

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD



Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem

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II



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Prologue

In a certain prefecture, in a certain district, there was a rural village. And this village was located in an area suffering from population decline. As one would imagine, this meant that there were few youths in this village. In fact, people in their forties were considered young.

Living so far out in the countryside came with a lot of inconveniences, but the denizens of the village spent their days helping each other out—it was good old-fashioned rural life. The worst that ever happened was the occasional rampaging wild boar, crop-eating monkeys, or huge nest of wasps—that sort of thing. That was how peaceful this village was.

But on this particular day, something was different in the village. Some unusual visitors—several young men and women—had shown up. However, they didn't seem excited to be there at all. They wore clothing of the same color, and walked with their faces turned downwards. The villagers, too, wore the same color and walked in the same manner. Some of them wept. Some collapsed onto the ground. They were all heading to the same place, where one story would end and a new one would begin.

Tenma Otori looked on as these people poured into the meeting hall for the funeral. As he watched them, he thought, "*This is a strange world we live in.*" There wasn't anything unusual about what he saw. What was unusual was the place from which he was watching them, because he was sitting cross-legged on top of a coffin. Under normal circumstances, if someone did something that foolish and rude, the bereaved family and friends would probably have beaten them senseless.

But no one grabbed hold of Tenma. In fact, no one even looked at him. It was a bizarre sight to behold, indeed.

Well, if there had been anyone who could behold it, anyway. Yes, you must have figured it out by now—the funeral Tenma was observing was his own. In other words, no one could see Tenma because he was a ghost.

"Wonder how long I have to stay here," he muttered. But of course, there was no one there to answer him.

Or at least...there shouldn't have been.

"Well, shall I take you somewhere else, then? Hello, Tenma Otori. I've come here to recruit you."

This was the first thing anyone had said to him since he became a ghost. He hadn't been expecting anyone to answer his question, so he turned around, startled. At that point, he saw a strange, human-shaped light.

"Hello, I'm— Whoa!"

The light reached out its hand(?) towards Tenma, who grabbed a nearby bowl and chucked it at the light. He lobbed the bowl quickly and rather accurately, but the light bent to dodge it like something out of the Matrix.

"Hey! That's dangerous!" The light seemed startled, but not angry. Despite that, Tenma grabbed another bowl and was on the verge of throwing it too. That was when the light began to panic. "Look, I'm not here to hurt you! Don't throw that at me! If you do, it might hit someone else! Just listen to me!"

After the light began pleading with him, Tenma put down the second bowl. The first had gone through an open window, so it probably hadn't injured anyone. "Well? What are you?" he asked. "It seems as though I'm some kind of ghost, so I'm guessing you are too?"

In response, the light puffed out what Tenma could only assume to be its chest. "How rude! I'm a god!" At these words, Tenma slowly reached for the bowl again. "I'm not lying! It's true! Seriously, just listen to me!" the light said. Tenma paused. "At least let me finish, okay? Allow me to formally introduce myself. I'm a god from another world. And I've come to recruit you to my world, Tenma."

Though Tenma was frozen with surprise when he heard what the self-proclaimed god (pfft!) had to say, he quickly recovered.

"'Pfft'? Hey, don't you think that's kinda harsh? Anyway, you sure seem to be handling this well. I thought you'd be more confused."

"Well, I *am* a ghost, after all. So I think I can buy that you're a god from the Otherworld who wants to reincarnate me. Why'd you pick me, though?"

"Oh, that's easy. It was random." Once again, Tenma took up the bowl—"Enough of that already!"—before rethinking it. "Anyhow, it's true. I just happened to be passing by when I sensed a soul that I thought would really fit the vibe of my world."

"But...you already knew my name."

"Right."

"And you mentioned you came to recruit me."

"Right."

"But you just said you only happened to be passing by and thought I fit your world's vibe."

"Right."

"Is it possible that you weren't 'just passing by,' but that you instead knew about me all along?"

The light paused. "What makes you say that?"

"Because it all sounds a little bit too perfect. Maybe you just happened to come across me and thought I'd fit right into your world...so then you killed me, turned me into a ghost, and acted like it was all just a big coincidence. That would make more sense."

The light was silent.

"So?" Tenma prompted it. "Did you kill me?"

"Of course not! I wouldn't do that! Don't be ridiculous!"

"Sorry," said Tenma quickly, apologizing when he realized the light was close to tears (and it called itself a god?). "I think I'm just kind of on edge."

Then the light lowered its voice. "I have something I need to apologize for as well. Honestly...I've known about you for a long time. But I swear, I didn't kill you! I've been keeping a close eye on you, waiting for your life to come to an end."

"How long is 'a long time'?"

"Since you were born."

"That long?! But I'm from a different world. Why were you interested in me?"

"In my world, there exists a sickness which can affect even the world itself. Everything that exists has something called 'élan vital,' which is kind of like their life force. And when the world gets sick, the sickness drains the élan vital out of it. In the worst-case scenario, the entire world could disappear. So in order to avoid that, we regularly gather souls with very rich life forces from otherworlds, and send them to our world in order to stimulate the growth of the élan vital."

"Kind of sounds like a vaccine or something. What does it mean for someone's soul to have a rich life force, though?"

"Well, it basically means that they're able to have an effect on physical things, even when they lose their physical forms and are reduced to little more than their souls. Think about it—you're a ghost, but you were able to pick up that bowl and throw it at me, right? Normally, if a ghost had tried that, their hands would slip right through the bowl. That's how ghosts are, after all."

Until Tenma heard those words, he hadn't even realized he'd picked up a bowl and thrown it. Wanting to give it another try, he reached for a nearby cup and tried to pick it up. An elderly person who was near the cup witnessed this and was rather startled.

"Watch it, Tenma. Most people would call what you're doing right now 'poltergeist activity'!" Frantic, the light snatched the cup away from Tenma and set it back down.

The elderly person blinked a few times, then did a double take when he saw the cup back in its original position. He rubbed his eyes several times, then shrugged. Even though he was a little drunk and would probably forget it in the morning, this funeral was going to turn into an exorcism if Tenma wasn't careful.

"So what are the pros and cons of me being sent to this other world?"

"Hey, don't just change the subject and pretend it never came up. I'm serious—you have to be careful! Anyway, back to your question... I really don't think

there are any cons. At most, I'd say that since you're going to be reborn, you'll have to start from square one, as a baby. And as for the pros, I'm going to give you various abilities that will make your life much easier—cheats, basically. If you want, you can bring all the memories, experiences, and abilities you gained in this life over to your next one. And I can use magic for you—but only once, and it has to follow the rules of this world. The other condition is that it can't do harm to anyone else."

Tenma thought for a while about this single-use magic. *If it has to follow the rules of this world, then it probably can't be used on me. It might be interesting to wish for world peace...but I don't really know what that entails. I was thinking that removing certain things from the world might make it peaceful, but the light said we're not allowed to harm anyone...*

And then, suddenly, he became very conscious of the voices all around him.

"Could you make all the memories of me in the world fade?"

"I could...but may I ask why you'd want me to do that?"

"So this village suffers from population decline, and pretty much only old people are left. But I want everyone to keep trying their best and gradually get the population up again."

"Hmm, hmm..."

"My grandpa and his friends are the ones really leading that effort, and they all adored me. Everyone here looks so depressed that I wouldn't be surprised if they all died tomorrow. It's too much to bear, so I really wanna do something about it."

Upon hearing Tenma's answer, the light's body—or what was probably its body, anyway—began to tremble. Tearfully it said, "What a wonderful boy you are! Well, that would be a piece of cake! But why don't you want me to erase their memories completely?"

Tenma flushed slightly. In a quiet voice, he said, "Because it would make me sad if they forgot about me entirely."

"Tenmaaaa!" The light sobbed and tried to hug him, but he deftly evaded it. "You meanie! Anyway, in order for your wish to be granted, you must first leave

this world. Go ahead and touch my hand.” The light held out its hand, and reluctantly, Tenma took it. “Let’s go!”

“All right... See you, everyone. For my sake, I hope you live long, happy lives.”

The next moment, Tenma felt a floating sensation, then lost consciousness.

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“Tenma?”

Everyone in the room turned towards the casket at once. They were looking towards the spot Tenma’s soul had been, at the exact moment it had disappeared with the light which called itself a god. All at once, they began to say they could’ve sworn they’d just heard Tenma’s voice.

One old man who seemed perhaps to be grieving the most over Tenma’s death wiped his tears with his sleeve and peeked inside Tenma’s casket. Then he started to sob. Wondering what was going on, the old man’s friends came over and peeked inside the casket too. Then they realized why the old man was crying so.

“Tenma’s smiling...”

“That’s right... He must’ve gotten to heaven safely...”

As Tenma’s body lay in the casket, his face had been expressionless, but when the old man looked, he saw that the corners of Tenma’s mouth had turned upwards. It made him look like he was smiling.

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“Are you awake, Tenma?”

When I opened my eyes, I saw ten beams of light standing around me.

“Where am I?” I murmured. One of the lights approached me—well, actually it was more like it got shoved forwards by the other beams of light—and slid right onto its face.

“This one’s great! We’ve never had one like this before!” The voice that came from this light sounded like it was female, and it—she?—hugged me.

“I’m so glad he’s the one who came!” another light—this one seemed female

too—said happily as it approached me.

“Never heard anyone say that before!” Yet another light, one which seemed like an old guy, whacked me on the back. Meanwhile, two other lights were quietly looking me up and down from a short distance away.

One more came up and started sniffing me—probably a pervert of some kind, if I had to guess. A second one wriggled around me as it patted me down. Judging by the way this pat down included the lower half of my body, this one was a real pervert, but I managed to block it from the goods just in time.

There was a light who was watching from behind the female-sounding lights, and then one last one standing beside it, watching me very hesitantly (this one seemed a little gloomy).

It seemed like they had pretty high opinions of me, but since I couldn’t see their faces, I wasn’t sure.

The very first light—the one who had hesitated, then been shoved by the others—spoke up. “You’re making Tenma uncomfortable, you guys! Give him some space!” At this, the other lights finally started to calm down.

“I don’t know who any of you are, so it’s hard to tell you apart...” I muttered. Unfortunately, this just started the commotion up all over again.

“Whoops, I forgot to make it so that Tenma could see us! Sorryyyy! Ehehe!” I was a bit annoyed by that comment, which came from the light who’d been shoved by the others. It was probably the same light who had brought me here, and who was now being beaten to a pulp by the ones who had shoved him.

In the meantime, the most feminine-sounding light placed her hand—or hand-like appendages, at any rate—on my temples and said, “Hold still for a minute, okay?”

She began to chant under her breath, and my temples immediately began to grow warmer until they felt a little hot.

Then she let me go. “All done!” Even though she had only touched me for a couple of minutes at most, it had brought about a drastic change.

I could now see a beautiful woman standing in front of me, wearing a soft

smile. And she was also extremely well-endowed, so naturally my gaze traveled down to appreciate it.

"You can see us now, right? I'm so sorry about that! He can be such an airhead sometimes!" With a wry giggle, the beautiful woman apologized. Another beautiful, slender woman—the one who had hugged me—was standing next to her. Then there was a stout woman who looked like an innkeeper or something, and a little girl of maybe ten years old peeking out from behind her.

A short distance away was a young man of about fifteen years old getting pummeled by a muscular guy—the old dude from before—and then an animal that looked like a wolf... No, wait, it was just a guy wearing a wolf skin. Then there was a guy who was so good looking that even I wasn't ashamed to admit he was handsome, although the way he moved was a little weird. Suspicious, even... *Uh-oh, we made eye contact!* As soon as our eyes met, he winked, then blew me a kiss. Wait, it's him! He's the pervert! Hey, I'm disappointed in you!

After I'd looked around for a while, two more of the men came up to talk to me. One was an attractive middle-aged gentleman, and the other had a hood pulled low over his face like some kind of magician.

"Hello, Tenma. I am the god of destruction, and this man in the hood is the god of magic. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." I greeted them in turn. They had names that were kind of disturbing, but I figured it would be fine as long as I was polite and didn't make them mad. After that was done with, the girls came over.

"It's so wonderful to meet you, Tenma! I'm the goddess of love!"

"I'm the goddess of nature! Nice to meet you!"

"Hey there, Tenma! I'm the goddess of life!"

"I'm the god of death... Nice to meet you."

The beautiful slender woman, the beautiful woman with the soft smile, the innkeeper, and the little girl introduced themselves to me in turn.

By then the three guys must've gotten sick of beating the god who looked like

a young boy, because they came over next.

"Hey! I'm the god of skill! Nice to meet ya, Tenma!" The old dude whacked me on the back again. It hurt pretty bad.

"...I am the god of beasts..." The wolf—I mean, the guy wearing a wolf skin—came up from behind and started sniffing me again. Well, I guess I get why he's sniffing me so much if he's a wolf... Wait, no! What if he eats me?! I'm scared!

"Hiiii! I'm the god of war! It's so nice to meet you, Ten-MWAH! Eheh!" A Wild Flirty Guy appeared! Flirty Guy used "Blowing Kiss"! Tenma avoided the attack. Wild Flirty Guy looks disappointed... *Phew, that was a close one!*

"Ahem! Nice to meet you, Tenma. I'm the one who brought you here. I'm the god of creation," the guy who looked like a teenager said to me. There were about eight big golf-ball-sized lumps on his head, just like the ones you'd see in a manga. Actually, it was kind of impressive that those were the only injuries he had after being beaten to a pulp.

"Nice to meet you, everyone. I'm Tenma Otori. Do you think you guys could tell me what's gonna happen to me, and what I should be doing right now?"

"That's a good point. I'll explain things. First, just have a seat." The boy who called himself the god of creation snapped his fingers. A chair appeared next to me, and then ten other chairs appeared, forming a circle around me. The boy straightened up and went on, "Once again, it's a pleasure to meet you, Tenma. And welcome to our world, Phantasma! Though we're the only ones who know its name..."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

I waited for permission to speak before asking him the one thing I was the most curious about. "You keep saying you're the gods and goddesses of such and such, but you haven't actually told me your names."

The god of creation gave me a blank look. "Names? We don't have any. I guess if I had to pick, our names would be the God and Goddess of Such and Such."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. “Isn’t that a little inconvenient?”

The god of creation seemed to understand what I meant. “Yeah, I guess from your perspective it might seem inconvenient for us to not have individual names. But the names of gods change with the times and the sovereigns in charge, so we don’t really like being called by the names that humans come up with. It’s kind of a pain.”

I had the feeling that the last thing he’d said was the most important reason, but I decided not to say that out loud.

“Setting that aside, the first thing I want to tell you is that just because you’re being reincarnated into this world doesn’t mean there’s something specific we want you to do for us. That’s because the moment that you’re reincarnated, the reason we called you here ceases to exist. You may live freely. Well, we’ll probably intervene if you try to destroy the world or go around massacring people, though,” he joked—although it didn’t actually sound like he was joking.

“Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“That’d be great. Because it’s really a huge pain for us if we have to intervene.” It seemed the god of creation thought just about everything was a pain.

“You mentioned something about giving me abilities that would be like cheats, right? So what are you gonna give me?”

“Yeah! Well, we have to start with the basics, of course, so we’ll give you Identify! That one’s super useful. Also, I’m going to give you Growth Boost! That one increases all your growth—like the experience points you receive and stuff like that—by about ten times what the average person would receive. As for the rest...the gods and goddesses who like you will bestow you with various protections or cheat abilities. We’ve decided that those present will do that.”

“So, what am I gonna get?” Having grown up in modern times surrounded by manga, anime, and light novels, I was pretty interested in supernatural abilities.

“That’s a secret. You’ll have to wait until you’re reincarnated to find out. But you’re the first person to have ever received abilities from this many gods. Aren’t you lucky!”

“The first? So you mean there have been other people who came to this world before?”

“Yeah. Maybe forty or fifty in all. But it wasn’t just people who came—there were dogs, cats, and strangely, even a fish...”

“A fish...” *So my soul is in the same class as dogs, cats, and even fish...?*

Unaware of my internal conflict, the god of creation continued speaking with a fond look on his face. “A Japanese koi, to be more specific. A huge koi with the name of Namitaro—more than two meters long! A fisherman caught it right after it was reincarnated, though...”

“Oh, that sucks.”

“The majority were humans, but some of them had such terrible personalities that none of the gods wanted to give them anything. Most received one or two abilities, though.”

“In that case, it does seem like I’ll be getting a lot. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. It’s time for us to start now, though. Oh—what do you want me to do with the memories from your past life?”

“Leave them intact, please.”

“Got it. We’ll do this all while you sleep, so by the time you wake up, you’ll have been reincarnated. Also—I’m calling it ‘reincarnation,’ but we’re actually going to simply create a body for you, so you won’t have parents. We’ll just leave you near someone we think might raise you. Worst-case scenario, even if they don’t, you’ll still have the protection of the gods, so I’m sure you’ll manage.”

“That...feels pretty irresponsible, but okay, sure. Let’s get started.”

“You sure you’re ready? I’ll try to find the nicest people I can. We’ll start now, then. Tenma, I pray that your second life will be full of happiness. Good night.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

At once, Tenma fell asleep.

"All right, let's give Tenma our protection and his cheat abilities. Besides Identify and Growth Boost, I'll give him Creation Magic, Enchantment, and Conceal. And my protection too, of course."

"I'll give him the full power of my protection. That's all I can give, anyway."

"But having the full protection of the goddess of love means he'll meet all kinds of great people! I'll give him my protection and Detection."

"I'll give him Vitality Boost and Recovery Boost, I think. And my protection."

"I'll give him Instant Kill Resistance and Debuff Resistance. I won't give him my protection."

"I don't really think he'd mind having your protection, or anyone else's protection either...but it's your choice, Death. I'm gonna give him Skill Acquisition Boost and my protection."

"I'll give him Omni-Elemental, Magic Boost, and my protection."

"...I'll give him Sensory Buff, Follower Buff...and my protection..."

"Oh, so Tenma can become a Tamer, then. I'll give him Destruction Resistance, Destruction Boost, and my protection."

"I think...I'll give him *ME!*"

"Be serious!" everyone else cried out.

"Whaaat? You don't have to yell at me. Fine, fine. I'll give him...'My Love'!"

"That's the same thing!" everyone else yelled again.

"Fine... To help him gain combat skills faster, I'll give him Combat Master, Physical Ability Boost, and my protection! There—are you satisfied?"

"That should do it. Now it's time to cast the enchantment on Tenma." There was a pause. "There, all done. Let's check his current stats."

Name: Tenma Otori

Age: 25

Class: Human

Title: Favorite Child of the Gods

HP: 15000 → 50000

MP: 15000 → 50000

Strength: B- → S+

Defense: B → SS

Agility: B → SS

Magic: C+ → S+

Mind: A → SSS-

Growth: C → SSS

Luck: D- → B

Skills

Sword: 8

Brawling: 8

Throwing: 8

Cooking: 8

Rod: 7

Endurance: 7

Dismantle Items: 7

Spear: 6

Traps: 6

Night Vision: 6

Archery: 5

Axe: 4

Gifts

Protection of the Gods: 10

Identify: 10

Conceal: 10

Detection: 10

Skill Acquisition Boost: 10

Follower Buff: 10

Growth Boost: 8

Vitality Boost: 8

Recovery Boost: 8

Debuff Resistance: 8

Sensory Buff: 7

Physical Ability Boost: 7

Destruction Boost: 5

Magic Boost: 5

Creation Magic: 5

Enchantment: 5

Destruction Resistance: 5

Instant Kill Resistance: 5

Omni-Elemental: 5

Combat Master: 5

“Think we overdid it?” the god of creation wondered aloud. The other gods just chuckled wryly.

“The abilities we promised him surpass those of even the strongest humans in his world. Plus, since we packed him full of protection, there’s no telling how strong he’ll get,” the goddess of nature said, sounding unusually panicked.

And it was no wonder. It was basically guaranteed that he’d be the strongest

human out there if he had a normal childhood, but depending on his experience it was highly possible he'd become even stronger than that. That was how humans became gods...or became humans who could kill gods.

The goddess of nature wasn't worried about the latter. She was more worried that Tenma's emotional growth might not catch up to his physical growth. Most humans who got hold of superhuman powers ended up ruining themselves with them, after all.

"He's got my Destruction Resistance, so I don't think his physical body or his mind will break. Let's just watch over him. If we think he's in danger, we can simply take care of it. Let's do what's in our power, while at the same time respecting Tenma's will."

Everyone nodded in agreement with the god of destruction. Together, they all gazed at Tenma as he lay on the ground, each of them wondering what they could do to help him.

Chapter One

Part One

I woke up to the feeling of wind caressing my skin. *Ahh, I'm awake... I can smell plants and earth on the wind. I wonder if I'm in a forest?*

Every time the wind blew, I heard leaves rustling and flying about, followed shortly by the sound of birds singing and flapping their wings. It was all so comforting that I was just about to fall back asleep...when I sensed something strange nearby.

That stinks! What in the world is that smell? It doesn't smell like an animal. It's more like someone who hasn't had a bath in years...

Forcing my eyes open, I saw a humanlike creature dressed in dirty clothes, staring down at me and smiling.

It's smiling, but that's more like the face of a hunter who just found his prey!

The creature was about thirty meters away. It slowly approached me, taking one step at a time. Now it was about twenty-five meters away. I tried to run, but my body was too weak. I couldn't even stand up.

Twenty meters. I tried to call out for help, but my throat refused to work and I couldn't get any words out. Fifteen meters. I looked around to see if there was someone who could help. When the creature saw me do that, it laughed out loud.

Ten meters now. The creature was much bigger and creepier than I'd originally thought. I was scared, but instead of crying felt something more akin to resignation. Only five meters left. The creature held a club as big as a log, and easily raised it up as it laughed. It was easy for me to imagine what was about to happen to me, so I squeezed both eyes shut.

Why in the world did they leave me in a place with monsters like this?! You had one job, gods! How cruel would it be if I died minutes after I was

reincarnated?!

As I cursed the gods in my head, the monster was still slowly making its way towards me. The moment it brandished its club, I heard a swishing noise, then a thump, then a rolling sound. It hadn't brought the club down on me, so I hesitantly opened my eyes. The monster lay right in front of me, with a thick arrow protruding from its chest.

"Man, that was a close one! I certainly wasn't expecting to find a baby out here. Good thing I decided to check out the noise!" I heard an unfamiliar voice behind me. I still couldn't move, but at any rate the owner of the voice scooped me up and peered into my face.

The person who picked me up...was a giant.

"What are you doing out here? Where's your mommy and daddy?" The giant spoke to me in a kind voice, but I couldn't understand what it was saying. "I wonder if they abandoned you. Poor thing. Well, I can't just leave you here, so I'll take you back to my village." The giant muttered something, then put his bow back in its sling. He gently shifted my weight to carry me again. I began to panic, and flailed as much as I could to try to run away, but the giant didn't seem to be bothered by my resistance. He just smiled wryly at me.

Eventually I realized the giant wasn't going to harm me, so I decided to calm down. What else could I do, since I couldn't move that much anyway?

"You look like a healthy, brave baby. You didn't even cry when that goblin came for you. You're going to grow up to be someone great," the giant said softly. He sounded a bit happy, but just like before, I couldn't understand him.

After the giant had carried me for about an hour, a village came into view. It was, I assumed, the place where he lived.

"I'm back. Hey, is anybody home?" the giant yelled. Several other giants came over.

"Hey, that was fast. I thought you weren't going to be home until nighttime. Um...what's that?" said a male giant, walking towards us. Then a female giant came running over from behind him, and noticed me.

"Where'd you get that baby? He's very cute... Don't tell me you kidnapped

him!” With a smile, the female giant took me from the arms of the giant that was carrying me.

“Don’t be ridiculous! I found him in the forest just as a goblin was about to get him, so I rescued him. I looked around for a while, but there was no one else out there. I think he might have been abandoned. So I stopped hunting and brought him back here.”

The giant who’d been carrying me seemed to be talking to the female giant. Meanwhile, other giants began to gather around us. As I looked at them, something occurred to me for the first time since I’d woken up.

The gods told me I’d be reborn as a baby. These aren’t giants...they’re just normal-sized humans!

Just then, I spotted something familiar in the corner of my vision. It was an ear. Not a human ear, however, but an animal’s. One of the men had ears that looked like dog ears on top of his head. And it wasn’t just him—several people gathered around us had animal ears too. Some had floppy dog ears, and some had pointed cat ears.

Hm... So demi-humans really do exist. I wonder if they’ll let me touch their ears?

While I was enraptured by the animal ears, the conversation wrapped up. The man who’d rescued me took me back to his home with the woman who seemed to be his wife.

“This will be your home from now on,” she said to me. “You can think of me as your mother.”

“I’ll be his father, then.”

“That’s right, and he’ll... Wait, I wonder what his name is?”

“Is there anything sewn into the blankets he was bundled in?”

“Hang on... Hmm, yes—there is! It says, ‘Tenma Otori.’”

“So he’s got a last name too? I wonder if his parents were nobles or something. I don’t know why they would abandon him, but let’s raise him with this name. Nice to meet you, Tenma!”

“Nice to meet you, Tenma!”

Just like before, I had no idea what they were saying to me. But they seemed friendly and like they'd give me a good home.

Are they gonna be my parents? I'd like that.

In my previous life, both of my parents had died and I didn't really remember much about them. For that reason, I felt a little grateful to the gods for bringing me here.



"Hey, what are we gonna do about feeding him? I mean, nothing's about to come out of *there*, right?" the man asked suddenly, staring at the woman's chest as she held Tenma.

"O-Of course not...!"

They looked at each other awkwardly. Unfortunately, none of the women in their village had given birth in quite some time. In fact, it had been over a decade since a child had been born there. The average age of the villagers had always been a bit on the higher side, and there hadn't been any new long-term residents in recent years. The few younger folks who did come to the village never stayed long because they couldn't deal with the quality of life. So the village was well on its way to becoming your standard rural village suffering from population decline.

After this conversation, the two of them quickly went around to all the women in the village who had child-rearing experience for advice on how to care for Tenma so he didn't starve. Thanks to these ladies, they found out that Tenma would do just fine on goat's milk. Next, they visited the local goatherd and asked him if they could have dibs on any milk his goats produced.

Since Tenma's new parents had carried him around the village with them on their quest, all the residents had become familiar with him, even though it was only his first day living there. Within a few days, the minute he was spotted, a crowd of villagers would gather around him.

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Three years had passed since the couple took me in. The man who'd brought me to the village was named Ricardo, and he was a hunter. His wife was named Celia. The two of them used to be adventurers, and apparently they were pretty good at it, because in their heyday they'd made quite a name for themselves. But now, they were my new parents. They weren't alone—there were a lot of other former adventurers in this village too.

Around two hundred people lived here, and over a hundred and fifty of them were either former adventurers or something in that same vein. It was a small village, but we had farmlands as well as a huge forest where one could pick good-quality medicinal herbs. Thanks to their prior experience as adventurers,

the villagers were well acquainted with the local geography and would gather the herbs themselves, or else serve as guides for people who were seeking the herbs but didn't know the way. This brought in some money, and although none of them were rich, they all lived comfortably.

Recently, they'd begun to allow me to walk around the village by myself. Previously, my mom, Celia, would go everywhere with me and never let me out of her sight. I thought it was a bit overprotective, but she had good reason for doing it. I think it happened about five months after they'd taken me in. Back then, Mom and Dad did everything for me. They fed and bathed me, of course, but they also changed my diapers.

That was only natural, because at the time, my body was still that of a baby's—but mentally I was different. I was in the same bizarre situation as a certain boy detective; I was a baby on the outside but an adult on the inside. Because of that, having my diaper changed was mortifying. So mortifying that I started holding it in, to the point that it made me sick. And that made Mom cry...

Of course that made me feel even worse, so I decided to get over my embarrassment. I swore to myself that once I was able to walk, I'd go to the bathroom by myself. I was so determined that I started standing and walking on my own much sooner than normal. And the very first place I wanted to go was to the toilet. *I'm finally free!* Or so I thought, but the second I squatted over the toilet...I fell in. And got stuck. *Really* stuck.

Even though I was finally able to walk, my muscles were about as strong as those of a tadpole that had just sprouted new legs. I couldn't hold a squat for very long at all. It took about an hour for my mom to find me and rescue me from the toilet. When she saw the upper half of my body protruding from the hole in the ground, she started tugging on me frantically and pulled me out. She rescued me, but obviously I was filthy and absolutely reeked.

That's when Mom muttered something and waved a hand. In seconds, my body was clean again. That was the first time I'd ever seen someone do magic. That day was truly unforgettable to me...in more ways than one.

Another advantage of being able to walk was going outside on my own. I never went very far from my house, but my mom still worried. She'd say, "You

can't take your eyes off this child for one second, because there's no telling what he'll do!" and she wouldn't give me any freedom. Not that I could blame her...

So even though I was finally allowed to walk around on my own, I could only explore within the village, where I had eyes on me at all times. I wasn't allowed to go near the forest by myself yet. Still, I was happy that I could walk freely where I wanted.

"Heeey, Tenma! Over here!" a villager called out, having spotted me. He must've just gotten back from hunting, because he had several birds slung over his shoulder.

"Hi, Uncle Mark."

"Hi there. Take a look at this haul, Tenma! I got five birds!"

These pheasants looked a lot like ordinary pheasants; they weren't great at flying, but they were fast. They weighed around one to two kilograms each, and they were *delicious*.

"Ricardo helped, though. He got three pheasants and a boar. He'll probably be home soon, so let's prepare the meat while we wait for him."

Uncle Mark was also a former adventurer, and he'd been friends with Dad since they were kids. He liked to teach me archery while we waited for Dad to get home from hunting trips. Of course I couldn't use an adult-sized bow yet, so it was pretty much just playing pretend. But I felt like I was gaining experience points anyway. After I'd managed to hold the bow a few times, Dad finally returned.

"Welcome home, Dad. Looks like you had a good trip!"

"Hey, Tenma. Look at all this loot! I'm gonna have Mom fix us a feast tonight!" Dad grinned as he took the wild boar out of the pack he had over his shoulder. It still gave me a strange feeling to see him pull a two-hundred-kilogram boar out of that little bag.

"Man, that magic bag of yours sure comes in handy... Wish I had one." Uncle Mark's comment put Dad in an even better mood. The magic bag was a treasure of his that he'd gone through a lot to obtain back in his adventurer

days. It was a rare item that was difficult for even the best magicians to create. It could hold creatures weighing up to five hundred kilograms, not including things attached to the carcass, like parasites, microbes, or eggs—basically, anything with weak life force didn't count.

"It really is useful. I'm surprised they say it's only an Common bag. If it were just one tier better, it'd be good enough to be the family heirloom of nobles, or a national treasure or something." My father was the owner of this particular bag, of course. All items in this world had a tier. The tiers were Poor, Common, Good, Special, Excellent, Legendary, and Divine. The tiers applied to magic too. So even though Uncle Mark was jealous of the bag, it was actually of a lower tier. Moreover, Legendary and Divine items only appeared in fairy tales and other folklore, so generally Excellent items were considered the highest rank.

"Oh, that reminds me, Ricardo. Did you hear the sage is coming home?"

"The sage...you mean Merlin? First I've heard of it! Why, it's been over ten years since he left!"

"Who's Merlin?" I asked.

"A weirdo," both Dad and Uncle Mark answered in unison.

"The strongest magician alive right now, who'll probably go down in history. He's well known for being eccentric, and he used to live in this village," Uncle Mark elaborated.

"One time he charged buck naked into a dungeon overflowing with monsters and fought them all off. Another time, he showed up to an audience with the king wearing just his robe and nothing else underneath. He was also pretty fond of strolling all over town wearing only his underwear," Dad said.

Sounds more like a perverted nudist than just a weirdo, I thought.

"Oh, and he's got the God of War's protection, which is pretty rare for a magician," Uncle Mark added. My father nodded in agreement.

Hmm, if he's got the God of War's protection, no wonder he's a weirdo. At that moment I realized that I, too, had the protection of the God of War, and felt kind of bummed out.

"Well, enough about that. Let's butcher the boar and have us some dinner! Mark, you start the fire. Tenma, you call over some of the neighbors to help us."

"Okay, sounds good! Ah, but I didn't bring my flint today," Uncle Mark said.

"Oh, that won't work, then. All right, Mark. You butcher the boar, and I'll start a fire with magic."

"Dad, I wanna try to light the fire. Teach me magic!" It seemed as good of a time as any to ask. Dad thought for a moment, and then, since lighting a fire was the most basic magic of all, agreed to teach me.

"All right. There are a lot of people who can't use magic, though, so don't get upset if you can't do it. And if you *can* do it, you must never use magic when there aren't other adults around to watch you. I'll teach you only if you agree to those two things."

"Okay! I promise!" I said.

Dad nodded while Uncle Mark went off to call over the neighbors. "First, you need to quiet your mind. Then, bring your finger near the place where you want to start the fire. Picture a fire in your mind and then say, 'Ignite!'" The moment my dad spoke the word, the pile of dead leaves in front of him erupted into flame. "That's all you have to do. It's very simple magic. The most important thing is to picture a fire very clearly in your mind. Now you try it."

He'd made it look so easy that I thought it *would* be pretty simple. I brought my finger close to the leaves and spoke the incantation, "Ignite!" The instant I said it, a burst of flames way more powerful than I'd expected came forth. The pile of leaves erupted into flames all at once, creating a mini explosion. I was so startled I tumbled backwards. Dad was frozen with surprise too, but quickly recovered and, after doing a quick check of the vicinity, scooped me up from the ground where I lay on my back.

"Tenma! Are you all right?!" He patted me all over to make sure I wasn't hurt. Once he saw I was fine, he let out a sigh of relief. Then I spotted Mom running over to us in a panic; apparently Uncle Mark had called her over.

"Tenma! What happened? Are you hurt?" She was totally freaking out. Dad tried to explain the situation to her, but she misunderstood and got angry with

him because she thought he'd been trying to teach me attack magic.

Finally, after Dad had frantically explained it again with my help, she realized what had happened and seemed to accept it, though somewhat reluctantly.

"We can talk about this again later tonight. Right now, let's just cook up the boar and eat. Mark will probably be back with the others soon, anyway."

"Sounds good."

And with that, Mom and Dad stopped talking about my first experience with magic, and started getting dinner ready for us and the neighbors.

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That night, after Tenma had gone to bed, Ricardo and Celia sat down to have a talk.

"I think it's a bit too early to start teaching him magic." Celia was of the opinion that they shouldn't teach Tenma until he was a bit older.

Ricardo had a differing opinion. "I disagree. I think we should be proactive about it," he insisted. "I think he's got a strong aptitude for magic. Normally, that spell is only powerful enough to burn you a little, but he has the ability to turn it into offensive magic."

"And that's why I think it's dangerous to teach him until he gets a little older."

"Celia, your magic ability is so much higher than mine that we can't even compare the two, and you know you're way more talented as well. But already, Tenma's innate ability surpasses mine. At this rate, he'll surpass you too in a few years. That's how naturally gifted I think he is."

"And what are you basing that on?"

"My instincts as a former adventurer."

"Your instincts, hm?"

"You don't trust them?"

"I do. Those instincts of yours have saved me more times than I can count, but..."

If it had been anyone else, Celia would just have laughed at them for citing

their instincts as their reason. But Ricardo had been her partner for many years, so she knew his instincts weren't to be taken lightly. Of course, he was retired from adventuring now, but since he'd continued hunting all these years, Celia knew his instincts were still as sharp as ever.

"Celia, it pains me to say this, but Tenma's not our biological child. His real parents could show up tomorrow. I hope they're good people, but they might very well not be. And if they discover his abilities, they could use his powers for evil. So, for that reason, I think that we should teach him how to defend himself. If he has a sharp knife, is it better to let him go off and use it on his own, or teach him the basics of how to use it properly under our supervision? I think this is best for both him and us. Though even if his birth parents do show up, I have no intention of letting him go after all this time."

Celia paused. "All right, then."

"Let's talk to Tenma about it tomorrow morning."

"Fine. But I intend on teaching him the basics in a classroom setting first."

"Right, I was thinking about teaching him some more physical skills little by little as well. Whether it's magic or combat, he needs to know how to use his own body correctly or else he'll only destroy himself."

And so Ricardo and Celia finally agreed on the direction Tenma's education should take.

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For some reason, the day after the explosion commotion, my parents began to formally teach me magic. Mom still looked a little unsure, but Dad was very gung ho about it.

"Starting today, we're going to be teaching you many things. But it can be very dangerous if you miss even one little step, like with yesterday's fire magic incident. So it's very important that you do exactly what Mom and Dad tell you," Dad warned.

"The foundations of magic are very important, so I'll be teaching you from textbooks for a while. If you get sick of it or disobey me, though, your magic lesson will be over for the day. Do you understand?"

"Yes! I understand, Mom!"

"Good." Mom smiled and nodded at my response. I wondered why she had looked so unsure about it at the beginning, but then Dad began to speak, interrupting my thoughts.

"Dad's gonna teach you how to use a bow and arrow, and a knife. But it's too dangerous for you to use the real things just yet. So I'm going to teach you using a practice bow and arrows with no tips, made just for children, and a wooden knife," Dad told me. "I won't be able to give you lessons while I'm out hunting, so while I'm gone, you can have Mom give you lessons or go walk around the village alone."

I figured he wanted me to walk around so I could build up my stamina. "Okay, Dad!"

He took the morning to explain things to me, then we studied magic in the afternoon. After that, Dad went out to make jerky from the leftover boar from yesterday.

"Now listen," said Mom. "There are many different elements used in magic. If it involves fire, it's Fire Elemental magic. If it uses water, it's Water Elemental magic, and so on. There are some other types of magic, such as Time-Space magic and Alchemy, but I'll explain those later. Do you understand everything I just said?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. Next, we'll go over all the types of elements. Basically, there are eight elements, including Fire, Water, Earth, Wind, Lightning, Light, Dark, and Non-Elemental."

"'Basically'?" I asked. "So there are more elements than that?"

Mom smiled, as if I'd just asked a really great question. "That's right. There's Time-Space magic and Alchemy, like I mentioned before. Then there are sub-elements within Light Elemental magic, such as Holy and White Elemental magic, and sub-elements within Dark magic, such as Shadow Elemental magic and Black Elemental magic. Powerful fire magic is called Flame Elemental magic, and water magic which uses ice is called Ice Elemental magic."

"Wow... There's a lot of them."

"There sure are. Some people say that all magic originated from a single element, but began to be separated into more elements according to the differences in people's thinking, how the magic was used, and the individual effects of the spells. So that's how we came to have so many different elements."

"Whoever came up with that idea must either be really smart or really weird."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because not many people think too hard about things we use or look at regularly. So they must be either really smart, or really twisted."

Mom looked very surprised to hear me say that. At first I thought it was because that was something not many three-year-olds would be able to say, but later I learned that it was because that was the opinion most people held about the person who'd come up with this theory.

"That's right, Tenma. Now, back to our discussion about elements. Magic that uses elements outside the basic eight is very difficult, and few people have mastered it. So in other words, you could say those eight types are the standard." Mom paused and took a breath, then went on. "Within Time-Space magic, there are spells such as Fly and Float. As you can imagine, using these spells causes you to fly through the air and float in the air respectively, but Fly can also be performed with Wind magic. You can use Alchemy to dismantle or disassemble objects, or build them. It's not very user friendly and is quite difficult to learn, so you don't see it used much. For example, Alchemy can be used to remove the water from laundered clothes, but it's much easier to just use Wind magic to dry them, you see?"

