon with just one blow, but Aura had only ended up with a red mark or fallen on her bottom. Luna, whom she had attacked the most, had merely sustained a light scratch from a fall. Kriss was sturdier than the two of them and more agile, so she hadn’t been injured at all.

“Maybe I should warn Tida,” I thought. Tida was the weakest of all the males who visited the estate and needed to be more cautious. It would be a disaster if he were to end up like Leon. After all, Leon had suffered a lot.

I drifted off to sleep with those troubling thoughts in my mind...or so I thought.

“Oh-eeeyyy!”

Suddenly sensing a suspicious presence, I opened my eyes to find a bizarre creature staring at me.

“It’s a monster!” I cried.

Instinctively, I punched it and was about to cast a follow-up spell when...

“Wait, Tenma!”

“Tenma, that’s Namitaro!”

Those familiar voices stopped me in my tracks.

“Huh?”

I canceled my spell and looked towards the voices. The god of skill and the god of war were here, and the creature I had punched was indeed Namitaro.

“Wait, if you two are here, this must be *that* room again...which means I’m dreaming.”

When I looked closer, I saw that the god of creation was behind them, tied up and gagged. His face was dry and withered, and he almost looked like a mummy.

“Mmph...”

He appeared to be alive and was trying to say something as our eyes met (although his eyes were darkened, so I wasn’t really sure if he could really see me). I listened closely and it seemed like he was saying, “Help me.”

It was hard to be sure because of the gag and his half-mummified state, though. I felt sorry for him and untied the ropes and removed his gag, but I had no idea how to restore his skin. I tried using Water magic, and to my surprise, he quickly recovered. It was honestly a bit creepy to watch.

“I made it, somehow...”

I wondered how he survived, and the god of skill explained it to me. “He absorbed the mana you used for recovery before he ran out of magic. He did it just in time.”

“Is that why I was summoned here this time? And why is Namitaro here?” I asked.

“That’s simple. If we can summon you, we can summon any reincarnated person, like Namitaro.”

“As for why you’re here, we have no particular request. It’s actually because of Namitaro and myself.”

“Tee-hee! Nyanny nyanny boo-boo!”

I noticed Namitaro doing something silly in the corner of my vision, but no one commented on it.

“But, but I couldn’t help it!” Namitaro said. “I thought I’d be summoned at any moment, but Tenma never called! And I had all this seafood to share...”

“Why didn’t you just come visit? I’d appreciate the seafood too,” I said.

After all, Namitaro knew where Gramps’s mansion was and could easily sneak into the capital.

Hearing this, Namitaro looked as if some sort of great revelation had dawned on him. “Oh, I never thought of that. I thought I had to be summoned. Okay, I’ll come over right now! Goodbye!”

And with that, Namitaro dived into the ground and disappeared. This was a dreamworld, after all, so anything was possible.

“Uh-oh! It looks like the goddess of love has noticed Tenma’s presence!” announced the god of creation. “God of war, god of skill, seal the exits immediately!”

“Leave it to me!”

“I’ll handle it!”

The two of them responded immediately to the god of creation’s command. The god of war suddenly shifted into macho mode.

“Why seal the exits? Is it a problem if she shows up?” I asked.

“If you’re okay with it, that’s fine, but if the goddess of love shows up and causes a scene? Who knows when you’ll be able to leave! I’m forcibly stabilizing this space right now, but if it becomes too unstable, the time axis might shift,” the god of creation explained.

Apparently, Namitaro had stayed in this space for almost an entire day, exhausting most of the god of creation’s power. Most of his energy had been spent playing with Namitaro rather than maintaining the space.

He’d opposed summoning me at first, but due to the strong urging from

Namitaro and the god of war—along with the god of skill joining in on the fun—they had forcibly used the god of creation’s power to summon me. If the goddess of love were to intrude at this point, things could get chaotic.

“Well then, good night, Tenma.”

And with that, I was pushed back onto the futon where I’d been sleeping and was forced to lie down. Honestly, I wasn’t feeling sleepy, but the moment the god of creation touched my forehead, my consciousness began to grow dim.

“Oh, and by the way, it seems there are people trying to create a story about you, Tenma. You might wanna check on that. Mwah!” the god of war mentioned just before I lost consciousness.

That sounded rather concerning. I wished that he had told me that while I was still fully conscious. At least I had managed to avoid the kiss he blew at me by rolling over in bed...or at least I hoped I had.

“Ugh, morning already?” I groaned.

I had a slight headache from not sleeping enough, but remembering the commotion in my dream, I couldn’t bring myself to go back to sleep. I forced myself to get up. If the god of war’s last words were true, it meant someone was either in the process of writing a book about me or planning to do so. It would be best to deal with this issue quickly, so I figured I should consult with Queen Maria.

This world did have concepts of privacy and copyright, albeit much looser than in my previous life. If a story about a real person or someone heavily influenced by one deviated too much from the truth or caused that person harm, it could be deemed a crime. Moreover, if that person had their own patrons, creating a story without their permission was also considered a crime.

In the case of knights like Dean, information leaks were prevented by requiring the king’s permission, as he was their superior.

In my case, I was affiliated with the royal faction, so I would ask Queen Maria, the head of the royal family, to handle the issue.

Considering my current fame, it was unlikely that I could completely stop a

book from being published. Therefore, I planned to have Queen Maria endorse an official version. That way, any future stories about me would be regarded as fiction unless they were officially sanctioned by the royal family... At least, that was what I hoped as I hurried to the castle.

## Part Ten

Once upon a time, there was a man and a woman who, after overcoming many trials, became husband and wife. They had a very happy life together, although they were not blessed with children of their own. Despite that, they were satisfied with their happy life together and spent their days thanking the goddess.

The goddess had been watching over them all this time, and one day, she appeared in the man's dreams and told him to go to a certain place in the forest.

When the man went there, he found a baby. The child's parents were nowhere in sight, and the forest was inhabited by dangerous monsters and other animals. The man understood that the goddess must have sent him a message to go there and save the abandoned baby, so he took him home.

His wife was surprised to see the baby her husband brought home, but after hearing her husband's story, she decided to raise the child as their own.

From that moment on, this man and woman became "Father" and "Mother."

The baby grew up to be a very talented young boy whom his parents loved deeply. His talent for magic in particular was quite remarkable, impressing even his grandfather, who had been his mother's teacher.

In addition to his magical abilities, he was gifted in martial arts. He could even tame monsters!

One day, while he was with his slime and Fenrir followers, he saved the king from a monster attack. Grateful, the king invited the boy to live in the capital as a noble. But the boy loved his family dearly and declined, saying that he would be happier to stay in his village with them.

The king was moved by the boy's words and decided to respect his wishes. The monarch then left the village, telling him to come to the castle if he ever needed help.

The boy's peaceful, happy days continued after that. He went hunting with his

father, enjoyed cooking with his mother, and studied magic with his grandfather.

But one day, that happiness was shattered when a giant dragon appeared in the village. The dragon had become a zombie and led countless minions. The soldiers who were supposed to protect the village had fled, leaving the boy and his family to protect the village with the other villagers.

The boy and the others decided to fight. However, despite their best efforts, the dragon zombie was a more than formidable opponent. This wasn't surprising—this dragon had once been a legendary one who had wreaked havoc on the kingdom before having become a zombie.

The boy and his family were at the ends of their ropes but continued to fight, believing they would be victorious. And their determination paid off when the boy's magic spell struck the dragon zombie.

The dragon zombie fell and stopped moving. The villagers witnessed the successful attack and rushed out to praise the boy—but that was exactly what the dragon zombie wanted.

Once the boy's parents and grandfather reached the boy, the dragon zombie stopped pretending to be dead and unleashed a powerful breath attack aimed straight at the child.

His father and mother immediately sensed danger and pushed the boy out of the way just as his grandfather cast a defensive barrier on the boy instead of on himself. Thanks to his family, the boy was barely injured. However, his parents and grandfather had taken the full force of the dragon's attack.

When the dragon's breath subsided, the boy saw the scorched ground, destroyed defensive walls, and fallen villagers around him. People who had been farther back from his parents and grandfather had perished, making his family's survival seem impossible.

The boy was overcome with deep despair and intense anger. He felt a rage unlike anything he'd ever felt before, one so fierce that it made even the dragon zombie afraid.

The goddess, sensing the boy's anger, felt his pain and cast a spell on him,

transforming his rage into courage and strength so that he would not be broken by it.

The dragon zombie turned to flee, either because it had noticed the goddess's presence or because it had sensed the boy's newfound power. When it believed it was far enough away, it turned back to look upon the village. However, that had been a fatal mistake—the dragon zombie then saw the boy floating in the air several meters away.

The goddess's magic had granted the boy the ability to fly, and he chased after the dragon zombie. The monster knew it had to fight, but before it could prepare itself, the boy activated his magic. As the dragon zombie lunged at the boy, a large tree flew at it from the side, slamming into its body. Countless trees pummeled the dragon zombie. At first, it tried to dig its claws into the ground to hold itself steady, but before long, it could no longer withstand the force of the attack and was lifted off the ground. The dragon zombie was pulled into the air and began to spin around the boy.

This was the power that the goddess's magic had awakened. A massive tornado formed around the boy—one strong enough to swallow the dragon zombie. Once it had been caught in the boy's tornado, the dragon zombie was helplessly torn apart and perished at last.

Even though the boy had defeated the legendary dragon zombie, he felt no joy. He'd just lost his father, mother, and grandfather right before his very eyes, and he was on the brink of physical and mental exhaustion. At this rate, not even he would survive this ordeal. But it was at that critical moment that the boy's followers came to his rescue.

With the help of the slime, the Fenrir managed to get the boy onto his back. The Fenrir swiftly carried him away to safety, because although the dragon zombie had been defeated, its minions still posed a threat.

Thanks to the quick thinking of the slime and the Fenrir, the boy was now safe. However, once they reached safety, he fell unconscious.

A few days later, he finally woke up. It took a few more days for him to return to the village only to find it abandoned. The villagers had moved on, leaving

behind the terrible sadness that had occurred there.

Nevertheless, the boy desperately searched the wreckage for his parents and grandfather. He spent an entire day looking for them but found nothing. Their home, which had been filled with countless memories, had been destroyed by the dragon zombie and its minions.

Overwhelmed by grief and fatigue, the boy decided to sleep where his home once stood. That night, he dreamed of happier days when his family had been together. He dreamed of his father showing him how to hunt, his mother teaching him academics and how to cook, and his grandfather teaching him magic—the everyday routines that had brought him happiness until just ten days ago.

But that dream ended the moment his family had been erased by the dragon zombie’s breath attack.

When the boy woke up the next morning, he remembered his dream and cried. He wept all day, and the next morning, he made a decision.

“I’ll travel around this country, and when I’m done, I’ll explore the whole world.”

And so the boy set out on a journey to see the world his father, mother, and grandfather once traveled...

“What the heck is this?” I asked.

When I had gone to ask Queen Maria for advice, she had handed me a book—one that contained that story.

“This one was the most decent out of all the ones brought to me. Apparently, they’re planning on illustrating it and turning it into a children’s book,” she explained.



According to Queen Maria, she had already had several drafts of books presented to her as samples. Many authors, even if they were adventurers, had realized they couldn't freely sell books about someone who had the backing of the royal family, so they had brought them to her for approval first.

However, many of the books had been romances, which she had immediately rejected. Some authors had even asked her what was wrong with their writing, and once she'd explained that, they'd scrapped those stories.

Apparently, most of the authors who wrote romance stories had been influenced by nobles, and some of them had featured heroines who closely resembled real noblewomen.

The next most common stories had been based on the actual quests I had done. Queen Maria had high hopes for those, but since I'd only been an adventurer for so long, there weren't enough substantial stories to create a whole book of them. Those had been rejected as well.

"For now, I've given conditional approval to authors who brought me a decent story and who have no noble influences. Those people will be able to continue to write under certain conditions, but the writers who brought me inappropriate content have been blacklisted," she said.

The authors who had been deemed decent would be given another chance. If their next works passed the queen's inspection, they would be sold officially as approved books. If they were rejected again, they'd face an uncertain future. Even if someone were to publish a book without the queen's approval, the royal family could denounce the contents as nonsense, and if the stories were too outrageous, they could be considered an insult to the royal family.

"This way, some slightly exaggerated or conveniently told tales may circulate, but completely fictional ones shouldn't spread too far," she assured me.

The book that had passed Queen Maria's inspection didn't explicitly name the characters inside, but anyone familiar with my story would recognize it immediately. However, there was nothing in the story that would harm my reputation. In the worst-case scenario, it would bring more attention to me while causing me some embarrassment.

“I suppose I could refuse to authorize any books about me, but that would be problematic, wouldn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, indeed. We could do that using the royal family’s power, but then we wouldn’t know what kinds of books would be sold under the table,” the queen explained.

Basically, it was better to have an official, royalty-approved version to make the unauthorized stories seem like mere fabrications.

“In that case, I’ll let you take care of it. But please don’t approve any romance stories,” I said.

“I understand. If I do approve one, it’ll only be after you’ve gotten married. Honestly, I wish you’d marry soon so I can hold your child in my arms!”

The queen wasn’t telling me *who* to marry, but it seemed like she had someone in mind. I had an idea of who it was, but I didn’t want to bring it up. Doing so would only delay my departure.

“Well then, I should get going,” I said and quickly excused myself from the queen’s parlor to avoid any unnecessary trouble.

I was in the royal quarters in the castle and had planned to leave right away, but, of course, I ran into the person I least wanted to see at the last moment: the king.

“Ah, are you done speaking with Maria? Come with me,” he said.

I saw that he was dressed in unusually plain clothing, so I had a bad feeling about this. But since I didn’t think it was a good idea to shake off his grip either, I reluctantly followed him.

“I should’ve run away...”

The king had taken me to a place where the archduke, Prince Lyle, and Luna were waiting. Thankfully, Tida was there as well. I knew that I could rely on him to keep things in check should anything go awry.

Tida bowed his head when he noticed my gaze. “Sorry for all the trouble...”

“It’s all right. You’re a victim here too. Do Queen Maria and Prince Caesar

know about this gathering?” I asked.

He shook his head, which gave me the feeling that if the queen found out, she’d be furious.

*In that case, I might have to ditch the king and make a run for it...*

“If you do, please take me and Luna with you...” Tida whispered, sensing my thoughts.

I nodded silently. Tida had been dragged into this mess, but Luna seemed to be an active participant. She wouldn’t escape a lecture from Prince Caesar even if I helped her.

“All right, everything’s ready, so let’s go! By the way, Tenma... You don’t need to address us formally while we’re out in this group.”

“Understood, King,” I replied and boarded the carriage he pointed to.

“Hey, wait!”

“Come on, King,” Archduke Ernest said.

“Pfft! After you, King,” said Prince Lyle.

“I’ll get in first, King,” Luna said.

“Um, excuse me, King,” Tida said.

“That’s not what I meant!” the king protested.

“Queen Maria will find out if you make too much noise, King.”

“Yeah, King.”

“Get in already, King.”

King climbed into the carriage, muttering, “Damn it, Tenma!”

Of course I knew that he had really meant that I shouldn’t tip anyone off that he was the king, but it didn’t matter what I called him—he wouldn’t fool anyone. He was the most famous person in the kingdom, so it really would’ve been better for him to just use an alias. When I suggested that in the carriage, everyone agreed, except for King. Therefore, his official alias became King.

“So where are we going?” I asked.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, didn’t I? We’re going to a pub I frequent,” Lyle said.

A royal and the minister of the military visiting a pub? Maybe it wasn’t so strange. Lyle *was* the king’s son, after all. I was curious if the queen knew about this.

The carriage entered the city without incident, and about an hour after leaving the castle, we were nearing our destination.

Lyle handed some money to the soldier disguised as a driver. “You take care of the carriage. We’ll probably be back in around two hours, as usual.”

He then headed into an alley. We followed him, and I couldn’t help but think that it would be easy to get lost here without someone leading the way. This place was like a maze.

“Hm, looks like a normal tavern to me.”

Everyone except for King nodded in response. Maybe they had all been wondering if we were going to some kind of shady establishment as well. Then again, since Luna had come along, I had doubted it would be anything too bad.

Lyle gave us a stern warning and began checking our disguises. “Don’t state the obvious... Anyway, they call me Lye here and I’m just a soldier, so don’t blow my cover. Got it?”

Our story was that King and the others were related to Lye, aka Lyle. I was a soldier-in-training, making me Lye’s subordinate.

King was disguised as a wealthy official. He was wearing glasses and had his hair slicked back.

Ernest was now “Nest” and was dressed like an old gentleman, complete with a silk top hat and glasses.

Luna was now Lulu. She had put her hair down and wore a different academy’s uniform and glasses.

Tida, or Dino for now, was wearing a uniform from the same academy as Luna and also had glasses on.