It sounded like the latter was the more popular method in this world, unlike in some of the manga I'd read during my past life. Personally, though, the idea of putting your hands together and creating an object in a flash with alchemy sounded incredibly appealing to me, and I vowed to master it one day.

After that, my studies with Mom continued until the evening. She taught me more about the basics of magic, and the lessons were interspersed with tales from when she was an adventurer.

Interlude: A Conversation Between Idle Gods

War: "Hnnngh..."

Death: "What's wrong? Why did you make such a creepy noise?"

War: "Creepy?! How rude!"

Fertility: "Now, now. What's the matter?"

War: "I was just watching Tenma."

Nature: "Yes, what about him?"

Love: "What? What? What's going on, now?"

War: "He's just so little, and when I see him I get this overwhelmingly warm feeling inside my chest..."

Nature: "Ooh, I understand. Tenma really is adorable."

Love: "So adorable!"

Death: *nods*

Fertility: "When one is reincarnated, their mind is held back by their body. So he appears much younger than his actual age, and that's cute."

Beasts: "Yep!"

Fertility: "Ack! Where'd you come from?!"

War: "Beasts watches Tenma with me a lot."

Love: "I feel like watching over Tenma while wearing that wolf skin of his makes him look like a faithful dog concerned for his master."

Beasts: "...Woof."

Death: "Now he's embarrassed..."

War: "So I've got a rival now!"

Love: "Um, I don't think so..."

War: "Anyway, this feeling I have inside of me... Do you think it's maternal instinct?!"

Love & Fertility: "No!"

Death: "No... It's just creepy."

Nature: "For goodness' sake..."

War: "What's with you guys?! You're all a bunch of meanies!"

Beasts: "War..."

War: "Beasts, you understand me, right?"

Beasts: "That's not maternal instinct. You're a man, so it's paternal..."

War: "You're so mean! I'm a girl at heart! I am, I am!"

Everyone: "No, you're not!"

Nature: "For goodness' sake..."

The End

Part Two

About six months had passed since I started studying magic. Mom was still just teaching me the basics and hadn't allowed me to actually use any magic yet. Dad thought she was being overprotective, but he never said it to her face. About two months earlier, he'd tried to sneakily teach me some magic, but she found out about it and tore him a new one. That was one of the first times I really observed the power dynamic in their relationship.

Dad told me, "You can't disobey Mom when she gets like this! Don't try to argue with her because it'll get you nowhere. Your best bet is to just agree with her."

At any rate, after that Dad loosened up on the restrictions he put on me while we were training, maybe because he disagreed with Mom's teaching methods. Lately, he had been letting me use a knife and learn how to clean smaller animals he had hunted. Today he was teaching me how to prepare animals again. While I was working, some visitors came up to me.

"You're getting really good at that, Tenma."

"How are your studies going, Tenma?"

It was Uncle Mark and his wife, Martha.

"Hi, Uncle Mark. Hi, Aunt Martha. I'm doing my best, but it's kinda hard."

The two of them smiled at my response. "You're doing a very good job for your age."

"That's right. Why, when I was your age, I was so frightened at the sight of blood that I'd start to cry!" Aunt Martha said, and the two of them laughed.

Villagers would often come up to me while Dad was teaching me things outside, like the two of them had just done. When I was learning archery, there was a good chance the hunters would come over for a chat. When I was running to build up my endurance, the ladies in the village would bring me water. When I'd work on sparring, Dad would "make" Uncle Mark be my opponent.

I felt bad for some of the people involved, but honestly I was really grateful

that I could learn so many things from so many different points of view. And there was something else I realized after meeting so many of the villagers—there were no children my age here. Not only that, but there were no children here, period. When a child in the village came of age, more often than not they would leave the village and travel to a bigger city to become an adventurer.

In this world, most people were treated as adults when they turned eighteen, but in some cases it was fifteen. But most of those people were skilled children of nobles or merchants, who tended to mature faster than others their age. Plus, the sooner they became independent, the more convenient it was for their families.

“What’s wrong, Tenma?”

“Nothing, Dad.”

There were three continents in this world, and many islands. This village was on the biggest continent, called Ullens, on the edge of the Kingdom of Krastin. To the north of Ullens was the Principality of Hangul, and to the east was the Republic of Gilst, which was the largest country and made up of an alliance of three countries. Then there were many small countries to the southeast. My village, Kukuri Village, was on the edge of a domain led by Margrave Haust, a powerful person in Krastin. The forest nearby was called the Elder Forest.

“Tenma?”

“What is it, Dad?”

Anyway, the Elder Forest was very large. I saw a map of it once, and if the scale was to be believed, it was about the same size as or even bigger than Japan. Much of it was unexplored, but it was said to be very rich in resources. However, the deeper you went into the forest, the stronger the monsters became. Three generations ago, the king at the time sent out soldiers to try to take the forest several times, but each attempt had ended in failure. The kingdom’s finances suffered as a result, but then a huge dungeon was discovered within the kingdom, so they managed to recover. Now, there was really no need to stir up all that trouble again, so the soldiers never really came here anymore.

“Tenma. Hey, Tenma!”

“Huh? What, Dad?”

“You’re acting strange, mumbling to yourself like that. Are you sure you’re all right?” Dad lay a hand on my forehead.

“Yeah, I’m just a little tired.”

“Are you? Let’s take a break, then.” Dad bought my excuse, and told me to go rest in the shade. While I was resting, he started talking to Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha a short distance away. I looked over at them and used Identify, a skill I’d learned recently.

Name: Ricardo

Age: 40

Class: Human

Title: Former First-Class Adventurer, First-Class Hunter

HP: 18000

MP: 6000

Strength: A

Defense: B+

Agility: B+

Magic: C+

Mind: B-

Growth: C

Luck: A+

Skills

Archery: 9

Dismantle Items: 8

Throwing: 8

Brawling: 7

Sword: 7

Traps: 7

Endurance: 7

Debuff Resistance: 7

Spear: 6

Axe: 6

Fire Magic: 5

Wind Magic: 5

Water Magic: 4

Cooking: 3

Gifts

Protection of the God of Beasts

Name: Mark

Age: 37

Class: Human

Title: Former Adventurer, Hunter

HP: 7000

MP: 1000

Strength: B-

Defense: C-

Agility: B

Magic: D

Mind: C+

Growth: C

Luck: C

Skills

Throwing: 7

Dismantle Items: 7

Endurance: 6

Archery: 6

Brawling: 5

Sword: 5

Debuff Resistance: 5

Traps: 5

Cooking: 5

Axe: 4

Fire Magic: 4

Wind Magic: 3

Name: Martha

Age: 35

Class: Human

Title: Housewife

HP: 3000

MP: 500

Strength: D

Defense: D

Agility: C-

Magic: E

Mind: B+

Growth: C

Luck: C+

Skills

Cooking: 8

Dismantle Items: 7

Endurance: 6

Debuff Resistance: 4

Fire Magic: 3

Water Magic: 3

Archery: 3

Traps: 2

Brawling: 2

Axe: 2

All of this information popped into my head. Their abilities averaged out to be about C grade. The number next to each skill denoted its level, and after comparing all of them, I figured out that the max level was 10, with levels 1-3 being novice, 4-6 being intermediate, 7-8 being advanced, and anything 9 and above considered master. Those were just my own assumptions, of course, so I could be wrong, but I thought I was probably right. It seemed like the effect of each skill level was influenced by one's own physical ability and condition. I wasn't sure what the titles were all about, but perhaps it represented your general reputation, or something along those lines. It was also possible that the

gods gave titles based on values unknown to us, or perhaps they just came up with them randomly.

Dad's abilities are pretty high, though...

Speaking of abilities, these were mine:

Name: Tenma Otori

Age: 3

Class: Human

Title: (Favorite Child of the Gods)

HP: 500

MP: 2000

Strength: F-

Defense: F

Agility: E-

Magic: C+

Mind: C-

Growth: S

Luck: B

Skills

Throwing: 3

Cooking: 3

Night Vision: 3

Endurance: 2

Dismantle Items: 2

Fire Magic: 2

Traps: 2

Archery: 2

Sword: 1

Brawling: 1

Spear: 1

Rod: 1

Axe: 1

Omni-Elemental: 1 (6)

(Identify: 10

Detection: 10

Conceal: 10

Skill Acquisition Boost: 10

Follower Buff: 10

Growth Boost: 8

Vitality Boost: 8

Recovery Boost: 8

Debuff Resistance: 8

Sensory Buff: 7

Physical Ability Boost: 7

Destruction Boost: 5

Magic Boost: 5

Creation Magic: 5

Enchantment: 5

Destruction Resistance: 5

Instant Kill Resistance: 5

Combat Master: 5)

Gifts

Protection of the Gods

The parentheses around some of the skills seemed to be the result of the Conceal skill, which appeared to give me the power to hide, falsify, or express titles, abilities, skills, and levels at will. I figured the reason my overall stats were low was because I was still so young, so I could probably count on them improving as I grew up.

“By the way, Mark. Whatever happened to Merlin?”

“Well, you know how weird he is. Maybe he changed his mind on his way home and decided not to come after all.”

“Guess it’s possible.”

I wasn’t particularly interested in the conversation between Dad and Uncle Mark. I had no way of knowing at the time that the sage they spoke of would end up having a huge influence on me.

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Four years had passed since my parents took me in, which marked one year since I’d started learning magic.

“Tenma, today will be your last day using just textbooks. You’ve done a wonderful job. Starting tomorrow, you’re going to begin practicing the basics of novice-level magic.” Mom had finally given me permission to use magic.

Truthfully, I’d already used Identify several times, but although it was quite handy, it never really felt like I was actually using magic. So I couldn’t help but blurt out happily, “Really? You’re gonna teach me magic?! Yaaaay!”

“However! From now on, you need to listen even more closely to Mom. You may not use magic recklessly, and you can’t give up no matter how tough your lessons are. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mom!”

"Tomorrow, we'll go out to the river with Dad and practice magic there. So I want you to go to bed early tonight to rest up."

"Okay!" I answered obediently, but that night I was so excited to start learning magic that I hardly slept at all.

The following morning, we walked about ten minutes out of town to a nearby river.

"Now pay attention, Tenma. First, I'm going to be teaching you water magic. Watch me carefully. 'Flow!'"

Placing her hand into a calm section of the river, Mom intoned the spell. Just then, a column of water about a meter high erupted from the river's surface. "See? That's basic water magic. You start where the water is calm, and then gradually start shaping the column of water where the currents are stronger. Now you try."

After Mom had explained the basics to me, I was about to stick my hand in the water when all of a sudden I felt someone watching me. I whirled around. Mom and Dad did the same, looking stunned.

"Well, well—you spotted me! I didn't intend to interrupt." A man wearing a black hooded robe stood about ten meters from my father and about fifteen meters from me. When he began walking towards me, Mom stood protectively in front of me. Dad took a step backwards and grabbed his big hunting knife from his hip, then put himself between the man and me.

"Who are you?" Dad asked cautiously.

Seemingly unfazed, the man paused before responding. "Why are you so suspicious of me, Ricardo? Don't you remember me, Celia?" As he spoke, he slowly lowered his hood.

"Merlin!"

"Uncle!"



The old man, whom Dad had called Merlin and Mom had called Uncle, smiled at them, his wrinkles deepening. “That’s right. It’s me, Merlin. Now put that knife down, Ricardo.”

“R-Right, sorry.” Dad put his knife back in its sheath.

Once Merlin had seen that, he slowly walked over to us. “It’s good to see you two again. How many years has it been?”

“It’s been eleven years...”

“That’s right, Uncle. We hadn’t heard from you in so long we were worried sick!”

Merlin laughed at that. “Sorry, sorry. I kept meaning to write you, but then I always forgot.” He scratched his head.

“Honestly, Uncle, you never change.”

“We got word about you from travelers now and again, so we knew you were still alive, at least.”

Suddenly Merlin looked beyond the two of them, right at me. “By the by, is that your child? When did you give birth, Celia?” he asked, crouching down to put himself at eye level with me.

At that question, Dad pulled Merlin away from me and Mom, turning his back to us. “You’re only half-right about that, Merlin,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“He was abandoned in the Elder Forest when he was just a baby. I happened to find him one day when I was out hunting, so we took him in and adopted him.”

“I see, I see...”

“He’s very precious to us.” Dad smiled. Seeing Dad happy made Merlin smile too.

Dad was whispering so that I wouldn’t be able to make out his words, but with a bit of concentration I could hear him perfectly. I figured he probably didn’t want me to know that I had been abandoned, but it was rather pointless.

Once they were done talking, they came back to us and Merlin introduced himself to me. “So you’re Tenma, eh? It’s nice to meet you. I’m Merlin, Celia’s uncle. Most people call me a sage,” he chuckled.

Suddenly, I remembered the conversation I’d overheard between Dad and Uncle Mark and blurted out, “You mean you’re that weirdo?” I realized it was very rude of me, but Merlin didn’t seem bothered at all.

“People call me that too,” he answered nonchalantly.

“Oh... I’m sorry. My name is Tenma. I’m four years old.”

“Oooh, I see, I see. No need to apologize. I’ve done many things to warrant being called a weirdo!” He laughed. “By the way, Celia, what were you doing out here?”

“I was trying to teach Tenma the basics of magic.”

“I see, I see. Show me what you’ve got, then, Tenma.”

“Okay.” I stuck my hand into the river and intoned, “Flow!” With relative ease, I made a column of water about a meter high shoot up right in front of my eyes.

“That was great, Tenma! You did it on your first try! Amazing!” Mom exclaimed.

“Yeah—normally the water doesn’t react at all, or can’t keep its shape!” Dad agreed.

The two of them showered me with compliments, but Merlin had a stern look on his face.

“Tenma, there’s something you need to do before you practice this, or it’ll be too dangerous,” he said. Before my parents could say anything, he went on. “Your magical ability is very high for your age. So you must first learn how to control your power before using it.”

“But Uncle, don’t most people need to practice a certain amount of magic to get their bodies used to it before they learn how to control it?”

“Yes, it’s true that under normal circumstances, it’s best to get your body used to emitting mana, and then you can learn how to control it. But that only

applies to children who have a normal magical inclination.”

“So you’re saying Tenma isn’t normal?” Dad asked, to which Merlin nodded.

“This child possesses enough innate mana to become a first-class magician with just a bit of effort. But physically, he’s still a child. If he releases too much magical energy without being able to control it, it could go haywire. Best-case scenario, he could seriously injure someone. Worst case...he could demolish everything around him.”

We were all shocked. “Then what should we do?” My mother looked close to tears.

“He needs to learn how to let the magic flow through his body without releasing it. That’s how he will learn to control his power,” Merlin said.

My mother looked a bit calmer after hearing this, but told him she had no idea how to teach me to do that.

“Don’t you worry one bit!” Merlin assured her. “I’ll teach Tenma. Plus, if his magic ever does go haywire, I’ll be able to neutralize it before it causes any damage.” He patted my head with a very grandfatherly look on his face.

“I’ll leave Tenma’s training to you then, Merlin,” Dad said.

“Please take good care of Tenma, Uncle!”

“Yes, indeed. Any child of yours is like a grandchild to me anyway, so I’ll do everything in my power for him. Is that all right with you, Tenma?” Merlin asked.

Right now, I couldn’t see any other way for me to learn magic than under him. Plus, learning directly from a sage meant it would be much less dangerous, so I responded with enthusiasm, “Yes! I’m looking forward to it!”

Part Three

About two years had passed since I started learning magic under the tutelage of Merlin, whom I now called “Gramps.” During that time, I learned how to control my powers. I basically did the same thing every day, and it turned out to be much easier than I’d imagined.

This was how I practiced control:

Step one: Get in the water and stand up straight while quieting your mind.

Step two: Imagine pathways all throughout your body that the mana circulates through.

Step three: Now imagine mana flowing through those paths.

Step four: Feel your body getting lighter. Once you feel warmth flowing from the top of your head to the tips of your toes, you’ll know that you’ve succeeded.

That was basically it, except you added one extra step once you’d mastered the last one—step five: Funnel the mana into an object you’re holding or the clothes you are wearing.

That was the point I’d reached. Now, step five was basically what my mom had taught me at the river, but the act of funneling magic through the clothes you were wearing was difficult unless you were an upper-tier magician. Those with lesser abilities used items that were easier to funnel magic through, or else items that had been specifically fashioned with pathways for the magic to flow through them.

Of course I didn’t know that at first, so when Mom asked me how I managed it so easily, she was quite shocked by my answer: “When I pictured blood vessels instead of pathways and the mana as blood flowing through them, it just happened.” She was surprised because the method I’d used was the same as how first-class magicians did it, and also because I’d never been taught about how blood moved through blood vessels.

Both Mom and Gramps questioned me about this. I told her that it was an

idea that just popped into my head, and I told him that I came to understand it from helping dad butcher the animals he'd hunted. I didn't like making excuses like this, but neither of them knew I had been reincarnated. Nevertheless, they seemed to accept my explanations, so I escaped any further questioning.

It was around that time that I began to feel the magic flowing through me as I went about my daily life. The only noteworthy thing to relate about my studies was that I was studying less with Mom and more with Gramps. Up until that point, my study time had been divided equally between them, but now it was more like seventy percent of my time was spent with Gramps.

And so, after two years of studying in that manner, I turned six. Dad said that starting today, he was going to teach me how to hunt for real. (I already knew how because I'd done it in my past life, though.)

Dad and I left early in the morning for the Elder Forest. And...

"Dad, there's a pheasant behind that tree there."

"All right, leave it to me!" Dad said, and quickly loosed an arrow. It pierced the pheasant right through its neck, killing it on the spot. "That's amazing, Tenma," he said. "That's your eighth pheasant and it's not even lunchtime yet!"

"I'm only spotting them, though. Plus, three of them escaped."

"It's still impressive. Even a veteran hunter would have a hard time spotting prey at this pace. And you'll keep getting better with your bow." Dad comforted me in a gentle voice and patted my head; he must've thought I was upset about it.

It's easy for me to spot prey if I use Identify and Detection in combination while we're hunting. Still, it doesn't matter how many animals I can find if I can't hunt them myself... I thought as Dad continued patting my head.

"Tenma, I know it's sooner than we'd planned, but let's call it a day. We got way more than we expected anyway," he suggested. He probably meant it was bad to overhunt this area. Despite how much his magic bag could hold, the forest didn't belong to just us. But most of all, if we hunted too many pheasants, there might not be any of them left.

I nodded and was about to get ready to leave when I heard a rustling sound in

the brush nearby. Both of us immediately backed away and got out our knives, ready for battle. But then Dad relaxed when he saw what had appeared. "Oh, it's just a slime," he said. "It's all right, Tenma. This is the lowest-level monster there is."

Actually, I'd used Identify and Detection right before the slime appeared, so I knew what it was before Dad did. But this was the first time I'd ever really seen one.

"Tenma, this is a good opportunity for you. Try to defeat it," Dad said.

Nervously, I approached the slime. It didn't even try to run away as I came near; it just stared. Paying close attention to its behavior, I slowly closed the distance between us, step by step. When I was about two meters away from it, all of a sudden I felt something very strange and hard to explain. *Huh? I feel like the slime is pulling on my consciousness somehow...*

I couldn't explain why, but I sensed that the slime in front of me had no desire to attack me. I paused and put my knife away, then continued to approach it.

"Tenma! What are you doing?" Dad panicked and lunged at the slime, but I held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't worry, Dad. He doesn't want to attack me." I reached my hand out towards the slime. Its body trembled as it drew closer to me, and then it rubbed itself against my hand. At that moment, I felt a very strong connection with the slime. "Dad! I think it likes me!"

He looked at me in surprise as I picked up the slime. "Tenma! I didn't know you had the ability to use Tame!"

"What's Tame?"

"It's a skill that lets you befriend monsters. Normally monsters won't befriend humans, but someone with your abilities can use monsters as followers. There are some adventurers who can get monsters that obey them to fight in battle on their behalf."

"Wow, that sounds fun!" *Actually, sounds like that anime from my past life, P*k*mon.*

"Slimes might be the lowest-ranked monsters, but it's still very impressive that you got it to like you!"

"Think Mom and Gramps will be surprised?"

"Not sure about Merlin, but I'm sure Mom'll be surprised. Although we should probably tell them about the slime before you show it to them."

"Why? I want to keep it a secret and really surprise them."

Dad seemed reluctant about my idea to spring it on Mom and Gramps.
"Because if you surprise them too much, they could attack the slime."

"I don't want that to happen!"

According to Dad, in general monsters were supposed to be defeated when you happened upon one, and since the two of them had experience as adventurers, they might instinctively attack the slime if it suddenly appeared in front of them.

"Let's show it to Merlin first and then he can try to convince your mother. He's much calmer than she is, anyway."

"Okay!"

"Let's go home now."

Once we were ready, we started walking back to the village. I was still holding the slime, and from time to time its little body trembled with happiness.

"Merlin? You home?"

The first place we stopped when we got back to the village was Gramps's house, and there, we told him about the slime. He actually lived next door to us, only a few dozen meters away.

"Ooh, so you've got the Tame skill, do you? Good for you! I understand your concerns about Celia. I'll go with you. There's something else I want to discuss regarding the slime too," Gramps said, and accompanied us back home to where Mom was waiting.

As expected, Mom was quite surprised. As soon as she heard how I tamed the slime, she showered me with compliments. "That's amazing, Tenma! It's been

ages since anyone from this village successfully tamed a monster!"

Gramps said he wanted to talk to her, so she sat down at the table. Dad and I joined them. The subject of the discussion at hand was currently settled on my lap.

"First of all, it seems as though this slime can use magic."

We were all surprised to hear Gramps say that. At that moment, I decided to use Identify on the slime for the first time.

Name: ????

Age: 1

Class: Slime

Title: Tenma's Follower

HP: 500

MP: 500

Strength: E-

Defense: E-

Agility: D-

Magic: C+

Mind: D-

Growth: B

Luck: B

Skills

Debuff Resistance: 5

Endurance: 2

Brawling: 1

Time-Space Magic: 1

For something known as the weakest monster, it was still a bit stronger than me and had a skill with a fairly high level. But more importantly, it had Time-Space magic, which was said to be rare even among humans.

"Sometimes mutations happen and monsters that are stronger than usual are born. This slime seems to be one of them. Monsters like these tend to be intelligent and have a greater potential for growth."

"So then this is a rare slime, Merlin?"

"That's right. But even if it has a mutation, it's still a slime. So most of the time, a slime like this would be defeated before it ever got the chance to grow stronger. So it's also rare in that respect."

"Is that why you came over here, Uncle?" Mom asked.

Gramps glanced back and forth between me and the slime. "That's part of it, but the main reason has to do with Tenma's magic ability."

"What about it?" I wasn't expecting him to say that and gave him a puzzled look.

"Well, lately Tenma's gotten very good at controlling his powers, so I've been thinking about teaching him magic in earnest now."

"What's the slime got to do with that?" Dad asked.

"Now just settle down. First, I was thinking of using this." Gramps took out a small pebble and set it on the table.

"That's just an empty magic stone, isn't it? One that isn't infused with magic yet. What are you going to do with it?" Mom asked.

"I was considering having Tenma learn how to use his powers by putting magic into it, but now I think I'll use it to give the slime magic powers too." We listened earnestly as Gramps continued. "If you put too much magic into a magic stone, it'll explode. It's the perfect tool to practice the controlled expulsion of magic. And since the slime is his follower now, it's a simple way for them to exchange mana through the path that connects them."

"I think I understand most of what you're saying...but what do you mean by

‘path,’ Gramps?”

“Well, it’s just like it sounds—there’s a sort of pathway that links you with your followers. We humans would call it a connection.”

“But isn’t it dangerous to infuse a slime with magic?” I asked, and Gramps nodded in agreement. If I tried to pour too much mana into the very first slime I ever tamed and it exploded, it would no doubt cause lifelong trauma.

“Don’t worry. Slimes are omnivores, but they’re also monsters which can survive on just water and mana alone. It’s possible that consuming your mana will make it grow stronger, so that’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

I sighed in relief.

“Celia, I’ve got a bunch more of these empty magic stones at my house. I’ll bring them by later. Once they’re filled with magic, go ahead and sell those to a traveling merchant, and then use that money to buy new empty ones.”

“Thanks, Uncle. Are you sure it’s okay if we have these, though?”

“Why, what about all the times you’ve cooked for me? Just think of it as payment for that.”

After that, Mom accepted the magic stone without hesitation. Dad, who had been watching their exchange, spoke then as if something had just occurred to him. “By the way, Tenma. You should give the slime a name. Things might get awkward if it doesn’t have one.”

Gramps and Mom both chimed in. “That’s right. It’s a new member of your family, Tenma. Give it a good name.”

“Yes, I’d feel sorry for it if it didn’t have a name. But you must make sure to take proper care of it, Tenma.”

Actually, I’d already decided on a name for the slime. “I’m going to name it ‘Rocket.’” Ever since I’d tamed the slime, all I could think about was the name of a slime from a certain RPG I’d played back in my past life. But of course, these three had no clue about that.

“Rocket—never heard that name before. Easy to remember, though.” Dad said.

“Ooh, I like it. It’s cute.”

“Well, of course it is. Tenma chose it! Seems like the slime likes it too.” Gramps was right—the slime, Rocket, was quivering and twitching with happiness. It almost looked like it was dancing.

“I’m looking forward to a long partnership with you, Rocket,” I said to my newest family member.

◊◊◊

Two years had passed since I tamed Rocket, and I’d spent most of that time studying magic with Gramps. As a result, I’d grown in many ways.



Name: Tenma Otori

Age: 8

Class: Human

Title: Sage's Apprentice, Tamer, (Favorite Child of the Gods)

HP: 11000

MP: 16900

Strength: C-

Defense: C

Agility: C+

Magic: S-

Mind: A+

Growth: SS-

Luck: B

Skills

Magic Manipulation: 8

Tame: 8

Follower Buff: 8 (10)

Cooking: 7

Dismantle Items: 7

Fire Magic: 6

Wind Magic: 6

Earth Magic: 6

Light Magic: 6

Enchantment: 6

Throwing: 6

Night Vision: 6

Endurance: 6

Traps: 6

Archery: 6

Brawling: 6

Rod: 6

Lightning Magic: 5

Dark Magic: 5

Time-Space Magic: 5

Sword: 5

Magic Boost: 5

Alchemy: 5

Spear: 4

Axe: 4

Omni-Elemental: 3 (7)

(Identify: 10

Detection: 10

Conceal: 10

Skill Acquisition Boost: 10

Growth Boost: 8

Vitality Boost: 8

Recovery Boost: 8

Debuff Resistance: 8

Sensory Buff: 7

Physical Ability Boost: 7

Destruction Boost: 5

Creation Magic: 5

Destruction Resistance: 5

Instant Kill Resistance: 5

Combat Master: 5)

Gifts

Protection of the Gods

Gramps told me that with my current abilities, I could probably even take on Mom and Dad and not lose. Since I'd already surpassed Dad's magic abilities, Gramps had determined that between all of them, I would beat Dad first. Dad was pretty bummed out about that.

But that was only if it were a long-ranged battle. If we were even twenty meters apart, I wouldn't be able to hold my own. At any rate, I was really pumped that I'd learned Alchemy. I mean, it was *Alchemy!* *Alchemy!!!*

There was a time when I kept thinking, "*Whoa, I bet I can just put my hands together and use alchemy better than the brothers in Fullmetal Alchemist!*" But it actually wasn't that simple. *Tenma, Tenma, Tenma...*

As you can imagine, learning that it wasn't as simple as putting my hands together was a huge disappointment. Gramps got aggravated with me too. He said, "You have to use an actual magic circle!" Once he said that, though, I realized something. If I couldn't accomplish it with steel, I thought it might work with fire, like how a certain famous newtype robot and pilot shoot it out of their fingers with a newtype flash sound. So I tried imitating the *Fullmetal Alchemist* brothers' boss by drawing a magic circle on gloves, and it actually worked!

Thus, I ended up drawing a magic circle on the top of a pair of gloves. It'd be an exaggeration to say I put my hands together like the brothers and infused mana into them in a flash of light...but I did basically recreate that action. I was impressed! However, after actually trying it, I have to say it was much harder to

use than I had expected. You had to put your hands together to make it work, but if you had multiple kinds of magic circles drawn on your gloves, they'd all go off at once and just end up canceling each other out. So in the end, it all went haywire and was just a huge waste of magic.

So if you wanted to use several different magic circles with this method, you had to wear that many gloves, which was a pain. Not only that, but in my case I could already use every type of elemental magic due to my cheat ability, so it was easier to not use any magic circles at all.

But learning how to use them wasn't a waste, because it led to my learning how to create magical tools. After that, I learned several Time-Space magic spells. Now, armed with both of these skills, I wanted to challenge myself to make a magic bag. However, it was pretty tough.

I used Identify on the bag that Dad had several times and got some advice from Gramps, and after some trial and error, ended up making two attempts. I showed the first one to Gramps and he said that it wasn't a magic bag, but something called a dimension bag. It was similar to the magic bag that I was trying to make, but had different effects. In the case of a magic bag, its interior capacity depended on the materials used and your individual skill level. It used Time-Space magic to enlarge the interior to fixed size and to freeze time within the bag. As long as the bag itself didn't break, food placed inside of it would never rot. The only catch was you couldn't put living creatures in it.

On the other hand, a dimension bag resulted from trying to make a magic bag, but putting either too much or too little mana into it. On the rare occasion that you succeeded in enlarging the space, time still wasn't frozen within it. So most of the dimension bags you'd see down at the port could only hold slightly more than they would appear to, and were generally seen as flops or inferior items. When I made that flop in particular, though, not only did I put Time-Space magic into it, but also the embodiment of my imagination, Creation magic. So the interior ended up being about fifty meters long in all directions.

Until Gramps saw it, I thought I'd made quite a handy little flop and that was the end of it. So I was quite surprised when he said that people would be coming after me when they discovered I had a dimension bag of this scale, and that I should use magic to register the item for myself, and Enchant it with

defensive properties.

After thinking about it for a bit, I realized that although it couldn't protect against degradation like a magic bag, which froze time for any objects placed inside of it, it still allowed you to hold a lot of items in a small space. And unlike a magic bag, you could carry living things inside a dimension bag.

In other words, this small, unassuming bag could even carry people inside of it. Soldiers could use it, or maybe even a group of criminals. And since it could hold a lot of items within it, it could easily be used for war or a coup d'état if it fell into the wrong hands.

Of course not everyone would think like that, but even just the fact that you could carry so many items in it would make merchants want it desperately—even to the point where they might try to kill me to get their hands on it.

This bag could be the spark of war, the seed of discord, the key to fortune, a tool to help many people—the possibilities were endless. Once I'd come to that realization, I finally understood what Gramps meant.

So I quickly began to work on giving the bag security measures. Gramps showed me how, and using the simplest and strongest method, I fashioned it so that the dimension bag could only be used with a registered user's blood, mana, and key. Not only that, but unless you possessed those three things, you couldn't interact with the space inside the bag either. And if you tried to forcibly remove the security measures, you would incur magical damage (I'd made the bag a Lightning Elemental type) from it.

As for the key, it could be a real key, or something that would be used in place of a key, like a ring or some other kind of accessory. But most people preferred to use a password, so that was what I decided on too.

It seemed like the reason so many people used a password as their key was because you could just think of the password and touch the bag to unlock it; you didn't even have to say it out loud. That also reduced the chances of someone else finding out what it was. I thought long and hard about what my password should be, and then decided on "Tenma.com." Since the internet didn't exist in this world, I thought it was a pretty decent choice. I didn't tell Gramps my password, of course, and he didn't ask either.

Lately, my days had been pretty fulfilling, as I mostly spent them conferring with Gramps, testing out various spells. But recently, monsters had been spotted coming from the Elder Forest and roaming around nearby, and many people in the village had fallen ill. Gramps kept saying, “I have a bad feeling about this. I hope it’s nothing, though...” as if foreshadowing what was to come.

I hoped the same thing. But I was concerned, because it seemed bad feelings like this had a way of turning out to be right all along.

Part Four

Ten years after I had been reincarnated, I was finally allowed to enter the Elder Forest by myself. Originally, Dad said I could once I turned eight, but my mom was vehemently opposed to that idea, so then it was changed to when I turned ten. I had to return home before dark, though.

So once I turned eight, I decided to learn the magic spell Fly before I turned ten. The only catch was that, while it was fast to use Fly as a Wind Elemental spell, I could only travel in a straight line, which made it pretty difficult to use in a forest. That was why I decided to test out making a type of flying spell with more freedom by combining the Fly spell with Float, which was slower but gave me the ability to move more freely through the air. Then, I threw in a little Time-Space magic to reduce the g-forces experienced by my body while flying. The result was an original magic spell I called Soar.

Using Soar, you could fly to a location you had reached previously and gain experience by searching from that area. Once I showed the spell to Gramps and Mom, they both said, "How very useful!" and learned a similar spell themselves. The only difference was they didn't include the element of reducing the g-forces like I had, so their spell was slightly inferior compared to mine. However, they were able to use Boost magic to make up for this shortcoming and come pretty close to matching mine. In fact, they both learned it so quickly it made me pretty mad. Not only that, but they were so overly proud of me that they'd tell anyone who'd listen what I'd done, which was utterly mortifying.

After that, I used the knowledge from my past life to craft several more original spells like that, but I kept most of them a secret from my parents and Gramps so I never had to go through that kind of embarrassment again.

About six months had passed since I'd been given permission to explore the forest. I was walking around like usual, and used Detection in a twenty-kilometer radius. Just then, I sensed two large objects right on the edge of the radar screen that popped into my head. I used Identify on them.

Name: Golden Fenrir

Name: Silver Lobo Fenrir

I was about twenty kilometers from the village, but the monsters were no more than thirty. And they were gradually approaching the village. Even though we were in the forest, a monster like that could travel thirty kilometers in about two hours with no problem. Deciding that I might be able to scare them away from the village at the very least, I approached them from the air as quietly as I could.

I flew, using Detection and Identify in combination, and after about twenty minutes I finally spotted them. Now that I had them in my sights, I used Identify once again.

Name: Golden Fenrir

Sex: Male

Rank: A

Class: Mythical Wolf

Name: Silver Lobo Fenrir

Sex: Female

Rank: A

Class: Mythical Wolf

This time, I got a bit more specific information about them. I was still a ways off, so I couldn't view their skills, but a Rank A monster with a name like "Fenrir" was definitely no weakling. They were probably the strongest monsters I'd seen so far.

I tried observing them from about a hundred meters in the air so they wouldn't spot me. They were both black from head to toe and moved sluggishly. I'd purposely tried to leave as much distance between us as possible, but maybe I was staring too hard because just then I made eye contact with the

golden Fenrir.

As I did a sharp nosedive from way up high, with enough force to quickly attack and then retreat again using my magic, I regretted not having used a surprise attack to take care of them all at once. At the same time, I began to chant a high-level ice-type Water spell called Ice Lance. Right when I'd gotten as close as I possibly could to them, though, the exact same feeling I'd had when I first met Rocket came over me.

Flustered, I quickly stopped casting the spell. I landed behind a tree about thirty meters in front of the wolves, which was a cautious buffer distance to ensure I could run away at any time. I stayed on high alert as I slowly approached, using the trees as a shield. As I got closer, I realized that they were each more than four meters long, and the reason they looked black from head to toe was because they were covered in blood; I wasn't sure if it was their own, or something else's.

They seemed cautious but not hostile at my sudden appearance, so it didn't feel as if they saw me as an enemy. When I got to a point about fifteen meters away, I stopped, and we simply stared at each other for nearly five minutes. When that passed without incident, I was about to take another step towards them when all of a sudden they stood up and started howling at the brush nearby.

The howls startled me, and I was about to quickly fly backwards to put some distance between us, but at that exact same moment, something leapt towards me from the side, its mouth open wide. I was already floating in the air, so instead of trying to change directions I used an Earth magic spell called Earth Needles. I basically guessed at its location as I cast the spell over and over again, skewering the unknown monster from below right through its chin.

It turned out to be a Rank B monster called a dragonsnake. This monster was also not the kind you'd usually see around this area. This dragonsnake was alone, but they were strong, higher-rank monsters. Unfortunately, most of the time they moved in groups of four or five to hunt their prey. When they were in a group, their danger rating jumped to A or A-. They were generally about seven or eight meters long, but sometimes could get as large as ten meters in length.

Using Detection, I discovered that there were eight more hiding in the area, not counting the one I'd just skewered that was on its last legs. A pretty large group. Even if I tried to escape through the air, they could easily jump over ten meters high using their full height. So if I botched the timing of my escape attempt, it would leave me defenseless and I'd end up being their lunch. I thought it was perhaps a better plan to try to defeat them one by one while the two wolves were still here. That was if the wolves cooperated, of course. Thanks to the dragonsnakes' sudden interruption, I now had a potential three-way dogfight on my hands.

I could take on three while the wolves took on five. Then we might be able to get away.

The dragonsnakes immediately split into two groups, with me taking on the smaller group. I briefly considered waiting for an opportune moment to run away, but if I did that, it would mean certain death for the wolves. And if they *did* survive, they might hold a grudge against me for abandoning them and follow me back to the village.

On the other hand, if the wolves were defeated, it was highly possible that the two of them wouldn't satisfy the group of dragonsnakes, so worst-case scenario, the dragonsnakes would come after the village too. It would be much more convenient for them to target prey like the villagers, who would be easier to hunt than monsters in the forest. So running would be my absolute worst choice right now.

Why are monsters like this so close to the edge of the forest in the first place? I'm glad I didn't bring Rocket with me this time.

Since the Elder Forest was so vast, even a location thirty kilometers into it was still considered to be at the edge of the forest. Normally, only monsters of Rank C or lower were found here. One would usually come across Rank A and B monsters a hundred kilometers into the forest. So what had happened today was extraordinarily rare. But even though it was a rare occurrence, I wasn't happy about it in the slightest.

With these kinds of odds, it was like I'd won the lottery...but the only good thing about this situation was that I hadn't brought Rocket with me. My original

agenda had been to go deeper in the forest than I ever had before, so I'd asked Rocket to stay home just in case. Rocket didn't seem happy about that, but it obeyed me anyway. I was glad it was a very obedient slime. Even if I had taken it with me, I would've put it in my bag while I fought, just to be extra careful.

As I silently cursed my luck, I prepared a magical attack. But for some reason, the dragonsnakes backed away. They had surrounded me, but didn't seem like they were going to attack.

What's with them? Are they hesitant because they saw me fight back against their comrade? Or are they after something else...?

"Awooo!" As I was pondering the unusual behavior of the dragonsnakes, I heard the wolves howling behind me. I turned and saw that they were in trouble. One of them had gotten slammed to the ground, and the other had its teeth sunk into a dragonsnake's head and had broken the skin. Unfortunately, another dragonsnake had bitten its throat, and so it was close to death.

Now that I was distracted by the wolves, the three dragonsnakes surrounding me must've thought it was a good chance to strike, because they lunged at me all at once.

"I'm tougher than you think!" I yelled. I created a barrier of compressed air between the three dragonsnakes and myself to block their attacks, then used Wind magic to fire off three separate Windcutter spells. The three dragonsnakes must've sensed that I had used magic, because they tried to leap into the air to dodge the spells, but the moment they hit the ground again, the impacts made their heads slide right off and they died.