I was Sora and had put on clothes typical of a low-ranking soldier. I also wore a banana on my head. And...glasses...

“Why are so many of us wearing glasses...?”

Initially, only King and Dino were supposed to wear them, but Lye had insisted everyone needed to cover their faces. That had led to all of us wearing them. As for Lye’s disguise...

“Uncle looks the same as usual,” Luna said.

He did—his clothes were a bit more casual, but he didn’t really look much different.

“Don’t worry about that,” Lye said. “Let’s just get inside.”

He stepped confidently into the tavern and quickly spoke to a waitress, asking if a private room was available. When she confirmed that it was, he headed straight for it before she could show us the way. The private rooms were separated by partitions, so you could hear voices from inside each one. You could see inside the private rooms from certain angles too.

Lye declined the waitress’s offer of drinks and explained the situation. “I’ll pass on drinking today. I’ve got family and kids with me, but feel free to serve those two.”

It became clear from their conversation that he usually sat at the counter while he ate and drank. King looked slightly envious of his freedom.

We were served meat skewers and stew, perfect for appetizers and all prepared painstakingly with no unpleasant odors.

“This is delicious. Honestly, I expected a cruder taste since Lye recommended it.”

“Right? Many places serve innards that are too smelly to eat, but this place is really delicious!”

“This grilled intestine might be better than what we ate at Ten—er, Sora’s place,” Dino said hesitantly.

“The liver doesn’t stink at all and tastes great!” Lulu had quickly declared that the food was better than mine and was happily munching on the innards.

King and Nest enjoyed the food and drinks while they wondered aloud why Lye had kept this place a secret.

After we had finished our meal, Lulu was beginning to look sleepy, so we decided to pay our tab and leave the restaurant. Lulu looked unsteady on her feet, so Lye picked her up and carried her to the waiting carriage. Once we got to it, we stopped using our fake names.

“Well, I should be going. I’ll make my way from here.”

I declined their offer to be dropped off at Gramps’s mansion and chose to get off at the fork in the road between the castle and the mansion instead. As I said goodbye to everyone and walked home, I had the feeling that I had forgotten something...

A few days later, Tida accused me of running away alone after he had been scolded by Queen Maria, Prince Caesar, and Princess Isabella.

I had gotten scolded too, but by Gramps and Amur—for not bringing back any treats for them. A few nights later, I was dragged back to Lyle’s favorite place and forced to pay for an extravagant feast.

Then, the day after that feast, I was scolded by Queen Maria! She was upset that I hadn’t invited her when I had taken Gramps and Amur to the pub. It seemed unfair, but the queen didn’t get to dine out that much just like the king didn’t, so I saw where her anger was coming from. I managed to explain myself by emphasizing that it was all Prince Lyle, the king, and Archduke Ernest’s fault. I also promised to recreate some of the dishes we’d had using regular meat instead of innards for the queen, Prince Caesar, and the others.

However, after the queen tasted my cooking, she became very curious about the dishes at the pub and insisted that I take her there. Prince Caesar and Princess Isabella said the same thing. Desperate, I consulted with Cruyff, Aina, and Dean about what to do. We ended up renting out the pub for the royal guard, disguising the three of them, and taking Luna and Tida along too. When the king and Lyle tried to sneakily join us, a single glare from the queen was enough to stop them in their tracks.

I tried to invite Zane, but he declined, saying, “Mizaria will be sad if I go without her,” before hurrying home.

Despite her disguise, Queen Maria’s presence couldn’t be hidden and the staff recognized her immediately. However, perhaps because we were in

different clothes than the previous time, they didn't realize that Tida, Luna, and I were the same patrons as before. Luckily we didn't end up blowing Lyle's cover as Lye the soldier...hopefully.

## Part Eleven

“All right...”

One snowy day when no one from the castle was visiting, I decided to clean and organize my magic and dimension bags. I had gotten the idea from my visit to the pub with Gramps and the others.

I’d put some treats for Rocket and my followers into my magic bag only to realize that a lot of the souvenirs I’d bought were still in there, forgotten.

That had been mainly due to my own poor management, but the fact that items stored in a magic bag could last almost forever was also a factor. So, I decided I’d check the contents of the bags so I could get rid of anything I didn’t need.

Right now, I was using four magic bags and had three spares. That made seven in all, including the one the gods had given me. As for dimension bags, I had five—three I used often and two spares. The largest of those was for Rocket and the others, the second largest one was exclusively for Thunderbolt, and the third I used was for storage.

The storage bag contained items that needed to age like unfinished miso, soy sauce, or aged meat. I used spare bags to keep items that needed to be in regular or cold storage separated. At this moment, I only had miso and soy sauce, so I only needed one storage bag.

“I’ve got a lot of food in here...”

Most of the food was in my magic bags, and a third of the food items were ingredients, seasonings, and finished foods. Leaving those in the bags wasn’t a problem, so that was probably why I’d stocked up on them so much.

For now, I decided to transfer all the food to an empty magic bag and then move on to the next largest grouping of items I had—materials.

“I guess I can sell off the things I won’t need later.”

I decided that I would keep rare materials and ones that I frequently used. For anything that I didn’t need or was easy to gather, I’d sell them to the guild. I

mainly planned to sell them materials from low-ranking monsters, but there were some Rank B and higher materials here too. If I sold them in bulk, they'd fetch a good price.

Once I transferred the materials to an empty bag, I ran out of space. I had to pause and move the remaining materials to the magic bag the gods had given me before I could continue.

"I think that should do it."

Organizing the contents of my magic bags took about two hours of work. I divided the items into broad categories, but I still had to use empty dimension bags too because I ran out of magic bags.

The categories were as follows: food and ingredients, materials, weapons and armor, general items, money, items for sale, trash, and miscellaneous. The miscellaneous category included things like furniture, carriages, and other items that couldn't be categorized due to my limited number of bags. The materials and general items categories included medicines and medicinal ingredients, so I'd need to sort through those again sometime soon.

As for money, I sorted it into different types and placed it in boxes inside a dimension bag. There was so much of it that counting was too much of a hassle...

I looked at the large pile of items I still had to sort through, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"This is my problem..."

There were so many items that weren't immediately necessary but seemed too valuable to throw away, particularly weapons and armor. Many had some scratches and could be used again if I were to repair them, but they weren't as powerful as the equipment I was currently using. Throwing them away felt like a waste, but I wouldn't sell them for much either. I *could* keep them as spares, but then that defeated the purpose of organizing in the first place. My mind just kept going around in circles as I figured out what to do.

"I know I should throw this stuff away, but I just can't bring myself to do it..."

After I thought it over for a while, I decided to rank the items. Then, I'd

dispose of lower-tier items and repair the higher-ranked ones. But since some of the items wouldn't fit me even after being repaired, I'd give those to Amy. She could use them for practical training at the academy, and since she was my apprentice, it wouldn't be a problem.

"I should take Amy to Kelly's place soon. I doubt Kelly's all that busy these days anyway."

Since adventurers weren't very active during the winter, Kelly's business should have slowed down as well. There might have been some adventurers who had decided to repair or refresh their equipment during this time, but I doubted there were all that many of them.

"I'll burn the wooden and leather items I don't want out in the plains later and ask Kelly about the iron ones. Some might be worth selling if they can be reforged."

So with that, I finished sorting the weapons and armor. I placed the items I intended to keep into the same dimension bag where I had stored my money. Then, I put the items I needed to have reforged or that I'd throw away into an empty magic bag.

"Now for the food and ingredients... I'll start using them up beginning today," I said to myself. "I can keep a few things, but maybe I should have a party soon to get rid of most of the meat."

This category was easier to sort than others. I usually bought a lot of food and ingredients at once and used a good portion of them at each meal, so this was more like getting rid of leftovers. I would keep some food in reserve to eat during adventures or while on missions.

Rare items, like the white buffalo meat, should be saved for special occasions. It'd be a waste to serve that at a party where everyone would be drunk.

I put the remaining food and ingredients into the magic bag the gods had given me and then decided to hand the consumable items to Jeanne and Aura. They each had their own magic bags, so they would have plenty of storage space.

I thought it would be best to give those things to them now so I could finish

my cleaning binge, so I went to go find Jeanne and Aura. They were in the kitchen, planning dinner. The two of them were happy to have more ingredients but were a bit overwhelmed by how many there were.

Shiromaru and Solomon, however, quickly ate half of the meat on the spot since they'd been waiting in the kitchen for a snack.

"Master, I found something strange!"

Just as Shiromaru and Solomon finished eating, Amy came rushing into the room in a panic. She then told me she had picked up something near the mansion, and I realized I needed to warn her not to pick up strange things.

"What if it's something dangerous, Amy?" I said.

"I'm sorry, but...there's this strange fish frozen outside the house holding your family crest!"

I was about to scold her, but she had mentioned something that gave me a bad feeling.

"Amy, show it to me right away!"

"Okay!"

She opened her dimension bag that Rocky and Birdie usually stayed inside and struggled as she tried to pull out a huge frozen fish. It was too big for her to handle, even with the rockbirds' help.

When I looked into the bag to help Amy, I saw Namitaro there, frozen and just as I'd expected.

"How the heck did you get this in here?" I asked.

"I had the golems by the gate help me."

I'd forgotten that I'd set things up so Amy could give the golems simple commands in addition to being able to enter and exit the property freely. She usually didn't order them to do anything, so her having permission to do that had completely slipped my mind.

"Oh, that's right. Well, here goes!"

Even I had trouble pulling Namitaro out, so I had to summon Giganto to help

extract him.

“He’s really frozen solid?”

“He’s hard as a rock.”

Amy tapped on Namitaro while Rocky and Birdie pecked at him.

“Tenma, is he really alive...?” Jeanne asked.

“Even Namitaro might not survive this one,” Aura said.

The two of them were watching the scene from behind me, looking skeptical as to Namitaro’s survival. But this was Namitaro we were talking about. He wouldn’t die this easily.

“We need to take him to the bath right away to defrost him!”

I could’ve let him thaw naturally, but using hot water would be faster.

And just as I had thought...

“Ahh, this is the life! Can you make the water a bit hotter, please?”

Namitaro, revived and refreshed, was enjoying his bath. Jeanne and Aura looked astonished by his resilience and then returned to their work, leaving Amy and me alone with him.

Amy was fascinated by the strange creature but heeded my earlier warning and didn’t get too close.

“Why were you frozen in front of my house?” I asked.

“Well, it was a bad idea for a fish to try to go somewhere in the snow! I managed to get close to the mansion, but that was my limit!” he yelled. “I almost turned into frozen sashimi!”

Even if he had, I wouldn’t have eaten it like that. I’d at least cook it first.

“That sounds like it wouldn’t taste very good,” Amy commented.

“What did you say?! There’s no fish in the world more delicious than me!” Namitaro immediately retorted.

Amy hid behind me, but Namitaro ignored her and continued enjoying his bath for a bit longer. “Tenma, move aside for a moment? All right, here we

go...! Ouch!”

With a sudden burst of energy, Namitaro leaped out of the bath. He immediately slipped and crashed into a shelf in the changing room.

“Sorry about that!” he said sheepishly after I pulled him from the wreckage.

Having to do that made me feel quite irritated. I decided that I’d repair the shelf later on—when I eventually returned to it, I found that he had significantly damaged it after all.

I then led Namitaro to the reception room. However, he waltzed around the house like he owned the place, leaving Amy and me behind as he glided across the floor. I touched the floor to make sure he wasn’t leaving some kind of wet or slimy trail like a slug, but it was perfectly dry. It was a mystery to me how Namitaro moved around, but I decided to just chalk it up to his peculiar nature.

“Master, what exactly is Namitaro?” Amy asked. She seemed to have heard about him participating in the tournament as my follower but didn’t know the details.

“Honestly, I don’t know much about him,” I admitted. After all, this was Namitaro.

She seemed a bit surprised at my response, but in time, she would understand that Namitaro was one of the world’s greatest mysteries.

“Well, all jokes aside, let’s hurry,” I said. “We can’t leave Namitaro alone. Who knows what he’ll do.”

Amy laughed and then hurried along beside me.

“Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

I heard loud, ominous chanting as we approached the parlor, and my premonition turned out to be correct.

“Great job, Namitaro!”

Scratch that—in reality, I was thrilled. That’s because...

“Squid, octopus, horse mackerel, mackerel, sardines, bonito, and tuna!” Namitaro yelled. “Sea bream, flounder, flatfish, scallops, clams, mussels,

oysters, turban shells, abalone, and sea urchin! Seaweed, green laver, hijiki, and kelp... How about that?"

This was an incredible gift for someone who used to be Japanese. The kelp in particular was a treasure, especially since it was dried. There were also both fresh and dried squid and octopus. There were other seafood items here that Namitaro hadn't mentioned in his chant as well, and apparently, what he was displaying was only half of the souvenirs he had brought.

"Well? How about that?" he exclaimed again proudly.

To show my gratitude, I offered him some sweet potato paste from my magic bag. His eyes began to sparkle and he snatched it from my hand before quickly devouring it.

I began putting Namitaro's gifts into my magic bag one by one. "Let's use these for tonight's dinner!"

I had all sorts of ideas in mind for the seafood.

"Mm, this squid is delicious," I muttered. I was snacking on some dried squid while I worked.

Shiromaru and Solomon came over, their mouths hanging open eagerly. However, since you needed to chew dried squid thoroughly to release the flavor, they didn't seem to enjoy it very much. Those two tended to gulp down their food quickly.

Jeanne and Aura were curious about all the seafood too, but apart from the octopus that they'd already tried before, the raw fish, seaweed, and dried squid seemed like a tall hurdle for them. They decided to wait until everything had been properly cooked first.

Meanwhile, Amur was behind them, munching on some dried squid. Although squid wasn't common in the SAR, Amur had said that if she could eat octopus, she'd probably like the squid too, and had swiped a piece from me that I had been eating. Unfortunately for her, I was tearing off pieces instead of biting into it, so she'd had no chance for an indirect kiss.

"Master, do chestnuts grow in the sea too?" Amy asked as she looked at a sea urchin. She seemed to be fascinated more by their appearance than their taste.

When I cracked open a sea urchin to show her what was inside, she was shocked since she'd thought it was some kind of chestnut. The idea that people actually ate the yellow part inside shocked her even more—she seemed a bit uncomfortable when I scooped out the sea urchin roe with my fingers and ate it.

The seafood Namitaro had brought me was chilled to perfection, ensuring its freshness and making it perfectly safe to eat raw. I hadn't tasted sea urchin in so long and it was incredibly delicious. I wanted nothing more than to have some over rice.

"Tenma, more rice please! A large portion."

"Me too, please!"

"I'll have some too!"

"Me as well, Master!"

It appeared the sea urchin had won over the hearts of the women. After I showed Amy how to eat it, Shiromaru and Solomon judged it to be delicious and begged for some. Amur, Aura, Jeanne, and Amy hesitantly followed.

I had no choice but to prepare a large batch of sea urchin rice bowls to satisfy everyone. Still, the demand was high, and making portions for five people and five followers (Goldie and Silvie included) used up nearly half the sea urchin that Namitaro had brought. Speaking of Namitaro, he declined a bowl since he'd already had his fill back in the water.

"We're running low, so no more sea urchin. Instead, let's make bowls with some other sashimi," I said.

I didn't want to run out of sea urchin so quickly, so I decided to switch to other fish. At first, everyone was disappointed, but they quickly perked up as soon as they saw the new options before them. They began to enthusiastically pile toppings onto their rice.

I wanted to have sort of a rice bowl buffet where everyone could choose their own favorite toppings. That would allow for a variety of flavors in one meal.

"Just a reminder, but once you've taken a scoop, please let the next person

have a turn. Otherwise, *some* people might hog it all...”

I glanced pointedly over at Amur, who’d been taking multiple scoops of one type of fish. She sheepishly put the bowl of chopped tuna back on the table. Well, I was calling it chopped tuna, but it was actually a mix of the meat from near the bones and skin. I considered the main dish of the buffet.

I asked Amur why she was taking so much, and she said, “Because that’s also the tastiest part of salmon.”

This prompted the others to scramble for the bowl, but Jeanne was the quickest and secured it first.

“Got it!”

She must’ve set her sights on it along with Amur. Aura would be next, then Rocket, Amy, and finally me. This order was determined by who had touched the dish first (Rocket had used his tentacles) and I was the one who’d come up with that rule. I was surprised that the usually very courteous Rocket hadn’t let Amy go ahead of him.

As those thoughts went through my head, Jeanne finished scooping up her portion, and then it was Aura’s turn.

“Heh heh heh. Jeanne’s so naive,” Aura said with a smirk. Then, she lifted the spoon and scooped up a huge portion from the bottom of the dish. “This is how you do it!”