Perhaps they hadn't realized they'd been sliced in half, or perhaps they just had very high vitality, because their bodies and heads were still moving independently even though they'd been severed. I figured they didn't pose much of a threat to me in this state, though, so I went ahead and ran off towards the wolves.

I checked my surroundings as I ran, and spotted two dragonsnakes—one on its last legs that had its stomach ripped open, and another with a gaping wound in its head.

"Eat this!" I located the remaining three dragonsnakes and used compressed

air magic to cast Air Bullet, firing off several rounds while making sure none of the shots hit the wolves. I was able to shoot the dragonsnake that had its teeth sunk into the wolf's neck right in the head, tearing open a hole in it about three centimeters wide.

It didn't die instantly, but instead sprang away from the wolf to roll around on the ground in agony. It wouldn't last long after that. The two survivors tried to lunge towards the wolf that lay on the ground, but seeing the effects of Air Bullet took the wind out of their sails and staved off their attack. Once I saw them hesitate, I prepared myself to use magic against them. However, it seemed they had finally realized that their other six comrades had been defeated, and they ran off deep into the forest before I had the chance to attack.

I made sure that the surviving two had run far away before looking back at the wolves. The one that had a wound on its throat had already passed away, and the one lying on the ground seemed like it could die at any moment. I quickly tried to use healing items and recovery magic on it, but it must have lost too much blood and taken too much damage for any of it to have an effect. At that point, I decided to try and at least make it comfortable in its last moments, when suddenly I noticed something odd.

First of all, its stomach looked very big—but not because it was fat. At first I thought it was just bloated because of internal bleeding, but that didn't seem to be the case. Its nipples were swollen, and only then did I realize that it must be pregnant.

At that moment, it mustered up its strength and started to bear down. It was about to give birth. I thought it was unlikely that it would be able to make it through the birthing process when it was in this state, but concluded the very least I could do was keep it safe from other monsters. So I watched over the wolf, making sure no other creatures got near it.

Ten minutes must have passed since its labor started. I saw all the tension leave the wolf's body, and then a little white baby wolf was born. The mother wolf was close to death and could barely move, but ever so slightly, she lifted her head to stare at me. The moment we made eye contact, I scooped up her baby and brought it to her face. She still couldn't move, but she stuck out her

tongue and mustered up some strength to clean off her baby.

A few minutes later, she finished cleaning the baby and looked at me again, then weakly lifted up one of her hind legs. I realized she wanted to feed her baby. I moved the baby over to her nipple and put its mouth to it. At first the baby didn't know what to do, but finally its instincts kicked in and it started enthusiastically nursing on its mother's milk.

Once the baby had drunk its fill of milk, the mother took her last breath and passed away with a look of satisfaction on her face.

I placed the bodies of the two wolves and the six dragonsnakes into my dimension bag. Then I scooped up the baby wolf once again and used Tame to make it my follower.

"I'll be your family now, since yours is gone," I told it. "What should I name you? How about *shiro*-something since you're white... I know—Shiromaru!"

"Awooo!"

"It's nice to meet you, Shiromaru!"

And so I gained another new follower—no, a new member of my family.

Can you hear me, everyone? This is Tenma, coming to you live from the scene! I'm reporting from Kukuri Village, where Mt. Celia has erupted! The scope of damage here is serious. Witnesses confirm the volcano has erupted five to six times, and the lava is threatening to encroach upon both the Ricardo and Merlin defensive walls.

This has been Tenma, signing off... Ah, hang on! It's erupting again! The lava is now flowing over the defensive walls and coming our way! I'll see you all again if I make it out of this alive!!!

"Tenma! Are you listening to me?!"

"Yes! I'm listening!"

"Don't lie to me! You've been spacing out this whole time!"

I've been busted, everyone. And that was a close one—I almost triggered another eruption.

"Tenma! Why didn't you run away?!"

Here we go again. Just then, the defensive walls—er, I mean Dad and Gramps—came to my rescue.

"Celia, that's enough. Maybe what Tenma did was dangerous, but I think he made the right decision."

"That's right," Gramps chimed in. "Even if Tenma had run away, that doesn't guarantee that the dragonsnakes would've gone back deeper into the forest. Worst-case scenario, they could have ventured even closer and attacked villagers who came to hunt in the forest, or even attacked the village itself! So it's a good thing that he helped prevent that."



"Fine, then," Mom said reluctantly, after a pause. "But I don't want you going anywhere near that forest until we've made sure the edges of it are safe! Do you understand me?"

"What?"

"I *said*, do you understand?"

"Yes! I understand, Mom! I won't go into the forest until it's safe again, ma'am!"

"That's more like it!" Thankfully, Mom ignored my unusually polite choice of words and accepted my answer.

"At any rate, I think we should check the borders between the forest and the village to make sure no other dangerous monsters are lurking about."

"And of course, we should let Margrave Haust know what's happening, just in case."

Dad and Gramps conferred with each other for a bit, gathered up their things, and then left the house. It felt a little awkward now that it was just me and Mom.

"Awooo!" The tension in the air must've agitated Shiromaru. He'd been curled up in a corner of the room fast asleep, but was now on his feet, yawning and stretching.

"Shiromaru, hm? Where do you come up with all these names, anyway?" Mom seemed to be unsure of the Japanese-style name I'd given my new wolf pup. It was taking her longer to get used to it than with Rocket. Nevertheless, there was a smile on her face as she watched the newborn pup.

They had given me permission to keep him as soon as I got home. Not only was he already registered as one of my followers, but in a rural forest village like Kukuri, taming a wolf-type monster was something to be celebrated, especially one of a higher-level species like a Fenrir.

The reason for that was because even in this world, wolves lived in packs with absolute hierarchies. As such, they naturally avoided areas where stronger members of the same species lived. Lower-ranking members of the pack feared

for their lives if they should encroach upon the territory of stronger wolves, and higher-ranking members didn't want to risk losing their status to a stronger wolf either.

I couldn't expect any of that from Shiromaru yet since he was still a baby, but once he grew bigger, I hoped that he would become a guard dog of sorts and that his sense of smell would aid the whole village.

So there was no way Mom would tell me to get rid of someone who could become so important. Even Dad was already looking forward to taking Shiromaru hunting. Thanks to Shiromaru's presence, the awkward mood in the air between me and Mom dissipated, and things went back to normal.

"Tenma, don't you think it's time to feed him?" Mom asked, right as Shiromaru began whining. Apparently, she was right.

"Looks like it. I'll be back," I said, and scooped him up in my arms. I took Rocket along, and the three of us headed for the village entrance. Shiromaru could still only drink milk, so I was going to get goat's milk for him, just as my parents had done for me when I was a baby.

We'd already spoken with the goatherd, who happily gave us permission to have the milk. He said, "This is my investment in his future, because once he gets bigger he can be a goat guard dog." I'd never heard of a guard dog for goats before, so I guess the goatherd had made it up.

This was actually the same goatherd from whom my parents had obtained the milk for me, so in that sense Shiromaru and I were milk-siblings. Once Shiromaru had drunk his fill of the goat's milk, he fell asleep right away. I squeezed some more milk into a bottle, then put it in a magic bag to preserve it—not for me to drink later, of course, but for Shiromaru.

You might have wondered why I'd even go to the trouble of taking him along, but Gramps said that having Shiromaru drink directly from the goat would make him stronger. As for the bottled milk, I was preserving it for emergency use.

After I finished milking the goat, I thanked the goatherd and was about to go home...but the goats were just so fond of me that I started playing with them and lost track of time. I ended up getting home pretty late and Mom got mad at me again.

The next day, Dad, Gramps, Uncle Mark, and some other volunteers from the village helped butcher the meat from the two wolves and six dragonsnakes I had in my bag. At first, I was opposed to butchering Shiromaru's parents. But they told me that it was common knowledge that the bodies of strong monsters needed to either be butchered or burned to ash, because if we buried them there was a possibility they might come back as undead monsters. Apparently Fenrirs as a species were even more likely than usual to come back from the dead, according to my ex-adventurer parents. After that, I realized that my way of thinking was quite silly.

And so we removed their hearts, hides, fangs, and teeth, burned the rest of them, buried the ashes deep in the ground, then erected gravestones on top.

After we had washed the hides thoroughly, I realized they were a beautiful glossy gold and silver color, respectively. Also, once I gave Shiromaru a bath, I discovered he wasn't white after all—he was also silver. I made the decision to take Shiromaru's parents' fur and use it to make a bed for him.

Some villagers seemed taken aback by the way I treated the materials we got from the wolves' bodies, but they seemed more enthusiastic once we started butchering the dragonsnakes. That was mainly because I suggested we take some of the meat and have a feast together.

Since there were six dragonsnakes, all with bodies over four meters long, we thought we'd have a rough time butchering them. But they were surprisingly easy to skin. And all we had to do was separate their hearts, skins, fangs, skulls, innards, and meat—no special preparation was needed for any of their insides. For that reason, we butchered the six dragonsnakes much more quickly than the two wolves.

I had the rights to the materials we got from the wolves. I decided not to sell the parts, and instead put them in my own personal magic bag, which was Good tier and could store items weighing up to one ton. My plan was to keep the parts there in storage until I needed them. I just didn't like the idea of selling parts of Shiromaru's parents for money.

The flesh and hearts of the dragonsnakes weighed twelve hundred kilograms all together—one whole dragonsnake weighed about three hundred kilograms,

with about two hundred kilograms of that being edible. I put four hundred kilograms worth of that meat in my bag to preserve it, and gave another four hundred kilograms to the villagers to share amongst themselves. I decided to save the rest of the meat, the skins, and the rest of the materials to sell the next time traveling merchants came by the village. They visited fairly soon afterwards, and happily bought the dragonsnake materials for 300,000G and the meat for 40,000G.

I thought since it was snake meat it would taste gamy, but it was actually even more delicious than chicken. It had the perfect amount of fat, so it tasted fairly light.

The women in the village had prepared the meat with various spices and seasonings so people wouldn't grow tired of the same flavor, and it was so delicious most of the four hundred kilograms of dragonsnake meat ended up in the bellies of villagers that same day.

I was suddenly rich thanks to the dragonsnakes, but obviously since I was still a kid I had my mom keep the money for me. There wasn't much for me to spend it on out here in Kukuri Village anyway, and they weren't the kind of parents who would let their child hang onto a small fortune. I voluntarily gave it to them—or, well, to be more precise, I had a feeling Mom was going to say something about it, so I handed it over before it became a big deal.

The currency in this world was gold (G for short), and from what I could tell 1G was roughly equivalent to 10 yen. There were seven types of coins in all: copper, silver, and gold all had small and large coins, and then platinum was its own type. Small copper coins were worth 1G, large copper coins were worth 10G, small silver coins were worth 100G, and so on—all the way up to platinum coins, which were worth 1,000,000G.

The average family of four living in a big city could survive on about three or four small gold coins (30,000 to 40,000G) a month, while in a rural village, you could get by on one small gold coin a month, or even less. But in a village like Kukuri, all the way out here on the border of the kingdom, you could make do with five or six small silver coins (500-600G) a month. That was because we supplemented our food supplies with the meat we hunted and the crops we grew in our fields.

So even though we were out here in the countryside, the villagers here were pretty well off. They had goods to sell, but not a lot to buy. At that time, I had no idea I would soon face an incident that would make me realize that being blessed with money out in the countryside wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Part Five

About a month had passed since I'd sold the dragonsnakes, and a large group of adventurers had come to the village. Since the Elder Forest was nearby, it wasn't unusual for adventurers to visit, but these particular adventurers weren't after medicinal herbs like the rest. They were after monsters of Rank B and above, like the dragonsnakes I had defeated.

Apparently they'd heard about the dragonsnakes from the merchant I sold them to, and a bunch of them got the idea in their heads that they could make a killing if they caught a monster like that, or at the very least, some quick cash by selling medicinal herbs. They all came at once, so it was like a festival in the village.

"We're making a lot of money selling such a simple meal," Dad murmured as he stared at the adventurers lining up to buy the soup my mom was selling. She'd made it with meat and medicinal herbs, which gave it a slightly salty taste. It was quite simple, but it was definitely the most popular item for sale in the village.

"Looks like you were right, Tenma." Gramps agreed with Dad, and gave me a pat on the head.

It had been my idea to use dragonsnake meat in the soup. It seemed like adventurers were superstitious in every world, so I told Mom that if we were going to sell them food, I suggested that we should advertise it like, "Nab a dragonsnake with our dragonsnake soup!" to attract customers. The adventurers got a huge kick out of this, and ate bowl after bowl. It took not only Dad and Gramps to control the long line winding out of our door, but Uncle Mark as well. His family wasn't selling anything, so we paid him for his part-time help. Meanwhile, my aunt helped Mom serve the food.

Three people were enough to control the crowd, but most of them obeyed instructions immediately when they saw Gramps and Dad, quickly falling into a neat line. Not only that, but some of them even asked to shake their hands. I knew that Gramps was famous, but I didn't know that Dad was too. I asked Uncle Mark about it and he said that while Dad wasn't as famous as Gramps,

there were even people in the capital city who would've heard of him, and Mom as well.

Mom and Dad still looked pretty young, so I asked if they were popular with the opposite sex. To my surprise, Uncle Mark said Mom was really popular with women, and that Dad was really popular with men. Later that night I asked the two of them about it, but they just laughed it off. Gramps and the other villagers wouldn't tell me either.

About a week after the adventurers had begun arriving, none of them reported encountering any monsters that were Rank B or higher. Gradually, they began to give up on the hunt and leave the town. It was around that time that the incident occurred.

"There aren't any Rank B monsters at all!"

"You lied to us! All you villagers are in cahoots with the merchant who tipped us off in the first place!"

"Give us back the money we spent to come here!"

There were a few ne'er-do-wells among the adventurers who remained, and one day they raised a commotion. According to them, the stories of Rank B monsters near our village were lies designed to steal money from adventurers like themselves. The villagers and the merchant who'd provided the information were all working the scam together.

Honestly, they were a bunch of complete idiots. And I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Dad, Mom, Gramps, the other villagers, and even the other adventurers all agreed, and treated the rabble-rousers like they were stupid.

And that was because they believed that one of the fundamental rules of being an adventurer was taking responsibility for yourself. The adventurers who'd come here hadn't bought the information directly from the merchant, but had instead heard it at a guild from other adventurers who had met the merchant on the road.

Obviously, it'd be a different story if the adventurers were young and inexperienced, but generally speaking, if they came all the way to Kukuri Village because of sketchy information and then suffered a loss because of it, it was

ultimately their own fault for having been misled.

Plus, there were some adventurers who'd only spent a day at the village before deciding there weren't any Rank B monsters here. Most of the ones who remained were the usual crowd who came to gather medicinal herbs. Of the ones still on the hunt for Rank B monsters, there were those who'd received the same information as the men causing a ruckus, those who knew the chances were low but wanted to take a gamble at the edges of the forest, and those who fully understood the dangers and had their sights set on the forest's depths.

Just listening to what the troublemakers were yelling made it clear that they weren't newbies, so there was no reason to feel sorry for them. In fact, everyone was ridiculing them.

"If all you're gonna do is whine about it, why don't you just go home? Staying here won't get you anything, right?" Their attitudes were so poor that my dad couldn't take it anymore. He began to engage with them.

But they were stubbornly convinced that they were right, and wouldn't listen to a word he said. Then they started ganging up on Dad. "Shut up! We had to borrow money to come all the way out here!"

"Yeah, if you want us to go home, pay off our debts! And throw in some extra for damages!"

There were five men surrounding him. They were all muscular, and bigger than him too. However, Dad remained completely calm, which only provoked the men more.

"How 'bout you give us the money right now...unless you wanna die!" The situation continued to escalate. At last, their behavior angered Dad, and his mood became hostile in a flash.

"Shut your mouths..." said Dad.

Those three little words made the atmosphere tense. The adventurers around him must've sensed danger, because they unconsciously took a step backwards. The only ones who didn't seem surprised were me, Gramps, and the other residents of Kukuri. "You speak so easily of death. That must mean you're also

prepared to die, right?” Dad spoke in a quiet, deliberate tone, which only made it scarier. He was seething with anger, and looked even more dangerous than a dragonsnake. If Dad ever got that angry with me, I’d be groveling on my hands and knees apologizing. That’s how intimidating he was.

“Wh-Wh-Wh...” The men seemed pretty scared of Dad too—they were paralyzed with fear.

“So what’ll it be? Are you going to leave, or are you going to take me on?”

“Grr... Damn it! Let’s go!” The leader didn’t stand a chance against Dad’s chilling intimidation, so even though his face was scarlet with anger, he took his group and headed out of the village.

When they were out of sight, Dad let out a deep sigh and went limp. “Honestly...no matter how old I get, there’s no shortage of idiots like that in the world.”

“That’s true—but the world was full of idiots like that even back in my day. I think there are far fewer nowadays, believe it or not,” Gramps said. He and Dad started to laugh, which made everyone else chuckle as well.

“Tenma, don’t ever forget that you’re the only one responsible for the decisions you make. Apparently those guys don’t understand that you only get one life, so you should make the most of it.” Judging by the look on his face, Dad must’ve thought he’d said something pretty clever, but Grandpa shook his head.

“Even if they did understand that in their heads, the rest of ‘em was no good. Subtract their faults from their good points and you don’t just get zero—you end up with a negative number,” he quipped, making everyone burst out laughing.

Dad blushed, looking embarrassed, and quickly excused himself. He seemed to be back to normal by the time we got back home, but Mom was suspicious about Dad’s behavior, so she asked Gramps about it. After Gramps told her the story she started laughing too, which caused Dad to lock himself up in his room.

The next day, Dad was still a little grumpy. Uncle Mark, however, was completely oblivious and ended up mentioning the incident from the day

before in conversation, which led Dad to make Uncle Mark spar with him for stress relief. RIP, Uncle Mark.

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"Damn it! That old redneck geezer thinks he's really something, doesn't he?" Late at night, the adventurers that had run away from Ricardo sat atop a hill some ways from the village, airing their grievances around their campfire.

The most vocal of the bunch was their leader, whom Ricardo had shot his death glare at. He was stomping around in circles, trampling the grass around them. The others seemed pretty angry too. They were completely oblivious to the fact that this was little more than an unreasonable grudge. And the reason they were oblivious was just as Merlin had said—they had more negative qualities than positive ones. If Merlin and the others could have witnessed this conversation, their opinions of the adventurers would have plummeted even further.

"Isn't there anything we can do? You know, to make them eat their words!" The leader shouted at his friends, but none of them could come up with anything. Just then, however, they heard a voice from behind them.

"You just want them to eat their words? That's all?"

"Who's there?!" None of the men had heard anyone approaching and they panicked, quickly grabbing their weapons.

"Put those things away, they're dangerous! If I wanted to kill you, I would've done it already, and silently...if you were our enemies, that is. So, you want revenge on those villagers? We'll lend you a hand." A man emerged, a mask concealing his face. There was another person standing behind him.

The leader of the adventurers seemed cautious, but he couldn't move a muscle. Of course, he was a half-wit who hadn't realized how strong Ricardo was, but unlike Ricardo with his unassuming appearance, these men were clearly dangerous and had snuck up on the adventurers without their even noticing. "Wh-What do you want from us?" he finally managed to ask.

The two men briefly exchanged glances, and then one of them spoke. "We have our own reasons. As it happens, we found something we've been looking

for in that village. But that place is a bit dangerous, you see? So we've been looking for people who will cooperate with us. We were surveying the situation, and that's when we stumbled across those of you who seem to share our interests. So, we came here. Well? What will you do?"

"All right—we'll work with you. What do you want us to do?" The leader came to this decision immediately. His friends were a bit wary that he hadn't even bothered consulting with them first, but he was the leader because he was the strongest among them, so no one dared to complain.

The leader was aware that the two men were looking down on him and his companions, but at the same time, he'd decided that the two men were clearly stronger than them. He couldn't explain why he was afraid, but he was, and thought that this was the least dangerous choice. He knew that if he'd said no, the men would've certainly killed them all right there on the spot. If that was how it was going to be, it was better to be their pawns.

And he wasn't wrong about that. The two men gave the leader and the others orders, then left. Once they'd gotten some distance away, they joined up with a third individual. All of them had wicked grins on their faces.

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"Hm? It looks like it's going to rain. Tenma! We're cutting our hunting trip short today!" We'd been so busy dealing with the adventurers lately that it'd been quite a while since Dad and I had gone out hunting in the forest. But now the air seemed humid, and Dad spotted dark clouds gathering in the sky.

"Got it. Come, Shiromaru!" I wasn't too pleased about this, but I didn't want to have to shelter from the rain out here in the forest, so I called Shiromaru back to me and picked him up in my arms. Dad called for Rocket, who immediately went inside my dimension bag without being prompted. He had what I guessed was probably his face peeking out the top, waiting for me to check on him. "All right, we've got both of them."

"Let's hurry home, then."

We'd spent about three hours out today, but it had taken at least an hour to get to where we wanted to go, so really we'd only spent a bit under two hours hunting. And that wasn't a very long time for a hunting trip at all.

"We didn't do too well today."

"Yep—only one mountain quail and one pheasant. But you know, Tenma, this is a pretty good result for how little time we spent hunting," Dad said. In my opinion, this was a pretty bad result, but according to him my normal hunting haul was unusually large.

Mountain quails and pheasants were very cautious animals, especially those that lived here in the forest among the monsters, so it was harder to catch the ones that lived here than those that lived in other places. I was surprised when I first learned that, but after giving it some thought, I realized that it didn't matter how well they hid, because I could use the abilities Detection and Identify that had been bestowed upon me by the gods.

I'd sneak up on game before they even had the chance to become suspicious, and kill them before they even noticed me. It was so fun that it was actually kind of addictive. I'd even brought back ten mountain quail in one day. Apparently, that was a new record in Kukuri Village—the previous record had been held by my dad when he was young and nabbed seven of them. When he found out I broke his record, he had a conflicted look on his face, and I couldn't tell whether he was happy or sad about it.

We hurried towards home, not thinking much about hunting, and reached the village in about half the time it had taken on the way out. The only problem was that as soon as we passed through the gates, it started to pour. Completely soaked, we ran the rest of the way home.

As soon as we walked through the door, Mom scolded us and sent us straight to get a bath. She didn't have any more complaints once we'd washed up, though. Apparently she was angry about the fact that we'd burst violently through the door, not the fact that we'd gotten soaked.

"Gramps might not make it back in this weather."

"Not even Uncle would go out in this downpour."

Today Gramps was away from the village on an errand, which was unusual for him, and so he hadn't come hunting with Dad and me. Missing out on going hunting with us almost made him decide not to go, but since he'd made a promise, he very reluctantly parted ways with us at the village gates.

"He might be closer than you think. Maybe even at the front door..." Dad laughed, pointing at the door, and just at that moment, someone knocked.

For a moment we were startled and thought Gramps really had come home, but after another knock we heard, "It's Mark! Please let me in!" and we realized we were mistaken. We all exchanged looks and chuckled wryly.

"It's open, come on in!" Dad called. The door swung open and Uncle Mark stood there in the doorway, completely soaked.

"Ricardo, you need to come right away!"

"What is it?" Dad asked Uncle Mark, who looked visibly shaken, pulling himself to his feet at once to get ready. Mom started getting ready to leave too, grabbing her robe and staff from her room.

"There's a pack of wolves lurking around near the village. They killed some of Hugo's goats."

Hugo was the village goatherd who'd given us the milk when I was a baby. He was a large man who looked very strong, but had a kind heart and a surprising aversion to violence, particularly towards children and animals. According to Uncle Mark, it was all he could do to defend himself against the wolf attack. Fortunately he wasn't injured, but the wolves took the bodies of his goats after they'd killed them.

After the wolves left, Hugo called for help and several villagers began patrolling around the perimeter of the village. But since they thought there were at least ten wolves, they decided to form a hunting party led by Dad to kill them, or at the very least chase them off. Apparently the mayor had decided this, and he hardly ever intervened in matters unless they were quite serious.

"So he only wants me and Celia, then?"

"Yes—not even the mayor would ask Tenma to participate. If he did, the whole village would probably hate him."

"Uncle isn't here, but if it's just some wolves, we can manage fine on our own. Tenma, you stay here and hold down the fort."

I'd been getting ready just like my parents, so I froze when I heard these

words. They gave me apologetic looks when they saw how I reacted.

"Listen, Tenma. You don't have experience fighting in the rain yet. We're planning on showing you how at some point, but it's just too dangerous to let you come with us when we don't know exactly how many there will be or what state they're in."

"But they're just wolves. I've fought dragonsnakes before..." I had a hard time believing there were any wolves stronger than dragonsnakes and I tried telling them so, but Dad shook his head firmly. Mom and Uncle Mark agreed, looking at me with stern expressions.

"Sure, Tenma—if they were normal wolves, it wouldn't matter how many there were, because a dragonsnake would always be stronger. And if it were daytime, we'd certainly take you along. But this time, even if they *are* ordinary wolves, there are situations when even first-class adventurers can't let their guards down. And that's fighting after nightfall, *especially* in the pouring rain."

"That's right, Tenma. Plus, it'll be even more dangerous if the wolves get inside the village and there's no one to fight them. So your job is to protect the village." Mom was speaking to me as if she was placating a child... Well, I guess technically, I *was* still a child.

I had a feeling that, if Mom and Dad pulled out all the stops, there was no way those wolves were getting inside the village, but since everything they said was true, I obediently decided to stay home. But first, I made them promise they'd take me out hunting the very next time it rained.

After a quick strategy meeting, they left. Once they were gone, I locked the door and went back to my room, but I was still wide awake. Later, I discovered that Dad had laid a sort of alarm system around the house after they left—less to deter the wolves, and more to make sure I didn't try to leave. He left clappers as makeshift alarms all around the house, but there were several gaps between them so I decided that in the worst-case scenario I could just escape through those.

The rain began to ease up around an hour after they left. From time to time, I could hear wolves howling in the distance.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." I murmured to myself.

I made some soup and put it in my magic bag so it would stay warm for when they came home. Every time I thought I hadn't heard the wolves in a while, I'd hear them howling in the distance again. It bothered me. Even though they were wild animals, would they still howl to let each other know where they were when they were hunting or being hunted?

I pondered this as I looked at Shiromaru, who was curled up sleeping in a corner of my room.

"Well...there's no use just thinking about it. Detection!" First I used my skill across the village. The village was a couple of kilometers across, but it seemed like the hunting party left most of their members outside its borders. Within the village, I received two separate pings of groups of three individuals.

I widened the scope of Detection and found Dad and Mom about five kilometers away from home. They were in the fields where the mountain goats usually grazed. I detected several defeated wolves nearby, and then two groups of wolves that were moving in opposite directions. Mom and Dad started chasing the group that was heading towards the village.

"Hmm... I don't think I can see any farther than that, but it doesn't seem like this will take much longer. I guess they really don't need me... Huh?" Once I'd determined that Dad and Mom were beating the wolves by an overwhelming margin, I tried to search for Uncle Mark, but what I found surprised me.

Dad and Mom's paths were arcing slightly away from the village. I could only tell because I was using magic to basically get a bird's-eye view of the village, but since they were on the ground chasing after the wolves, they probably didn't realize it.

The wolves had started out moving towards the village, but once Dad and Mom started chasing them, they gradually began to turn away.

Something else that was strange was that there weren't any wolves by Uncle Mark and the other villagers at all. Yet they would hear howling coming from various directions, and each time they'd start racing off towards it. I tried to expand the range of Detection as far as I could just in case, but I still didn't find any wolves.

"When did the wolves disappear? Hm? Wait... Who are these people?" I was

so distracted by trying to locate Dad and the others that I only just now noticed that my skill was alerting me to two separate groups several meters from my house. There were five people in one group and three people in the other. They were on opposite sides of the house, but it was clear that they were slowly making their way towards it.

I decided to use Identify to check, but I didn't recognize any of their names. They were not from this village. In fact, I saw the words "Assassin" and "Murderer" show up in the data for the group of three.

"They're definitely not part of the hunting party... Rocket, Shiromaru. Quick, get in my bag." I urged them inside my bag, then raced outside with it before either group had reached the house. The group of three seemed pretty tough, but the other five were normal adventurers, and none of them had any particularly dangerous-sounding titles or high-level skills.

So I decided to take the adventurers on first. Wanting to figure out what they were up to, I got close enough to observe them.

"Are you really sure this is gonna work?"

"It's worked so far, hasn't it? Just do what they say!"

"Even if it doesn't, at the very least it'll scare them."

"That old geezer ain't here anyway, so beating one or two kids should be a piece of cake!"

The five men continued to draw nearer, apparently not cautious in the slightest. I recognized them at once as the group of adventurers my father had scared off. They hadn't noticed me yet, and they were talking a whole bunch of smack. So I took that as my cue to not hold back.

"Take that!"

"Oof!"

The moment they were next to me, I charged at the man in front of the group and punched him right in the face.

"What the hell?!"

Next, I landed a kick on another one, sending him to the ground. Only then

did they finally realize they were being attacked, drawing their weapons...but they didn't even get the chance to use them before I rendered them all powerless.

"Wow, you guys are weak. I think forest goblins put up more of a fight than you!" I didn't actually mean that, but it was true that the men currently sprawled on the ground before me were incredibly weak.

It was too dangerous to leave them where they were, so I confiscated their weapons and tied them all up. Just then, I heard a clatter from the direction of the house. The group of three had set off the makeshift security system. They were surprised for a moment, but went inside the house anyway.

"If they were just burglars, they wouldn't come out for a while...but it looks like they're up to something else," I mused aloud, once I saw them come back out right away. It seemed like what the adventurers had said was true—it was me they were after. As such, I decided to hide a short distance away from the crew of five that I'd tied up.

Unlike the adventurers, the group of three was approaching very cautiously. As I hid in the brush, I wondered if they were looking for the adventurers so they could join up with them. Suddenly, the largest of the three men stopped and started looking around. He was a canid—a dogman—but no matter how much better his sense of smell was compared to that of a regular human, there was no way he'd be able to pick out my scent in this rain.

As I continued watching, the man pulled down his hood. When I saw his face I nearly yelled out loud. Most demi-humans I'd seen either possessed a particular animallike feature, or had bodies or faces that were sort of animallike in nature, but for the most part they looked roughly human. But this man was different—his face was basically all dog. That wasn't the only thing that surprised me, though. He had scars on his face, as if he had been tortured.

One of his ears had been mutilated and he had large scars across both of his eyes. I wondered if he was blind. There was also a wound across his mouth as if it had been sliced open.

"He's close... He's somewhere close, but not even I can pinpoint his location exactly with this rain."

"Then it's my turn. Hey!" The smaller man who was standing next to the demi-human spoke up, gesturing towards the heavyset man who was behind them. The heavyset man nodded quietly. He took a bag out from inside his coat and opened it up. The next moment, five wolves leapt out from it and sat down obediently, waiting for the man's instructions.

"I found these clothes in the house. I think they belong to the kid." The small man held out a piece of my clothing and let the wolves sniff it.

"So they're the ones behind the wolves..." I muttered. "I gotta get away from here." But the moment I stood up to move, the wolves suddenly came charging right towards me.

"Over there! Hey, let's go!" The small man began to run alongside the wolves. They were at least fifty meters away, so I had enough time to prepare myself...or at least, I thought I did.

But the wolves were closing in on me faster than I expected. Their eyes glinted and drool dripped from their mouths. Even though I wasn't fully prepared, I took out my shortsword so I'd at least be able to get one hit in and put some distance between us. I meant for my first hit to be a counterattack, but timed it poorly, so though I thought I'd sliced off the head of the wolf in the lead, it put on the brakes instead. I got nothing but air, while it proceeded to lunge straight at my throat.

I quickly changed the arc of my sword and managed to slash the wolf, but it was unfazed and actually bit the blade, still lunging towards me. I rolled across the ground, narrowly escaping danger as I evaded the wolf who was biting my sword while the rest of the wolves rushed in.

"Eat this!" I cast four Windcutter spells towards the wolves, but the blades of wind couldn't cleave the wolves in half. Instead, they just left shallow cuts in their chests. That seemed to spook them, though, so they put distance between us, which gave me several openings. I thought it was strange that they didn't seem as hostile as before, but I didn't want to let this opportunity slip, so I attempted to make my escape. But since I'd spent time engaging with the wolves, that allowed the little man to get close to me.

"*Hiyah! Hiyah!* Take that!" As I was unarmed, his attacks seemed to taunt me.

I couldn't see his expression because he wore a hood over his face, but I was certain it would look crazed. The man seemed to be enjoying himself as he attacked me over and over again, and I frantically twisted around to dodge him. Still, his knife grazed me several times and the scent of my blood filled the air.

Fighting in the rain was much more difficult than I'd expected. It chilled my body, numbing me such that I couldn't move as I normally would. All of my senses were thrown off too, but the worst of them all was my vision.

If the problem was just a lack of clarity in my vision that would be one thing, but I couldn't stop the rain from getting in my eyes, which made me involuntarily squeeze them shut. Most of the injuries I'd received had occurred when rain got in my eyes.

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't go dyin' on me yet! I'm not done havin' fun with you!" Most of his attacks were little more than taunts, but every time I tried to use more sweeping movements to dodge them, the wolves would come running. And if the wolves weren't enough to keep me in check, the other two men were now loosing arrows in my direction. So I was stuck with no real way out.

"Hey, hey, hey! Wha...?" The man must've gotten cocky, because his legs got stuck in the mud and he lost his balance. "Argh!" Finally, I had my chance. As he fell, I landed a kick right in the pit of his stomach. Then I used the kickback of my attack to cast my Soar spell.

"And take this too! Flash!" I used a Light Elemental spell which let off a very bright light for a split second. This was a boosted form of the basic elemental spell Light, which was normally used like a flashlight. I'd tried to aim for the same kind of effect as a stun grenade, but if I got lucky, this alone might be enough to incapacitate my enemies. However, it didn't make any sound and it didn't have the capacity to kill them.

Mom and Dad would surely notice if I used a spell that stood out as much as this one. I used Detection to check on them, but both of them were surrounded by wolves. That explained why they hadn't returned even when the security system had gone off.

In that case, I'd have to go and meet up with them myself. But the second I spun around to do so, an arrow pierced my leg. The pain stunned me and I

nearly plummeted to the ground, but I somehow managed to stay afloat. I looked in the direction the arrow had come from and saw the small man crouching down with his eyes covered, and the wolves flailing around next to the man who had controlled them. The demi-human stood next to them, readying his next arrow.

"Heh heh heh... You must have used light magic, but unfortunately for you, your spell doesn't work on someone who doesn't rely on his sight!" He began to loose arrows one after another. Although he'd said he didn't rely on his sight, his arrows were aimed straight for me and I flew around desperately to avoid them.

Still, if I could just stick it out, eventually the others who had seen the flash would come to check it out and find me. Surely Dad and the others would realize I was in some kind of danger...

But that was only if I could last.

All of a sudden my vision began to spin and my whole body felt like it was on fire, as if I had a fever. I lost my sense of equilibrium and fell to the ground. I didn't have far to fall, so luckily I didn't suffer much damage. But it felt as if the ground itself were roiling beneath me, so I couldn't even stand up.

"Hey, it finally worked! I was worried I had a defective product on my hands. They said, 'It can take down an ogre with one shot!' Yeah, right! They must've meant 'goblin'!" the dogman complained as he took a small bottle out of his pocket, spit flying from his mouth as I crawled on the ground.

"Ahh, damn it! I can't see a thing!" the little man cried as he stood up, but he really must have been blinded because he turned in the opposite direction from where I actually was.

"Not that way! Hurry up and use recovery magic!" the canid said. Apparently, the little man had forgotten that he could do that. He quickly began to use recovery magic.

"My vision's clearing up a bit, but I think it'll take some more time. I can only barely see."

"You can see better than me, though. Let's hurry up and take care of the brat,

then get what we came here for!"

Just as the men started coming towards me, several arrows sailed through the air right for them. None of the arrows hit their targets, but it was enough to make the men back away from me cautiously.

"Keep shooting! We need to get them as far away from Tenma as we can!"

It was Aunt Martha. She was with some of the elders of the village and the women who had been left out of the hunting party. They were the ones shooting the arrows. Around ten of them kept firing one arrow after the other in our direction. They may have been left out of the hunting party, but they were still residents of a village which bordered a monster-infested forest, so there were many former hunters and adventurers among them—and even those who didn't have that kind of background still knew how to use weapons. So although they weren't the best archers out there, they weren't the worst either.

Other villagers who had stayed behind heard the commotion and came out wielding bows as well. If we could buy enough time, I was sure that the hunting party would return soon. But my attackers had come to the same conclusion.

"Tch, just grab it and let's run! Guess Fatty won't be able to..."

By "Fatty," he must have been referring to the heavyset man, who was still writhing on the ground holding his head in his hands. Apparently they had decided to just abandon him.

"You take care of the ones behind us. Once we get our hands on it, we get the hell out of here."

Deftly avoiding the onslaught of arrows, the little man approached me. He kicked me as I lay on the ground, then reached for my dimension bag, which contained Rocket and Shiromaru.

"Bag's locked. Must be inside. Here we go... Ouch!" The instant the man shoved his hand into the bag, he let out a yelp and then yanked his hand back out. Shiromaru had latched onto the man's hand. Since Shiromaru was still a baby, his teeth hadn't fully grown in yet, but he seemed to have bitten the man as hard as he could. Even though the man tried to shake him off, Shiromaru

wouldn't let go. "Knock it off, you damn dog!"

"Awooo!"

Still, Shiromaru refused to release his grip on the man's fingers. The man lost his temper and raised his arm, then slammed Shiromaru down onto the ground. Shiromaru twitched several times, then went limp.

"Damn it! This is your fault too!" Furious, the man grabbed me by the collar and clenched his hand into a fist to punch me. But the moment he did, Rocket leapt out from the bag. "Wha—? Arghhh!!!"

Rocket slammed into the man's face as hard as it could, and it looked like it hit him directly in the eyes. The man screamed and tried to protect them, but Rocket was glued to the man's face, covering even his mouth.

With his mouth smothered, the man couldn't take the pain. He reached for the dagger hanging at his hip and sliced at Rocket, not caring if he cut his own face in the process.

Severed in two, Rocket peeled away from the man's face and fell to the ground.

The man's breathing was ragged. "You're not gonna get away with this, brat! I'm gonna kill the old geezers here, and that old witch, and all the rest of you too! And I'll save you for last, you snot-nosed little jerk! You can watch me kill everyone else before I finish you off! Have fun in hell!" With a psychotic look on his face, he turned his back on me and started walking towards my aunt and the others. Frantically, they continued to loose arrows, but kept missing or having their shots turned away. Not a single one hit their target.

Despite this, Aunt Martha and the others stood their ground. They began to pull out other weapons like swords, axes, and hoes.

"Damn it! That idiot's snapped! Now I've got no choice... Hey! Quit wasting time! Not even we can take on that brat's parents!" the canid yelled.

In response, however, the small man simply raised his dagger.

"They're coming! Everyone who has a bow, try to stop the canid! Surround him and attack all at once! Don't let him corner anyone by themselves! Those in

front—focus on defending us instead!” One of the villagers who had battle experience began to call out orders. Everyone fell in line, preparing to take on the small man, who looked unfazed as he continued his approach.

“Fire!” At the villager’s signal, they surrounded the small man. Still, his expression never changed.