At first, Amur and Jeanne looked like they wished they had thought about doing that first, but after watching for a moment, they realized the danger of doing so. And sure enough...

“Whoops!” As Aura brought the spoon towards her bowl, the mound of tuna piled up on it spilled onto the table.

“Aura, you’re out! We’re confiscating the spoon!”

Aura tried to scoop some out again as if nothing had happened, but Amur and Jeanne snatched the spoon away from her in unison. They placed the remaining tuna in her bowl and then handed the spoon to Rocket.

However, instead of immediately taking a scoop, Rocket moved his bowl next

to the dish.

“You want mine too?”

He took Amy’s bowl with his tentacles and placed it beside his. Then, Rocket smoothly scooped one portion of the tuna into each bowl.

“Ooh!”

“Spill! Spill!” Aura yelled.

As Rocket lifted the spoon, he showed off a larger scoop of tuna than Aura had gotten. Amur, Jeanne, Amy, and I watched in awe while Aura cursed Rocket. However, despite her prayers, Rocket deftly placed the mound of tuna into Amy’s bowl without dropping a single bit before serving himself an equally large portion. Technically, Rocket had broken the rules since he scooped twice, but since it wasn’t just for himself and Amy was thrilled, no one was petty enough to point it out.

Well, someone almost did, but they held back at the last moment.

When it was finally my turn, there was only a tiny bit of the tuna left after Amur’s relentless scooping, Aura’s mishap, and Rocket’s crit-hitting giant double scoop.

“There’s not much left...” I muttered. Still, I ended up with more than Aura.

Now that the tuna bowl was empty, we moved on and added a new rule. Everyone would point to their next choice at the same time. If no one else wanted what you were pointing to, you could serve yourself first, but if more than one person wanted that dish, the order would be decided by rock, paper, scissors. After taking one scoop, everyone would wait until we were all done. The minced fish dishes like horse mackerel, mackerel, and sardines were popular, along with the bonito sashimi. There wasn’t as much interest in the shellfish and whitefish.

We repeated this process until most of the food had been served. Amur’s and Aura’s bowls had twice the amount of toppings as rice. My bowl was about half and half, while Jeanne and Amy had fewer toppings than I did.

Amur and Aura had been the greediest, as expected, but Rocket had taken it

to another level.

Rocket's bowl had three to four times *more* toppings than rice, forming a massive yet perfectly balanced mountain that even included the tuna Aura had dropped. Aura wouldn't eat it since it had dropped on the table, but that hadn't bothered Rocket, so he'd added it to his bowl—with permission, of course.

"Rocket's so greedy!"

Aura and Amur were usually the ones criticized for being greedy, but they were now the ones teasing Rocket, turning a blind eye to their own excessive portions.

However...

"Rocket, you're so nice."

"You want more bowls? Got it," I said.

Rocket began sharing his bounty with Shiromaru, Solomon, Goldie, and Silvie. In the end, he had fewer toppings than Jeanne and Amy.

Amur and Aura had been teasing Rocket, but they could no longer bear Jeanne's cold stare and the pleading, hungry looks from Shiromaru and Solomon. They reluctantly offered those two some of their toppings. Meanwhile, I took my chance to eat my own food while Shiromaru's and Solomon's attention was focused on Amur's and Aura's bowls.

Amy sought refuge beside me. Rocky, Birdy, and Spidey were peeking out from her dimension bag, so she couldn't resist giving them most of her bowl too. Once I saw the sad expression on her face along with her half-empty bowl, I had no choice but to share mine with her too. It wasn't much trouble since I'd served myself so generously, and this was Amy—she wasn't someone who ate much.

"Hm? What are you all eating?" Gramps returned home just as everyone finished and saw all the empty dishes on the table.

"It was my gift!" Namitaro exclaimed.

With that, Gramps realized we'd had a feast while he was gone. He looked at me expectantly, but all I could offer him was a white seafood rice bowl using

the remaining whitefish and scallops.

Gramps seemed a little dissatisfied. “It’s tasty, but I would’ve liked some other colors...” He preferred the richer flavors of the tuna and bluefish over the bland whitefish.

A few days later, Queen Maria, Tida, and Luna visited unexpectedly and finished off the remaining sea urchin and most of the fatty tuna.

“I’m sorry, Master. But when Luna asked what we’d eaten, I couldn’t help but tell her...”

Apparently, while Amy had been playing with Luna and Tida, Luna had asked if she’d eaten anything unusual at our house lately. Amy had mentioned the seafood bowls, and word had made its way to the queen.

The queen had seen Luna fidgeting and realized something was up, so she had come with her to the estate. She had brought Aina and Kriss along as well.

“Tenma, next time you have such an event, please invite me as well,” Queen Maria said with a smile, saying that it was okay not to inform the king, Lyle, or Ernest—that would mean less for her.

“All that sea urchin...” I muttered.

I felt a twinge of disappointment as I looked at the pile of empty sea urchin shells after the surprise attack. I’d hoped to enjoy it a few more times. We still had tuna and other fish, but I hadn’t expected the sea urchin to be gone so soon. It felt like a significant loss.

Aina popped into the kitchen and found me staring forlornly at the sea urchin shells. “Is there something wrong, Master Tenma?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just wondering if I could use these shells as fertilizer.”

“You’re lying,” she said, seeing right through me.

Still, I figured the sea urchin shells would contain calcium, so I might as well dry them for future experiments.

“I’ve never seen sea urchins before,” Aina said. “The first person to ever eat one must’ve been very brave. Any normal person would never think to eat

something that looks like this, but they're delicious. I can understand why you're upset, Master Tenma. Let's consult with Queen Maria."

And with that, Aina took the shells and headed to the room where the queen was.

"Excuse me, Queen Maria."

"Aina, is Tenma with you?" the queen asked, sounding concerned. As soon as Aina knocked on the door, the queen opened it. She immediately apologized once she saw me. "I'm sorry, Tenma."

She explained that she understood why I was upset. She knew how often the royal family had been eating and drinking at our house. Although she herself didn't come often, Tida and Luna visited frequently—and the king, Ernest, and Lyle did too. They usually brought ingredients to help, or Caesar would give Tida and Luna money to pay for their share, but I also served food from my own storage. Most of that had come from my guild missions, but some meals had used rare items from the SAR, which had cost me a pretty penny. Queen Maria knew about Tida's and Luna's frequent visits, but she was surprised by how often the king and the others came.

After reflecting on the fact that she'd eaten too much sea urchin, she felt both angry and apologetic once Aina and Gramps had told her about the king's repeated visits. However, she didn't know how to make it up to me, so she'd asked Aina to keep an eye on me for any clues.

I wasn't sure how to respond to the queen, but luckily Aina stepped in.

"Queen Maria, I have a suggestion," she said and presented her with the sea urchin shells.

She seemed slightly irritated by the interruption. "Aina? What's this about?" she asked, speaking with a sharp tone of voice.

"This is the sea urchin we ate earlier, Queen Maria. Don't you recognize it?" Aina pointed out.

The queen took a closer look at the sea urchin shell in her palm and seemed to recognize it. She looked surprised.

“This is the sea urchin? Something that looks like this was really that delicious?”

“I had a feeling... It seemed like what you’d mentioned before, Your Majesty. How about you get some from your hometown as an apology?” Aina suggested.

“That’s a wonderful idea! Tenma, I’m not sure if this will make up for everything, but I’ll arrange for a great number of sea urchins to be brought in from my hometown!”

The queen had suddenly become very excited and now shook my hand emphatically.

“Uh, what’s going on?” I asked, unable to follow their conversation.

However, the queen had already forgotten me and was dashing off a letter. She was in such a rush that she kept making mistakes and crumpling up pieces of paper, though.

“Aina, why is the queen acting like this?” I asked.

“Well, sea urchins are regarded as trash in Queen Maria’s hometown.”

Apparently, Queen Maria was from a duchy along the northern sea which was rife with sea urchins. The locals didn’t consider them to be food but instead as a nuisance to fishing. They regularly removed and disposed of them.

Aina hadn’t recognized the sea urchins from their insides, but once she had seen their spiny shells, she’d realized they were something the queen could easily get for me.

“It’s done!” the queen said. “Aina, please send this to my family immediately!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Aina took the letter and handed it to the coachman waiting outside the mansion, telling him to take it to the castle.

“Now we’ll have an unlimited supply of sea urchins!” the queen said excitedly. “Let’s claim credit for discovering their culinary use so we can secure a steady supply before my father and brother realize how delicious they are and try to turn them into a specialty of the duchy! And we can do the same for kelp!”

According to the queen, no one ate sea urchins in her region or the

neighboring territories, so if her plan worked, it could become a major industry. She planned to sell the information to her brother and her father—the current duke and the former duke—in exchange for securing a free supply of sea urchins for me.

As we discussed this, Queen Maria was so thrilled that she started dancing with me. Not a proper dance like you'd see at a ball, but a wild, improvised dance like drunk people would do at a bar. But she was a queen, so her movements were still elegant.

As her excitement reached its peak, she hugged me at the end of the dance.

"Aina, as her son, how should I react to this situation?" a voice asked.

"I think you should laugh."

I turned towards the voices and saw Aina watching us with a blank expression. She was with Lyle, who seemed to have been drawn in by the promise of good food.



For a moment, time seemed to freeze for all four of us. Lyle didn't know what to think, Aina remained indifferent, and Queen Maria was embarrassed by being caught having fun. I simply decided not to say anything until someone else made a move first. All of this resulted in an incredibly awkward and tense atmosphere.

The first person to move was Queen Maria.

"Lyle! Sit down right there!"

"Oh, um... Okay."

Hearing his name called, Lyle obediently sat down in the hallway as he was told. Unfortunately for him, this marked the beginning of a lecture. It seemed mostly like the queen's attempt to hide her embarrassment, which made it twice as long as usual. Lyle ended up sitting in the hallway, being lectured by his mother, for about three hours.

"Tenma, I'm really sorry."

Lyle apologized to me about all the food and drink after that ordeal. As a result, it was decided that the cost of the food and drink would be deducted from Lyle's salary, as overseen by the queen. That would also reduce his monthly allowance.

Lyle had come here expecting a meal and had ended up with a lecture from the queen, so he couldn't bring himself to ask for anything to eat. After he apologized to me, he returned to the castle with Tida and the others. He was about to receive a second lecture from the king too.

I heard he'd had to endure a third lecture later on when Ernest, who'd been absent during the second one, had joined in.

The day after the queen and the others had come over for seafood rice bowls, I decided to give Amy the equipment I'd stored in my magic bag, although it turned out I had gotten to giving them to her a bit later than I'd planned.

"You can have this equipment, Amy. These are items I've used before, so there are some scratches here and there, but they're high quality, lightweight,

and durable. After being repaired a bit, they'll be perfect."

This was equipment I'd used before I'd gone to Gunjo City, and it had been made out of a bipedal lizard monster called a lizardman. They were masterpieces that the craftsman had been proud of as he'd made the pieces from the best parts of the monster. However, due to its size, it was too small for the average adult male. It would even be snug on some women.

But because of that, I had been able to afford it back then—even though the shopkeeper had thought I might've stolen money to buy it. However, they had probably thought it'd be better to sell the pieces than to leave them sitting there since they'd really only suit a child.

This equipment was light, durable, and easy to move in, making it my favorite armor at the time. However, after a year and a half, it had become too snug on me, so I had switched to another set of armor before I had worn it for two years. Even though I wasn't using this set anymore, I had tried to have it repaired a few times, but the lack of suitable materials and a craftsman skilled enough to fix it had left it to just sit in storage in my magic bag.

However, I knew skilled blacksmiths like Kelly in the capital now, and with materials from the wyvern variant and the earth dragon, it could be restored.

"It'll be even better armor than when I used it," I explained.

Despite yesterday's events, Luna had shown up today. She was looking over the lizardman armor. "If you're going that far, why don't you just make a new one from the wyvern variant materials?" she asked.

There were several reasons why I hadn't done that.

"One reason not to make a new set from scratch is because new armor will be stiff and difficult to move in. The one I used before is old, but it's still in good condition. It's been preserved in my magic bag, so it's still flexible. Secondly, making a set entirely from wyvern and earth dragon materials would be too expensive and dangerous."

If people were to find out that Amy had armor made from such expensive materials, they would be eager to steal it from her. They'd want to try to sell it off or use it themselves.

It'd be one thing if they were to try to injure her to get the armor, but in the worst-case scenario, they might attempt to kill her. Although Amy had a golem for protection, her lack of experience meant that she could be easily caught off guard. That was why I would only be trying to repair the armor using expensive materials in inconspicuous areas. That way, it would seem valuable, but not so valuable someone would kill her over it.

"For school purposes, lizardman materials should suffice," I said. I didn't know too much about their curriculum, but it seemed like they'd be venturing into the nearby forests or the plains.

"Thank you, Master!" Amy exclaimed. She seemed excited to have her own set of armor now.

"As for weapons, you can choose something from here, but I think we should look at Kelly's shop first," I suggested.

So, Amy, Tida, Luna, and I set off for Kelly's workshop. Kriss came along too, for the children's protection.

"This is quite the crowd," Kelly said with a hint of exasperation as she met our group.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized we had quite an entourage. In addition to the aforementioned members, Amur, Jeanne, Aura, Aina, and Shiromaru (at Kriss's request) had tagged along with us. Not only that, but for some reason, Albert and his two idiot friends had come too.

Amur had started getting ready as soon as I said I was going out, and Jeanne and Aura had come along because Aina would be too strict with them if I wasn't there. Aina had joined as their guardian (as well as being a bodyguard for Tida and Luna).

That was all typical, but the reason the three idiots were here was because they had happened to see us while they had been walking around. They had been looking for something to do, so they'd decided to join us.

I would've sent them away under normal circumstances, but Amy had insisted that they stay since they'd helped her out recently. Tida had been wary of Leon lately—he thought Leon was getting too close to Amy.

“All right, so you want this armor repaired and adjusted, and you need some advice on weapons. I can’t get this ready for you immediately, so we can discuss it today and you can pick it up later,” Kelly offered.

Amy agreed, so Kelly started taking her measurements on a wooden board. Tida was trying to sneak a peek, but Aina promptly restrained him. Only Aina, Kriss, and I noticed what was going on, so those two took him over to the corner to quietly scold him so the others wouldn’t see.

Tida was embarrassed and apologized profusely, but I reassured him that it was natural to be curious about someone you had a crush on. He asked me if that was the case for me, but I answered without thinking and said no, which only made it worse. What I really meant, but couldn’t say, was “Not in this life.”

While Tida moped about, Amy consulted the group about her gear. When it came to the color, Luna said, “Your armor should be bright red!” and Tida reacted the most enthusiastically to the idea. Amy seemed to like it too.

“Why red?” I asked Luna, and she explained it was the same color as her own armor.

“Red has a special significance in the royal family, Master Tenma,” Aina explained. Men in the royal family traditionally wore blue while the women wore red. Sometimes they used gold and silver in their armor too, but it was almost all red. It wasn’t forbidden for nobles to use the same colors, but as a matter of etiquette, if they chose to use royal colors, half of their armor should have been a different color. When it came to commoners, though, it seemed that they didn’t need to worry much about colors.

“Then red isn’t a good choice,” I said.

Tida looked the most surprised at that. He was probably imagining Amy wearing a color that matched his armor, so he looked at me resentfully. Meanwhile, Amy and Luna appeared to be puzzled that I’d said that. Amur and Aina looked like they understood, but the others seemed confused.

“Amy, since you’re planning on being an adventurer, you don’t want to draw unnecessary attention. Red armor would make you an easy target. Adventurers usually wear black or brown to blend in with their surroundings,” I explained.

For example, the dungeons Amy would likely frequent would be dimly lit, so bright colors like red would make her easy for enemies to spot. The same was true for grassy areas—red would stand out and make it easy for prey to escape. Not to mention it would make her an easy target for flying monsters...

“However, royalty wears conspicuous colors in times of war to stand out. It’s a sign to their allies, like ‘I’m nearby, fighting with you,’ and ‘The head you’re looking for is right here’ to their enemies.”

Amy looked surprised, nodded, and immediately decided against red. Luna seemed tempted by all this and said she wanted to change the color of her armor now too, but Aina warned her that it was her duty as royalty to wear red.

Eventually, Amy chose a brownish-green color for her armor, which I’d have called olive green in my past world. As for the rest of us, my and Aina’s armor was black, Jeanne’s and Aura’s were reddish-brown, Kriss’s was white, Amur’s had a black and yellow tiger pattern, Albert’s was indigo, Cain’s was gray, and Leon’s was dark green. Those last three hadn’t decided on their official colors yet, but those were their current favorites.

Luna commented that Amur’s tiger-pattern armor stood out, but I told her that the pattern actually had a camouflage effect against animals, including animal-type monsters. It was also magical and had a concealment effect. Luna seemed to understand that—or she might’ve just been tired of thinking about it and decided that was just how it was.