“Shut up! Lie down and die, you old geezers!” The man was fielding attacks from all sides, but he beat down every villager, one by one. A few minutes later, the ground around the man was stained red with blood—but none of the villagers were dead. Apparently, he hadn’t taken them seriously enough to injure them. As the villagers got back to their feet one by one, the man smiled and brandished his sword.

Now that the men’s attention was diverted, I dragged my body along the ground over to my two followers.

“Rocket, Shiromaru...”

They were both very weak, but fortunately their injuries weren’t fatal. If I healed them both right now, they wouldn’t die. I used recovery magic on them as an emergency measure, then turned to glare at the men.

The small man was cackling with amusement as he battled the villagers. The canid merely looked bored that no one was shooting arrows at him anymore, and let out a relaxed yawn. The moment I saw this, I felt something very dark and ugly bubbling up from deep inside my chest.

I’d been attacked by monsters and beasts before, but never by people. In my past life, I’d gotten into fights with people, but they were the kind of fights where neither of us ever intended to kill the other. Those scuffles usually ended in tears, or when one of us got sick of fighting.

So I’d never felt like this before. I’d never felt like an emotion this strong—a desire to kill someone at all costs.

But the poison prevented me from moving as I wished. I was in better shape, but I was still in no condition to kill them, thanks to the arrow piercing my leg and its poison collecting in my wound. So...

“Nngh, aah... Oof!” To get the poison out, I simply had to pull out the arrow. I

couldn't do anything about the poison that had already worked its way through my system, but if I got rid of its source, surely I'd recover on my own. After all, that was how my body had been created. So I pulled out the arrow, then used my dagger to widen the wound so that the poison flowed out along with my blood. Then I used recovery magic to close up the injury once more. At my current skill level, I could only heal it rather haphazardly, but it was good enough to stop the bleeding. I should've had Mom show me how to use magic to cure poison...

It seemed like the pain from opening the wound had brought me back to my senses, because my vision was starting to clear. I had pretty much regained the feeling in my hands and legs too. But I didn't think this moment of clarity would last long. That meant I had to attack now and put an end to this as quickly as possible. I was going to kill them...

"Hey! I said stop playing around! Damn it, you never listen... Huh?" Even though the canid couldn't see, that bastard immediately sensed I had gotten up —though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, since he *was* a dogman.

But it was too late.

"Aircutter!" When I'd attacked before the arrow had hit me, I'd done so using the usual amount of mana, producing only a fraction of the amount of force my attacks usually had. Thinking logically, if I instead used several times the amount of mana I usually did, then I would be able to attack with my usual amount of force.

So I tried using five times—no, ten times—my usual amount of mana, just to see what would happen.

"I'm not scared of magic that couldn't even hurt a wol— Wha?!" At first, it seemed the canid had intended to defend against my magic with just his armor, but his animal instincts must've kicked in, because his body contorted as he tried to dodge my spell. Unfortunately for him, though, my magic sliced off his right arm and leg, sending them flying.

"Ah... I messed up. I should've cast it *horizontally*, not vertically. Then I wouldn't have to go to so much trouble..."

I'd cast the spell by swinging my arm in a downwards arc, which apparently

made it easier to dodge. While voicing my regrets about this, I ran straight at him.

"Wha...?" Now that the canid had lost his leg, I went right up to him before he hit the ground. This time, I waved my arm in a chopping motion towards his neck. That was all it took for his head to hit the ground as well.

"Hm... I can use this pretty well." It was magic that I was talking about, of course. Since I was too close to him, instead of suddenly loosing the Aircutter spell as I normally would, I'd wound it around my hand instead. I felt something like a blade made of wind—a Windsword—being created in my fingertips. I'd also expended about ten times as much mana as I usually did for a normal Cutter spell. It packed a punch and the blades were virtually invisible, so it was perfect for a surprise attack. It didn't take long to invoke at all, and the blades of wind dissipated in a few seconds. It cost a lot of MP, but it was strong. Not to mention, it was very easy to use and I figured I could use the same technique with other elements too.

I looked at the canid, and it stared back into my eyes. I thought to myself, *This is the first time I've ever killed someone.* Apart than that, though, I didn't have any other feelings on the matter. Life in this world was short. If I was in a life-or-death situation, what would I do? I'd pondered that question several times since I'd been reborn into this world. After all, deep down inside, I used to be Japanese. Some might have said that as a people, we had no concept of danger, because we took our peaceful existence for granted. For myself, I used to think while I'd probably be able to kill an animal, there was no way I could kill a human. But it turned out that this fear was needless.

Some humans were lower than animals. And I didn't need to hesitate to kill people like that. Otherwise, I'd lose those precious to me. Once I came to that realization, the canid's head rolling across the ground in front of me looked like little more than trash. Maybe the scars on his face had been inflicted on him because he so strongly resembled a wolf. But the reason his head was rolling on the ground right now was because even his heart had turned into that of a beast.

"Sometimes people look human on the outside, but are even lower than beasts inside," I murmured to myself. Then I ran in the direction of the other

man, who was still doing battle with my aunt and the others. I could feel that he was beginning to tire, though.

"Hey! I'm gonna put an end to this now, so let's finish this! Tch!" As I ran, I passed by a sword that was stabbed into the ground. I pulled it out, then used it to slash at the man. Unfortunately, he happened to turn and defended against my attack. But he was one step behind me, so I decided to keep at it, repeatedly going at him with my sword.

"Ugh—nngh—gaaah!"

After I'd attacked him ten times, I was gradually beginning to lose my momentum, and by the time I reached twenty, he was able to ward off all my blows. But the end result was better than I could've imagined, which made me smile. I wasn't specifically trying to hurt him with my attacks. If I landed some blows on him, great. But my main goal was to get him away from my aunt and the others.

The man pushed back against my rush, moving out of the circle where my aunt and the others lay. Now I could attack him however I wanted without worrying about accidentally hitting the others.

"Don't get cocky!"

I fended off his attack with my sword, but the force of it knocked me back about three meters. The man was stronger than he looked. Meanwhile, using the sword to shield myself, not to mention the flurry of blows I'd directed at the man before, had left it bent and covered in nicks and chips.

As I faced off against the man, I determined the location of the next nearest sword.

"Fatty is useless, Dogface is dead... Wasn't expecting this, but now I don't have to share the payout. So die!" The man's face twisted cruelly as he charged towards me. I glanced over to the sword I'd located earlier, and then threw the bent one that I held at him. "I can tell exactly what you're gonna do next, so—Arrghhh!" He beat back the sword I threw towards him, swinging his own blade down to block my path as I took a step forwards.

He'd correctly predicted my behavior up until that point. But that wasn't my

ultimate goal. I knew that he was going to thrust his sword towards me, so I abruptly stopped short, and his swing caught nothing but air. Then I used Windsword—the same spell I'd used on the canid—and cut off the man's arm. Immediately afterwards, I stopped using Windsword and used my fingers to gouge out his left eyeball. I hooked my thumb into his now-empty eye socket and then slammed him into the ground as hard as I could. Then I jumped away.

It seemed he was in more pain from losing his eye than from losing his arm. He pressed his remaining hand against his eyes, writhing around on the ground. Now that our one-on-one battle was over, I suddenly noticed a sharp pain coming from my right hand. Eyeballs were tougher than I'd thought, because apparently I'd broken two of my fingers when I'd stabbed them into his eye socket.

I used emergency recovery magic to set my bones in the right direction again, but since I was still a novice at recovery magic, I wasn't able to completely fuse the bones together. So really, it was little more than a step up from painkillers. I was just glad it didn't hurt as much anymore.

I recovered the sword that was lying near the man, as well as the one his severed arm was still holding, then turned towards my aunt and the others.

Though they weren't even a few dozen meters away from me, it was tougher to reach them than I expected because as I moved, my body began to feel heavier and heavier. As for the villagers, they seemed to be unconscious from blood loss, exhaustion, and the severe beating they'd received. Much to my relief, though, not one of them had life-threatening injuries.

I began to use recovery magic on them, starting with the most seriously injured. After I'd healed several of them, someone else who could use recovery magic regained consciousness, so they took over for me.

The moment I thought that my job here was done and began to let my guard down, pain lanced through my entire body and I fell to my knees. And all of a sudden, I sensed an intense hostility coming from where the man still lay writhing.

"Gonna...kill...youuu..." Drool spilled out of the man's mouth as he staggered towards me on unsteady feet. Blood streamed from his missing eye, and he

didn't seem to have his faculties about him. I'd come to that conclusion because not only did he not seem to care about the saliva dripping from his mouth, but he ignored the flow of blood from his severed arm as well. Actually, now that I thought about it, maybe it wasn't that he didn't care. Rather, it was like he didn't even feel any pain.

His behavior reminded me of the wolves who had attacked me when all of this had begun.

"Crap..."

He was coming closer, but my body felt as heavy as lead. It was all I could do to not lose consciousness.

"Somebody! Get Tenma out of here! The rest of you, start throwing stuff! Weapons, rocks—whatever you can get your hands on!" a villager with comparatively light injuries screamed as he grabbed a rock at his feet and chucked it at the man. He'd aimed for the man's head, but the man just paused for a moment before starting to walk again as if nothing had happened.

"Do whatever it takes to stop him! Just get Tenma out of here!"

"Let's go, Tenma!" Aunt Martha lifted me onto her back and began to run, while the other villagers shielded us. Once we made it past them, they clustered together and started throwing things again.

"Ngah?!"

All sorts of objects slammed into the man's body, but he didn't stop. Every now and then, he would look like he just remembered something and take a small bottle out of his inner pocket, downing it in one gulp. Every time he drank, he seemed to become less human, until eventually he reached a point where it was like he'd turned into a beast entirely.

"Physically hold him back if you have to! Don't let him through!" At those words, the villagers rushed him all at once, but then the man began to run at an unbelievable speed, using them as stepping-stones to jump towards me.

"Ahmgonna...kiiiill yaaaaa!" Nearly bursting with malice, he leapt towards me, but was struck by something in midair. Whatever it was that struck him splattered muddy water as it landed. At the same time, the man fell, his head

slamming into the ground.

“Ughhh... Aghh...”

He was tenacious. The fact that he’d survived all that meant he was definitely no longer human. Over and over again, he tried to stand up on his broken legs, and each time he fell back down. His remaining arm and his neck were broken too. His head lay twisted sideways upon his shoulders.

I wanted to look away from the whole bizarre scene. While my attention was fixated on the man-turned-zombie, something hugged onto me from the side.
“Tenma! You’re alive!”

That mysterious muddy ball that had knocked the man away and was currently trying to strangle me to death turned out to be Gramps, who was supposed to have been away.

“Gram— I can— Argh— Gonna...die...!”

In Gramps’s powerful embrace, my life was quickly dropping to zero. Aunt Martha panicked when she heard how strained I sounded and rescued me, leaving me lying faceup on the ground. The rain which soaked me was still uncomfortable, but it made me feel like I was really alive. Gramps, the culprit behind my current predicament, was on his hands and knees groveling and apologizing to me, but I didn’t have time to deal with him right now.

“Teeenmaaa!” At that moment, Flying Object Number Two charged onto the scene—AKA my mother. *Ugh, I’m so exhausted my thoughts aren’t even making sense anymore.* “You’re safe! Uncle, what in the world are you doing?”

Gramps’s body twitched momentarily when he heard Mom’s voice, but he didn’t lift his face; he just continued groveling. Instead, Aunt Martha had to explain the situation. Immediately, Mom began to cast recovery magic on me to cure my poison and disinfect my wounds.

As expected, Mom’s magic was super effective and all my pain disappeared. My feeling of lethargy still lingered, though. I had a feeling that was because I’d lost too much blood. There was no healing magic that could give you more blood, after all.

“Uncle, we’ll talk later. We need to help everyone first.”

Everything...everything will be okay now that he's here."

"A-All right..."

"Tenma..."

Looking pale, Gramps nodded. Just then, my dad charged in, but he wasn't able to hug me because of a wall my mother had put up around me.

"Dear, Tenma's injured! Go give *him* your attention instead!"

Thankfully, since the wall was made of mud, Dad wasn't injured when he ran into it, but now he was filthy. Mom tried to keep him away from me, pointing instead at the man who was still inching towards us.

He'd come pretty close, but since he could only move at about the speed of a turtle, Mom and Gramps had decided he wasn't a threat and had ignored him. Now, though, he was near enough to be dangerous. Dad had showed up just in time, so Mom directed him to deal with it instead.

Mom explained what had happened to Dad, and right away Dad decided this man must be part of the group of assassins who hurt me. He said, "I'm not going to kill him right away—I'm going to make him suffer until I feel better!" and cracked his knuckles, reminding me strongly of a character from a certain "ghoulish" apocalyptic manga.

Speaking of the group of assassins, the one they'd called Fatty was still unconscious. The villagers who'd recovered had tied him up along with the gang of adventurers I'd defeated. And for some reason, the wolves were also all out of commission, foaming at the mouths with expressions of pain on their faces.

While I rested beneath a tree, Mom and Gramps continued healing the rest of the villagers while Dad used the man as a punching bag. Mom also used recovery magic on Rocket and Shiromaru, who were now perfectly healthy and sleeping in my bag. The villagers from the hunting party had surrounded Fatty and the adventurers, but I couldn't see what they were doing.

"Merlin! Come over here!" Dad must've tired of using the guy as a punching bag because he now had him sprawled out on the ground. He called Gramps over and they began to discuss something. Curious, I strained to hear their conversation, but just as I did so my vision went completely dark.

"What's gotten into you, Ricardo? You've gone too far. I know this man's despicable, but this is just too cruel!" As Merlin looked at the man Ricardo had used as a punching bag, he voiced this objection. Several of the man's bones were broken at unnatural angles, making him look as if he'd gained a bunch of new joints.

"I guess you're right... I shouldn't have done that. But I don't regret it! Still—don't you think it's strange that he's still alive, even in this condition? That was another reason why I kept going. I wanted to see why he *wasn't* dying."

"Oh, now you're just making excuses..." said Merlin, poking fun at Ricardo's excuse. "It is pretty odd, though. Maybe he's got the life force of a zombie or ghoul or something. Martha said he looked human at first...so maybe he's just deranged?" he mused aloud, after checking the man's condition.

"It must be a result of what's in those bottles," Ricardo said, pointing at the pile of empty bottles lying in the man's wake. The villagers said the man had been drinking from them.

"Hmm... That's the only explanation I can think of. Might as well give up on trying to get answers out of him. I'd like to get a sample of what's in those bottles, but who knows what could happen. I think the best idea is to get rid of him entirely."

"Yes, that's the safest choice. I'll have Celia look at his friends later," Ricardo said, and then lopped the man's head right off. There wasn't a trace of guilt on his face as he did it.

Of course, now that he'd been decapitated, the man finally died, but both his head and body continued to move for a few seconds afterwards—surprising the two men right up until the end.

"Well, we need to make sure we collect every single one of these bottles. And then... Gah, hold on! He's still got more on him!" Ricardo fished around in the man's pockets and removed two bottles, along with three more that were inside his magic bag. In addition to this, he had poison and paralysis potions, concealed weapons, counterfeit items—basically, his bag was filled with all kinds of suspicious objects no ordinary person would have any business owning.

"I'm not sure we should get rid of all of this ourselves...particularly because the forged documents have Margrave Haust's seal on them! Maybe we should have the guild contact the margrave and let him know."

"You really want to get the guild involved?"

Regardless of whether the documents with the governor's seal on them were genuine or fake, having them in their possession would cast doubt on Ricardo and Merlin and would likely prove to be quite troublesome. That was why Merlin thought it was best if they had the adventurer's guild bring up the matter—because as an organization, they were capable of dealing with the margrave. And he had another reason for that too.

"The guild owes our village, anyway," he added with a smirk. Even though he had a smile on his face, it wasn't like any smile he'd ever shown to Tenma. And the reason he said this was because of the gang of adventurers who had aided the three assailants. After he and Ricardo had looked through their belongings, they'd found each of them was carrying a card. It was a form of identification adventurers belonging to the guild carried—a guild card. The most damning thing, however, was that they were carrying a promissory note from the guild. If Ricardo and Merlin brought that to the guild, the guild would surely grant whatever "favor" they asked for.

The guild had lent the adventurers money, and they had gone on to do bad things with it. So it was difficult to say that the guild bore no responsibility for those deeds. And if word got out without Ricardo and Merlin's control, their necks could be on the line too, since they were members of the guild—people might even say that they were party to the crime.

Worst-case scenario, even if the guild tried to feign ignorance, Merlin could use his own notoriety and connections to get something done...but it would be a lot more trouble to do things that way.

"I'll take the potions. If we can trust the guild, then I'll hand the potions over to them, along with the documents with the margrave's seal on them. If I feel like I can't trust them, I'll have my friends investigate. It'd be a disgrace to have to bow my head to the guild, after all..."

After that discussion, Ricardo and Merlin stuffed the corpses and potions into

an empty magic bag. A few days later, they dug a deep hole in the middle of a meadow and dumped the empty bottles in it, then incinerated them. They decided to keep the bodies in the bag, in case they turned out to have some further clues and became useful later.

“What about the survivors?” By this, Ricardo meant the surviving adventurers who had aided the party of assassins. Just then, however, he heard someone calling for him and Merlin.

“They confessed! The adventurers wanted to get revenge on Ricardo. Also...the fat one’s in danger,” Mark informed them.

Ricardo and Merlin had a feeling this was going to be trouble, but they couldn’t just pretend they hadn’t heard him. They urged Mark to continue.

“According to the fat one, they were after Tenma’s follower, Shiromaru. The person who hired them is a collector of rare animals, a taxidermist—he stuffs them. He’s been wanting a Fenrir pup. They brought him information about Shiromaru, and he contracted them to capture him. The person who hired them is a noble—a viscount. That’s who’s behind this whole plot.” Mark’s face was pale as he told them a noble was responsible for this. The rest of the villagers looked the same way; the only ones who seemed unaffected were Ricardo, Merlin, and Celia.

“What—just a viscount? Judging by that look on your face, I was afraid it was a count or someone ranked even higher than that! What if his superior is the margrave?”

“Ha ha, would’ve been pretty interesting if the margrave was behind it! Would you take even the margrave’s head, Merlin?”

“Maybe we could, if we took him by surprise. Besides, I’d hold even the margrave accountable if he was the one who attacked Tenma!”

Everyone was quite taken aback by the trio’s enthusiasm, including the heavyset man. But none of them thought it was impossible either. After all, Merlin by himself was more than capable of pulling it off. Add the two very skilled former adventurers to the mix, one of whom had been the sage’s apprentice, and the villagers might even have felt sorry for the margrave if he were attacked by such a fearsome trio.

Ignoring the aghast villagers, the three of them began to hatch a plot, but Mark interrupted them with more information.

"Just hang on a minute! This has nothing to do with the margrave!" His frantic intervention seemed to have disappointed the three of them as they called off their scheme. "The viscount doesn't have a superior. He doesn't belong to any political faction."

When they heard what Mark said, the trio's eyes gleamed.

"Ho ho ho! That's awfully convenient!"

"It gets a lot harder to get away with things once superior nobles are involved..."

"Don't worry. Even if they did involve nobles in their little plot, it won't be a problem unless they left behind evidence that can definitively be traced back to them."

Once Mark saw the three of them resume plotting, he wondered if he should've given them that information in the first place.

Two days later, a certain noble's manor was raided. However, since the perpetrator left no clues behind, the incident remained unsolved. Not only that, but there was no harm done to any of the residents who were home at the time. Only one room was ransacked, so even though there had been a raid, it was difficult to say they'd done much damage. This left the knight who was in charge of investigating the incident scratching his head—but there was a stunning development the following day when the lord of the manor, his wife, his son, and some of their servants were arrested.

This is what happened: On the day following the raid, the knight in charge asked for permission to do a more detailed search of the manor. However, the viscount denied their request. The knight grew suspicious that the viscount was so adamantly refusing his investigation, and that was when he received a message.

The message said, "The viscount is illegally collecting protected animals and other rare creatures as trophies. There are even *humans* among the trophies."

The knight in charge was shocked, and immediately conferred with his

superior, who dispatched the entire order to investigate. He made the decision right away because he'd long heard suspicious rumors about this viscount. By the time it had gotten to that point, the viscount barely put up a fight while the knights investigated. They quickly discovered a hidden room in the basement which contained the viscount's collection.

They didn't find any humans that were completely stuffed, but they did find embryos preserved in alcohol and what they thought were human eyeballs and other body parts. This was more than enough to charge the viscount with a crime, so he was arrested.

Around the same time the knights entered his mansion, several people inside tried to escape and were captured and arrested by a separate troop. Those people were the viscount's wife, children, and servants.

And that was how this particular noble was erased from the kingdom's history. However, they never found out who raided the viscount's manor, nor who sent the anonymous tip to the knights. So of course no one ever knew that the guild and a certain very influential noble were behind it all.

Part Six

"I recognize that ceiling..." I murmured as I stared up at the ceiling I'd seen every morning for close to ten years now. Slowly, I sat up and looked around. Yep, this was my room. I remained there in bed spacing out, when suddenly the door opened and Mom came in, carrying a bucket. Dad was right behind her.

"Tenma! You're awake!" The instant Mom realized I was up, she tossed the bucket out of her hands and raced over to me. The bucket slugged Dad who let out a noise like "Eegh!" before he collapsed, but Mom didn't even notice. "Does anything hurt? Do you feel sluggish or feverish or sick at all?" She rattled off questions as she examined me and took my temperature—honestly, it was kinda terrifying.

"Nothing hurts and I don't feel sick, Mom," I answered, moving my joints and flexing my muscles where I sat on the bed to show her. That seemed to calm her down. Just then, I heard Gramps's voice coming from the front door. He came inside and headed straight for my room. That's when he discovered Dad sprawled across the floor in my doorway.

"What in the world?! Ricardo, snap out of it!" Gramps helped Dad up—he had been knocked out cold by the bucket's direct attack. "What happened to Ricardo, Celia? Ah, Tenma! You're awake!" Just as Gramps started to ask Mom about Dad, he glanced over and saw me, and promptly threw Dad back onto the ground. Dad rolled a few times until he bumped into the wall and came to a stop. Gramps ignored him and ran over to me, examining me just as Mom had. Likewise, he calmed down once I told him I was all right.

"I'm fine but...I think Dad might be in worse shape right now."

"Ahh!" Both Mom and Gramps cried out at the same time.

Dad was lying against the wall like a limp rag, but the impact of hitting the wall after rolling across the floor seemed to have woken him up. Still, he remained there, unmoving. On closer inspection he was trembling slightly, so I wondered if he was crying from all the cruel treatment.

After that, the three of us succeeded in cheering Dad up, and discussed what

had happened that day. I learned that I had been unconscious for about a week since then. Sometimes I would open my eyes, and groggily use the bathroom or drink some water, but only if I had someone with me. I had no memory of this at all, but I was pretty relieved when I heard it was either Dad or Gramps who accompanied me.

"Hrm... You made the right decision by immediately getting out of the house, but not when you fought the adventurers. That just bought the group of three more time to find you. You should've either run away or called for help. Luckily, you used that light magic right away, so someone quickly came to help."

"I'm sorry..." Earnestly, I accepted Dad's slightly stern opinion and apologized.

"Well, let's just let that go. In the end, it was because Tenma chose to fight that even though some people got injured, no one died or was hurt too severely. And we were able to catch all the perpetrators."

"That's true...but it nearly gave me a heart attack! When I found out they were using poison, I was terrified that Tenma was going to die! But you did well, Tenma."

In the end, they came to the consensus that I had made the right decisions, so I didn't get scolded. As the conversation continued, I tried to bring up the canid I had killed, but the three of them avoided the subject. They did the same thing when I tried to ask about the adventurers and the two survivors, or what else had happened after the incident. I figured they were just trying to be sensitive, but it made me a little sad that they were excluding me. So I kept prodding them, and eventually they told me that the adventurers and the two survivors were given appropriate punishments, and that I had a very good reason for killing the canid so I shouldn't feel bad about it, and that I wouldn't be punished for it either.

They didn't tell me anything else, but from their conversation I gathered that the three assassins were after me and Shiromaru, and that the surviving perpetrators had either been given the death penalty or something similar to that. But they wouldn't tell me for sure.

At any rate, the incident that had happened in Kukuri Village was now completely resolved, and life gradually returned to normal. The only thing that

was different was that since I hadn't fully recovered, I wasn't allowed to go into the forest for a while, so I spent most of my days studying.

◊◊◊

About six months passed after the incident before I had finally recovered and was therefore allowed back into the forest. Truthfully, I'd felt perfectly okay not even a month after the incident, but since it was such a speedy recovery even for an adult, much less a child, Mom didn't believe me, and I had no choice but to obey her.

Since I couldn't go into the forest, I instead avidly read every book at Gramps's house that caught my eye, studied the basics of magic again with Mom, analyzed the cheat abilities I'd gotten from the gods, and did other such sedentary activities. In the end, those six months turned out to be pretty fulfilling.

Mom told me I was forbidden from engaging in any kind of strenuous exercise, so I couldn't spend much time training with Dad, and even when I did it was only for a short time, with very light exercise.

For that reason, Dad got pretty jealous of Mom and Gramps for being able to spend more time with me. Since he couldn't teach me magic either, he began to spend more and more time hunting in the forest. So when Mom decided I was fully recovered, he was the happiest of us all.

Anyway, during those six months, I practiced using the Alchemy spell Construct and the Creation magic spell Create, and put more effort into learning support magic. As a result of my studies, I successfully learned how to manufacture weapons and golems, and learned the spells Detox, Disinfect, and Boost.

The only one that didn't go very smoothly was Create; I seemed to be at an impasse with that one. One of the reasons for that was because Creation magic itself was a type of magic that seemed to exist in more of an allegorical sense than a practical one. Gramps had heard of it before, but apparently it was only ever referenced with old religious connotations, such as, "The gods used creation magic to create the world," in texts that he'd read a long time ago. On top of that, when he'd read about it at the time, he thought, "That sounds

pretty shady to me," and had forgotten about it entirely until I brought it up.

I didn't understand why I wasn't able to use Create even though I more or less understood how, so instead I focused on Alchemy, which I got better at using more quickly than I had expected. Because of this, I gradually began to care less about the Create spell. I wondered to myself if the process was the same as with Alchemy, but perhaps the reason it wasn't going well was because they were simply two different types of magic.

In order to use Alchemy to construct a weapon, you had to use materials near at hand to create a weapon of your imagining. The image in your head had to be well defined—you had to picture its shape, its size, its strength (or density)—and once you visualized those three aspects, it seemed as though you could make a second-class weapon or better, even if you couldn't quite call it a first-class item. That didn't really matter to me, though, since I intended on using this skill only in emergencies, and whatever weapon I'd created would be tossed afterwards. Though I couldn't create a lot of them at once, I had figured out another way to raise the weapon's level up to first class, so in my free time I challenged myself with that task and was able to create just a single weapon I was satisfied with. It actually took a lot longer than I expected...

As for constructing a golem, you could make its core by infusing a magic stone, a piece of metal, or a magic core with mana. If you then put that core into a body made with Alchemy, you'd have a golem that would follow its creator's commands.

If you made the core from metal, it would only carry out basic commands. However, if you made the core from a magic core or a magic stone, depending on its qualities and compatibility, it was even possible to make a golem with artificial intelligence...but that was much more difficult.

For example, magic cores possessed the characteristics of the monsters they came from, and embodied the mana they contained. Small ones were about two or three centimeters big, while the largest one on record came from an Ancient Dragon and was about a meter across in size.

That magic core in particular wasn't recovered after defeating the Ancient Dragon, but was miraculously found among its bones and then extracted. For

that reason, the magic core degraded very quickly and crumbled to bits within a few years. There were no pieces of it remaining today. That was why a lot of experts believed that the record of it was false. Even more damning, there was no record of the bones the magic core had supposedly been found with. And it seemed strange that they would even have taken the bones back after defeating it in the first place.

Getting back to the point, people said that it was better to use a magic core or a magic stone in order to make a stronger golem. The first time I made one, I put a rough image of it into a magic stone, and made the body from dirt I'd gathered nearby. Apparently this was a slightly more difficult method of making a golem, but still among the easiest methods. Another simple method was creating the body from wood and putting the core inside.

For my first golem prototype, I applied the core to the ground and was able to create one that sprouted from the earth, just like a C*Itivar. When I showed off my brand-new golem to Dad, though, he yelled, "It's a mutant goblin!" and cut it in two. That wasn't all—he also managed to cut the core cleanly in two, so I wasn't able to repair the golem at all. I was pretty bummed out about it.

Mom and Gramps were nearby, and sat Dad down to yell at him. Ever since then, I'd given up on the C*Itivaresque brand of golem. Personally, I liked the way they looked, but there was nothing to be done if they'd only be viewed as monsters in this world. By then I'd learned that there were naturally occurring golems in this world, though the chances of coming across one were pretty low.

Moving on to my other skills, the spells Detox and Disinfect did pretty much what they sounded like—they were the spells Mom had used on me before, when I was injured. You could use Boost on an item, raising properties like its defense, resistance, and attack, or you could cast the spell on yourself. It was a very versatile spell.

I thought it would take me a long time to learn it, but it actually wasn't that difficult of a spell. I was able to use a basic form of Boost the very first day I tried it. Visualization was very important in magic, and I found that if I just pictured stuff I'd seen in RPGs in my past life, things went pretty smoothly. Well—it worked to an extent, anyway. Anything beyond that proved to be more difficult.

But since I had the protection of the gods, I seemed to advance more quickly than most, and apparently people thought of me as a genius. That made me a little embarrassed, but when my family or the villagers mentioned it, they seemed very proud of me, which of course made me feel happy. I vehemently refused to be called “Genius” or “Favorite Child of the Gods” as a nickname, though.

After all that had happened, I was finally allowed to enter the forest. But since Mom was worried, I decided to just walk around the edges instead of going deeper inside.

“Go get it, Shiromaru!”

“Woof!”

Shiromaru enthusiastically chased after the stick I’d thrown. My wolf pup had grown about fifty centimeters in the past six months. His silver-white fur gleamed as he ran towards the stick, while Rocket and I watched over him. Speaking of Rocket, he was currently peeking out of the basket I wore on my back. This was his new favorite thing nowadays. As I played with Shiromaru, I practiced using Detection across a five-kilometer radius. All of a sudden, there were several dozen pings on my radar, so I quickly called Shiromaru back over.

I used Identify and discovered it was a group of orcs. Orcs were a type of monster that were also called razorbacks or porcines. Although they were referred to as demi-humans, they had the shape of pigs or boars that walked on their hind legs. The only thing about them that resembled humans was their hands. People ate their meat, and since they were more delicious than ordinary pigs, it was even sold at the butcher shops in town.

Shiromaru was still itching to play, but I picked him up and put him in the basket along with Rocket, then put the basket in my bag. I flew up into the sky to look down on the group of orcs. They were on a rocky hilltop away from the forest, right where it transitioned into a ravine. They were in the middle of attacking a carriage. Six people were fighting on the human side, against a group of forty-three orcs and then another separate group of six orcs. The humans had their backs to the rocky wall and were fighting with their carriage surrounded, but since they were vastly outnumbered by the orcs, the latter

were gradually closing in on them.

The orcs are gaining the upper hand... I gotta do something! I descended from the air and landed on top of the carriage, then climbed down.

"I'm here to help!" I said. I took ten magic stones out of my magic bag, then tossed them into the fray, between the six humans and the orcs.

Both sides were startled by my sudden appearance, but the next minute I heard even more cries of surprise. And that was because where the magic stones had landed, ten huge golems made of stone sprang from the earth, each standing about two meters high.

"Golems! Protect these people and defeat any enemies who get near them!" I shouted the order. Then I cast Hi-Heal on the six humans. None of them were injured too severely, but I figured it would at least ease their pain, even if it didn't restore their stamina.

The man who seemed to be the highest ranked out of the six of them began to thank me after I'd healed them, but I interrupted him. "There are six other orcs who are trying to circle around from above. I'm going after them." Then I flew up to the top of the cliff.

"Everyone, use this chance to prepare yourselves!" the man yelled. The other five retrieved spears from inside the carriage and began to attack the orcs from behind the golems.

Three minutes later, I flew back down to the bottom of the ravine. About seven or eight of the orcs had been defeated. The other orcs were spooked and had backed up, leading to a stalemate. Just as I landed, I spotted one orc in the back of the group who was even larger than my golems. "So that's the orc king, huh?"

An orc king was the highest-ranking orc of the species. Normal orcs were Rank D or C-monsters, while orc kings could be Rank C+ to B monsters. The reason they were dangerous was because it was said that they could boost their followers up a rank.



It seemed to be similar to my Follower Boost skill, but weaker. All it did was make the normal orcs just a little stronger than usual.

“Snorgh, snoorghhorgh!” The orc king let out a war cry, pumping up the other orcs and filling them with enthusiasm.

Reaching into my magic bag, I pulled out my sword. It had a curved, double-edged blade, and in my past life would have been called a *kogarasu maru* sword. It was about seventy centimeters long and didn’t have a guard or a grip. In place of a grip, the wielder would wrap a rope around their hand. I cast Boost on my sword as I charged towards the orc king.

“Snort!”

“Snorgh!”

I fired off a Windcutter with my left hand, slicing through the bodies of the orcs charging towards me. Then, with my right hand, I swung my sword, lopping off their heads in one stroke and slaying them one after the other.

The orcs were confused. But the king had definitely earned his title, because he remained unfazed and continued to attack me. And his weapon of choice? One of the headless orcs I’d just killed. I guess to this orc king, his pawns were as good as trash once they were dead.

Judging by the creepy sneer on his face, I had a feeling he thought that one mighty swing was all it would take to render me a lump of dead flesh. But in the face of his attack, I didn’t hesitate; I took a step forward and swung my sword, aiming for his neck. And that’s how the orc king ended up leaving this world with that same creepy sneer on his face.

The other orcs and the six people standing behind the golems stared in astonishment at the king’s head as it rolled before my feet, the smile still etched onto its face. I went ahead and slashed the orc nearest to me before it could snap out of it, and then used Earth Needle on a group of orcs that were huddled close together.

The sharp spires that thrust out from the earth knocked out about half of the orcs before they came to their senses. The other half of the group quickly tried to scramble away, but there was no way I was going to let them escape. And

now the humans were joining in on the counterattack along with the golems. Now it was the humans who had the upper hand, and we took down the rest of the orcs in no time at all, with very little resistance.

As I was moving the dead orcs inside my dimension bag to clean up the battlefield, one of the men approached me.

"Thanks for saving us back there. Because of you, no one was seriously injured." He was the best dressed out of the six, and the one who had tried to thank me earlier.

I quickly used Identify to see who he was.

Name: Alex von Blumere Krastin

Age: 47

Class: Human

Title: King of the Kingdom of Krastin

"King?" I blurted out, prompting the other five to shoot me suspicious looks. The most serious-looking of them all was a man with black eyes and short, silver hair. He stepped in, putting himself between me and the king.

"Oh, stand aside. He doesn't mean any harm," the king said to the man.

"But Your Majesty! This could all be a ruse! He could be waiting for the opportunity to attack you!" the silver-haired man said, drawing his sword.

"You would defy my orders?" replied the king, in a quiet, threatening voice. At once, the man backed down.

"P-Pardon me, Your Majesty!" He bowed his head and withdrew to his previous position behind the king.

"No matter. I know you are just concerned about my welfare. However, we do owe him a debt of gratitude for saving our lives. Also, you confirmed his suspicions when you called me 'Your Majesty' in front of him," the king pointed out. The man immediately gasped and went pale, then groveled on his knees. "What's done is done. I forgive you." He urged the silver-haired man to get up

and then directed his attention to me. “Now, as for you—how did you know I am the king?”

I couldn’t just tell him, “I used Identify on you,” of course, so I racked my brains to come up with an answer. Just then, the crest on the carriage caught my eye. “Th-The crest... The only ones allowed to use that crest, with the wild boar and the dragon together, are the head of the royal family or an archduke. And right now there’s only one archduke and I heard he’s pretty old, so I figured you must be the king.” I quickly rattled off my excuse. It was all stuff I’d learned from studying with Mom.

“There’s no need to be so nervous. Hrm, I see... You’re very well educated.” The suspicion disappeared from his face as he complimented me with a smile. Apparently he thought I was talking so fast because I was nervous, so he didn’t think much of it.

It had been ten years since I’d been reincarnated into this world and the first noble I met turned out to be the king. In my previous life, I only saw nobles on TV, or in movies and books. So honestly, I was afraid this was going to turn out to be trouble, and I just wanted to get out of there. “I’m so relieved none of you are hurt. Well, if you’ll excuse me...” I lifted a hand to wave as I turned, then tried to make an exit in the most natural way I could.

But the king grabbed me by my shoulder before I could run off. “Now, wait just a minute!” He had a smile on his face, but I just had a feeling something about him was saying, *You seem interesting, so I’m not about to let you go.*

To be honest, I had a bad feeling about this.

“I’m so sorry, Your Majesty, but if I don’t go home soon, my mother will start to worry.”

“What? I can speak to your mother for you. Surely she’ll accept an explanation from the king!”

You’re scary, Your Majesty... Your eyes aren’t smiling at all! Also, why are you addressing me so differently all of a sudden?

A woman who had long brown hair that grew halfway down her back must’ve sensed how I was feeling, because she reached out and grabbed my other

shoulder. “Give it up. Once His Majesty gets like this, he doesn’t quit.”

Hearing this, the king said, “You sure know me well!” and laughed uproariously.

I think I’m gonna cry.

“Your Majesty, please calm down. You’re scaring the boy...” one of the men said. He had a bandana wrapped around his short brown hair, and kind of reminded me of a bandit.

“He’s right, Your Majesty. He saved our lives, so it’s rude to make him uncomfortable,” a slender, handsome man with silky blond hair agreed.

“Fine, fine! Oh, that reminds me—I haven’t told you my name yet. I’m Alex von Blumere Krastin. I’m the king around here. Just call me whatever you want, though.”

The way he was talking now reminded me so much of the folks back in Kukuri Village that I blurted out, “Can I call you Uncle Alex?” I saw the faces of the people behind him all tense up at once.

“Ha ha ha! You say some pretty funny things, kid! I like you! It’s been a long time since someone talked to me in such a friendly way!”

I guess he likes me?

“I’m sorry. I was rude, Your Majesty.” I apologized for good measure. There was no way it was okay for me to call him “uncle.”

“I don’t mind if you call me Uncle Alex.”

I’m apologizing from the bottom of my heart! Please forgive me, Uncle A—Er, I mean Your Majesty!

“Call him King Alex, at least,” said a man who hadn’t spoken until just now. *Hey, thanks for sav—* “Right now, you look like nothing more than an old drunk uncle teasing his nephew, Your Majesty! No wonder that’s the first thing that came out of his mouth! Kings should behave in a more dignified manner! It’s really deplorable! Don’t you think, young man?” —*ing me...*

Even the king seemed to be mentally scarred from this barrage of harsh words, but he hung in there.

And I was really glad he did, without my having to step in and be like, “Please stop, he’s already dead!” Not that I really wanted to in the first place, anyway.

“And second of all, why are you always so cocky, Your Majesty? Can’t you think about the position that puts *us* in, since we’re the ones who have to clean up your mess? Are you listening to me, Your Majesty?!”

Wait, it’s still going? How long is this lecture gonna last? Also, is it really okay to talk to the king like that?

“And another thing, Your Maje—”

“Now, now. Calm down, Cruyff. His Majesty clearly feels bad enough as it is.”

“Yes, that’s enough for today. Let’s keep it short out of respect for Master Edgar.”

That was *short*?! Now I was morbidly curious as to what it was like if he *really* got going.

“Ah, forgive me for not introducing myself. I am Cruyff Sebastian, the grand chamberlain to the royal family. It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance.”

“And I am Edgar van Valentine. Thank you for your help.”

So the guy lecturing the king was his own butler?! Wait, and his name is “Sebastian”?

“Ah, by the way—the name ‘Sebastian’ is the name passed down through generations of grand chamberlains.”

Jeez, can you read my mind?!

“I cannot read your mind, but due to the nature of my job, I am quite skilled at reading one’s facial expressions.”

Damn, this butler’s good!

He must have been a first-class butler if he could tell what people were thinking without their having to say anything. If he used his powers for good, anyway...

“And I’m Jean Jack Bauer. You really saved our necks back there!”

Hmm... Isn’t that the same name as the main character of that drama that

unfolds over the course of twenty-four hours? That reminds me—there are twenty-four hours in a day in this world too, and twelve months in a year, but every month has thirty days so the year is only three-hundred-and-sixty days long.

“I’m Sigurd. Thanks for helping us out. And sorry I drew my sword against you, even though you risked your life to save us...”

“Thanks for saving us from danger. I’m Kriss. It’s nice to meet you. Also, um...could you please do something about those things?” The woman who called herself Kriss pointed towards the golems with an apologetic look on her face.

“Ah, sure! Good job, golems! Your work here is done!” I said, and the golems melted back into the earth and disappeared, leaving only their magic stones behind.

“Oh, they were golems? How impressive that you were able to control them to such an extent! May I ask your name?” said Cruyff the butler.

I stooped down to pick up the magic stones and answered him. “I’m Tenma. I live in Kukuri Village, just up ahead.”

“Ooh, Kukuri Village, huh? What a coincidence! I have some business there and I was just headed that way!” Suddenly recovering, the king joined my conversation with Cruyff. “Let’s keep going to the village. Cruyff! The horses and carriage are fine, right?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. While you and the young man here were speaking to each other in that appalling manner, I checked them all thoroughly.”

“O-Oh... Well, anyway, let’s set off for Kukuri! Hurry up and get in, everyone! Quickly!” For some reason the king was really hyped up and started urging everyone to get a move on. “You get in too, Tenma!”

That king is gonna be a pain to ride with, and it’ll take forever to get home...

“Ah, no thank you! I can use magic, so I’ll just fly home.” I turned to use my magic, but once again I felt someone grab me by the shoulder.

“Don’t be so cold, Tenma! You’re already here with us, so you might as well

ride along! Those horses were specially bred for the royal family and they're known for their speed, you know! Plus, they'll go way faster than normal horses because we'll use Boost on them!"

The king gave me a thumbs-up, and was talking so fast I couldn't get a word in edgewise to tell him flying was still way faster, so I just gave up. I got in his carriage and we arrived at Kukuri Village about two hours later. It wouldn't have even taken a half hour to get home if I'd flown. I asked the king some questions on the journey, and I learned he was quite the guy.

Q: Why are you going to Kukuri Village?

A: (Official reason) Rumors have come all the way to the royal capital lately about strange goings-on in the Elder Forest. Luckily, I conduct a survey of Margrave Haust's domain about once every ten years. I want the citizens to know that their king cares so much about the kingdom that he conducts the survey personally.

(Actual reason) My ministers have been driving me nuts lately, so I thought this would be a nice change of pace and an excuse to let off some stress.

Q: Wouldn't it have been better to just let them know through a statement by Margrave Haust?

A: (Official reason) The mere act of the king going to survey the domain in person puts a strain on the margrave. So having a small party on the way home after the survey means it doesn't put him out as much.

(Actual reason) I came here to relax. I don't want the margrave's minions following me around.

Q: Won't that create problems later?

A: (Official reason) It's important for the king to observe things directly so he can deal with things as quickly as possible.

(Actual reason) My ministers will take care of all that annoying stuff.

Q: Are you sure you're okay with that?

A: (Official reason) I surround myself with the best people so I can focus on doing my job as the king.

(Actual reason) I'm the king, I can do what I want!

And that was it for the Q&A session. Honestly, I was surprised there hadn't been a coup d'état yet. But the thing I was the most surprised about was—

"Ricardo!"

"Alex!"

—two old guys crushing each other in a bear hug...and those two old guys were my dad and the king. Apparently, back in the day Dad, the king, Mom, Cruyff, and another person—who wasn't here right now but was currently the captain of the king's imperial guard—were in a party of adventurers together. I guess they were a super famous party back then, and I heard they even managed to defeat a dragon. I did hear that Gramps had defeated one all by himself too. According to them, in this world it wasn't unusual for members of the royal family to go adventuring when they were young to study the workings of society. I also heard Gramps used to be the king's private tutor.

"He was of average intelligence, had mediocre magic abilities, and yet sometimes he did the most unexpectedly idiotic things. I never got sick of watching him," Gramps said with sincerity, reflecting on those bygone days. These words struck the king speechless. As the conversation centered on the two of them, however, all of a sudden Mt. Celia erupted once again.

"Tenma! How many times do I have to tell you to stop doing dangerous things?!"

"Celia, Tenma saved us. Go easy on him, would you?" The king tried to smooth things over just as he promised, but he shrunk back when Mom glared at him. "Er, never mind."

What a worthless king! But more importantly, what is the deal with Mom?! She just silenced the ruler of an entire kingdom with a single glare!

"Mistress Celia is Her Majesty Maria's—ah, that is, the king's wife, Maria von Blumere Krastin—bosom friend, ever since their days in the Lower School of the Magic Academy," Cruyff whispered to me from behind them as Mom glared at the king.

"Really?"

"And Queen Maria has the king wrapped around her little finger."

"So she's the one who calls the shots?"

"That is correct. Mistress Celia and Queen Maria still exchange letters, even to this day."

"Oh, so he doesn't want Mom to tell on him."

"No...but it would be more interesting that way for me, personally."

This butler's got a great personality.

"Tenma! What are you whispering about?"

"Oh, Cruyff just...huh? He's gone!" *When the heck did he disappear?!*

"Tenma... Apparently you still haven't learned your lesson."

Uh-oh! Mt. Celia is building up again. Isn't there a god? Oh, wait, there is—more than one, and I've met them, but who cares about that if they're not here to help right now?!

"Celia, just forgive him already. Someone who intervenes in a battle they can't win is foolhardy. But if you have a chance to succeed, that's courage. You should be complimenting him!"

"Uncle..." Gramps managed to gradually ease Mom's anger.

G-Grandfather! You're the one I should worship as a god! You shine brighter in my mind than any of those other gods!

"It's good to see you again, Master Merlin." The king greeted Gramps politely.

"Hrm. It certainly has been a while." Gramps nodded coolly in response. Er, wasn't the *king* supposed to be the superior one here?

"His Majesty respects Master Merlin like a father." Cruyff popped up again.

I'm just gonna ignore him this time. "His Majesty was quite naughty when he was a boy, and his behavior did not improve even when he was assigned a private tutor. Many of them quit, but he was so enthralled with Master Merlin's lectures that he gradually started behaving."

Wow, Gramps really is amazing. I'd decided I was gonna ignore Cruyff, but before I knew it, I couldn't stop myself from listening.

"He gave lectures about the most efficient way to torture someone, or the most efficient way to skip classes..."

"Talk about worthless..."

"At any rate, His Majesty found it so very entertaining. Master Merlin taught him things no one else would, and he grew fond of Master Merlin. Another reason was because Master Merlin was the only one of his tutors who ever struck him with his fist. In other words, Master Merlin is an expert at knowing when to offer a carrot and when to use the stick...although personally, I'm quite sure that was a fluke..."

Cruyff definitely had a gift with words—he knew just when to reveal the punch line. Not that that was important right now, but it just made me think about how many eccentric people there were around me at the moment.

"You're quite eccentric yourself, Master Tenma."

The last person I want to hear that from is a weird butler with mind-reading abilities!

The king and his party were going to check the perimeter of the Elder Forest all day tomorrow, then they would return to the royal capital the day after. There wasn't a lot of buffer in that schedule, but I guess they couldn't spare any more time. At any rate, today the king and Cruyff would be sleeping at my house, and the other four would be at Gramps's house.

Since Dad and the king were so amped up talking about old times, I had a feeling they'd be up late, so I decided to go to bed early. Good night.

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Later that night...

"I swear, you never change, Alex!" Ricardo said, as the emotions of their first reunion in ten years sunk in.

"Of course I haven't! Even if I'm older, I'm still me!" Alex said.

"He still never learns, that is for certain. Perhaps the only thing that has changed is that he has more power."

"I see you still have as sharp a tongue as ever, Cruyff," Celia mused.

"Power exists to be used!" the leader of the kingdom declared.

"And that's why Tenma got wrapped up in this!"

"I'm definitely going to tell Maria about this."

Ricardo was laughing, but Celia's eyes were not.

"Please do so, Mistress Celia."

"No, please—don't! Anything but that! Cruyff, you're supposed to be *my* butler!"

"I am also Her Majesty Maria's butler."

"My, my. Sounds like you're in quite the pickle."

For Ricardo and his friends, this back-and-forth banter was quite nostalgic. Sensing he was in an inferior position, Alex changed the subject.

"A-Anyway, since when did you have a child? If you'd said so in your letters, I would've come to visit sooner!"

"I did tell Maria. And she said at the very latest, she'd come to visit after Tenma turned fifteen."

"I never heard a word of this!" Alex insisted.

"Probably because Her Majesty knew if you caught wind of it, you'd abandon your duties and come for a visit right away."

"I can see Alex doing that... After all, here he is."

"True... This *is* King Alex we're talking about..."

Both Celia and Ricardo agreed with Cruyff's assessment. No one took Alex's side.

"Well, putting that matter aside, Tenma sure is something else. I don't think there's a person in the capital who could take him in a one-on-one fight and win. Why don't you send him there now to study instead of waiting until he turns fifteen?"

"You're quite right. If Tenma did not have magic, I think Jean could hold his own against him. But I think even Dean would be in trouble if he used magic," Cruyff said confidently. Dean was a swordsman and the last member of Ricardo's old party. He could use the highest tier of magic and was currently the captain of Alex's royal guard, said to be the strongest army in the kingdom.

"Oh? You really think he's that good?"

Back in their adventuring days, Cruyff served as the party's scout. He was said to have the sharpest eye in the kingdom for sizing up someone's abilities. That skill had helped out Ricardo's party tremendously back then.

"I'd love to retain him as my son's or grandchildren's guard."

"If that's what he wants," Celia said with a pause. Alex didn't miss the shadow that fell over her face.

"Is there something wrong?" Suddenly Alex's expression looked very regal, and Celia decided to tell him about how Tenma had been abandoned. The name "Otori" had been sewn into his blanket, so they had wondered if he might be related to a noble family in some way. And then she was concerned that if he found out they weren't his real parents that he would leave home, et cetera, et cetera...

Ricardo was just as surprised to hear this as Alex and Cruyff were. "Celia, I'm sorry I didn't realize you were so worried." He was sure that things were different from the perspective of a father, but after spending these ten years with Tenma, he felt the bonds between them were even stronger than blood. Strong enough that he was confident they could beat out any bond with his biological parents. In other words, he was taking the optimistic view that even if Tenma's birth parents showed up, Tenma would choose Ricardo and Celia. And that was because Ricardo trusted Tenma implicitly.

But Celia was different. Unlike men, women grew their children in their bellies and suffered through pain to bring them into this world, sometimes even losing

their lives. So she wondered constantly, “What if Tenma chooses his real mother over me?” and, “What if his real mother is better than me?” That was where a lot of her overprotectiveness came from—to protect Tenma from the woman who bore him, a person she had never even seen before. Of course she hadn’t been aware she was doing this, but now after thinking over it logically, it was the conclusion she had come to. Men simply had no idea of the anguish mothers went through.

Just then, Merlin quietly opened the door and came in, breaking the silence and the heavy mood in the room. He gently rested a hand on Celia’s shoulder. “Don’t be silly. You’re Tenma’s mother, without a doubt. You can tell just by looking at him!” His voice was kind. “He’s always thrilled to see you. It makes him sad when you scold him. He smiles happily when you praise him. I know sometimes he doesn’t listen to you, especially of late, and that causes a lot of stress. But that just goes to prove he doesn’t hold back anything with you, *because* he views you as his mother.” He paused for a moment to get his point across. “You should trust Tenma more. And rely on him. You’re his mother, after all.”

Celia wept. “You’re right,” was all she quietly said. Ricardo embraced her and stroked her hair.

Alex thought for a moment. “I’ve never heard the family name ‘Otori,’ but I’ll be on the lookout for it. It’ll have to wait until I’m back at the capital, but if I find anything I’ll let you know.”

Cruyff piped up. “Yes, I have never heard that name either. The closest name I *have* heard is ‘Audori,’ but they are related to the royal family. It is very unlikely they would have had a child we did not know about.”

Celia looked so upset that it just didn’t feel right for the others to continue the conversation, so they called it a night.

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“What do you say, Tenma? Will you be my man?” This was the question that the king posed me at breakfast the next morning. Everyone immediately stopped what they were doing to watch. As for me, I slowly rose from my seat and backed away from the king.

"Sorry, I'm not interested in you like that..." I answered, and then everyone resumed what they were doing. Mom hugged me, turning my face away from the king. Dad stood in front of me with bow in hand, reaching for an arrow. Gramps muttered, "I had no idea you were like that..." and grabbed a giant staff.

"Your Majesty! I realize you are fond of the boy, but don't you think he is a little too young? I am going to have to tell Queen Maria about this posthaste!" Cruyff said with great amusement, looking at the king as if he were disgusted by him.

"Your Majesty..." Sigurd murmured sadly.

Jean said, "A king is free to do what he wants...but to target his best friend's son?!"

Edgar had a smile on his face, but his eyes were not smiling.

Basically, every member of the king's party was backing away from him, and judging him heavily.

"H-Hang on just a minute! I just phrased it wrong, that's all! Don't shoot me, Ricardo! Master Merlin, you'd kill me in an instant if you whacked me with a staff that big! And Cruyff, please don't tell Maria! I'm begging you!" Frantically, the king tried to clear up his misunderstanding. Everyone seemed to accept his explanation, but they still kept a healthy distance. "Ricardo, Celia... I was referring to the thing we talked about yesterday."

"Ooh, *that* thing! Well, why didn't you just say so?! I was ready to skewer you!"

I noticed Mom reacting slightly when the king said "the thing," but when we made eye contact she didn't say anything, so I thought nothing of it.

Now that everyone realized the king didn't mean anything lascivious by asking me to be his companion, everyone sat back down. But they still seemed a little suspicious.

"What's 'the thing,' Dad?"

The king answered instead. "Last night, I suggested to Ricardo and the others

that you be the bodyguard of my son or grandchildren. So whaddaya say? Will you be our man?"

It seemed like the four guards were more surprised than I was.

"No, thank you," I immediately turned him down, and that surprised them even more.

"Hey, kid—it's a tough job, but the pay's good and it'll give you more power than a lower-class noble," Jean said.

"A commoner being recruited at age ten to be a royal bodyguard is unheard of! You'd be the first in history!" Kriss said.

"Yes...getting recruited at your age to be a royal bodyguard would mean more job prospects for your future. You might even be officially appointed to the nobility!" Edgar continued. Meanwhile, Sigurd looked too shocked to say anything.

"Can I ask why not?" the king said, making me wonder if I shouldn't have turned him down so quickly.

But I answered honestly. "I don't see the appeal in being a bodyguard. Plus, if I do that, I won't be able to see my family as easily." I saw tears filling up in Mom's eyes.

"You don't find it appealing, huh? Well, that's a shame, but I suppose it's your choice. You'd have to take an oath of confidentiality in order to be a royal bodyguard, after all. But Tenma, if you ever change your mind, let me know, and you'll be welcomed with open arms," the king said.

I figured it was probably an honor for him to go that far, even if I was his best friend's kid.

"Now, Celia went to all this trouble making breakfast for us. Let's go ahead and eat before it gets cold. After that, we can survey the Elder Forest. Ricardo, you'll show us the way?"

"Leave it to me!"

Now that the king had that all planned out, I tried to come along...but my mom firmly denied my request, not taking no for an answer. "Tenma, you're

staying right here.”

“Celia, I told you it’s not good to be so overprotective of him.” Gramps said, backing me up.

“I have a feeling if we take him, King Alex will do something reckless.”

“Ohh, I see.”

Everyone except the king accepted that explanation. I wondered if she meant something else by her suggestion that the king would do something “reckless,” or if it was just my imagination.

“A-Anyway, let’s get started as soon as everyone’s ready.” said the king, and everyone resumed their meals.

After breakfast, the party split up to be more efficient. Dad led the way through the Elder Forest with the king, Cruyff, Jean, and Sigrud, and Mom showed Edgar and Kriss around the village.

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Later, in the Elder Forest...

“Nothing around here seems to be out of the ordinary,” said Alex.

“We’ve only been traveling for about half an hour. We haven’t really left the outskirts of the village,” Ricardo replied.

“That makes sense. If things were so different this close to the entrance of the forest, there would be a lot more than just rumors,” Cruyff added.

“Are things really that shady around here, Ricardo?” Jean asked, although he didn’t think Ricardo was lying about things.

“That’s rude!” Sigurd chided Jean, who remained unbothered.

“In just one year, there were nine sightings of Rank B monsters and two of Rank A. Not even fifty kilometers from the village, at that!” said Ricardo.

“That many?!”

Alex was surprised, and rightfully so. The Elder Forest had always been crawling with Rank B or higher monsters, but it had previously been believed that they only lived two to three hundred kilometers deep in the forest. There

were many theories as to why, but the most popular was that since there were more monsters the deeper you went into the forest, higher-rank monsters were more comfortable there and there was more prey. It was more trouble for them to approach the village, where there were fewer monsters and therefore fewer options for food.

Up until recently, there were more Rank E and D monsters on the edges of the forest, which was about fifty kilometers in, and the strongest you'd ever see was maybe a Rank C. There were orcs, but no orc kings, and they only lived there in groups of about ten or so. Once every few years, someone might see a Rank B monster that had strayed out from the depths of the forest, but most of the time they turned right around and went back to where they came from.

In the thirty-odd years he had lived in Kukuri Village, not counting the time he'd spent as an adventurer, Ricardo could count the number of Rank B monster sightings on one hand. Until this year, that is.

"That does sound odd. What about Rank A monsters?"

"Tenma got chased by a group of dragonsnakes. And the dragonsnakes were chasing two Fenrirs."

"What?!"

Once again, Alex was surprised, and rightfully so. Fenrirs were the most powerful type of wolf monster, with abilities in the A to S ranks. It would take a group of at least twenty or thirty first-class adventurers to even stand a chance against a pack of four or five Fenrirs, and there was still no guarantee they'd win. So Alex didn't think eight dragonsnakes could possibly beat two Fenrirs.

"They were a mated pair, and the female was pregnant. They were attacked when they were both already weak. They both died right after Tenma defeated the dragonsnakes, but the female managed to have her baby before she perished," Ricardo explained. The party thought it made sense that the pregnancy had led to their weakness in fighting the dragonsnakes.

"I see...and what of the baby Fenrir?" Alex asked.

"Didn't you all already see him? He's the pup Tenma's raising."

"That's the 'Shiromaru' Kriss was going on and on about?"

Actually, Kriss loved dogs and wolves, but she had no time to raise any of her own because of her duties as a royal guard. Putting that aside, it was certainly rare for a Fenrir to be attached to humans, even if it was still a baby.

They continued surveying the forest, but came up empty-handed, and before long it was time to return to the village.

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Meanwhile, back in the village...

"The church is up that way, and that's the mayor's house, correct? And those two buildings, plus a room in your house, are where people can get medical treatment?"

"That's right. The church is more of a place for convalescing, though. Since it's away from the other houses, they'll take care of people who have contagious illnesses so the sickness doesn't spread to the rest of the village. Most illnesses can be cured with magic, but apart from that the building isn't used much. Sometimes elderly people who don't have family of their own left will go there if they're sick or injured, though. The mayor's house is mostly used to house pregnant women, although there haven't been any for several years now."

"I see..."

As Mom explained the layout of the village to him, Edgar took notes. Kriss, on the other hand, had abandoned the conversation a while back and was now focused on playing with Shiromaru.

"Ah ha ha—go get it!"

"Woof, woof, woof!"

Kriss threw a stick for Shiromaru to go fetch, and his happy barks echoed around us.

"Ha ha... Excuse me, Celia."

"Good boy! What a smart boy you are! Here, one more ti— Oof!"

Edgar had excused himself from the conversation with Mom, and went to stand expressionlessly behind Kriss. He took a dagger out of his pocket and whacked her upside the head with it.

"Kriss, what in the world are you doing? Have you forgotten your job?" That dagger looked sharp enough that, had he unsheathed it, it would've sliced Kriss's head in half. After taking the wallop, her eyes welled up with tears and she bowed her head.

Shiromaru had been happily playing with Kriss, but when he saw what Edgar had done, he got upset. He ran right over to me and jumped in my bag. Edgar's lecture continued until Mom intervened, and at that point she decided to get through their plans more quickly.

As we power walked through the village, occasionally Kriss would look over at me—well, at the bag containing Shiromaru, to be more accurate—but Shiromaru was too afraid of Edgar now to come back out.

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Later, back at Tenma's house...

The king's party returned a little after Edgar's, and they began to exchange information.

Edgar began his report. "It seems like things have changed here very suddenly in the past few years."

"Go on," the king urged.

"Well, it seems as though there have been more reports of illness in the past few years, along with more monster sightings close to the village."

Kriss took over from there. "Regarding the illnesses...after speaking to people in the village who offer medical treatment, including Celia, cases have increased two to three times in the past four to five years, compared to what they were ten years ago. Some people have seen monsters, such as goblins and slimes, as close as the village border."

"But Kriss, what do those two things have to do with each other?" Jean asked.

"I thought the same thing at first, but the majority of those who fell ill were people who regularly went into the forest, or who had fought monsters that appeared near here. So most of the people who got sick had some kind of contact with monsters," she answered.

"Furthermore, most of those affected were men...but as Kriss just said, since men were more likely to have contact with monsters, that might explain it."

"In that case, it's highly possible that there's been some kind of change inside the Elder Forest itself. I'll let Margrave Haust know so we can cooperate with the local government to formulate a plan to investigate the matter. Thanks for all your hard work, everyone. Ricardo and Celia, thanks for helping us out."

"No problem. It's for our own benefit too."

"That's right, King Alex. It's only natural we'd want to protect our village." The two of them smiled at each other.

As of right now, none of the illnesses had been serious, but it was true that more people were falling ill than before. They just had to pray that the situation wouldn't get worse.

Now that everyone was finished with their reports, they called the meeting to a close. Tomorrow, the king and his party would leave before noon and head back to the capital. They would meet up in a city along the way with the others the king had sent—forced, technically—to go on ahead. Tenma felt a little sorry that they had to put up with the king's antics, and thought that he had probably made the right decision in turning down the offer to become a royal bodyguard.

Part Seven

Two years had passed since the king came to survey Kukuri Village, and we had just welcomed the coming of spring. There had been a few changes in the past two years. Margrave Haust had built a garrison near the village, so more soldiers and doctors had come.

At first, the soldiers were all respectable men and the villagers welcomed them, but then the majority of them became arrogant and oppressive. As such, relations between the villagers and the soldiers were quite contentious. The main reason for that was that the soldiers had marked off an area of the forest as forbidden. The area included spots near the village that were prime locations for medicinal herbs, and that the villagers argued were relatively safe areas. And since the soldiers ignored their opinions, the villagers could only hold the soldiers responsible for the decision.

To add fuel to the fire, there were some soldiers who were gathering medicinal herbs themselves and selling them under the table to people who visited the garrison for extra cash.

That caused a major rift between the soldiers and the villagers. Since so many former adventurers lived here, they had more experience dealing with monsters than the soldiers did. From their perspective, it was no wonder they felt the way they did, since it was the fault of the soldiers that they had lost out on a source of their income as well as losing access to the herbs.

“Mom! I got a ton of herbs!” Lately, I’d spent a lot of time gathering herbs, as the soldiers had depleted the village stockpile.

Another reason was the poor harvest. There weren’t as many herbs growing in recent years as there had been before, so we were only able to gather a small fraction of what we previously had. But Gramps and the other older people in the village said these things tended to go in cycles, so there was no reason to worry. Apparently the same thing happened with fruit—there were good years and there were bad years.

The villagers hadn’t been too concerned about it, but then the soldiers came

in and restricted access to the forest. And the areas that were restricted included not just the main source of herbs, but also several smaller patches that surrounded the village.

In Kukuri Village, we had several rules regarding the gathering of herbs. Don't pick herbs that aren't fully grown and can't be turned into medicine yet. If you do find a patch of herbs, don't pick all of them. If you find a patch of herbs near the village, share its location with the other villagers. There were a few other little rules, but those three were the main ones.

The first and second were just common-sense rules for people who lived near the forest, and the third was common sense for villagers. Mom told me the reason for the last rule was because there were a lot of herbs that were most effective when freshly picked, so if they grew near the village, it was helpful for everyone to know where they were. That way, any villagers could pick them whenever they needed some herbs.

However, the soldiers broke those rules. Of course, they would claim they hadn't, since the rules didn't apply to them.

Previously, before those areas had been restricted, it was safe for women and the elderly to gather herbs. Now, though, they'd have to go deep into the forest, which was much more dangerous.

So now it was either the job of hunters to pick herbs, or at least the job of hunters to escort those who were doing so. But hunters had their own work to do, and the village needed the meat they brought back, or else it'd be hard to survive the winter.

Since I could fly a long distance in a short amount of time, I was designated the village herb-picker. Mom and Gramps prepared the herbs, and Dad took care of the hunting. We donated our surplus to the village reserves and were compensated in return, mainly in the form of vegetables or meat, at much lower than the usual rate. But this was all in the spirit of helping each other out, so our family didn't mind. Plus, the best part was that sometimes Mom showed me how to prepare the herbs and compound them into medicine, so I'd learned quite a bit about the process.

"Good job! I bet it was tough finding so many!" Mom said, though actually it

wasn't tough at all because I'd used Detection and Identify. She ignored my noncommittal reply and continued sorting through the herbs. When Dad got home, we took a break and started preparing dinner.

That was our normal daily routine, until one day, Mom fell ill. Luckily, we had plenty of herbs so we were able to heal her. She couldn't regain her stamina right away, though, so she had to keep resting.

I decided to leave the village and dig up some mountain yams I'd found in the forest, because I heard they were very nutritious and could speed up healing. But as soon as I set foot out of the village, a group of those classless soldiers accosted me.

"Hey, kid! Where do you think you're going?"

"Your family's been getting an awful lot of herbs lately. Give some to us. We protect you, after all, so we deserve something for it!"

These soldiers were so bad they'd even harass a twelve-year-old. Or at least, someone who appeared to be twelve on the outside. It was too much of a pain to engage with them, so I tried to ignore them and walk past, but one of them grabbed my shoulder.

"Hey! Don't ignore us, you little brat!" I grabbed the soldier's arm and flipped him; he slammed into the ground and lost consciousness. "Ughh..."

"What the hell are you doing, kid?!" Furious, another one of them tried to punch me, and this time I didn't hold back.

"Special move: Descendant Decimator!" I mercilessly unleashed a forbidden attack. It was one Mom had taught me, a move which Dad and Gramps had designated forbidden because of its unparalleled brutality. I'm a man too, so I knew just how dangerous this move was. That's why this was the first time I'd ever broken it out. Or, to put it more accurately, this was the first time I'd ever *felt* like using it.

After I kicked the soldier in his family jewels, he fainted in agony and crumpled to the ground. I gave him one last glance and then used Fly to travel to my destination.

Honestly, once I saw that soldier pass out from the pain I wondered if I'd gone

too far. But it wasn't like they went out of their way to be nice to me, so I decided to just call it legitimate self-defense. It wasn't like they were going to tell anyone who did it to them either. Even if they did, they'd just be embarrassing themselves. They tried to pick a fight with a kid and then got their butts kicked.

Once I arrived at my destination, I spotted the mountain yams growing from the earth and went to work. First, I used Earth magic to turn the dirt surrounding the yams to sand. Then I started to dig them out, being careful not to damage them. Finally, I used Water magic to rinse off the yams and Fire magic to burn their roots off, before putting them into my magic bag.

After about an hour, I had managed to dig up five mountain yams that were a meter long. Back in my past life, it would've taken me over two hours to dig up just one of these things. Magic was so handy! Plus, it was great practice for my Earth magic. The mountain yams in this world were mostly sticky when grated, like Japanese or Chinese yams. They were said to be very nutritious and had healing properties, but they weren't eaten very much in the city. Apparently, there were people in the city who thought yams were filthy because they were covered in dirt.

You could slice them up and fry them, but most people diced them up and put them in soup. They weren't that versatile. In our house, we grated them and added them to rice (not for a main dish, but to be used as a side), mixed them into flour and fried them up like *okonomiyaki*, or added them to broth to thicken it up so it could be eaten like soup. Of course, these were all my suggestions. I wished we had udon or soba to eat them with, but I'd never seen soba here, nor the flour needed to make udon, so that wasn't happening.

They didn't have the custom of adding soup to rice here either, but after I started doing it, it caught on in the village because it made a meal that was easy even for the elderly to eat.

As for the rice, the kind they had here was long and skinny, like basmati rice. Most people steamed it or parboiled it. I tried to boil it in a big pot like we did back in Japan, but it didn't turn out very well.

While I was digging up the potatoes, I spotted a rabbit and a mountain quail,

so I hunted them, cleaned and gutted them, and put them in my bag. Now we would have plenty to eat tonight.

Once I got back to the village, the soldiers tried to give me trouble at the entrance again, so I knocked them out with the Lightning magic spell Stun. As its name would suggest, it had the effect of a stun gun. As such, it was very dangerous to use on children, people with heart problems, or the elderly. But since it was used on soldiers, this was valid self-defense. It's not like I had any other choice, anyway. It wasn't my fault if I used a little too much force and they ended up foaming at the mouth.

Plus, even if they had a problem with it, I'd have Shiromaru with me tonight. He was already about two meters in length, and they'd find that out pretty quickly if they came to get back at me.

I made dinner that night. I decided on a menu of rabbit soup with parboiled rice and broth made with the yams.

Dad, Mom, Gramps, and I all sat around the dinner table. Even though there had been changes in the village, our family hadn't changed much. I thought that these happy days, being surrounded by my family's smiles at the dinner table, would never change.

But a month later, tragedy struck.

◊◊◊

There was a large, shadowy figure lurking around the dark forest. Each time it took a slow step, it made a sticky, gooey noise. There were other shadows around the larger one, all of varying sizes. Some bigger than humans, some smaller. Some with four legs. Some with six or even eight legs.

But they were all slowly headed in the same direction. Even if one of the shadowy figures tripped and fell, the others just walked over them and kept going. They kept on staggering towards wherever they were headed. There were more than a thousand of them, but no one knew the exact number. It wasn't clear what they were seeking. Everything about them was shrouded in mystery.

The only thing that was certain was that the ominous crimson light gleaming

from the eyes of the largest shadow foretold that something very bad was about to happen in the near future.

◇◇◇

Kukuri Village was facing the worst crisis in its history. That was the threat looming in everyone's minds over the past few days. And the reason for that was that several goblins had appeared from the forest.

In this world, living creatures could become zombies. This could happen when someone died while holding on to an intense grudge or unfulfilled desire, or when bodies were abandoned in places where a lot of mana was concentrated. A third way was if a necromancer (someone who had a very special kind of power) cast a special type of curse on a dead body. The corpse would then become a zombie, and would be a follower of the person who had cast the curse.

The goblin zombies were the latter.

They moved as if they were observing us, and if someone noticed them, one of them would run off while the others stayed put. It definitely seemed like someone was controlling them. We thought the reason only one would run off was because it was reporting back to someone superior.

That happened several times over the course of a few days. A group of the soldiers tried pursuing the zombies who fled, but only one of the soldiers returned. He said that there were over a thousand zombies traveling in a group, and that they would probably reach the village in a matter of days.

We received that report two days ago. Immediately afterwards, a representative from the soldiers and a representative from the village had a meeting. They decided that we should evacuate as many people as we could the following day. After that notice went through town, the plan was to have the injured and elderly all pile into carriages belonging to the village or the army and set off to the nearest town, accompanied by soldiers or other people who were capable of fighting. There, they would wait for support from the margrave.

The evacuations were supposed to take place the following day at sunrise—that is, today—but then something unexpected happened.

The carriages disappeared. The ones belonging to the village *and* the ones belonging to the soldiers. Some people from the village went to the garrison, but found it completely empty.

The soldiers had stolen the carriages. They'd run off with all of them, including the ones belonging to the village. Unfortunately, the carriages had all been moved to the entrance of the village that was opposite the forest so that we could evacuate as quickly as possible—and the one who had been keeping watch over them was a soldier.

Everyone in the village was stunned. The soldiers who had been dispatched by the margrave, at the request of the kingdom, had all fled and left the villagers for dead. It was absolutely unprecedented.

To make matters worse, we were hearing the sounds of monsters from deep in the forest that we thought must have been the zombies. They had arrived too soon; perhaps we had been given bad information so that the soldiers could save themselves.

Dad immediately sprang into action. "Everyone, start evacuating to the garrison immediately. I want the able-bodied folks to go collect anything that can be used as a weapon from all the houses, along with all the food you can find! Hurry up! The only way to save everyone is to hole up in the garrison! Two or three people need to act as messengers and get the word out—but *not* to the village the soldiers went to!"

Dad started barking out orders. Even though he wasn't the mayor, everyone listened to him because he had the most experience out of everyone as a former adventurer, plus he had even been in a party with the king.

Gramps, Mom, and I used magic to create a wall and a moat around the garrison. Meanwhile, Uncle Mark and a few other hunters watched for any movement from the enemy.

Once the evacuations were complete and the food had been carried inside, about thirty minutes passed before we saw the zombie vanguard. We'd just narrowly avoided the worst-case scenario.

There were about two hundred goblin and orc zombies in the vanguard. Once they got close enough, we showered them all with arrows. When that didn't

stop them, the warriors and the swordsmen joined in the attack.

“Come here, Tenma!” The zombies were just about to overtake the first unit when Dad called me over.

“What is it, Dad?”

“I want you to fly and take a message to the town the soldiers went to!” Everyone was abuzz when they heard him say that. Because right now, I was the strongest fighter Kukuri Village had.

“I can’t, Dad! If I leave now, we’ll be at a huge disadvantage in the fight,” I protested.

“I’m not telling you this because you’re my son—I’m telling you this because you’re the only one who can do it!”

Dad explained that if I used my flying ability, it wouldn’t even take me half a day to reach that village. I could get there before the soldiers, explain the situation, and ask for help.

Once everyone else heard this reasoning, they agreed. Dad reached into his pocket and took out a card, then handed it to me. “This is my guild card from back when I was an adventurer. If you take this and go to the guild, they’ll listen to what you have to say,” he said, handing me a small amount of food and water as well.

I immediately got ready and used Fly. I already knew where the town was because I’d seen it on a map the day before, and I remembered the location perfectly.

I’d flown for about an hour when I saw the soldiers who had fled. They were taking a break and didn’t notice me. There were twenty-five of them—a pretty small number considering the size of the garrison. They certainly had their guard down, because some of them were even drinking alcohol. I didn’t have time to deal with them though, so I ignored them...for now.

About six hours later, the town came into view. The town’s name was Russell City, and it was the second largest city in Margrave Haust’s domain.

I saw some large gates up ahead. The guards noticed me and gestured for me

to stop. But I ignored them and continued into the city. I found the guild and quickly ran inside.

As soon as I got inside, I yelled, “Ricardo from Kukuri Village has sent me with an urgent message! I need to speak with someone immediately!” Several people looked at me in surprise, and one man walked over to me.

“Shut up, kid! Go home and suck on your mama’s titties!” And then he grabbed hold of me.

Panicked, I shoved him away from me without holding back at all. I threw the man over my shoulder, after which he hit the floor and then rolled all the way over to the wall.

Just then, five guards rushed into the room. “We heard someone entered town without permission and charged into the guild! You must come with us, and don’t put up a fight!” They came over to arrest me.

“What’s all the commotion? It’s too loud in here!” A clear voice suddenly resounded throughout the guild. I used Identify on the man who had spoken.

Name: Yully Finland Forester

Age: 200

Class: Elf

Title: Russell City Guildmaster

HP: 14000

MP: 17500

Strength: B-

Defense: A-

Agility: B+

Magic: A-

Mind: A+

Growth: B

Luck: A

Skills

Archery: 8

Water Magic: 8

Wind Magic: 8

Magic Manipulation: 7

Sensory Buff: 7

Earth Magic: 6

Light Magic: 6

Throwing: 6

Night Vision: 5

Traps: 5

Brawling: 5

Sword: 5

Magic Boost: 5

Conceal: 5

Recovery Boost: 4

Debuff Resistance: 4

Gifts

Protection of the Forest

Apparently his name was Yully. He was the first elf I'd ever seen before, but more importantly, he was the *guildmaster*.

"Are you Yully, the guildmaster?" I asked him directly, ignoring the guards.

"I am... Who are you?"

"Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Ricardo's son, Tenma—from Kukuri Village. My father asked me to deliver a message to the guild." I spoke as fast as I could so the soldiers wouldn't interrupt me.

"Ricardo? Do you have any proof that you're his son?"

I'd succeeded in explaining the situation to the guildmaster before the soldiers could get a word in edgewise. I handed him my father's card.

"This is definitely Ricardo's card. I'll hear you out. Come this way." The guildmaster was about to show me into another room, but then a soldier yelled.

"Please wait, Guildmaster! He's suspected of entering town without permission! Please turn him over to us!"

"Well, now that poses a problem. But the guild has its own laws on guild territory, so this is outside of your jurisdiction. And since he's now inside the guild, he also has a right to that privilege. I have no obligation to turn him over to you."

At this point, an argument began.

"Guildmaster, I don't have a lot of time. Please, just hear me out here. The soldiers need to hear what I have to say too," I said.

"Very well, then. Go ahead and speak."

Now that I had the guildmaster's permission, I told him about what was going on back in the village. There were about twenty people in the room listening to me, including the guildmaster, various guild members, and the soldiers who came to arrest me. First, I told them how I had come to be here, starting with the group of zombies that were discovered and going on to how the soldiers had used the villagers as bait, how they'd fled by themselves and were on their way here, and how Dad had evacuated everyone to the garrison and was awaiting their help.

As I told my story, I heard various howls and groans from my audience. Especially during the parts where I stressed that soldiers dispatched by the margrave under the kingdom's orders had fled, leaving the villagers defenseless.

Once the soldiers were finished hearing my story, all the color had drained out of their faces in response to their comrades' behavior. Everyone else gave me sympathetic looks, and shot critical looks over at the guards.

"So anyway, that's why I came here for help."