“How about weapons?” I asked.

“I want something like your sword, but shorter,” Amy said. She told me that katana-style weapons were becoming popular at the academy. It didn’t matter to her that they were popular—she just said she wanted a single-edged weapon.

However, Kelly looked concerned. “If that’s really what you want, it’s fine, but... You know, after Tenma’s success in the tournament many people switched to katanas, but after a while, most gave up and returned to their original weapons,” she explained.

According to Kelly, many young adventurers were fascinated by the sharpness of the katana I’d showed off at the tournament and had begun using them, but

because the ones circulating in the capital had been simply forged and sharpened, many of them had bent or even snapped during use.

Since the capital wasn't known for high-quality katanas, most of the ones available were second-or third-rate products. And even when someone *did* get their hands on a high-quality katana, they would often damage it by smashing it too forcefully against other swords without knowing how to use it properly. Such stories were common, and there had been adventurers who ended up in financial trouble just trying to repair their katanas.

Kelly had only forged a few herself, but they were just practice pieces that she had ended up disposing of instead of selling. Some of her fellow blacksmiths faced issues even after they had clearly stated that they were selling practice or second-rate pieces at a low price. Buyers would often claim they had been sold defective goods when the katanas broke quickly, which had led to disputes. In most of those cases, the blacksmiths won the confrontations easily, at least.

There was one blacksmith who did have actual experience making katanas, and although his practice pieces weren't top-quality, they were still quite functional. A traveling merchant from the SAR had happened to pass by and had remarked that it was almost impossible to get such quality katanas at such a low price.

"It must've been Lani," I mused.

"Lani-tan," Amur said.

I was almost certain that the merchant had been Lani. He had probably noticed that katanas were rising in popularity here and was already scouting out potential business opportunities.

"Well, the final decision is up to Amy, but at any rate, I won't be forging any katanas. I can't produce anything worth selling," Kelly said.

Once I saw Amy hesitate, I decided to offer my opinion. "Amy, if you want a single-edged blade, there are other weapons that are similar to katanas."

I grabbed a blade from one of the workshop's shelves and showed it to her. "This is a nata. There's also a variant called a kennata, which is similar in shape to a katana while being quite easy to use."

The people who had failed to use katanas had probably tried to use them by striking instead of slicing. Many people here swung their swords forcefully, pulling their weight behind their swings, which was easier and required less skill. However, with something as thin as a katana, that approach would inevitably lead to breakage or bending.

In contrast, a nata could withstand rough handling. It was thicker, meant for tasks like chopping firewood, and could be used as a blunt instrument with its dull side. Depending on its length, a nata could even function as a cooking or utility knife.

Amy seemed interested in the kennata after my explanation and began looking around for one in the shop, but Kelly told her she didn't have any. Despite Amy's disappointment, she decided to proceed with the kennata idea.

"You can use the materials I have," I told Kelly.

As Amy and Kelly discussed what it would be made of, I handed Kelly the dimension bag filled with items slated for disposal. Kelly rummaged through it and selected a few pieces.

"These'll work," she said, pulling out some useful weapons and armor that had been made from magical iron. She could repurpose them into several kennata.

Meanwhile, a female dwarf employee helped Amy by having her hold sticks of various lengths. Using lead weights, she was able to determine the general center of gravity needed for her kennata.

"I should have the kennata prototype done by the day after tomorrow. The armor will be done after that," Kelly said.

She was ready to get to work. We paid the deposit and left the shop. The female dwarf employee mentioned that since business had been light recently, the kennata might even be ready the next day. Even so, we weren't planning on coming by until the day after that.

"Well, if you're free, let's head to the guild!" Leon suggested as we left the workshop.

"That's fine with me, but what about everyone else?" I asked.

Everyone nodded in agreement, so we set off for the guild.

After we walked for several minutes, it started to get chilly, but we arrived at the guild soon after. We rushed inside to escape the cold and headed straight to the attached bar for warm drinks. A few adventurers were having a drinking party there, but no one dared to bother us since Kriss—a knight of high status—and the three noble idiots were present.

Once everyone had gotten their drinks and had relaxed, I checked the bulletin board for quests. There weren't any easy ones since it was winter.

"Hey, how about this one?" Leon said, suggesting one to Albert and Cain.

"Sorry, but I have plans tonight," Albert said.

"Same," Cain said.

Leon looked at me once both of his friends had turned him down, but I shut him down too.

"No way," I said. "It's too cold outside." I had no desire to work outside in these freezing temperatures.

We ended up leaving the guild quickly. Leon later found out that Albert and Cain both had plans with women, which led to him being in a depressive state for several days.

The kennata we'd ordered during our visit were used by Amy and Tida at school. They performed well, making the weapon popular at the academy. Kelly received a surge of requests not only from students but also from adventurers who had heard rumors about it. As the number of customers increased, so did the number of ridiculous requests, which led to Kelly venting her frustrations on me fairly often.

## Extra Story: The Fallout

“What’s taking them so long to come out of the waiting room?”

Even though the awards ceremony was over, the spectators wouldn’t be satisfied if the stars of the show—the athletes—stayed hidden. At the very least, they should go wave to the fans who had cheered for them. It would boost sales, after all.

“Hey! What are you doing in there?!” I shouted as I entered the waiting room.

I had expected to find them so lost in a discussion about sumo that they had forgotten about me and the audience. Instead, what I saw was my sister and brother-in-law locked in a passionate kiss.

They didn’t even notice me after I had called out to them. They even began to kiss again after briefly pulling apart.

“Cut it out, you two!” I yelled.

Naturally, the officials and guards burst into the room once they heard me yelling, but who could blame me? It was *their* fault.

“What’s going on?!” they exclaimed.

“When did you get here, Sis? What’s happening?” Sana asked. She looked surprised, but she didn’t let go of Blanca. In fact, she was hugging him even tighter than before.

“What are you two doing in here? And where are Tenma, Master Merlin, and Amur?” I asked. I could guess what these two had been up to, but I needed to know where everyone else was.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t seen them,” she replied.

“Yeah, where could they have gone? Did they go to the wrong room?” Blanca asked.

“There’s no way!”

These two were so caught up in their own little world that they hadn't even noticed what was going on around them. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere with them, so I grabbed an attendant who was walking nearby and asked if they knew where the other three of them were. They told me that Tenma and company had left the room in a hurry not too long ago.

"So in other words, they couldn't stand watching these two lovebirds' bizarre behavior either and went outside for a breather," I said.

The two lovebirds in question glared at me as if I'd insulted them, but the other attendants and the guards quietly nodded in agreement. They should've considered their behavior before glaring at me. No matter how dissatisfied they were, having Blanca carry her like a princess everywhere was an odd way to behave.

I sighed. "Fine. Since those three just went out to have fun, they probably won't be back for a while. There are some things I want to discuss regarding what comes next, but we'll have to do that later. Blanca, you must be tired, so you and Sana can go home and I'll contact you if anything comes up. When I reach out, you need to come to the estate immediately."

And with that, the two of them nodded and left the room.

"Lady Hana, are you sure this is all right?" one of the soldiers asked, looking worried.

"Of course it is. Blanca delivered the best possible outcome for our family. This isn't a reward, of course, but we should at least give them some time to relax together. Besides, if anything happens, the people at the estate and I will just need to work a little harder than usual. We can handle most things without them."

Now, if something like a running dragon or multiple wyverns were to show up, we would need to ask for help from Tenma or Master Merlin, but we could manage anything else. However, it seemed like that wasn't what the soldier was worried about.

"No, my concern is letting them go home in their current state."

"In their current... Oh!" It suddenly dawned on me what they'd meant.

Although Sana and Blanca had nodded, there'd been only one set of footsteps leaving the room, which meant... "Did he leave the room still carrying her?" I hoped I was wrong, but unfortunately, the attendants and soldiers all nodded. "Call them back here immediately! Well, it's probably too late..."

Although not much time had passed, it had been more than enough for them to get outside and make a spectacle of themselves. Forcing them to come back would only make things worse and start strange rumors.

"If only there were some miracle—like a swarm of wyverns or a rampaging dragon... Anything to distract people so no one pays attention to them!"

Even though such a thing would be a disaster, I again reminded myself that we could manage it with Tenma and Master Merlin. I knew joking about such a thing wasn't appropriate, though...

"Well, in that case, let's just give up and go home," I said. "Good job, everyone!"