The guildmaster frowned a bit and said, "We can help you, but I can't send that many people on such short notice. It will take at least a day for me to talk to the mayor and gather food, a day and a half to two days to gather up the help and get them mobilized, then another three or four days to reach Kukuri Village."

Impatient, I said the first thing that came to mind. "I have about 500,000G. Use this to hire as many adventurers as you can. And then dispatch them to Kukuri Village. I'll let you set the price for both the manpower and the food."

"Very well. I accept your emergency request. I won't charge you the guild's referral fee this time. Instead, I'm certain the margrave will pay out restitution money, so I'd like you to give the guild a cut of that. If you agree, go ahead and sign this contract here." The guildmaster produced a contract, and I agreed to give him a portion of any restitution paid to us by the margrave.

"Now, let's say that each adventurer will be given a deferred payment of 10,000G as well as the right to any spoils of battle, with the possibility of a special additional reward, and start recruiting with those terms."

I had a feeling that the bonus was going to be a bounty offered by Russell City, which would be bundled along with the compensation. Otherwise, just the 10,000G from me wouldn't be sufficient to attract first-class adventurers.

"I have two other favors to ask of you, Guildmaster."

"What's that?"

"First of all, I want to hurry back to the village. Could you make it so that I don't get arrested once I leave this place?"

"Well, you heard him," the guildmaster said, with a pointed look towards the guards.

Apparently they didn't want to look any worse than they already did, so one

of the soldiers stood up straight and answered, “We’ll inform the captain that we made an exception due to the emergency situation.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” said the guildmaster, before turning back towards me. “And? What’s the second favor?”

“I’m going to use magic and give the soldiers who fled a good smack. If they live, tell the adventurers to capture them. And if they die...hire me a good lawyer,” I said, with a faint smile on my face.

“Very well—I accept. I don’t think you’ll need a lawyer, though,” he told me. I gave him a puzzled look and he chuckled. “They disobeyed orders from the kingdom, so it’s only natural they should face the consequences. They used the people they should have protected as a shield, so they would be facing death anyway. The government will probably be grateful you saved them the trouble.”

I wondered if it was just my imagination that the rest of the people in the room seemed spooked by the ominous smiles on our faces as we discussed this with each other.

Immediately after that, I ate and drank, then flew off back to Kukuri Village. I was in the air for about five hours before I spotted the soldiers. I used a strong Stun spell on them, but not strong enough to knock them unconscious. Once they were incapacitated, I used Earth magic to bind their legs and arms together.

After this, I picked up the carriages, all the goods piled in them, and all the soldiers’ weapons they had on them, and stuffed them into my dimension bag. Then I set off for the village again.

I’d heard that, during a siege battle, knowing help is on the way makes a world of difference with your morale. As I recalled that fact, I kept flying—I wanted to get there as fast as I could, because even one second could make a difference. After I got my revenge on the soldiers, I flew for another two hours. Just as it started to get dark, I saw smoke coming from the direction of the village.

“What’s that smoke?!” With a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, I kept flying. And once I could see the village more clearly, I was stunned at what met my eyes.

Ricardo (several hours before Tenma's return):

"Celia, Merlin! Once I give the signal, use ranged Fire magic on them, in the direction of the gate! Have the swordsmen and warriors take down any who make it past you!" I waited for the right moment to give the orders. "Now!"

"Firestorm!" The two of them attacked the zombies with advanced Fire magic. The zombies didn't have the skills to avoid the spell, so the flames burned up the majority of the group. There had been about five hundred zombies, but only about twenty or thirty escaped the ranged magic attack. The others were reduced to ashes.

Seeing this, I charged in with about thirty skilled warriors and swordsmen. "Listen—we have to incapacitate them with one blow! Then retreat immediately!" Obviously, the strongest fighters were in the vanguard with me, so everyone took out their targets with one blow. Even though we were fighting unarmed goblin and orc zombies, everything was going smoothly.

The problem was that there weren't many weapons in the garrison, and we were running low on arrows in particular. Under normal circumstances, there'd be more than fifty soldiers stationed here, with plenty of weapons and food to sustain them—but we didn't even have enough supplies for thirty people. Damn it, couldn't they have cut costs elsewhere?

For the first year and a half, there were normally fifty or sixty soldiers stationed at this garrison, and it wasn't unusual for there to be over a hundred when replacements arrived. But the more they went to explore the forest and came across goblins, slimes, and the occasional orc, the more their numbers began to dwindle, until recently there were only about twenty or thirty at a time...maybe forty at the most.

Not only that, but when the soldiers fled, they had stuffed as much food and as many weapons into the carriages as they could, so there was barely anything left in the reserves. That was why the villagers were mostly fighting with weapons they had found in the houses.

"Retreat!"

“Ahhh!” came the enthusiastic reply as my comrades ran back inside the gates. We could stick it out until reinforcements arrived if things kept going like this, but not if more enemies showed up. This was our sixth foray outside since Tenma had left, and we had probably defeated more than three thousand of them. Those bastard soldiers had lied about their numbers; there were clearly way more than a thousand.

Due to the stress, I’d started cursing again just like in my adventurer days, but no one cared.

“Hey, Ricardo!”

“What is it, Mark?” Mark had been standing guard and I heard tension in his voice.

“We’re in trouble! Ogres are on their way! About thirty of them, with about eight hundred goblins and orcs behind them!”

Yeah, we were definitely in trouble. Orcs were Rank B monsters, and giant ones were more than three meters tall. Thirty of them could easily scale the hastily constructed fortress wall we’d made.

“Celia, Merlin!”

“Right!”

“Leave it to us!”

They immediately knew what I wanted and responded.

“Fire Arrow!”

It was a little far, but the two of them shot off a series of Fire Arrows. It was a ranged magic attack that didn’t consume very much MP. They aimed these towards the ogres, but to little effect, so once the ogres got a little closer they both used Firestorm to attack all the monsters, including the goblins.

Of course they didn’t manage to get rid of all of them, but they took out about ninety percent, leaving behind five orcs in the mix.

“Chaaarge!” I called. My comrades immediately sprang to action. Since the monsters were already wounded, we killed them easily.

I was relieved that we had gotten rid of another wave of zombies, and took a break to drink some water. Celia and Merlin were still fine, but they both drank some mana potions just in case. After that, there were several more attacks, and just one wave had over a thousand zombies in it. If this was part of the enemy's battle plan, it was incredibly vexing. First, they had started out with a small number of weak enemies, but then they'd gradually started increasing the numbers as well as adding stronger monsters to the mix. Whoever was controlling these zombies must have been someone very intelligent.

"Ricardo, the enemy has withdrawn!"

"They fled?" I asked Merlin hopefully.

"Unfortunately not. They just withdrew to the forest."

"I see... At least we have time to rest now, though." I had a feeling things wouldn't go that smoothly, but I had everyone take a break, making sure they'd be ready to spring into action at any moment.

I ate a little bit of food and then checked our weapons, thinking about how if things had gone smoothly, Tenma would be on his way back by now. But at the same time I wished he didn't have to come home to find us in this state, because he would want to fight alongside us.

It would probably be getting dark in about an hour. I told the rear guard to start building a fire. We had to tear down the stables in order to get enough wood to burn. Just then, we heard the beastly noises of the zombies coming from the forest again.

"R-Ricardo! We're in trouble!" Mark shouted, and then I heard screams from the people who were waiting on top of the wall.

I leapt on top of the wall and looked in the direction of the fortress. "What's this?! There must be five thousand of them! Maybe twice that!" I watched the hordes of zombies streaming out from the forest. There were goblins, orcs, kobolds, ogres, dragonsnakes, and all manner of zombies.

It was a zombie disaster.

They weren't only coming from the forest, so there was no telling just how many there were. At a glance, I thought there might be close to ten thousand of

them. And the thought that there could be even more waiting inside the forest made me start to feel something very akin to hopelessness. But we couldn't run away. We had to buy time and survive long enough for help to arrive.

"Seems like a hopeless fight..." Gradually, zombies that were so numerous we could no longer count them began to surround the fortress.

And nightfall was coming. Zombies could move at any time of day, but humans had a harder time moving at night. So this meant we were sorely at a disadvantage.

"Build as many fires as you can! We need to make the fortress as bright as possible!" I knew that if we kept burning fires at this rate, we wouldn't have any wood left for tomorrow night. But if we didn't survive now, we wouldn't live to see tomorrow night anyway. As I watched the smoke rising from the fires, I knew I had to increase our odds, and bet on that chance of surviving as long as we could.

Part Eight

I flew above the fortress and spotted a large group of zombies. There must have been over ten thousand of them. Not only that, but from this height the zombies looked so packed together they seemed like one giant monster rather than a group.

If their eyes didn't have that creepy glow, I might not have even noticed they were a group. I was frozen with shock for a brief moment, but then regained my composure and landed.

"Dad, I'm back!" I found Dad and the others staring down the zombies from on top of the gate and called out to him.

"You're safe, Tenma! What did the guild say?"

I told Dad everything that happened in Russell City. When everyone heard it would take at least three days for reinforcements to come from the city, they looked disheartened for a moment. However, once I explained what I'd offered them and said I wasn't sure how many there'd be, but that I had a feeling they'd be here sooner, there was a glimmer of hope in everyone's eyes.

"By the way, Dad—on the way back I found those soldiers who ran away. I stunned them with magic and took all their belongings and their weapons."

We got down off the wall into the central area, and I took the carriages and all the goods that had been packed inside of them out of my dimension bag, along with the weapons I'd found on the soldiers.

Once everyone saw the sheer amount of food and weapons I'd brought with me, one of the villagers got excited and shouted with joy. His enthusiasm infected the others and they all started cheering, one by one. Surprised by their reaction, I wasn't sure what to do.

Dad looked at me. "Tenma, you came back at the perfect time! We don't have much food or many weapons left," he whispered in my ear. "Not only that, but there were a lot of folks who lost heart once they saw all those zombies. But now they've got a bit of hope after seeing the food and weapons you brought. I think they're forcing themselves to see the bright side." He laughed and said no

one could wage war on an empty stomach, after all.

It seemed today had been a very stressful day for them.

“If the zombies are going to attack, they’ll do it after the sun has set completely. Until then, we need to come up with a strategy and finish passing out the weapons! Once you’re done, take a break and have someone else take your place!”

We were positioned parallel to the village, facing the forest. There was a fence about a hundred meters long, four meters high, and two meters thick surrounding the garrison. There were gates on all four sides. The barracks were on the opposite end of the garrison, away from the forest.

Currently we were on the opposite side of the fortress, building a moat about two meters away from the fence in all directions. We wanted it a meter deep and about two meters wide.

The forest spread out in an arc around the village and the garrison. The closest part of the forest was about two hundred meters away from the garrison. To the east was the village, and to the south was the forest. The zombies were mainly coming from the south.

“First, I want Celia and everyone who can cast intermediate magic on the south wall. I want half of you to stay on the wall, which should be about twenty of you, while the other half will come with me to fight. I want archers to do most of the fighting, with the magic users switching off with them to fill in any gaps during the battle. Tenma—how many golems can you make?”

“Five large ones, twenty medium ones, and fifteen small ones, so forty in total. But the farther away they get from me, the less efficient they are. This distance should be fine, though—I think they’ll listen to simple orders from me.”

Large golems were about three meters tall, medium ones were two meters, and the small ones were about a meter.

“Then put a large one in front of the south gates, and ten medium ones on this side of the moat.”

“Okay.”

"On the east gates I want Merlin, Tenma, ten mages, and ten warriors. Put one large golem in front of the gate, five medium, and then ten small golems on this side of the moat. I want ten warriors each at the west and north gates, with one large golem in front of each gate. But let me know if you spot more zombies. Everyone else, jump in when needed to relieve the other fighters. Tenma, hurry up and place the golems. Those who can't fight—tend to the wounded and pass out food and water."

Everyone sprang into action to follow Dad's orders. I threw magic stones on the outer side of the moat to create the large golems. I told them, "Your enemies are zombies and monsters. Attack all enemies who come near you. Follow the orders humans give you." Since the villagers had built that wall, there weren't many stones or boulders around, so some of the golems had to be made from packed earth. They were still pretty strong, though.

I finished placing the golems in about twenty to thirty minutes. Once the sun set and it got dark, we heard the zombies advancing just like we thought they would.

Obviously we couldn't take on such a large number head-on, and we had a limited number of arrows, so it was only natural we had to rely on the magic users.

East Gate

Gramps and I were the ones giving out orders, since we were at the center of defense on the east gate. As everyone called Gramps a sage, people had no qualms about following his orders. I thought maybe they wouldn't be as thrilled to do what I said since I was only twelve, but Gramps said, "Being an adventurer is only about skill. Plus, everyone knows you've had the best education a child can get from the age of three and that you've already defeated Rank B monsters. Anyway, I'll be giving the bulk of the orders, so don't worry about that."

I was still a little worried, though.

"The zombies are coming, Tenma. There must be about five hundred of 'em. We need to be as efficient with our magic as possible."

As soon as Gramps spotted the zombies, he started giving out orders.

I tried to use Detection to see exactly how many there were, but there were so many that all the dots on my mental radar just converged into one giant ping. *There must be twenty thousand of them or so...*

Just then, Gramps said, “Everyone start using Fireball in intervals of five! Tenma and I will shoot twenty rounds of Fire Bullet! Stagger your spells! Fire!” Thus, he ordered the attacks to commence.

Fireball didn’t use up very much MP and it was a simple spell, so it was the most commonly used attack magic of all the types. Fire Bullet used up about the same amount of MP, but it was faster and had more of an impact than Fireball. That’s what Gramps said, anyway.

A portion of the zombies were blown away by the magic, while some caught on fire and started flailing around.

The first wave had several ogre zombies in the mix, so I aimed for the one in front. I blew a hole right between its eyes and instantly killed it (although I guess it’s weird to say I “killed” it, since they were already zombies). Just like that, I slowly made my way through the zombies that came towards us.

“We’ve defeated about half of them!” Because Fire Bullets were so powerful and zombies were weak to fire, not to mention the fact that the sparks from the Fireballs spread and lit up the surrounding zombies, we successfully defeated at least two hundred and fifty zombies in the first round. The fire was still spreading, in fact, so more zombies continued to die.

“I have a feeling the zombies are really going to start pushing back. The real fight starts now.” Gramps was right—about two thousand zombies suddenly pushed through.

“Gramps, they’re learning from their mistakes! They’re leaving space between them now so that the fire doesn’t spread!” That was very unusual for zombies. Normally, they had very low intelligence and wouldn’t be able to think of countermeasures in a battle.

“Either the person controlling them is very smart, or he’s very important,” Gramps muttered. “At any rate, let’s each cast Firestorm. Then we’ll see how

many are left.”

I followed Gramps’s orders and we both cast the spell. But since the zombies had spread out so much, there was little effect.

“We only got about five hundred, including those that survived the first wave. Not many. Do it again, Tenma.” I cast my second Firestorm, but once again only killed about five hundred. By then, the survivors had made it to the gates, where the golems were punching them to death.

“If they keep coming at this rate, we’ll run out of mana!” Gramps complained.

Just then, a messenger rushed over. He yelled, “We’re in trouble! A huge group of zombies have appeared at the north gate!”

“What?! How did they get over there so fast?” There were around three thousand zombies by the north gate, with their numbers growing by the minute. Apparently they had taken a longer route to go unnoticed as they moved from the east and west gates. “Grr... All right, we’ve got no choice. Tenma, you go and back them up. Messenger, go tell Ricardo that Tenma’s headed to the north gate and to get the remaining mages t—” Gramps started to give out orders, but was interrupted by screams coming from the west gate. “More zombies to the west too?” It was all happening so fast that he couldn’t hide his surprise. Now we were surrounded on all sides. Thankfully, he quickly regained his composure. “I want two mages from the east side to go with Tenma!” he commanded.

“But then this side will be vulnerable!” one of the mages protested.

“If zombies have appeared to the west, then their defenses will fall unless we send every last mage who’s available. And if we add Tenma to the mix, we’ll have mages who can use advanced magic in the north, south, and east, but none in the west. That’s why we need those numbers to make up for it!” Gramps explained. “Tenma, there’s nothing the fire can spread to in front of the north gate, so don’t hold back. Go now and defend the north gate with those two.”

“Got it, Gramps!” I said, and flew over there right away.

East Gate (Merlin)

Things were bad. The zombies were faster than I expected them to be. The original plan was to attack them all at once with long-ranged magic while they were crowded together and then have Tenma do hit-and-run attacks. But apparently, whoever was controlling these zombies knew a thing or two about military tactics.

"Master Merlin, the zombies are on the move again! Including the survivors, there are around three thousand left."

There are more? What a nuisance. It would be a more efficient use of our magic if they attacked us all at once.

"I'll shoot off three Firestorms. Ignore the ones on the verge of death, and fire arrows at the zombies who are barely injured." With these words, I shot a Firestorm towards a group of zombies. But I only managed to kill about a thousand of them. *This isn't good...there are six more hours until sunrise.*

Killing a thousand zombies was barely scraping the surface of the hordes that kept pushing towards us. More had arrived at the walls, but I had a feeling my stamina would run out before my mana did. "The smoke is making it harder to see, so be careful where you shoot!" I commanded as I shot off a round of about ten Air Bullets. I had a feeling the remaining mages stationed here didn't have much mana left either.

"Mages, take a rest for a little while and drink a mana potion! But don't down it all at once, because you could die if you have too much!" Being mages, they probably knew that already, but I wanted to say it just in case. After the spells we cast dissipated, I shot off several Windcutters. The swirling wind broke up the smoke that was lingering in the air, but it didn't look like we'd killed that many zombies.

"Let the golems take care of the smaller zombies! Shoot the medium-sized and larger zombies with arrows to deal damage to them!" There were more of the smaller zombies and they were faster than the others, so it didn't take long for them to get right up to the walls. They died easily with one punch from the golems, or from the fallout of the magic spells. Any zombies bigger than that needed a direct blow to the head to be killed.

"There are a lot more medium-sized zombies now." At the beginning of all this, we only saw the medium-sized ones occasionally, but now they outnumbered the smaller ones about four to one. The overall numbers had neither increased nor decreased; now, nearly three thousand zombies were slowly approaching us.

Just then, a huge column of fire shot up from the north gate, lighting up the area around the walls.

"Was that an enemy attack?"

"What was that?"

"Is the north gate safe?!"

Voices rang out from all around. Some people panicked, thinking it was a new enemy.

"Everyone just calm down! The column of fire must be from Tenma!" I tried to explain, but that didn't ease their panic.

"Master Merlin, I know Tenma can use advanced magic, but I've never heard of a spell like that!" said one of the mages, his voice shrill.

"I'm certain it's Tenma. His magic abilities have already surpassed Celia's! And he's more talented than me too! After all, he's already come up with original magic spells even at that age. And I'm sure that spell was one of them!" I explained again. None of them seemed entirely convinced, but at that moment a messenger showed up and told us that Tenma's magic had almost wiped out the nearly four thousand zombies that had been collecting by the north wall, as well as a group that was approaching the west gate. Everyone cheered with joy.

South Gate (Ricardo)

There were about seven thousand zombies gathered around four to five hundred meters from the south gate.

"What are the zombies doing over there?" Ricardo shouted.

Celia squinted towards the zombies who were crawling out from the forest. "They haven't made any big moves yet. It's creepy," she answered with a frown.

"Zombies are generally creepy, yes," he replied in a lighthearted tone.

Her face remained serious. "That's not what I meant. I mean their behavior is suspicious. They're standing still like they're waiting for something."

It was true that a lot of zombies had emerged from the forest, but were for some reason keeping their distance.

"Something? Like what?"

"I don't know...but I don't think it's anything good."

Just then, they heard the sound of several spells being cast in succession, along with glimmers of light coming from the east gate.

"They're attacking the east gate at the same time!" Ricardo said, and braced himself, but the zombies by the forest still didn't move. Confused, he agreed with Celia. "Yeah, that is pretty creepy. How's your mana doing?"

"Almost full," said Celia. "I just drank a potion."

As the two of them spoke, the zombies slowly began to move forwards.
"What in the world are those zombies thinking...?"

"No idea. Why didn't they go attack the east gate at the same time? You know, that's why the whole thing is so creepy."

They weren't certain what was going on, but they decided to spring into action. "Mages, get in a line! Cast Fireball at my signal. Warriors, stand by!" Ricardo commanded. He waited until the zombies were about two hundred meters from the wall and then yelled, "Fire!" The mages all cast their spells. "Keep going! Now this time, aim a little bit farther out. Fire!" This happened about five more times, and they successfully killed about two thousand zombies.

"I wish we could end this without having to go to too much trouble," Ricardo muttered.

"Me too, but I highly doubt it," Celia replied. Meanwhile, the zombies were trampling the corpses of their fallen comrades, still making their way forwards.

"Use the same attack pattern as before. Fire!"

Still clustered together, the zombies continued on towards the gate. The mages cast their spells, setting the zombies on fire. They took a short break to drink potions, then started again. After repeating this process several times, they had killed over ten thousand zombies. Midway through, a messenger raced to Ricardo's side.

"What? There are groups of zombies at both the north *and* west gates?" They had pulled off the same attacks so many times that he was becoming numb to it, when all of a sudden, a surprise attack came in. Ordinary zombies wouldn't have been able to come up with such a battle strategy, which was why the people around him were panicking so much.

"Tell the mages and warriors on standby by the north and west gates to attack!" Ricardo had planned to give those orders, but then the messenger told him that Merlin had ordered the mages on standby to head to the west gate, because Tenma was headed for the north gate. At that point, Ricardo changed his plans. "All right, then! Only the warriors head for the north gate! All mages on standby, head to the west!" All units on standby immediately sprang into action, heeding Ricardo's instructions. "Celia, do you think we can get the mages currently engaged in combat to head somewhere else?"

"We can't. It would seem like this is what the zombies were waiting for. They're moving faster now," Celia replied. Up until this point, the zombies had been clustered together, but now they were more spread out as they approached.

"So the attacks before were just theatrics?"

"I really don't want to believe it...but it certainly seems that way. They pretended we got the upper hand all so they could surround us later. This must be the first time in history that zombies have ever behaved this way." Her voice took on a somewhat joking tone, but her face was all business.

"I'm just anxious to see how many of them Tenma can get rid of," Ricardo murmured.

Celia didn't seem concerned about that, though. "He'll be fine. He's got more magic ability than me...plus he's been using those original spells he came up with."

Ricardo gave her a puzzled look. “How did you know about that?”

“He never flaunts it, but sometimes he uses unbelievably powerful magic. It seems like he’s very good at coming up with new ideas and modifications to spells we could never even dream of—like the Bullet spells.”

Actually, Tenma had devised the Bullet-type spells based on his memories of guns from his previous life. Celia and Merlin were able to learn them when Tenma explained how he had come up with his Fly spell and Bullet-type magic. On top of that, once Celia heard that not even Merlin had seen the Bullet spells before, she had to assume they were original spells Tenma had come up with. Of course, only Tenma and the gods knew the truth of it, but at the same time it wasn’t wrong to say that the spells were original to *this* world.

“Still, he doesn’t have much experience, and that’s what I’m worried about.” Ricardo had noticed that recently Celia hadn’t been as protective over Tenma as she used to be, and now that he heard she knew things about Tenma that he didn’t, he felt a little jealous.

“Then let’s hurry up and annihilate these zombies, so we can go back him up!”

“Great idea! That’s what we should shoot for,” Celia responded as she let loose a Firestorm. But just then, a huge column of flames shot up from the north gate.

“Hey, Celia—is that another one of Tenma’s spells?” It all happened so suddenly that both the south wall defenders and the zombies paused momentarily.

“I think it might be...” she answered, a slightly tense expression on her face.

“Hm? Celia! The zombies stopped moving! We need to use magic attacks now!”

At this, Celia shot off five Firestorms in a row. Following suit, the other mages cast a series of Ball-type spells. They weren’t sure why the zombies had stopped, but the zombies were also slow to respond to the attack and the magic obliterated them one by one, this time to the tune of about three thousand zombies.

“All right! We really dealt a blow to them this time!”

Most of the zombies who had come right up to the walls were dead, leaving a void behind in their place. Meanwhile, another column of fire shot up from the west gate, covering such a great area that it had to have dealt a lot of damage. Ricardo and the others began to think that if things kept going like this, maybe they might pull through this after all—that is, until they saw the black beam of light that shot out from the depths of the forest...

North Gate (Tenma)

Per Gramps's orders, I flew straight to the north gate. As far as I could see, there were over five thousand zombies that had perpetrated the surprise attack, and their numbers were growing by the minute. I wondered if they had circumvented the village altogether to hide in the forest. I cursed myself for not using Detection since I'd started attacking, not thinking that it was a matter of life or death.

"Firestorm!" I cast Firestorm three times before the zombies noticed me. The group in the front were engulfed by a sea of flames. But the zombies in the back seemed unbothered by this and kept trudging onwards. The fire gradually dissipated before the mass of zombies that remained.

"What an extreme strategy," I heard someone mutter. Sure, it might have been a bit extreme, but it was the most effective strategy for us right now to crush their numbers with the limited defenders we had. Whether or not the zombies themselves could think that far ahead was beside the point.

"Gramps ordered me to come here and give you guys backup!"

"Hey, thanks."

Having quickly told them why I was here, I started firing off spells. "Earth Needles! Fireball! Aircutter!" I continued using spells of different types to reduce the enemy's numbers. But more zombies just kept coming and coming. "There's no end to them, and I'm worried about the west gate... At this point, it's all or nothing. Might as well try it," I muttered. I shot off a series of ten Firestorms towards the center of the group, incinerating about two thousand of them, but there were still zombies left. Even though I'd been about five hundred meters away, waves of scorching heat came all the way up to the

fence—probably because I'd used Firestorm so many times in succession.

"Tenma! Stop getting desperate and wasting your mana like that!" A mage rushed over to warn me, but I ignored him.

"Everyone, either get down really low or evacuate! Hurry!" I ordered in a loud voice. At first everyone looked confused, but once the mages realized I was about to use very powerful magic, they explained it to everyone else and people began to evacuate. The moment I was in the clear, I started chanting the spell. "Tornado!"

It wasn't an unusual spell. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was considerably stronger than your average magic, but I'd have been lucky to knock out even a hundred zombies with one of them—under normal circumstances, that is.

During the Taisho era in the Japan of Tenma's previous life, the Great Kanto Earthquake led to around 105,000 people being reported dead or missing. And about forty thousand of those deaths were attributed to a certain phenomenon. It occurs when a large-scale fire disaster causes intensely hot air to quickly rush upwards. It's called a fire whirl, or fire tornado. The fire starts to gather all the air around it, growing bigger until it creates a tornado with temperatures that can surpass one thousand degrees.

Tenma had tried to recreate that phenomenon using magic. But it was a gamble, because the mechanisms behind the fire whirls weren't completely understood even in his past life. However, his bet paid off; the fire tornado slowly made its way towards the swarms of zombies. They tried to run from the path of the tornado, but nevertheless ended up sucked into its vortex and set on fire, then reduced to ashes.

In just a few minutes, he'd completely obliterated nearly the entire group of zombies which had been heading for the north gate. Once Tenma saw that, he used mana to weaken the fire tornado.

"Whoa! The zombies disappeared!"

"Now we just gotta take care of the stragglers!" The protectors of the north gate cheered and finished off the surviving zombies.

Inwardly, Tenma was relieved. *I'm so glad that went smoothly... It's super*

effective but kind of hard to use. If I'd lost control of it, it could've come back this way. Plus, it requires mana to make it dissipate. I have to be really careful when I use it, depending on my surroundings. He took a mana potion from his bag—he'd been downing them like water.

"Sorry, Tenma, but could you eat this and then hurry over to the west gate?" said a guard, handing him one of the sandwiches that had just been passed out.

"All right." I washed down the sandwich with the mana potion and then flew off to the west gate.

The sight I encountered at the west gate was a far cry from the one I'd just left. Honestly, it seemed like there were even more zombies here than there had been to the north, and the only reason they hadn't breached the gate was probably due to the number of mages here. I found Uncle Mark, who was in charge of this gate, and went up to him. "It's Tenma. I've come to give you backup."

"Oh, is that you, Tenma? We could use the help. Hey, were you the one responsible for that fire column we just saw?"

"Yes, that was my magic," I answered.

Uncle Mark looked surprised. "Can you do the same thing over here, then?" He glanced towards the zombies.

"I can. But I need the other mages to help." I had the magic users cast ten Fireballs each towards the center of the group of zombies, while I cast five Firestorms. "Everyone get down from the wall! Hide and take cover as much as you can!" With these instructions, I cast a Tornado just as I had done by the northern wall. Once again, Fire Tornado consumed nearly all of the attacking zombies, and by the time it dissipated the entire group was basically decimated. The defenders cheered and then finished off the stragglers.

I was about to go back to the east gate to give my report, but suddenly I sensed a terrible presence coming from the forest beyond the southern gate. Then, a black beam of light shot towards the gate. The beam of light made it to the center of the wall, and I could hear screams everywhere. The south gate and a portion of the adjoining wall had been blown away. It seemed like several defenders had taken the brunt of the attack.

The attack had contained unbelievable force. Everyone around me, myself included, froze—we had no idea what had just happened.

“Mom! Dad!” After a few seconds of being frozen in place, I quickly flew over to the south gate, praying the two of them were all right. On the way there, I looked around and saw the victims in a state of chaos. There were people hugging relatives who had passed away, and some sobbing as they collected stray body parts. And inside the walls an even more hellish scene awaited me.

There were seriously wounded people among the injured, but I didn’t have time to heal them at the moment. Maybe that sounded cruel, but now that the wall was damaged, the zombies would be able to invade the interior of the fortress unless I acted fast. I needed to do something *now*.

Even though I hadn’t been that far away from the west gate, it felt like it took me forever to get there.

It had taken way more damage than I’d expected. I thought the wall had been sturdily constructed, but now it had been blown to bits, and the parts around the center were nothing but rubble. Actually, “rubble” was too generous of a word—half of it had been simply melted by the beam of light’s direct attack.

“Where in the world did this power come from...?” I muttered. Several people began moaning with pain at the sound of my voice. I looked around and saw people scattered around me, either injured from the fragments of the wall or grazed by the beam of light. Most of the people who’d been struck directly had simply disappeared without a trace.

“Tenmaaa!” As I stood there stunned from the situation, I suddenly heard Mom’s voice. I looked around and saw her and Dad about a few dozen meters away from the broken gate.

“Dad! Mom! You’re safe!” I rushed towards them, but as I got closer I noticed something was wrong with Dad. He was missing his right leg from below the knee and his left arm was twisted in the opposite direction, gushing out blood. “What happened to Dad?” I asked Mom, who was using recovery magic on him.

“I was right in the path of that light when it shot out from the forest. Dad pushed me out of the way and saved me, but it grazed him. And then he got blown away by the recoil,” she explained as she sobbed.

It was a miracle she was uninjured. And with Dad having been seriously injured, he was lucky to be alive. There were several others who had been in the path of the beam of light but survived—however, most of them were on the verge of death.

“All right. Mom, you finish healing Dad and take care of the other injured people. I’m going to defend the gate.” I flew up to the top of the gate. The zombies were close to it now. “Damn it! They’re too close for me to use Fire Tornado!” That spell was my trump card, but the zombies were closer than I’d expected. The possibility of further damaging the wall or injuring others was too great.

First, I began to use Earth magic to close up the gate. Next, I used Firestorms on the lines of zombies that were closest to gradually widen the gap between us. Once there was sufficient space between the wall and the zombies, I cooperated with the other mages and created a fire whirl.

“Now we’ll be able to win!”

“Burn those zombies to the ground!”

“Go to hell, worthless zombies!”

Everyone cheered. However, the fire tornado didn’t even make it fifty meters before it was broken up by another beam of light. I’d hoped the tornado would cancel the light beam out, but far from it—the light still reached the wall and blew another hole in it, although this blast had been weaker than the last.

Luckily no one was injured this time, but a feeling of hopelessness had started to spread throughout the villagers. I’d left Mom to take care of the other injured, but she now climbed up onto the wall to join me. At the same time, the source of the light ray slowly showed itself. And I couldn’t have imagined what it was.

“A dragon zombie...” Mom murmured. She was right—it was a dragon zombie that was easily more than fifty meters long.

Just then, Gramps joined us for backup and added, “Not only that, but an ancient dragon zombie...”

There were different classes of dragons. Starting from the strongest, there

were ancient dragons, dragon kings, master dragons, common dragons, and lower or inferior dragons. They're most commonly seen in that same order, but in reverse.

Ancient dragons were said to have lived for thousands of years, and were distinguishable by the metallic ridges that shone like gemstones on the surface of their bodies. Legend said that the dragons' mana began to meld with its skin and scales, eventually turning them into metal over time.

Dragon kings were more powerful than master dragons, but didn't have the metal bodies that the ancient dragons had. Basically, ancient dragons were considered the strongest, but since there wasn't much difference between them from a human's perspective, people thought there must be dragon kings out there that were stronger than an ancient dragon.



The master and common dragons were determined based on their intelligence and strength, or whether they had wings and four limbs. Most of them resembled how dragons were depicted both in the East and West in my past world.

The other dragons were the lower dragons and inferior dragons, which included creatures with low intelligence such as wyverns, larger reptiles, and young dragons.

It was said that size or age didn't have much to do with strength, but a lot of the bigger dragons or those that had lived the longest were the strongest. And the dragon in front of me had black ridges about three meters long jutting out from both its shoulders.

"Hrm...? That one sure looks like an ancient dragon written about in the books from long ago. According to the texts, a few hundred years ago, a Dark-type ancient dragon appeared in the kingdom and destroyed several villages. Once it showed up in a city, though, it was driven out by the knights and the royal sorcerer."

"So that's why the zombies are smarter than average?" I asked as I continued casting spells.

"If we defeat it, the other zombies should fall along with it!"

And so all the mages began attacking it at once. But the dragon zombie shot its breath towards us, neutralizing the spells. Every time it spewed its breath, parts of the wall would crumble and more people were injured.

"At this rate, it'll destroy us! Isn't there anything else we can do?" Mom joined in the fight partway through, but she started to panic when she saw our attacks weren't succeeding at all.

"How's Dad?"

"Don't worry—I healed him to the point where he can move around normally! Same for most of the other injured people! There were several people who were beyond saving... I wish I could help them, but it's impossible in this situation..." Mom said sadly, her voice almost disappearing towards the end of her sentence. She must've had to abandon those people whom she couldn't

save even with her recovery magic. Right now she couldn't afford to waste her mana on people who were on the verge of death.

That was just the nature of war, but Mom had served as the doctor of Kukuri Village for a long time now, and so even though she might have understood that logically, it was hard for her to get over. It was normally Dad's job to comfort her at times like these, but he was slipping in and out of consciousness after being healed.

"Mom, channel your grief into fighting against the dragon. Otherwise you won't be able to apologize, or mourn, or take responsibility for anything. Right now we have to beat that thing, even if our lives depend on it." My tone might have been a bit harsh, but as her son, I decided to take over Dad's role. I wasn't sure if my words got through to her, though, and I didn't have time to check either.

The dragon had closed in—it was only five hundred meters from the gate now.

"I'm gonna cast magic from closer up. You guys give me backup!" I cast some magic as a smokescreen, then hid behind it to fly high up into the sky until I was directly over the dragon zombie. I was about fifty meters in the air when I started casting my spells.

"Earth Needles!" First, I started with successive attacks from the ground. The dragon zombie seemed surprised when the needles suddenly appeared from beneath its feet.

"Windcutter!" Next, I slashed the surface of the dragon's skin. Normal dragons had high defense and their scales gave them magical protection. But this one's scales were mostly torn off, lowering its defense—maybe because it was a zombie. So I could damage it using the same magic on it that I had used on the rest of the zombies.

"Fire Bullet! Fire Lance!" Finally, I used two piercing Fire Elemental spells in succession. Every time the dragon zombie tried to come near me to attack, Gramps and the other mages cast spells to get in its way, leaving it defenseless against my attacks.

It must have taken a dozen of my attacks by now. A cloud of dust covered the

area, obscuring my vision. About thirty seconds later, the smoke finally dissipated, revealing the shape of the dragon zombie, which was lying on its side, unmoving.

Now the surviving villagers really did cheer. This boosted the gate defenders' morale enough to drive out the remaining zombies. Exhausted from using so much magic, I landed unsteadily near the gate. The second I touched the ground, everyone crowded around me.

"Tenma!" Mom pushed through them and threw her arms around me.

Dad had finally regained consciousness, and slowly walked towards me, using Gramps's shoulder for support. "You were amazing, Tenma!"

"Why, you beat an ancient dragon almost completely by yourself! You'll go down in history for accomplishing that feat at your age!"

Everyone else joined in with Dad and Gramps to praise me. One of the villagers ran off by themselves to look at the dragon zombie. At that point, everyone truly believed the dragon was dead. Oblivious to the fact that we'd made a fatal mistake in letting our guards down, the villager who'd run off to look at the dragon peered into its face. The light had left its eyes, but all of a sudden they gleamed red and...

"Raaaaaaaaaaaar!"

"Aaaaahhhhhhhh!"

We all froze when we heard the roar and the screams that followed. The dragon zombie had suddenly revived and begun moving again. And it was holding the villager in its mouth. The light had gone out of their eyes, and blood gushed from their mouth and body.

The dragon stared at us for a moment and then swallowed the villager whole. It was so shocking we didn't really grasp what had happened right away. We were completely stricken.

And that was another fatal mistake. The dragon zombie dug its front legs into the ground, collecting strength. It was preparing to use its breath attack. I knew I had to do something, but just then I felt my body being shoved to the side. "Oof!" Confused, I glanced over and realized that Dad had shoved me. Mom

and Gramps cast a magic barrier in front of me, looked at me, and smiled. Their mouths moved and I thought I heard them speaking to me.

"Live."

"I want you to live."

"Live, boy!"

I reached out towards them, but then they were swallowed up by the black beam of light and disappeared. The only thing that remained afterwards were dead bodies scattered around and cries of pain from those who had miraculously survived.

All I could do was stand there in total shock as I looked around. I didn't understand what had happened. I thought I had defeated the dragon zombie, but it had survived and used its breath attack on us. The dragon's breath had engulfed my family, and obliterated all the people who had been crowding around me as well. A few moments later, the dragon unleashed another breath attack towards a different location. And I heard more screams.

The walls were so damaged it didn't take much to destroy them. Apparently the shock waves from the breath attack had knocked me into the moat. It didn't seem like I was seriously injured, thanks to the protective barrier Mom and Gramps had cast around me.

I slowly sat up and crawled out of the moat. I could see the dragon zombie from here. Suddenly, our eyes met. Even though it was about three hundred meters away, that bastard looked as if it were smiling at me. It probably thought I looked like a tasty snack that had crawled right up from the ground.

The dragon zombie turned, crushing other zombies beneath its feet, as if it had changed its target to me. It looked like it could use its breath attack at any minute. I couldn't move. I didn't have the spirit to move. I even thought that I didn't care if I died.

My whole family had just died right in front of me. I'd received a second chance at life and was reborn into this world. Having them as my parents had made me happy.

I thought it would be too sad to go on living without them. But just as I

thought I probably only had ten seconds left before I died, I remembered their words, how they had told me to live.

And once I remembered that, I noticed that the dragon zombie had a cruel smile on its face. It opened its mouth and was about to use its breath. Right before it did so, I unconsciously lifted up my hand. At that, around a hundred thick walls about five meters wide appeared between me and the dragon zombie.

Though it seemed surprised by the sudden appearance of the walls, it still let out its breath attack, but it dissipated before it even made it through half of the walls.

"I'll kill you..."

Anger boiled up inside of me.

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill kill kill kill kill..."

A kind of malice I'd never felt before overflowed from my body.

"I'll kill youuuuuuu! You rotten lizardaaaaaaaard!" Before I even realized what I was doing, I gave into my emotions and started running. I cast Boost magic on my whole body, racing towards the bastard at a dozen times my usual speed.

There was only one thing left to do. I was going to wipe that rotten lizard off the face of this earth. The dragon was surprised. After all, a bunch of walls had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and interfered with its breath attack, and now a tasty-looking snack was screaming as it ran right towards it. It was just one unexpected event after another.

But since it was a rotten, good-for-nothing dragon, it quickly recovered and started preparing to let loose another breath attack. The moment I saw that, I cast Earth Needles, sending a particularly large one directly at its chin. It smashed right into the dragon's open jaw, violently forcing its mouth closed. Without a place for the breath attack to go, the impact of it blew off the dragon zombie's lower jaw and throat. If it were an ordinary dragon, the explosion from the failed breath attack would've blown off its entire head.

But this one was a zombie, so the rotting, fragile jaw and its throat were

blown off first. And as a result, it survived the blow. But losing its jaw and throat was painful, even for a zombie. As the dragon zombie writhed in pain, I approached it and fired off Fire Bullet. Ten, twenty, thirty, one hundred shots. Then, when I was right in front of it, I flew upwards and took my sword from my bag. I focused mana into the blade and swung it, aiming for the dragon zombie's back. Thanks to the magical energy, it slashed through the dragon's back with tremendous force.

I'd intended to cut it in two with that one blow, but I'd only managed to get about a fourth of the way through the dragon's body. Even though it was rotting, it was stronger than I thought. Still, it was a decent-sized wound compared to how huge the dragon was in the first place. I was just about to keep hacking away at it until I'd managed to cut it in two, but then surprisingly the wound began to gradually close up. And most of the wounds from the Fire Bullets had closed up as well.

"Damn it! It's got regeneration abilities!" I retreated for a moment and was about to land when the dragon zombie swung its tail towards me. I floated in midair to mess up its timing and somehow managed to dodge the attack and land safely, but then it began to attack me with its front leg. I deftly stepped to the side and evaded the attack by a paper-thin margin. Then I swung my sword with the same force as I had when I'd slashed its back.

Although its flesh was rotten, its bones seemed quite strong, so I decided to aim for its joints. I managed to make a slight gash in the spot I was aiming for, but that was enough to sever the dragon zombie's front right leg at the knee.

"Raaaarghhh!" That knocked the dragon zombie off-balance. It screamed as it pitched forwards. Then I swung my sword, aiming towards its face. I managed to crush its right eye, but its skull was tougher than I'd expected, so when I went to pull my sword out, it got lodged in the bone below the dragon's eye, breaking clean in half.

Now I was the one to lose my balance. Meanwhile, the dragon started preparing for another attack. I knew I had to do something as it raised what was left of its leg right in front of me. I immediately cast a magical barrier in front of me, avoiding the brunt of its attack, but I wasn't able to completely negate the force of it. The blow knocked me backwards, slamming me into the ground.

I skidded across the ground for about ten or twenty meters and then came to a stop, but my wall had taken a lot of damage and was weakened. My vision blurred and pain raced throughout my entire body. Still, I somehow managed to pull two types of potions from my bag to both heal my injuries and recover my mana.

The dragon zombie hadn't finished regenerating its jaw yet, so it couldn't use its breath attack. But it was making its way towards me on its three and a half legs. I had a feeling that if it had finished regenerating its body parts by now, I'd already be dead. I jumped back as far as I could and cast Earth Needles towards the dragon zombie's left front leg.

Apparently the dragon zombie was so consumed by rage that it was completely oblivious to the spell and stomped right down onto the Earth Needle. It lost its balance and slammed face-first into the ground.

I tried to use that opportunity to cut off its head, but suddenly I sensed something flying towards me from behind, so I jumped away. I heard the *something* land with a loud thud, and I realized it was one of the small golems I'd made. I turned around in surprise and saw that the zombies that had been attacking the fortress were making their way towards me. One of the ogre zombies had started grabbing my golems and tossing them. A second one, then a third one came. Soon there was a mountain of small golems. Although none of them struck me, the shock waves from them hitting the ground was enough to interrupt my actions.

I had to take my eyes off the dragon zombie for a moment while I tried to avoid the incoming golems. I was sure it knew I was distracted. I heard a thud and looked up to see the dragon zombie's tail swinging downwards towards me. Apparently it had used its uninjured back legs to kick off the ground and whip its tail forwards.

I was so surprised by the unexpected attack that I lost the chance to move first, but I did manage to narrowly avoid it. But the blow to the ground knocked me off my feet. Then I felt a tremendous force sideswiping me. Even though the dragon was on its back, it forced its tail in a sweeping motion to the side. It crashed through the barrier I'd reflexively made around me and knocked me into the forest. I bounced off trees like a pinball, finally slowing down after

getting caught in so many branches. At last, I hit a thick tree trunk and landed on the ground.

"Koff! Koff koff!" My lungs must've gotten injured somehow, because I started coughing up blood. Thanks to the Boost magic I'd cast on myself, I'd managed to avoid death, but I was seriously injured. I cast recovery magic on my lungs, my other internal organs, my head, my bones, and all my wounds in order. I'd been hurt so seriously that it was a wonder I hadn't died. I couldn't fully heal myself in such a short amount of time, but it was enough to restore my movement so I could at least hang in there until I killed that dragon.

I dropped my magic bag, which I wore around my waist, and my dimension bag, which I'd slung over my shoulders.

"Rocket, Shiromaru. Sorry, but I'm gonna have to leave you here. If I make it through, I'll come back to get you...but I don't think that's gonna happen. And if I don't come back, then you guys are free. But I want you two to stick together and help each other out, okay? You're brothers, after all. There's food and medicine in my magic bag, so I think that'll keep you going for a while. Once everything is quiet, I want you to leave here. Shiromaru, make sure you listen to Rocket and do what he says. And don't take food from strangers. Rocket, take care of Shiromaru. And if you find someone you think you can trust, go ahead and forget about me and go with them. Well, see you. Take care, okay? I'm really glad I got to meet you guys."

I opened my dimension bag and held them as I said my goodbyes. They tried to come out, though, so I pushed them back inside and left the bag inside a hollow in a nearby tree. Then I flew back up into the air.

I confirmed the location of the dragon zombie. It was destroying trees left and right as it made its way in the direction I'd been catapulted in. Apparently it was looking for me. I watched from my vantage point up in the sky and started preparing to cast a spell.

It took about five minutes for the dragon zombie to spot me. Perhaps it could sense my growing mana. I held on to my spell and landed inside the forest about two hundred meters ahead of the dragon. This would be far enough away from Rocket and Shiromaru that they wouldn't feel the effects.

The dragon was mad with rage. It decimated the trees standing in its way as it came towards me. It seemed like it had finished regenerating all four of its legs. Its jaw was almost completely regenerated too, so it would be able to use its breath attack.

But this was where it would end. If this spell didn't work, I had no other options. It was literally life or death. Once the dragon zombie was about a hundred meters away from me, I cast the spell.

"Tempest!" A huge tornado appeared with me at its vortex. The dragon zombie was just outside of its radius, and dug in its heels to avoid being blown away as it kept slowly coming towards me. Countless wounds appeared on its body.

"I'm just getting started! Tempest F3!" I doubled the force of the spell. Even the dragon zombie had to stop moving at that point, desperately hanging onto the ground so it wouldn't get blown away. Blood and other bodily fluids started gushing from the wounds all over its body, but it paid no heed and began to prepare a breath attack.

"Tempest F4!" At last, the dragon zombie's body lifted off the ground and flailed wildly around in midair. Trees that had been caught up in the vortex slammed into it, and injured it even further. There was no way it could use its breath attack now, so all the energy it had gathered dissipated.

Meanwhile, since I'd increased the strength of the spell and I was still at the vortex, the wind lashed countless cuts on my body too. My vision began to blur, from losing too much blood or expending too much mana. I was in danger.

"I don't care! I'm gonna finish you off! Tempest F5!" I mustered up the last of my strength and increased the power of the spell again. That was my last, best effort. I watched as the tornado mercilessly spun the dragon zombie around in its vortex. Finally, its body could no longer withstand the storm and it broke up into pieces.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaarghhhh!"

Not even a minute after I'd cast Tempest F5, the dragon zombie let out a terrible death rattle and then disappeared along with the tornado. Covered in blood, I fell to the ground and lost consciousness.



Part Nine

The villagers in the fortress who'd survived were shocked and afraid of the giant tornado that had suddenly appeared, but strangely, once it had dissipated, about half the zombies who were approaching the walls simply collapsed and died. The zombies who were still mobile showed no signs of attacking them; instead they just wandered around aimlessly. Most of them began heading back towards the forest, but some ran into the walls, or even each other, and then fell to the ground.

All the golems Tenma had made were destroyed. Once Mark saw that, he realized something must have happened to Tenma. He immediately went to look for him, but the moment he left the south gate, he found Celia and the others buried in a pile of rubble.

"Celia! Are you all right?! Somebody! Lend me a hand!" Mark called out. Several dozen villagers who had survived, including Martha, rushed over to help. "Be very careful as you remove the debris! Bring anyone who can use Recovery magic over here, as fast as you can!" They began to move the pieces of rubble piece by piece. Around ten minutes later, they were able to extricate Celia. Merlin and Ricardo were nearby as well. Merlin was seriously injured, but Ricardo had already passed away.

"Celia! Hey, can you hear me? Celia, *open your eyes!*" As Martha held Celia in her arms, Celia finally reacted to Mark's pleas by cracking her eyes open slightly. But anyone could tell she was in dire straits.

"Mark, Martha... Where's Tenma...?"

No one knew how to answer her, so Mark quickly jumped in and lied to her. "Tenma defeated the dragon zombie. He was amazing! He chased it deep into the forest, though, and he's not back yet. I'm sure he'll be back any minute now!" No one had actually seen Tenma defeat the dragon, including Mark, but she was in such a precarious state that he was too afraid to tell her that not only was Tenma missing, but no one knew whether he was alive or dead.

"Oh... He fought so hard... I'll have to give him lots of praise..." Her voice

sounded weaker with every word she spoke. Mark and Martha were beside themselves as they called out to her frantically.

“Hang in there! Tenma will be back at any minute!”

“That’s right! It’s a mother’s job to greet her son with a smile when he returns!”

But Celia slowly shook her head. “I don’t have much time left. Mark, Martha... Please give this to Tenma for me, and praise him...” She handed her guild card to Martha.

“Don’t say things like that!”

But Celia was already starting to lose consciousness, and it seemed as if she could no longer hear those around her.

“Tenma! Celia, Tenma’s back! He’s running straight for us!” Mark cried, and no one contradicted him.

“Yes... Tenma... You came back... You fought so hard... What a good boy you are... Oh... I see Ricardo too! Now we can live happily as a family again...” And with that, Celia’s body began to go limp.

“Celia? Hey, Celia! Wake up!” Martha shook her body.

“I love you, Tenma...” Celia whispered, and then quietly took her last breath.

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Meanwhile, Tenma was still unconscious in the middle of the forest. He was bleeding from wounds all over his body, and at first glance one might have thought he was dead. But upon closer examination, his chest was moving up and down ever so slightly, proving he was still alive. Certainly, though, he would bleed to death if left for too long in this state.

At this point, two monsters rushed towards Tenma. Actually, it would have been more precise to say that one monster rushed towards Tenma while carrying the other one on its back. They were Shiromaru and Rocket. They had obeyed his commands and used their own judgment—and had decided to come save their master.

They had actually jumped out of the bag immediately after Tenma had flown

away, but weren't able to approach because of the aftershocks from Tempest. Once the storm had died down, Shiromaru tried to track Tenma using his scent, but since he had been flung around by the tornado, his scent was all over the place so it had taken some time.

Once Rocket spotted Tenma, it took several potions out of the magic bag that hung around Shiromaru's neck and poured them over Tenma's body. Once Rocket saw that the potions had stopped the bleeding, he instructed Shiromaru to roll Tenma over and they began to make him drink the potions slowly.

Once they saw he was instinctively swallowing the potions, they were relieved, but even after he was done, he still didn't regain consciousness. Shiromaru tried licking Tenma's face, but Tenma didn't react in the slightest. Unsure of what to do, Shiromaru and Rocket exchanged glances. But just then, they sensed zombies approaching, so they worked together to lift Tenma onto Shiromaru's back. Rocket served as a sort of glue, affixing their two bodies together. Once that was accomplished, they began to hurry away—but just as they began to move, Rocket saw something important on the ground near where Tenma had lain. It decided to pick it up, thinking Tenma might need it later.

Thanks to the two monsters, the zombies didn't reach them. But because they moved away from the zombies, that also meant they were getting farther away from the fortress. For this reason, Mark and the others were unable to find Tenma when they went searching for him, but certainly no one could fault the two monsters for their actions in saving Tenma's life.

Shiromaru ran through the forest for about four days until he finally came to a river. He and Rocket decided to stop there and let Tenma off his back. Rocket had been periodically taking water out of the magic bag to give Tenma, but it had taken four days before they no longer smelled the scent of zombies or other monsters.

Because Tenma had been on his back, Shiromaru hadn't run as fast as he could, and although he had backtracked and taken detours to avoid encounters with other monsters, they were now quite far from Kukuri Village.

Tenma woke up three days after they arrived at the river.

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"Where am I...? Dad? Mom? Gramps?" When I regained consciousness, it felt like there was a thick fog in my brain. I looked around but didn't recognize anything. I had no idea what had happened and felt a little panicked.

All of a sudden, something white appeared right in front of my face, startling me so much I nearly fell over. But then I realized it was Shiromaru. He was wagging his tail, licking me all over. By the time I could push him away, the fog had cleared and I finally remembered what had happened—and what had ended.

Mom, Dad, and Gramps had been murdered. Just the thought of it made my spirits start to sink, but then Rocket crawled away and overturned my magic bag. Curious, I watched as three lumps fell onto the ground—*thump, thump, thump*. I squinted and realized they were the dragon zombie's skull and the two black, metallic ridges that had sprouted from its shoulders.

"Huh?! Why the heck did you bring those along?!" I blurted out, my surprise winning out over my depression. Once again, Rocket rifled through the magic bag, and another giant object tumbled out onto the ground.

"The dragon's magic core..."

If Rocket had a face, he'd surely have a triumphant look on it right about now. Like, "*Hey! Look what I did!*"

Anyway, thanks to Rocket, I was feeling a little better. I used Detection, but apparently Kukuri Village was outside of its range. "We must be at least ten kilometers away from the village. Which way is it, Shiromaru?"

"*Wuff?*" In response to my question, Shiromaru tipped his head to the side, as if to say, "Beats me!" I guessed he'd been running so frantically that he had no idea where we were.

"I've never heard of a river like this in the Elder Forest, and I certainly never saw it either." I used Detection, but didn't sense any other monsters or large beasts around, so this must have been a safe zone.

Just as I let down my guard, though, all of a sudden the radar in my head pinged. "It's close! How in the world did something get this close to us without

my noticing?" I quickly began to prepare for battle in case of an attack. But when I looked around, I didn't see anything. Puzzled, I focused on my radar one more time and realized the ping was actually coming from inside the river.

"There's a monster in the river!"

I braced myself, but then suddenly a giant fish jumped out from the river. Just as I was breathing a sigh of relief that it was nothing more than a fish, it surprised me by crying out, "I won't attack you if you don't attack me!"

"It talked!"

I was so startled to see my first-ever talking fish I accidentally fired off an Air Bullet, but then the fish said "Ho!" and jumped gracefully to dodge it. Now I was able to see that it was a giant koi, more than three meters long.

"A koi!"

"That's right—I'm a koi. The mascot of everyone's favorite team: the Carps!" it joked.

"Actually, I'm more of a Hawks fan," I replied, for some stupid reason.



"What kinda nonsense are you spouting?" the fish asked, and at that moment I realized it had a slightly sketchy accent—maybe it was the Hiroshima dialect?

"Are you from Hiroshima?" I asked, just to see what it'd say.

"Nope—Niigata!"

"You're not even from Hiroshima and you're advertising the Carps?!"

It was a strange sort of back-and-forth banter we had going on. Of course, our only witnesses were Shiromaru and Rocket, who didn't find it amusing. In fact, Shiromaru looked thoroughly bewildered, which made me wonder if he'd suffered emotional damage.

"Hm? Wait a second... Were you reincarnated into this world too? Are you Namitaro?"

"Ooh, you've heard of me? That must mean you got reincarnated too!" Apparently, this really was the same Namitaro fellow the god of creation had told me about. However, I had a few doubts, so I decided to ask.

"How can you talk? How old are you? I thought you died..."

"I can't answer all your questions at once! I *will* answer them, though." And he did just that, one by one. Apparently, the reason he could talk was because he had lived a very long time in his previous life, and since he was wise, he asked the gods if he could talk once he got reincarnated. According to Namitaro, they hadn't allowed him to talk out of the kindness of their own hearts, but because they thought it would be amusing. Those pranksters...

He said he was over a thousand years old, but had stopped counting by this point. And he *had* been caught right after he got reincarnated, but he flailed and flailed and managed to escape. I suppose now that I thought about it, the god of creation had told me Namitaro had been caught, but never actually specified he'd died.

"Still... This is my first time talking to a human, including in my past life!"

"And this is my first time talking to a fish..." I muttered, but he ignored me. He kept joking around so much that it seemed like he must've had a lot of pent-up loneliness without human contact or something. This Namitaro really seemed

to like chatting, and just kept rambling on and on about things I didn't even ask him about.

For example, he said in his past life he was called Midori, and he lived in a lake on top of a mountain, and one of his friends got drawn in a fishing manga, how he'd turned the tables on everyone who'd been influenced by that manga, how he had a cute girlfriend named Sogyo...and a bunch of other nonsense.

And he went on to say that he traveled the world and ended up fighting Nessie, the Loch Ness monster; he went swimming with Ogopogo in Okanagan Lake and almost caused an accident; he played tricks on a fishing boat with a sea serpent in New Zealand; he defeated a Kraken in a northern European sea and ate it for dinner; how that idiot Takitaro was arrogant and how even though he was pretty unimportant he came up way too much in folklore, it was always Takitaro this, Takitaro that... Basically, he just went on and on.

"So? What're you doing here, Tenma?" It seemed he was *finally* done talking and had decided to ask me about what happened in the village.

At first I felt rather conflicted about discussing it, but after I got done telling the story, I felt like I'd managed to come to terms with it. Absently, I thought that talking to others really helps you work through your feelings.

After quietly listening to my story, Namitaro tried to wipe away his tears with the fin by his chest, but couldn't quite reach. "How tragic! You've really gone through some tough times, youngun. I wish we could just cry together!" All of a sudden, he'd switched to a Kansai dialect, and was trying to come ashore. I threw a pebble at him to get him to stay in the water, but then gave up and let him anyway. I wondered if he could breathe okay, but apparently the gods had made his body such that he could.

"By the way, where am I?" I asked, throwing another pebble at him.

"That hurts!" he said...although it didn't seem like it hurt at all, so I ignored him and continued throwing pebbles.

"Hmm, well... I just moved here recently, so I've never heard of this Kukuri Village. Hang on a spell—I'll ask for ya." He looked up at the sky and then called to a little bird I thought might be a sparrow. "Hey, Chiiiii!" The bird flew down right in front of Namitaro and started chirping. I stopped throwing pebbles at

this point, because of course, the bird hadn't done anything wrong.

Namitaro responded when the bird chirped at him, saying, "Hrm, hrm. Uh-huh. Well, I'll be darned..." and other such little comments. "Thanks, Chi. All right, Tenma. We're a hundred and eighty kilometers away from Kukuri Village."

"How the heck did you figure that out?!"

Apparently Namitaro could understand sparrows. I wasn't sure if I believed him or not, but he said the gods had given him that ability. In that case, I could believe it. Actually, it made more sense to me that he could talk to sparrows than to humans.

"One of Chi's friends just got back from Kukuri Village. Apparently all the people who were in the fortress went somewhere else, far away. Day before yesterday, in the morning. So there's nothing left of Kukuri Village but charred ruins. Some people came after the villagers left and tore down the fortress. Now it's just a mountain of rubble."

"Really? Then what am I going to do now...?"

"Well... You should either go someplace where there're other people, or try to follow the ones who left Kukuri Village." Namitaro's advice was dispensed casually, but he wasn't wrong.

For some reason, I didn't want to find the villagers. I was sure they'd welcome me if I met up with them. But on the other hand, they'd just remind me of my family. I didn't want to be in a place which belonged to Margrave Haust, when all of this had been caused by the hands of his minions. I was sure this probably wasn't something he could've foreseen, but because of his soldiers, my family and a lot of the villagers had been killed. Honestly, I wanted to give him a good couple of punches in the face.

I couldn't stay here forever, though. So I decided to leave Margrave Haust's domain and go to a big city somewhere else. I told Namitaro about my decision and he said, "Hm... That might be a good idea. Getting away from the pain is another option."

Why is a koi giving me advice, anyway? I thought, but I didn't say it out loud.

"The sun's gonna set soon, so why don't you set up camp here for the night

and set off on your journey tomorrow? I'm sure you're strong and all, but it's better to get a good night's rest and plenty of nutrition instead of trying to force your way through in the dark. If you follow this river, you'll eventually end up leaving the margrave's territory."

Since he seemed to know so much, I asked for more details. He told me that if you continued following the river, you'd eventually end up at the sea. Apparently Namitaro liked to follow the river every few years, head out to sea, and then move to another river.

I followed Namitaro's advice and made camp for the night. I had some dried jerky, vegetable soup, and bread that I'd stowed in my magic bag. It seemed like my stomach wasn't ready for the meat yet, so I gave it to Rocket. Then Namitaro wanted some, so I gave him some too. But then he complained that it didn't taste very good, at which point I threw more pebbles at him from close up. Shiromaru hunted a deer, which I skinned and cleaned, then roasted for his dinner.

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The next morning, Namitaro gave me several dozen magic cores and magic stones. Apparently they'd all drifted upstream, which is how he'd gathered them.

"Well, take care, Tenma. Hope we see each other again."

"Yeah. Take care, Namitaro."

Then I set out on my journey.

"Uhh... Why are you following me?" I'd been walking for about thirty minutes, but for some reason Namitaro was still swimming beside me.

"Oh, you know. Just kinda felt like it."

This went on for several days until I finally left the river behind me.

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Side Story: The Sage's Early Years

I'm bored. I'm always bored, no matter what I do. I'm so bored I thought I might as well withdraw to the country and live that slow, rural life, but I ended up running away before not even ten years had passed.

Maybe I shouldn't have, on account of the kid.

But I couldn't help it. Country life just wasn't stimulating for a young person like me—or at least, I still wanted to believe I was young. She might have laughed that off, saying, "That sounds like something Uncle would do!" It made me a little mad to think that *he* might be laughing along right beside her, though.

So this time, I wanted to show up after a long absence and surprise them. I knew it was a bit twisted, but that was more or less what my personality was like.

Thinking back on it, maybe I'd always looked at the world from a cold point of view. I was born the third son of a noble family. There was quite an age difference between me and my two older brothers, and as I was never regarded as being a possible heir, my mother didn't take very good care of me.

It wasn't that she was an unfeeling person, but she just put a lot of effort into my oldest brother's education, since he was the front-runner to take over. Hrm? Then again, she did ignore me from a very young age, so perhaps she *was* unfeeling. Well...no matter. I never wanted much attention from my mother anyway, so maybe it all worked out the way it should've.

The only thing I can say about my father was that he was mediocre. He had several other women around him, so really the only compliment I can pay him was that it was good that I didn't have more siblings floating about.

That's the kind of family I was born into, and when I was a child I was mostly cared for by servants. Sometimes, my brother who was five years older would play with me. My oldest brother was ten years older than me, by the way.

Anyway, my middle brother was such a capable person I had to wonder if he was really my father's biological son. He was the only one in my whole family whom I respected. If I had to name a flaw of his, it was that he was physically weak.

On the other hand, my oldest brother was no good at all. My parents had spoiled him rotten, so he was very cocky. He'd always say, "One day you will all be my vassals, so you'd better know your place and swear your loyalty to me now!" or, "If I'm ever in danger, you'll have to lay down your life for me! There will only be peace in this family so long as I'm around!"

Despite all that bravado, he never studied, so it would be quicker to find his rank in school if you counted up from the bottom. My middle brother, on the other hand, didn't seem like he studied much either, but was always top of the class.

Perhaps that was why my oldest brother was so cruel to my middle brother. And even though he was such a good-for-nothing, everyone certainly loved to make a fuss over him just because he was the oldest. At that time, there were more cases of second sons or even children below that succeeding the family than there had been in years past, but it was still quite rare. Therefore, most of the time people would have the eldest succeed regardless, "so as not to cause chaos for the family." It was a very old-fashioned way of thinking.

And it was also a damn shame. If only my middle brother had taken over, our family would've become greater. Right now, my family had the rank of viscount, but under my middle brother, it wouldn't have been far-fetched for the head of our house to be raised to the rank of count.

Of course I couldn't say that out loud, because it was a matter of life or death —that is to say, for my middle brother, not me.

My oldest brother's jealousy ran very deep indeed, and all my parents did was dote on him, despite how much trouble he was.

Once, when my brother was in middle school, I asked him once, "Doesn't it bother you?" He gave me a slightly perplexed smile and affectionately tousled my hair, without saying a word. I never asked him that question again.

That same year, my oldest brother got engaged. His fiancée was only the

second daughter of a baronet, and yet she was extremely haughty. Honestly, she was perfect for my brother in that regard. She was the kind of woman who made everyone else want to stay away from him.

The year I entered middle school, my middle brother got engaged too. His fiancée was the third daughter of a count, and the count wanted to know if he would marry into the family, thus taking their family's name and becoming the heir of his branch family in that fashion. My entire family was surprised to hear this. Because even if it *was* a branch family, it was still a *count's* family. That meant my middle brother's prospects for the future were quite wonderful indeed.

And if he became the heir of the branch family, that meant his future children could become heir to the count one day. It was a small possibility, but that was how highly the count regarded him.

My brother was very enthusiastic about the prospect. After all, he would be leaving this family and come under the count's protection—which meant he would never have to interact with my eldest brother again. I was sad to see him go, but I wanted him to be happy.

However, this never came to fruition, all because of my eldest brother. He went before my parents and said, “We need him in this family. He has to support us in case something ever happens to me!” Of course, he didn’t mean this one bit, but he made such dramatic gestures as he gave the speech that he convinced my parents.

Plus, he pointed out that this particular count’s family belonged to a neutral faction. Then he went so far as to say, “Our family belongs to the royal family’s faction! Do we really want to let our own flesh and blood go over to a different side, and perhaps have to turn against our faction someday? That’s basically the same as going against the king!”

At that point, even I lost my temper and felt like killing him. But, seeing how I reacted, my middle brother finally agreed to what my oldest brother said because he didn’t want any conflict.

That was my greatest mistake in life. If only I had explained the advantages of my brother joining the count’s family—that he could be a bridge built between

the neutral faction and the royal family's faction... But instead I let my emotions get the best of me and ended up causing trouble for my brother.

Fortunately, there was still a strong sentiment in those days that the second son needed to support the oldest, so the count's family didn't bear us any ill will, at least on the surface. But the nobles who were counting on us to be that link between factions weren't pleased at all.

That was when it began—when I first started planning to run away from home, that is.

First, I threw myself into my studies. Another reason for this was to distance myself from my oldest brother. He couldn't stand it when there was someone better than him around, especially if that person was his younger brother. I thought that if I achieved better grades than my middle brother, he would definitely start to despise me. That was the first step of my plan.

The second step was to get strong enough to live in the outside world on my own. I succeeded in that goal right away because I had exceptional magic skills. Since there was no one in my family famous for being a magician, it was thought to be a genetic anomaly. But no matter what the cause, power was power. And so I devoted myself to studying magic.

However, I ended up devoting myself a little *too* much to magic, so much so that my peers began calling me eccentric. I didn't do it on purpose, but I misjudged a magic spell once and ended up bursting into the girls' bath. Luckily no girls were present at the time and I received the light punishment of simply repairing the walls, but because of a certain boy who'd turned on me, the tale was distorted and spread through the school like wildfire.

According to the boy, I'd "made it look like an accident and burst into the girls' baths." I was also a "pervert who never wore anything beneath his robes," and my ultimate goal was "to use magic to turn myself invisible to spy on the girls' baths"—all sorts of rubbish like that. But since this imbecile was a legitimate member of the royal family who had a chance of succeeding the throne, people who didn't know what had happened between us believed him. I couldn't believe they fell for it, when more than half of those statements were lies.

I registered as an adventurer at the same time as I entered high school, so I often went hunting outside of the royal capital. Of course, I made sure that didn't affect my grades.

I'd never made money on my own before, so I became obsessed with taking on tasks at the guild. It was a way to relieve stress, practice my magic, and earn money all in one go. In fact, I got so obsessed with it that in my last year at school I was absent so often that I didn't have any credits to graduate, and some teachers were calling for me to be failed or even expelled.

But I'd gotten top grades in general studies, magic, and combat, so I didn't end up getting expelled. The following year, students were banned from becoming adventurers, but since I had already graduated, that didn't affect me.

And once I graduated, I cut all ties with my family. My father and oldest brother tried to put on a show and pretend to try to stop me, but I knew they were both secretly delighted. The only one who really tried to stop me was my middle brother. But once he realized how happy my father and oldest brother were to see me go, he relented. So really, I had those two to thank for my freedom. I didn't want to fight with my brother as I said goodbye.

That day, my middle brother was holding a girl in his arms that was almost three years old. And next to him stood my sister-in-law, who had a kind smile on her face.

Since his engagement with the third daughter of the count had been called off, he had married a woman my father had found. She was the oldest daughter of a knight. However, both of her parents were dead and she was about to sell herself into a life of servitude when my father suggested she work for our family. But my brother fell in love with her at first sight, and vice versa. They got married about a year after they met.

Surprisingly, the one most enthusiastic about the marriage was my eldest brother. This was probably because he was worried that his own wife had no powerful supporters, but now that my middle brother had married a woman of lower rank, he knew that my middle brother couldn't possibly overthrow him. My father was against it, but probably only because he had wanted the girl for himself.

For that reason, my middle brother decided to take his wife away from my father, and moved into my house. I'd never wanted to live there in the first place, so I was all for it. I lived outside of the capital most of the time anyway, being an adventurer, so it was no skin off my nose.

The deed had my name on it, but I'd left everything to my brother. That was in case my oldest brother or father ever came after him to threaten him. If that happened, they would be the ones labeled as criminals. I doubted they'd have the guts to do that, though.

Anyway, that was how I left the capital and began my life as an adventurer in earnest.

Sometimes I'd be up north, getting myself frozen solid and hunting monsters that were hibernating for the winter, and other times I found myself traveling from the west to the east, tailing a pack of bandits.

One time, I stopped by a country village to the south and saw something pretty interesting. A young boy not even ten years old was holding his own against an adult adventurer in a scuffle. But of course, the adventurer had him beat in both experience and size, so in the end the boy lost.

I waited for a good moment to jump in and save him, but instead of thanking me, the boy kicked me in the shins and complained! "I was just about to show off my stuff!" he declared. As an apology, I decided to stay in the village for a spell and teach him the basics of combat.

He didn't have much talent when it came to magic, but he made up for it with outstanding ability in hand-to-hand combat. His abilities were especially geared towards becoming an assassin. He told me that he was from a long line of hunters, so perhaps that had something to do with it.

I had to leave the village about six months later, but in that time he'd grown an astonishing amount. I spoke with him a bit before I left, and he cheekily proposed a match against me. I used magic against him and beat him easily.

Obviously, he never even came close to touching me, and I ended up knocking him out. Maybe it wasn't very mature of me, but anything else would've given him the wrong idea, so I had no choice. It certainly wasn't to get back at him for calling me an "old geezer." I decided to let the villagers deal with him when he

came to, and went ahead and left the village as I'd planned.

After that, I kept running into him when I least expected it. But at the time, I never imagined I'd ever see that kid again.

I spent the next few years wandering around the country, then decided to go home to the capital. The first thing I did was to go see my middle brother. He was cross with me because I hadn't contacted him in so long, but he welcomed me with open arms.

I decided to spend the next few years in the capital, but during my time there I won a fighting competition two years in a row, and after that the nobles just wouldn't stop trying to recruit me. I took on a job as the royal tutor for the prince mainly just to shut them up, but the prince turned out to be a precocious little brat. He was such a brat, in fact, that I had to give him a good knuckle sandwich the first time I met him. But for some reason, that only made him more attached to me.

His personal butler told me that all of his other tutors had spoiled him rotten, and that's how he'd gotten the way he was. And since I was the one who'd corrected this behavior, his butler saw me as something of a hero. In other words, he turned a blind eye to my punching the prince.

Tutoring the prince was more enjoyable than I imagined. He was very obedient when it came to me. Sometimes I'd give him a problem that had no solution, and even then he'd try his best to solve it. Every now and then, he'd come up with a method of solving things I'd never thought of before, so teaching him was always entertaining.

One day, I happened to ask him about school, and for some reason, he got a pained look on his face. I tried to get the details out of him, and eventually he told me there was an unruly kid in his class. No matter what the prince did, this kid butted heads with him. Plus, the kid got better grades than him so it was really getting on the prince's nerves.

In particular, the prince lamented that he couldn't hold a candle to the kid when it came to physical abilities, because the kid was ranked first in their grade. And for some reason, this kid was capable of predicting his opponent's moves, so his counterattacks packed quite the punch. The more he told me

about it, the more I realized that every counter this kid pulled off was a technique I knew.

Realizing that gave me a strange feeling. My techniques were mostly in the style of an assassin, and I'd learned everything on my own. I wondered if this brat's teacher had been self-taught out of necessity, as I was.

I didn't like the idea of my student getting beaten. It felt as though I was also losing to his opponent's teacher, and I really didn't like that.

So I taught the prince how to counter a counter. And it was worth it, because then for the first time, the prince finally bested the brat. He was in a wonderful mood for the first few days after his victory, but then one day he came home in a bad mood, and it lasted for several more days. It was so bad that the castle maids were terrified of him.

After I beat him to a pulp in training one day, I asked him what happened. He told me that, ever since the day he'd won against the kid in his class, people had begun to harass the brat. Not only that, but they were doing it in order to curry favor with the prince, which is why his mood had been so sour lately. By the way, the brat in question didn't even seem to mind the harassment, nor did he say a word to the prince. Instead, he acted completely normal, which only made the prince angrier. It was the prince's opinion that the whole situation could've been salvaged if only the kid would make a single complaint.

When he told me that, I was completely exasperated. He didn't want to extend his hand to the kid because he was afraid it would get pushed away. So I gave him a bonk on the head and ordered him to go make friends.

At first the prince pushed back, but I argued down every single point he made. I told him surely he felt like he could be friends with the boy. After all, the boy didn't care if he was a prince or not—he was trying to be on equal footing with the prince. That made the prince happy, and was the real reason he couldn't stand to see the kid get harassed.

Once the prince heard me say that, it was like he'd seen the light. His spirits were raised in no time, and he went to ask his butler for advice. I wanted to ask why he didn't ask *me* for advice when I was right in front of him, but I held back because he was finally in a better mood and I didn't want to ruin it. Although if

he *had* asked me for advice, I probably wouldn't have been able to come up with anything better than, "If it doesn't work out, just punch him in the face!" or, "Set up a trap that'll make him regret it!" So perhaps it was wise of the prince to ask his butler instead.

A few days later, the prince informed me that the situation was resolved. He introduced the kid from his class to me, and—wouldn't you know it—it was the same kid I'd taught, from that one village. I never did ask him his name back then, so I wouldn't have recognized him even if the prince had told me his name. When I wanted to get his attention I just said, "Hey, kid!" But when I mentioned that, the prince, the kid, and the butler all looked exasperated.

I visited my middle brother's house for the first time in a while and related this story to him. That was when I found out my niece was also in the same class at school with the prince and the kid! Then my middle brother's entire family was fed up with me.

Some time after that, my niece began dating the boy.

Thinking back on it now, that might have been the most enjoyable time of my life. I laughed and talked with my brother and his wife; I taught the prince, the boy, and my niece magic; I earned some pocket money by hunting—though I never expected I'd run into an earth dragon on my first foray, but I somehow managed to defeat it. The royal family didn't pay me much for it, but times were hard back then, so there was nothing I could do about that.

Later, I was surprised to hear the prince was getting married. Good thing he was in the royal family, because otherwise I wasn't sure an idiot like him would ever have found someone to be his partner. Not even I had found a wife, after all. I was more shocked that all of my classmates from school were already married by now.

After that, I often went hunting with my niece, the boy, the prince, the prince's butler, and one of the prince's young bodyguards. I taught them all sorts of things. The strongest member of the party was the bodyguard. The one with the most aptitude for adventuring was the boy. The most skilled magician was my dear niece. The scariest member of the party was the butler. Unfortunately for the prince, he was the least skilled of them. But from the

public's point of view, he had plenty of ability to keep up with his top-class peers. It was amusing to see him so down in the dumps, though, so I didn't tell him that. That was a secret between me and the butler.

When the five of them graduated high school, they joined me on my travels. They wanted to expand their horizons, and most of all, they wanted to learn survival skills. But perhaps the real reason was that the prince didn't want to get married right after graduation, because then he'd have to take over governing the kingdom, and he wasn't a fan of that idea yet. He wanted to spend a bit more time having fun with his friends.

Everyone around them was adamantly opposed to this, including the king. The prince's fiancée was extremely angry and blew up at him, yelling, "Are you planning on cheating on me before the wedding?! Do you really not want to marry me that much?! If you insist on going, then bring me with you!" She got so mad that it actually calmed everyone else down. In the end, I told her it was too dangerous and no one who couldn't protect themselves could come along, so she tearfully relented. Instead, she gave my niece her favorite whip and said, "If the prince ever tries to flirt with another woman, smack him with this."

Since the prince's fiancée had given her blessing, the king finally agreed. Therefore, my niece accepted the whip and the prince's fiancée showed her how to use it. Apparently the fiancée had been going easy on the prince until now, because once he saw how skilled my niece became at using it, all the color drained out of his face.

Seeing this, everyone began to pity the prince, so they all came around and gave their blessing (well, mainly the men), at which point the prince was finally allowed to go on the journey with us.

Many things happened while we traveled. The prince was punished with the whip when he tried to go with a lady of the night in the pleasure district. Another time, he got the brunt of it when he tried to peek in the baths. One time, the prince, the boy, and I were all posing naked in the boys' room and got the whip... That time I feel like it was my niece's fault for not knocking first, but since the butler and the bodyguard betrayed us, my niece won that one. Even though the party member with the most money for food and lodging should always be treated with the most respect in a party, those two now held a

grudge against me.