With that, I abandoned everything and fled, leaving the stunned soldiers and attendants behind. I would have loved to wander around the city like Amur, finding tasty street snacks and drinks to lift my spirits and escape reality, but I knew my position wouldn't allow that.

"Guess I'll have to settle for his hidden stash of fifty-year-old shochu..."

Master Merlin had taken the better stuff, but I wouldn't feel guilty chugging that shochu down. Alcohol tasted even better when it belonged to someone else.

I spotted an attendant as I left the waiting room. "Hey, you. Sorry, but could you buy some snacks from some nearby stalls and bring them to the mansion? If you have any money left over, keep it." I wanted some snacks to go with my drinks. Normally I wouldn't have done this, but I didn't want to see the reactions of anyone who'd seen Sana and Blanca.

The attendant seemed a bit puzzled but figured there must've been a reason for my request. They silently nodded and went off to buy the items.

I sighed again. "When I think about what lies ahead, I feel happy, sad, embarrassed, and stressed...and like I need a drink."

Blanca's and Sana's antics had likely spread through all of Nanao. People might laugh at them, but I couldn't stand being dragged into it. Commoners might keep silent, but they'd laugh secretly. Close friends of higher rank would definitely point and make fun, leading them to be the talk of the town.

"If that happens I might just lose it." I let out a self-deprecating laugh, but then I heard a rattling noise at the door followed by someone sneaking away.

"A big rat, huh? Maybe they want to join me for a drink? Or reclaim their liquor?" If the rat turned out to be useless, I could just offer them up as a sacrifice to the higher-ups in my place. "That might be the best idea... I'll handle the practical work, and the rat can be the court jester."

As I continued muttering to myself, a soldier called to me from outside. "Lady Hana, we've received some complaints about Lady Sana and Lord Blanca from the residents."

It seemed that my nightmare had come true sooner than expected.

"Maybe I'll just pretend I didn't hear them and go to sleep..."

Of course I couldn't do that, so my subordinates had to drag me out to deal with the complaints.

### *One Year Later*

"Oh? There have been more children born this year than usual, and the number of married couples has increased too."

As the lady of my territory, this was delightful news. But when I looked into the reasons behind it, I was dismayed. "I can't believe it was because of those two... That makes me feel a bit—no, *extremely* conflicted."

Many couples had been inspired by the sight of Hana and Blanca's affectionate display that day and it had led to more marriages and children. Given the trouble they had caused me, I just couldn't celebrate as much as I otherwise would've wanted to...

## Afterword

Hello, it's been a while! I didn't really know what to write here at first, but this is Kenichi, the author.

I've actually been running low on my stock of content from the web novel and have been struggling to write new stories, which has been quite stressful. But putting that aside for now...

In this volume, the story begins with Tenma heading to the SAR at Queen Maria's request. I'd been planning to write this story since I introduced Amur's character, so I had the plot outline already done. However, my initial outline had portrayed Honorary Viscount Lobo as a carefree, easygoing person. The reason his personality changed so much here was simply because I'd completely forgotten his original characterization. I clearly remember panicking when a reader pointed it out on the web novel version.

Another memorable moment happened when I was writing the story about the hidden village of beastfolk who had "beast faces." I received the design for the character of Galatt at the same time. Nem came up with two designs for him: one version with a beast face and one without. I liked the design of Galatt with a beast face—so did my editor, who pushed for it. However, since I had just finished a story for the web version about the hidden village that was supposed to be a refuge for the persecuted beastfolk with beast faces, I decided it would make more sense if Galatt had a human face. Hopefully I can find an opportunity to use his beast-faced design in the future.

Anyway, my personal favorite parts of volume 8 are definitely the character designs of Hana and Sana! When I saw Hana's design, I thought, "Oh so this is what Amur might look like when she grows up!" And when I saw Sana, I immediately thought of Beauty and the Beast. When I saw the new cover design, I thought, "Two new heroines!" and about how Blanca was glaring on the back cover, lol. Anyway, that's the highlight of this volume to me, and that was all made possible by Nem's incredible work!

It feels a bit awkward to just focus on that, so I'll also mention that I liked the story about the hidden village in the SAR arc. Amy's adventures in the capital arc were also great.

In the story about the hidden village, there's a reference to a beast-faced beastfolk man who attacked Tenma, which refers to the incident in the first volume. That story is not available in the web novel—it's exclusive to the books!

As for Amy's story, that came out of my own imagination since I've never played an otome game. I think it turned out fairly well. Imagine Amy as the protagonist with Tida, Tenma, and the three idiot noble sons as love interests. Lyle would be the secret route. There could even be a bad ending where Luna becomes Amy's BFF.

Finally, I want to thank the readers for supporting volume 8, my editor who planned everything, Mag Garden, Nem for the amazing character designs, and Shiba no Bancha-san who is in charge of the manga. Thanks to all of you, the manga version of *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World* has reached its tenth volume! I'm very grateful. Please continue to support us.

— Kenichi



Blanca

Sana

Lobo

Hana

ISEKAI TENSEI:  
RECRUITED TO  
ANOTHER WORLD

8



“They sure have a lot of energy,” I muttered. Even though only a few centimeters of snow had fallen, Amy, Tida, and Luna were gathering it up and having a snowball fight.

## Bonus Short Story

### Namitaro's Narrow Escape!

"Mwa ha ha... I bet Tenma's eyeballs are gonna bust out of his head once he sees me show up!"

Even though it hadn't been very long since we'd met in our dreams, he probably wasn't expecting me to come over. Not only that, but I'd brought some souvenirs so good that he'd probably fall to his knees and cry with joy. His eyes might fly out of their sockets! His heart might even stop!

"Still, I had no idea it snowed so much in the capital. This certainly wasn't in my plans..."

I traveled along the road to the capital as I imagined Tenma's reaction. It was a struggle, though, since more snow had fallen here than I'd expected.

"Well, it's not enough to bury me, so there shouldn't be a problem if I can just keep up this pace."

It'd been a long time since I traveled in this kind of weather but I was sure I could manage. However, this optimism had been my first mistake.

"It's so cold... I might freeze to death..."

I'd managed to sneak past the soldiers at the gate without them noticing me, but Tenma's mansion was farther away from there than I'd thought.

Come to think of it, most of my travel inside the capital had been via the fishmonger's carriage or in a carriage owned by Tenma or his friends. The only exception had been when Jeanne and Aura were kidnapped. That time, I'd gone from Tenma's mansion to the castle, which was in the center of the capital. Still, all I'd had to do was keep the castle in my sights and continue heading for it—it wasn't that I was actually familiar with the area.

"U-Ugh... I think...I finally see a familiar road..."

After randomly wandering around town, by some miracle, I had (perhaps) found the road leading to Tenma's mansion.

"I should've just asked for directions at the entrance gates or had him come pick me up at this point..." He had given me his family crest exactly for situations like this, but I was so intent on surprising him that I'd acted recklessly.

"Heh heh... Well, I can think about those regrets once I get to Tenma's house."

Luckily, I had been correct—I saw Tenma's mansion in the distance about a hundred meters ahead.

"You can do it, Namipoo! Just bear with a few more meters." I encouraged myself to keep going, urging my freezing body on for the last hundred-meter stretch.

"Only...thirty meters...left... Just...twenty meters... Ten meters... And I'm there!"

I'd made it to my goal, but my relief only lasted a few moments. Once I looked up, I realized there were many more meters between the gate and the front door.

"Wh-whyyyyy..."

I despaired at the scene before me, and just as I was losing consciousness...

"Huh? Is that a huge fish?"

I'd never heard a more beautiful voice than that one. It was music to my ears, although I didn't have ears since I was a fish. I entrusted my last bits of hope to the owner of that voice, mustered my remaining strength, and took out Tenma's family crest.

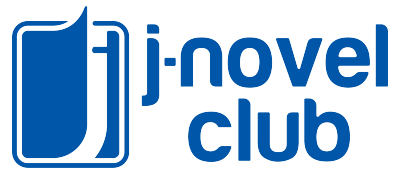
Then, I passed out.

"And that's what happened! If Amy hadn't shown up when she did, I probably would've died! Amy, you're my goddess!" I exclaimed.

"Stop being so carefree about it... Anyway, next time, don't push yourself. Wait for spring to come, or ask a soldier at the gate to call for me at least.

Seriously,” Tenma said after he finished eating his seafood rice bowl. He seemed exasperated after I had told him my tale of struggle.

Well, I would gratefully accept his warning, though I was sure I’d forget it next time anyway!



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 8

by Kenichi

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2024