I decided to get revenge on them. We came across a low-level dragon on our travels, and at first I told the five of them to fight it without me because they'd get more experience that way. I wanted to show off—especially to my niece—by saving them at the last minute, but surprisingly, they ended up slaying the dragon. Thus, my plans were ruined. Not only that, my niece had predicted I would do this, and gave me the cold shoulder for a while afterwards. But I did wonder just how good it would feel to say, "Don't get cocky! The dragon I slew was much stronger than the one you slew, *and I did it by myself!*"

Our journeys continued for about two years, but then the day came when we finally returned to the capital. There was a huge battle tournament being held right around the time we returned, and I intended on entering the five of them.

But once we arrived, we discovered there were some idiots who were running amok, doing as they pleased. Once we found out their plans, we wanted to kill them, but the butler suggested something else. His suggestion was more interesting, so we gave it up.

I had the five of them enter the tournament to hone their skills in preparation. We had an audience with the king and then put our plan into motion, chasing off the idiots. Right after that, my niece and the boy announced their engagement. The king gave his blessing, so no one else objected. Once I saw the look on those idiots' faces—well, it was one of the best moments of my life! It was so hilarious! Like I'd just cleared a grudge of many years!

But those feelings of happiness wouldn't last.

Right after my audience with the king, my middle brother and his wife died one after the other. Apparently, the cause of their death was exhaustion, but I had a feeling they'd finally come to a place of peace after the cause of their exhaustion was finally resolved.

I wanted to go and put an end to the people who had driven my brother and his wife to their graves, but they must have known I would do that, because my brother and his wife asked me not to in their wills. So, I respected their wishes.

My niece and the boy—now a man—wanted my brother and his wife to witness their nuptials, so they had a simple ceremony right before the funeral,

while my brother and his wife lay in repose. The king and queen were in disguise among the attendants, along with the prince, his fiancée, and several other nobles. None of them minded that there were two dead bodies among the guest list.

Promptly after the wedding, the new bride and groom attended the funeral, and afterwards I burned the bodies outside of the capital. After we had their bodies cleansed at a church in the capital, we could either choose to bury them or cremate them and bury their ashes, but my brother and his wife hadn't wanted to be buried in the capital.

So we buried a portion of their ashes at a spot on the vast plains outside of the capital and scattered another portion in the river, and then my niece and new nephew decided to bury the rest of their remains at the village they moved to.

The prince and the others were disappointed when they heard they were going to move away from the capital, but they also understood why, so they accepted their decision. The two of them were moving to that village where my nephew grew up, where he and I had first met. Since they weren't coming back, we decided to tear down the house that I'd given my brother and his family.

We did that because it's what my niece wanted. Even though they were moving away, this was the city where the prince and their friends lived, so surely they would come visit often. She said that knowing the house where she'd grown up and lived happily with her parents still existed was too painful for her. She didn't want to look at that building and be reminded of her parents' hardship, so she said she'd prefer if it didn't exist at all. She took all the possessions she wanted to keep out of the house, and then I destroyed the rest of it.

There wasn't much to take. That alone was enough to make it clear just how much my brother and his wife had suffered. I put a bit too much gusto into tearing down the place, and I look back fondly on the stack of complaints I got from the neighbors. I only destroyed the building, not the land, so I left the deed in the prince's name. I told him that if any lots around the land opened up, he could use his authority to secure them, and that if my niece and nephew ever had children one day, they could come and live in the capital using that

land.

Once he heard that reasoning, the prince agreed and started on the paperwork. Of course, I didn't tell my niece and nephew about that part. I knew that if they had children, they would grow up to have tremendous abilities. And I wanted to have the space to train them. Though...what do you call the children of your niece? Grandnephew and grandniece, perhaps? Ahh, that was too much of a pain! I'd just call them my grandchildren! That's right!

My niece was like a daughter to me, anyway. So what was wrong with me calling her children my grandchildren?

I was already eager to hear a child call me Gramps. I hoped she would have a girl first, although a boy would be quite fun too. Maybe I'd ask them to put some effort in and have both! I was so enthusiastic about this plan that I accompanied them when they left, but they were aloof with me throughout the whole trip. When we stopped at an inn, I took my nephew aside and asked what was the matter, and he told me quite bluntly that I was being a nuisance.

Apparently, they thought I would eventually come to the village with them, but they hadn't expected me to demolish the house and then tag along with them on that very same day! Upon further explanation, he informed me that it was hard for them to get into a romantic mood with me being a third wheel.

I was shocked. Hearing he wanted to do *that* with my niece made me want to knock him out...but if they *didn't* do it, then my plan wouldn't come to fruition. So, very reluctantly, I parted ways with them halfway through the journey.

Luckily, a newly constructed dungeon was just a few days away from the inn. I'd never gone into a dungeon before, but I had a feeling it would be quite entertaining. It would be the perfect diversion from my worries.

I was gonna go all in! I was gonna invade the dungeon, or in other words, vent all my displaced feelings!

Not even six months had passed since the dungeon had been built. And I couldn't have predicted what it was like...

As soon as I arrived at the dungeon, I had to figure out a place to sleep as well as start gathering information. Luckily there was an inn in the town nearby, so I

booked a room there. However, gathering information didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped.

I asked the villagers about it, but they wouldn't really talk to me. The only good information I got was that I should take a lot of food with me, but that was common sense for any adventurer worth his salt. I had no other choice but to ask other adventurers, and they all charged me for their advice. However, even after spending a significant amount of money, most of what they told me were either lies or just plain inaccurate. For example, they'd say things like, "*Apparently, some adventurers saw a huge lizard deep in the dungeon,*" or, "*I feel like I've heard there are monsters in there that can cause abnormal status effects*"—basically, all of it was secondhand, and none of it was reliable. So it didn't take me long to give up on gathering information. The thing I wanted most was a map of the dungeon, and I couldn't get my hands on that either, but even if I had, I doubt I could have trusted it anyway.

By the way, the guys who gave me the bogus information mysteriously disappeared from the village the next day. According to the people who saw them leave, apparently they ran off screaming as if something terrifying was chasing them.

So I decided to go about it very cautiously, and took about a month to go four or five levels deep in the dungeon just to get myself acquainted with the place. But there was nothing but Rank C monsters in there. It was pretty amusing whenever ten or so of them appeared in a cramped tunnel, but normally only one to three showed up at a time.

What was most mysterious, however, was that even after I'd defeated several hundred of them in a month, the monsters just kept coming. I was still able to gain magic stones and other materials from them, so they weren't just apparitions. It was all incredibly strange. But it was the perfect way to relieve my stress, so I gradually stopped caring.

After I'd spent about four months exploring the dungeon, I finally reached the end of it. There was a large room, different from all the rest, with ten monsters flanking what I thought was a Rank A boss. The boss seemed to be some kind of mutant because I'd never seen a monster like that before. If I had to describe it, I'd say it looked like a grappler ape, I suppose. Normal grappler apes were

anywhere from one to five meters long, and this mutant was about three meters long. I thought maybe it was an undiscovered species. By that point I'd exhausted my magic, so unfortunately I couldn't find out for sure. However, even a novel Rank A monster didn't stand a chance against a surprise attack of five Firestorms in a row—in a closed space, no less.

Behind the boss's room was yet another chamber. Inside was an object which was called the dungeon's core, and it was giving off faint light. I poked it a little and it cracked, then the light faded. Thus, I had conquered the dungeon.

I decided to prove it by taking the now-dark dungeon's core with me, but when I tried to pick it up, it crumbled in my hands and turned to pebbles with no magical energy in them at all.

The dungeon's core was now worthless, and on top of that, the boss had left behind no materials or magical core, so I had no proof I'd ever been there in the first place.

I wasn't sure what else to do, so I carved my name on the wall of the boss room, and wrote down why I wasn't able to take the core with me. With nothing left to do down here, I went back the way I came and headed for the entrance. By the time I got back above ground, I'd basically exhausted my food supply, so I had to hurry to the village to get something to eat. While I was eating, I listened to the other adventurers talk. They said that around the time I had conquered the dungeon, the number of monsters inside had dwindled. The ones in parties had discussed whether they should leave or not, but the villagers were concerned the local economy would take a huge hit if they did that.

I had to figure out what to do next too. It hadn't even been six months—should I head for the village my niece lived in, or should I wait a little longer? Just then, I overheard a conversation from some adventurers sitting nearby. They were talking about whether they should head for another dungeon that was fairly far away from here.

I eavesdropped, making sure they wouldn't notice me. It would take more than six months to get to this dungeon, but it was much larger than the one I'd just been in, and much more dangerous too. In turn, that meant you could earn a lot more.

As I listened to the adventurers, I decided to head for that place myself. The moment I figured out where it was, I skipped town. I made one mistake, though —I forgot to buy food for the trip. I was so excited to leave that it slipped my mind, and I was too embarrassed to backtrack. So I had to survive on my own for several days, eating fruit, weeds, and monsters, until I arrived at the next town.

I went as quickly as I could, and although I'd heard it would take more than six months to get there, I made the journey in ten days. The dungeon was right next to a fairly large city which also maintained the dungeon, so you had to pay an entry fee each time you went inside. It wasn't that expensive, though, so I just went ahead and bought a month's worth of tickets. That meant I could enter as many times as I wanted in a month and they wouldn't care.

I could definitely see myself enjoying this.

In the end, it took me four years to conquer the dungeon. I had a lot more fun than I thought I would, but after it was all said and done, I did end up a little disappointed.

Each floor of this dungeon was at least twice the size of the floors of the previous dungeon I'd been in, and the monsters were fairly strong too. So for that reason, although it didn't even take me six months to make it down to the tenth floor, after that it took me a long time to clear each floor. The average monster was Rank B here, which of course didn't stand a chance against my magic, but once I was out of mana they would swarm me all at once if I took a break. So, at times, I really felt like my life was in danger.

The only reason I was able to conquer the dungeon alone was because I had made my own map, and because I'd come up with a magic spell to create a space for me to rest where no monsters could attack me. I would use earth magic to create a sort of lid to keep the monsters out of little caves I found or junctions in the road, and was able to rest up inside them.

I used the money I made from my last dungeon to buy a magic bag and a dimension bag and filled them with food. I could create water and fire with magic, but my only option for food was to kill and cook monsters myself. I didn't want to waste time doing that when I could be resting, so if I put the dead

monsters in my bag, I'd have a backup plan in case I ran out of food.

When I got to the boss's room, there was an eight-headed hydra waiting for me—probably Rank S. It was incredibly hard to take it down. Hydras had very strong powers of regeneration, and although they weren't that strong, the longer they lived the more heads they grew, which made them stronger.

The strongest monster I'd ever seen up to this point was a four-headed hydra—in other words, one with half as many heads as this boss. And that one had been Rank A, but I remembered it having much higher agility than most Rank A monsters.

There was no sense in complaining about it, so I decided to go ahead and strike first, before the hydra did. Just one more step and my sword would reach it—and it hadn't noticed me yet. But the moment that thought crossed my mind, the hydra started thrusting its heads towards me. I hastily jumped into the air, and the remaining heads all spewed fire at me at once.

I used magic to create a protective barrier around me, but now I had lost the element of surprise. It was all I could do to avoid the fire the heads kept spewing at me. I ended up frantically running around the room.

Even worse, the hydra was blocking the entrance of the room and wouldn't move. The gears inside my head were turning at full speed trying to figure out what to do. Just then, I remembered how, in the other dungeon, there had been a room with the dungeon's core in it. I looked around, but I didn't see any other entrances besides the one I'd come through.

The hydra wasn't showing any signs of moving, and now that I was far away it couldn't reach me with its flames, so I had some time to think rationally.

I just couldn't come up with a good plan, though. All I could do was think about the hydra. In the first place, why was there even a hydra here? What did it eat to survive? The hydra I'd defeated before had probably lived for two hundred years, so that meant the hydra in front of me now had to be at least four hundred years old. And since the entrance to this dungeon had only recently appeared, did that mean it had spent those four hundred years underground in the dungeon? Basically, I just couldn't seem to stop myself from thinking about things I really shouldn't be thinking about right now.

I spent several days facing off with the hydra. Sometimes it would act like it was going to approach me, but it didn't. It seemed to be checking if I'd been sufficiently weakened. At the rate things were going, I was going to end up its lunch. Finally, I came up with several plans.

The first was to dig into the wall with magic. I'd simply dig and dig and dig until I could get back to the floor above.

The second was to attack the hydra with everything I had, wait until there was an opening, and then run out the entrance.

The third was to regain as much stamina as possible and then launch an attack.

However, the problem with my first plan was that the walls in this dungeon were very solid. It was quite the task to use magic to open a hole in them. It wasn't impossible, but it would take a very long time. So much time that the hydra could get close enough to burn me to a crisp. So that plan was out.

That left the second and third plans. The problem with my second plan was that it would be hard to get all eight heads of the hydra distracted at once so that I could escape.

The third plan was how I'd ended up in this spot to begin with, so I just couldn't decide. At any rate, I'd need more stamina to carry out any of the plans, so I decided to sleep for a while. I managed to sleep with my eyes open so I could sense any little changes around me in case the hydra attacked, and I managed to regain a bit of stamina. However, since I'd slept with my eyes open, they hurt quite a bit, which meant each time I woke up I had to use water magic to refresh them.

After I'd gotten some sleep, my mind felt clearer, so I went back over my second and third plans.

If I tried to escape, I'd have to lure the hydra away from the entrance and distract all of its heads at the same time. It wasn't as difficult as my third plan, but at the same time, it wasn't much better either.

If I fought, I'd have to slip past all eight of its heads and either destroy its heart or else cut it into pieces so it couldn't regenerate. The hydra I'd slain

before had been about half the size of this one, so I'd cut off all its heads and then carved out its heart. But even after a hydra's heart has been removed, it can still move for a little bit. Last time, once I'd cut out its heart, I let my guard down and it nearly got me. Just the thought of what might have happened if I hadn't cut off its heads first gives me chills to this day. So, honestly speaking, I just didn't want to fight it.

Taking all of that into consideration, I decided I had to run aw— Wait, what was that noise?!

I'd just made my decision and was about to spring into action when all of a sudden I heard a loud, crumbling noise coming from where the hydra was. The sound was that of the hydra falling forwards. I thought maybe it had somehow grown weak for a moment, but once the dust cleared, I prepared myself for death.

Apparently, the hydra had stuck its tail into the entrance, closing it off completely—as well as managing to sever it in the process. The detached tail was still wriggling around.

I had a feeling it realized I wasn't getting weaker, and had gotten tired of waiting. It had decided to take action. Depending on how you looked at it, if I'd been quicker going through with my second plan, I wouldn't have noticed its tail was blocking the entrance until the last second, and I would've gotten eaten. But that only provided a bit of comfort since I was still stuck in this situation with the hydra anyway.

At any rate, it was clear now that I had no way to escape and that I was the prey. If I didn't buckle down and kill him right now, I'd be a goner before my dreams could become reality. Wait—if I died now, would I become an undead monster?

I imagined this scenario. I'd be slain by an adventurer who came to the dungeon. In my mind's eye, that adventurer turned into my niece's child that I hadn't seen and didn't exist yet—my grandchild. I saw the horror in his eyes at the sight of his Gramps having become a horrible monster.

Oof, I didn't want that fate at all! I was going to be the kind of grandpa my grandchildren loved and respected! That's why I couldn't lose to this thing!

Now that I'd regained sight of my goal, I didn't have that same sense of hopelessness as before. Instead, I felt strength flowing through my body. But there was still a real problem here: the difference in my attack power and the hydra's was great. Even if I gave it everything I had, the chances of me winning were slim. It was basically a suicide mission.

In that case, I had to make the battle short.

Once I'd come to that decision, I fished around in my bag to search for anything that could be of use. That was when I remembered a certain item. I'd bought it at an auction the last time I was at the capital. Supposedly it had been made by a famous alchemist long ago, but since it was a single-use item, I'd held on to it all this time.

The item was called a magic sphere. It was a modified magic stone, which normally can't be filled with a specific type of magical energy. But this one was made to hold elemental magic, and a lot of it to boot. I could seal about ten Firestorms inside of it if I wanted. I had two of these magic spheres. One was empty, and the other was filled with the Lightning Elemental magic, Thunder.

I'd gotten this magic from a sorcerer I'd met in my travels after he lost a bet to me. Since I couldn't use Lightning Elemental magic very well, I had him put the spell into the sphere so I could get some use out of it. And now that time had come.

Since one was empty, I put the Firestorms into it right then and there. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough mana to put ten of them in there, but I did manage five.

Now I was ready. All I had to do was fight. I cast Boost magic on my entire body and charged towards the hydra, who was missing a tail but still very strong.

The hydra seemed surprised that I was attacking it, and paused when it realized it had lost the initiative. All its heads turned towards me at once and it began to suck in air. Right as I got within striking distance, it let out its fiery breath, one head at a time.

Obviously if I took the brunt of that I'd be burnt to a crisp, so I used Earth magic to make a hole and a wall, used Wind magic to divert the flames, and

thus managed to avoid a direct hit. Still, the heat from the flames overcame me and I was burned very severely on my hands and face. I dumped a potion over my head and healed myself to cool off my insides, then waited for the flames to subside.

Ten seconds later the fire disappeared and I jumped out of the hole and started running around again. The hydra was incredibly stunned by this, because I was still up and moving after taking what it thought was a direct hit from the fire attack it was so proud of. After all, I was just a lowly human.

As I got nearer, the hydra tried to spew fire at me again, but it didn't have time to amass the energy it needed, so it had to take another breath.

That was the opening I had been waiting for. I headed towards one of its heads in the center, and tossed the magic sphere that contained the Firestorms at it. The magic sphere landed right inside the hydra's wide-open mouth, and it reflexively swallowed it. Then a few seconds later, there was an incredible explosion, and heat filled the room.

Even I hadn't predicted the explosion would be that huge, and I was blown back behind the wall I'd made to hide from the hydra's flames. If the hydra had been just a little closer, or if I'd cast my wind barrier and Boost spells a few seconds later, I would've gotten caught up in the explosion, or perhaps just died instantly from the impact.

Lying on my stomach, I slowly lifted my head to look at the hydra. The head that had swallowed the sphere, along with both heads adjacent to it, had been blown off. The remaining heads were all askew, looking damaged.

However, it could still fight. Like a turtle, it slowly plodded towards me.

Now the tables had been turned, but I still couldn't let my guard down. I took out my other magic sphere, the one with the Lightning spells in it, and shoved it down the hydra's exposed gullet. My arm ended up getting burned badly by its digestive fluids in the process, but I was so high on adrenaline I didn't even notice.

I immediately jumped away and back into the hole I'd made with Earth magic. The next moment, there was a bright flash as though lightning had struck, and then I smelled the odor of something burning along with a thunderous rumble.

Then I heard the hydra fall to the ground with a thump.

I'd won. I suppose you could call it a stunning victory when you considered how little time it'd taken for me to pull it off, but I didn't care about that right now. As I hesitantly approached the hydra, I thought I saw one of its heads move slightly. I hastily cut off all its remaining heads and started stuffing them in my bag. They were each very heavy, and even if I emptied my bag completely, I could only take five. Still, cutting off its heads wasn't enough to make me relax, so I proceeded to slash into its body to take out its magic stone and heart, placing them in my bag before I finally let out a sigh of relief. Even a hydra, with its high regeneration ability and vitality, wouldn't be able to survive without its heads, heart, and magic stone.

I'd used mythril swords to cut the hydra's body, but since its digestive fluids were so acidic, I'd ruined several in the process. It almost made me think that maybe I'd gotten my hands on counterfeit swords or something, but then again, maybe the hydra's digestive fluids were just that strong.

I didn't particularly want to think about it, but I'd be in an entirely different situation right now if it had been digestive fluid it had spewed, and not fire.

After that, I took a deep sleep like I hadn't gotten in a long time. I wasn't sure how many hours I slept, but I woke up feeling so refreshed I figured I must've slept for one or two whole days. Once I was awake, I slowly ate some food, then finished cutting up the hydra's body, using one of my damaged swords to make the incision and drain it of its bodily fluids. Most of the hydra's poison was contained in its flesh, internal organs, and blood, but because they were only necessary for special medicines and because my bag was almost full, I disposed of them. Now the only things left were its skin, bones, and claws. I put whatever bones I could fit in my bag and then disposed of the rest.

At first I thought maybe I could just come back for them, but honestly spending several months coming back down here sounded like a huge pain. I didn't want anyone else benefiting from them either, so I dug the deepest hole I could and buried them inside. I did leave the flesh outside the hole, though. I didn't want to touch it...

The spoils from this dungeon had been pretty great. The skin from the

severed tail was relatively unscathed, so I bet it would fetch a high price at market. Next, I decided to start searching for the dungeon's core.

But no matter how much I looked, I just couldn't find it in the boss's room. I was about to give up and leave when all of a sudden I discovered a hidden door right next to the entrance. Incredulous, I opened it up—and there was the dungeon's core.

In other words, I hadn't even needed to defeat the hydra to get the core.

Once I learned that shocking truth, I lost all motivation, and spent another night in the boss's room.

The next day...or at least I figured it was the next day. I'd lost track of time down here, but since I felt a little refreshed when I woke up, I assumed it was the next day. Anyway, I got up and retrieved the dungeon's core. It was about a meter long and didn't crumble like the last one had, so I put it in my dimension bag. Just as I did that, it felt like something shifted in the space around me.

There was nothing else of value to take, and the room existed only for the dungeon's core in the first place. When I thought of it like that, the hydra parts seemed like the reward for conquering the dungeon. But if someone asked me if I'd do it again, I would immediately answer, "What, do you think I'm some kinda fool?!"

It was incredibly easy to get back up to the surface. After defeating the hydra in that closed-off space, the remaining monsters all seemed like small fries to me. They felt so weak. I wondered if it had something to do with the fact that I had the dungeon's core with me. Even though it had taken me four years to get down to the bottom, it didn't even take me a month to get back up to the surface. That made me feel a bit conflicted, but it felt so nice to have the sun shining on my face again that I let it go.

There were only a few monsters on the path back, but I did come across Rank A and B monsters. I slew them all, but since I didn't have room in my bags, I only took what I could eat at that moment, or just their magic cores. I had to dispose of the rest.

I ran into another adventurer along the way and offered to give him the spoils I couldn't take, but he got suspicious when I said he could have them for free. In

the end, he still took them. Several idiots tried to attack me to get the materials I couldn't carry, but I ended up defeating them and stealing their bags. That was how I ended up being able to carry everything after all. Of course, several problems arose after that, like having to alter the bags' appearances as well as destroying any identifying items inside, so that no one would know they'd been stolen.

The biggest problem, though, was when I reported the fact that I had conquered the dungeon to the adventurer's guild. First of all, they didn't believe me because I had done it solo. So after a long interrogation, I produced all the heads and the magic core of the hydra. Then, when I showed him the dungeon's core, the guildmaster finally believed me and apologized.

However, word of my conquest had spread and groups of adventurers just kept trying to recruit me. They were extremely persistent and I didn't know what to do about it. Finally, I told them I would only consider joining their party if each member was capable of defeating a hydra solo, and that was enough to make them eventually give up. I had a feeling that was a story I could stick to for a while.

I talked to the guildmaster about it, and he asked me to sell the dungeon's core and the hydra's core to him. I had no idea what the market price of the dungeon's core was, but I did know that of the hydra's. He only offered me slightly more for it. I wasn't going to accept that deal and was on the verge of leaving, but he was incredibly persistent. I wondered if perhaps he thought I didn't have the right to disobey the adventurer's guild...even though I was so powerful that I'd conquered that dungeon.

I tried to force my way out of the room, but then the guildmaster issued an emergency mission or something or other to the adventurers who were present, and they tried to tie me up! My crime was "defying the guild and rebelling against the governor." I had no idea why an adventurer would rebel against the governor, but there were a lot of adventurers who followed the guildmaster's orders. Most of them were fools blinded by money, but after that incident, the ones who actually had skills immediately left the guild.

When I thought rationally about the attack power I had left, I decided I'd give them two of the hydra heads. And then I issued a warning. Not just to the

adventurers, but to the guild staff as well. Even if the guild didn't have any adventurers, it couldn't function without the staff. As long as the staff were there, they didn't even need the guildmaster to function. That was what I had decided. And thankfully, around eighty percent of the staff members evacuated the building. The remaining were former adventurers confident in their skills, so they surrounded the guildmaster.

Once the final staff member evacuated, the battle began in earnest. Within a few minutes, the building was halfway decimated, and I'd rendered my enemies powerless. The adventurers were sitting ducks and I defeated them first, making them fodder for my magic. The remaining guild staff, although former adventurers, were all old geezers and retirees, so they didn't put up a fight at all. Now only the guildmaster held on, but was topped in no time after just a few blows.

Maybe I should've killed him, but the guild's second-in-command—a woman—had just returned from a mission and begged me to spare the adventurers' lives. It was too much of a pain to pick through the pile and save only the adventurers, so in the end I just tied them all up.

The governor heard about the commotion and came to hear the particulars of the story, but once he saw my face the poor thing went white as a ghost. Apparently he recognized me, and thought that going against me would be making an enemy out of the royal family.

In front of everyone, he introduced himself and bowed his head to me in apology. I told him what had happened, and learning the whole story seemed to frustrate him. Right there on the spot, he announced he would be seizing the assets of the guildmaster, the guild employees, and the adventurers. Not only that, but he was making everyone but the adventurers his slaves. He would use the money they earned for him to rebuild the guild and to compensate me for my pain and suffering.

Honestly, that felt like it would take forever, so I told him I appreciated the gesture, but that his apology was enough and all I wanted was to leave. However, he wouldn't take no for an answer.

The governor wanted proof that he had formally paid me as an apology, and

we couldn't agree. The one who ended up resolving the situation was the new guildmaster—the former vice-guildmaster. She suggested that she buy the dungeon's core from me as payment, and that she would send the money to the royal family since I claimed I didn't want it.

Thanks to her, I was able to immediately leave, and the royal family would receive the money from the governor. Therefore, they would be witness to the fact that the governor had paid his dues. If an ordinary adventurer tried to do that, the royal family would be suspicious, but since I had ties to them there was no problem. Moreover, this governor was part of the pro-royal-family faction, so that worked out to their advantage as well.

I knew we had compromised, so I went ahead and signed the contract. The new guildmaster put together the contract very quickly. I had a crush on her, but apparently she was already married, so nothing ever came of it.

I suppose it was around that time that people started calling me a sage. I didn't think I was really deserving of such an important title, but apparently other people thought I was humble and didn't have an ounce of arrogance to me. It was all very strange.

After that, I left again to go on another journey. I decided to visit my niece since it had been so long, but she got angry at me and asked me where I'd been wandering about this whole time. She had grown even stronger since the last time I'd seen her. The proof of that was how her husband was completely whipped. I'd worried about how she'd get on with the villagers, but since she was capable of treating medical issues, she'd built a friendly relationship with them. She was like a daughter to me, so I was relieved to see that my worries had been for nothing. It was a shame that they hadn't had a child, but they were both still young and had plenty of opportunities left.

I stayed in the village for several years and lived as I pleased. When I went back to the capital, the former prince had become the king. He gave me the money he'd received from the sale of the dungeon's core—it was close to two hundred million G. I had no use for such a large sum of money, so I decided to donate most of it.

He said the money would be used for building orphanages or improving living

conditions or some such, but I don't remember the specifics because I didn't care about money.

Almost every time I went to the capital, my niece and nephew would come with me, but I still wasn't used to how the nobles would approach me. Of course my estranged family never came near me, but knowing how rotten they were, I was sure they were speaking ill of me behind my back.

However, I still couldn't believe that the prince—now king—had been married at this point for almost ten years and had three children. I could still vividly remember how he would play pranks on me as a young boy. I wondered if he was really capable of being a good father. Well, his wife had her wits about her, so I was sure that even if he was a problem, everyone around them would raise their children well.

Yet every time my niece saw her best friend's children, she got a sad look in her eyes. No one ever mentioned it, but I had a feeling she knew people were being sensitive about it for her, and sometimes she seemed to feel guilty about that. Then, once we got back to the village, I thought about going back on the road for a little while...

I really intended for it to just be a brief journey, but I ended up staying away from the village for over ten years. And so even I aged during that time. Lately, I'd really been feeling like an old grandpa. I wondered if perhaps my life was nearing its end. All my joints hurt, and I couldn't move like I used to.

I hated to place this burden on them, but I'd decided to have the two of them care for me in that case. Even someone like me didn't want to die like a dog on the side of a road.

Since it was a rural village, it hadn't changed much, even though I'd been gone for a decade, except maybe having a few more roads. It looked like there were still a lot of fish in the river near the village and... Hm? Is that her mana? I feel her nearby. Maybe I'll startle her. I can sense his presence too. They're still just as close as ever, hrm? Wait... Who's the child? Don't tell me...

I tried to suppress my enthusiasm as I approached them, but the child turned and noticed me before I could say anything. Then my niece and my nephew noticed me in turn. At this point, I could already tell there was something

special about that boy.

If I didn't reveal myself soon, I'd be in danger. They were both being extremely cautious. Finally, when I showed myself, they relaxed. I decided to ask the question I was most curious about, but apparently the child was adopted. I was slightly disappointed, but once I saw how they treated him as if he were their own flesh and blood, I felt guilty about my reaction.

According to them, the boy had magical ability and had learned the basics in this past year. And today he was going to start practicing in earnest. I felt like taking an entire year to learn the basics was being overprotective, but it wasn't a bad thing, so I didn't mention it.

After I introduced myself, I nearly cried when he asked if I was the weirdo he'd heard so much about, but I didn't want to let that show. However, I certainly needed to find out the culprit who had been spreading these rumors about me and punish them...

I could save that for later, though. Right now I wanted to see this child's magic. And since it was my specialty, I would be a very harsh critic.

But I was surprised. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was like when I defeated the hydra, but it was difficult to remember a time when I had been so surprised seeing someone else use magic. They told me the boy was only four years old and had only used magic once. And yet the speed at which he could cast spells and the precision with which he did it was very close to that of a first-rate magician.

And that was why he was dangerous. His own magic could destroy him. It had been the right decision to make him learn the basics for a year. When I said that, all three of them went pale, but I could take over from here. Perhaps the reason I'd fortuitously come back today, of all days, was so that I could teach him magic? After all, I could cast spells better than most...

My niece and nephew seemed to accept the idea. I didn't want to make them worry. And so I said, full of confidence, "Yes, indeed. Any child of yours is like a grandchild to me, anyway, so I'll do everything in my power for him. Is that all right with you, Tenma?"

I asked him last, but for some reason I was certain he would agree. And once I

saw him bowing his head before me, my head was filled with one thought—my long-held dream had finally come true...

Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 1

End

Afterword

It's nice to meet you, everyone! I'm the author, Kenichi.

Thank you so much for picking up *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World*. I'm both happy and extremely surprised that I was able to publish this story with Mag Garden Novels. When I first started writing this story, I had no idea this would happen, so when I got the email from them I had to read it over and over again to be sure it was real.

I started this story after seeing the popularity of web novels and figuring, "Hey, maybe I'll give it a try." It was nothing too serious—it was partly just a way for me to kill time.

But as I kept writing, at some point the story turned into a novel. It's hard for me to believe, but for my family it's been even harder. I'm thinking about just leaving this book out in plain sight so that they might finally believe me. If not, I might just give up on convincing them entirely.

On a different note, this version of the story is a corrected and expanded version of the one found on the website, with the addition of Merlin's bonus story. When we first started talking about publishing it, my editor suggested we include chapter two as well, but it turned out to be a lot of content. So my choices were to either combine chapters one and two and cut down on a lot of the story, or publish chapter two separately but write a lot more to flesh out both volumes. I didn't want to change the story by cutting out so much, so instead I wrote an additional 40,000 characters or so to keep chapter one as a single volume.

I'm so grateful that you all read the new version of this story.

Thank you to everyone who read the web novel version, as well as those who bought the published book and read it, and thank you to the editors for giving me this wonderful opportunity, the illustrator Nem, and Mag Garden for publishing it.

I hope we meet again soon, but until then, farewell!



ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

Edgar van
Valentine

Sigurd

Jean Jack
Bauer

Cruyff Sebastian

Chris

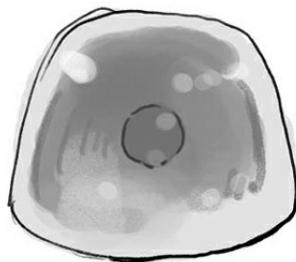
Alex von Blumere
Krastin



Character Designs

ROCKET

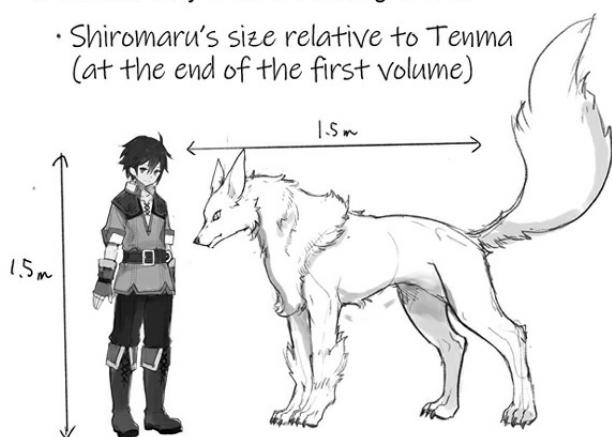
A mutated type of slime, which is a creature that looks like a round water droplet. Inside of its mollusk-type body is a small core.



SHIROMARU

A Fenrir (wolf-type monster) pup. His fur is luminous and looks silvery-white when the light hits it.

- Shiromaru's size relative to Tenma (at the end of the first volume)



TENMA

Our protagonist who was reincarnated in another world. By the end of the first volume, he's reached a height of about 150cm. He has soft, black hair and black eyes, with a slender frame.





CELIA

Tenma's adoptive mother. A rather powerful former adventurer. She has long chestnut-brown hair tied up at the back of her head. Her weapon is a staff.



RICARDO

Tenma's adoptive father, who found him in the forest. A former adventurer from Kukuri Village who was quite strong during his active years. His weapons of choice are swords and bows.



MERLIN

An eccentric man nicknamed "the sage." A sorcerer famous throughout the kingdom, but quite muscular since he's also skilled at combat. His weapon is a staff.

ALEX VON BLUMERE KRASTIN

The king. A well-built man with light blond hair who is 48 years old at the time of his first appearance. His weapon is a sword (a fancy one made just for the king!).



• Sword



JEAN JACK BAUER

Looks like a bandit. He has short brown hair with a bandana wrapped around his head. His weapon is a greatsword.



CRUYFF SEBASTIAN

The king's elderly chamberlain. A thin man with salt-and-pepper hair. He generally uses concealed weapons, but can wield just about anything.



Bonus Short Story

Follow the Giant Fish!

“Are you sure it was around here, Mark?”

“Yeah, Martha and a bunch of other people saw it too.”

“But are you sure a giant fish like that can survive in such shallow water?”

We were out by the river where I usually practiced magic. But we hadn’t come here for magic practice today; earlier this morning, Uncle Mark had shown up at the house in a panic.

Apparently a giant fish had been spotted two or three days ago in this part of the river. He wanted us to come help him find it so he could catch it. No one was sure what kind of fish it was, but supposedly it was over three meters long. And when it swam up by the surface of the water, witnesses said they could see its scales and that it had a brown back.

But just as Gramps had said, this river was pretty shallow—only about a meter deep on average, with the deepest parts being maybe two meters deep. It was hard to believe a fish that big could survive in such shallow water. He thought there was a good chance the witnesses had mistaken some kind of water monster for a fish, so the two strongest fighters in the village plus me came to check it out, in case we needed to defeat it.

In my case, they knew that if they left me behind I’d sneak out to come catch a look at it anyway, so they decided to just bring me along.

Mom stayed behind at the village to fix dinner. Before we left, she joked, “Don’t forget the side dishes for dinner!” so it didn’t seem like she really believed it could be a giant fish either.

Dad was putting in a lot of effort trying to find it, but when I used Detection, I didn’t see any such monster on my radar. I did see lots of small ones, though.

Dad warned me beforehand not to get too close to the river, so I was sitting in

a safe spot searching for crabs and crayfish. There were lots of them here, and they looked like Japanese freshwater crabs and crayfish. They were often eaten, or used for fodder or as bait.

Rocket and I put our finds into a wicker basket that I'd brought. There were too many tiny creatures underneath the rocks for my Detection skill to be useful, so I only had a general idea where they were. I had to just flip rocks over to look for them, while Rocket slid in the cracks between bigger rocks to chase them out.

Dad and the others were still looking for the fish by the time my basket was full. I watched them wandering back and forth along the riverbank as Rocket and I sat down on a rock to take a rest.

"We'd better go back home soon or Mom will get worried... Hm? That's an awfully big worm... Take that!" I grabbed the huge worm I'd noticed by my feet and flung it into the river. It landed in the middle of the water with a big splash.

"There it is!" Uncle Mark yelled. Dad immediately loosed an arrow and Gramps used Earth magic to shoot rocks at it. They were both aiming for the spot where the worm had landed with a splash, but they didn't turn up anything.

Gramps flew up into the air and slowly headed towards the spot in question. Dad held his bow at the ready in case he needed to give Gramps backup, gradually approaching the water himself.

"There's nothing here... Did it run away? What?!" Gramps leaned over to peer into the water when all of a sudden, *something* flew out of it towards him. "A turtle?!"

It was the head of a turtle. But it was much bigger than any turtle I'd ever seen, and just its neck stretching out of the water must've been fifty or sixty centimeters long. The turtle stretched as far as it could, trying to bite Gramps's feet, but he dodged it at the last minute. However, the turtle managed to grab the hem of Gramps's robe with its teeth and tried to pull him into the water.

"Oof!" Somehow, Gramps managed to pull away, narrowly escaping being dragged into the water, but since the turtle was larger than him, it seemed like only a matter of time before the creature would succeed.

"Merlin! Hang in there!" Dad yelled as he shot an arrow towards the turtle's outstretched neck. It pierced through the turtle's flesh, but still the turtle refused to let go.

"Let go of me already!" Gramps got a hold of himself and cast Windcutter at the turtle's neck, slicing its head clean off. Blood gushed from the turtle's body as it began to sink into the water. "Ahh, what a waste!" Gramps reached out, seizing the turtle before it disappeared beneath the waves, then shoved it into his magic bag.

"This must've been the 'giant fish' everyone was talking about! It sure was good at hiding itself, though. Even I didn't notice it until right before it appeared!"

Gramps thought that since the turtle's shell was a brownish color, from certain angles it was probably easy to mistake it for a fish. Dad and Uncle Mark agreed with him.

Either way, that brought an end to the mystery of the giant fish.

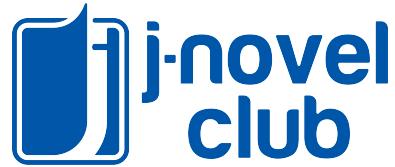
However, there was one thing I didn't share with Dad and Gramps. And that was...

"When the water splashed, I definitely spotted the fins of a fish... Oh, well! I have a bad feeling about that, so it's probably best left alone!"

That night, we all enjoyed as much turtle meat as we could eat. And after that, we stopped hearing about sightings of the giant fish.

ooo

"Phew, that was a close one! Good thing I managed to get away before they saw me. I feel pretty bad for that turtle, though... Oh, well. It *was* trying to eat me, so it serves it right!"



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 1

by Kenichi

Translated by Andria Cheng-McKnight Edited by Momo

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by MAG Garden This English edition is published by arrangement with MAG Garden English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

Premium E-Book