
ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD
5
Story by Kenichi
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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 5 [Complete]

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Prologue

After Tenma decided to enter the Imperial Martial Arts Tournament, he set out for the capital. On the journey there, he made many new friends and reunited with family and old friends.

During the qualifying rounds for the martial arts tournament, Tenma and his followers displayed an unparalleled amount of power and proceeded to the finals along with Jin and Galatt, Agris, and Marquis Sammons and his follower Gulliver. Another finalist was a man called the Bandit King, who wore very strange clothing.

Everyone in the capital waited breathlessly for the final rounds of the tournament to begin...

Chapter Five

Part One

All the preliminary rounds finished yesterday, and today was the first day of the main competition, when the individual battles would be held. The semifinals, which would determine the participants for the final round—to be held at a later date—would happen today.

I woke up earlier than usual, so I had a light workout in the yard with my followers. I still had time left after eating breakfast, but I was really antsy to get started. I'd experienced a fair amount of battles before, but they had all been training, battles to the death, or battles with my party—nothing that was really designed to test my strength in a formal setting.

Because of that, this battle felt kind of like my debut, even though it was coming a little late.

As these odd thoughts ran through my head, I realized that my heart was pounding. My anticipation had grown into nervousness.

In order to relieve the tension, I took several deep breaths, focusing on the image of oxygen circulating through my body.

"All right, let's go!" I headed towards the arena with enthusiasm. It was still a bit before the matches were scheduled to begin, but we'd been told to come early anyway so that they would have time to explain the awards for the winners. Even still, I personally arrived earlier than the designated time.

This was the schedule for today. First, they would explain the prizes and the rules. Second, the finalists would get the chance to introduce themselves to the audience. Then, the individual participants would draw lots to determine the order in which they would fight. Finally, the individual battles would begin.

There would be a total number of four rounds today, leading up to the semifinals. If you won all of them, you'd be in the finals on the last day of the tournament. There had never been a fifteen-year-old victor in the past. Dean

held the current record for the youngest victor—he'd set it at the age of nineteen.

Speaking of Dean, he had won the tournament ten times already. He'd won five times in a row, and only lost the individual competition twice. He'd first entered when he was seventeen and won two years in a row. When he was eighteen, he made it to the semifinals and went up against the person who was favored to win that year.

By the way, that person was so exhausted after his match with Dean that he lost in the next round.

Then, after all that, he won again the next year, at the age of nineteen. That year, he was the favorite. The reason why five consecutive wins was his record was because he was forced to stop competing after joining the king's guard.

I heard that there were rumors going around that I was his apprentice. In fact, I could hear people whispering as much as I approached the venue. This was the first time I'd heard that rumor, but it was true that Dean had taught me many things. I suppose technically you could say that.

A staff member led me to the waiting room. Several participants had already arrived despite the early hour, and they frowned when they saw my face. They must've heard the rumors outside. Some of them looked relieved, but those people seemed to be participating in the pair competition.

The Bandit King had also already arrived and was leaning up against the wall. He didn't react to my arrival, so I figured he must be sleeping.

Meanwhile, I sat down in the corner of the room to avoid the stares from the other participants. Before long, my acquaintances filed in.

"Oh! There you are, Tenma! Hey, we heard that you're the apprentice of the Black Lion!" Jin said.

"That's not fair... I wish *I* was the apprentice of the Black Lion!" Galatt chimed in. Mennas and Leena were behind them.

The Black Lion was Dean's nickname. When he was young, he wore black armor and carried a black sword and shield. Even though he used different armor now, people still called him that. He still seemed to prefer black, but not

as much as when he was young. Since he was the captain of the king's guard, he couldn't wear all black for official ceremonies, and had begun to wear other colors.

As I chatted with Jin and the others, Agris entered the room. There was an unfamiliar young man next to him.

"Morning, Tenma! Long time no see. Seems I somehow made it to the finals! Since he's here, I might as well introduce you. This is my grandson, Ricky."

"'Might as well introduce me'? Whatever... I'm Ricky Monocato. I've heard a lot about you, Tenma. It's nice to meet you."

Ricky seemed like a nice and cheerful guy. He looked about twenty years old, but didn't seem to have much talent for Taming. Rather, he appeared to be an adventurer specializing in swordsmanship.

After we shook hands, Marquis Sammons showed up. The room began to buzz at his appearance. "Hello, Master Tenma! Congratulations on the new record!"

He congratulated me for having set the record for the youngest winner who'd ever made it to the finals of the team event, then shook my hand.

As I was talking with everyone, I realized that this room in particular was filled with all the participants to watch.

First, there was me—the youngest person to ever make it through the qualifiers in the individual and team competitions. As Dean's so-called apprentice, I was drawing a lot of attention.

Next were the Dawnswords. Although Jin had not yet won a high-ranking prize, he was seen as a strong participant since he had been competing in the finals for a long time. Also, their team made the finals last year, and Galatt had gone on to the finals in the individual competition.

Meanwhile, Agris was the oldest competitor in the tournament. He had participated on several occasions in the past and achieved excellent results each time.

Lastly, there was Marquis Sammons. It was no exaggeration to say that he

was the biggest cause of the commotion. After all, he was a marquis. It wasn't uncommon for aristocrats to participate in general, but it was rare to see one with a high rank, like that of a marquis, joining the fray. Of course, he had the highest social status of any participant in the room. Normally, an ordinary person would never have gotten the chance to see a marquis up close.

I asked him if he had been forced to participate, and he said, "Well, royals have participated in the past, like when the current king was a young boy..."

By the way, he told me that the king had participated in a team match with my mother, my father, Dean, and Cruyff, and they'd won the championship. However, the king seemed to think he hadn't been very useful. To this day, he said things like, "I just happened to be on a winning team" and, "I was the one holding them back."

However, it sounded like he was just being too hard on himself, because as it turned out, he was the one who'd delivered the final blow to the opposing team in their last match.

Setting aside special cases like that one, it was rare for a high-ranking aristocrat like Primera to participate in the tournament. The fact that the marquis was also participating made it so that all eyes in the room were turned towards us.

And, of course, there were people who didn't appreciate how much attention we were commanding. There had been a hint of malice in the air for quite a while. Of course, it wasn't directed towards the marquis—if it had been, that would've been treason. Fortunately, he didn't seem to care very much, and his escorts and the knights around him just remained on guard.

After a while, the preparations seemed to be complete, and the participants were called to the arena. The king gave a speech expressing his gratitude, just like he had on the first day. Everyone but the individual participants vacated the arena, and then the lottery was conducted.

However, since there were an odd number of participants, those who weren't paired off would be seeded, automatically advancing to the next round.

We lined up, drawing tickets in order. I was tenth in line. First up was the Bandit King, who drew number twenty-three. As the lottery calmly progressed,

a loud cheer arose from the audience for the participant in front of me. It was the previous winner, who ended up drawing number ten. When it was my turn to draw a card, I drew number one. As a result, if things went smoothly, I would meet the previous winner in the semifinals, and I probably wouldn't face the Bandit King until the final round.

Next up was Jin. He drew number thirty-two. Galatt was next to him, and the moment he drew his number he looked irritated. He'd drawn number twenty-four—that meant he was going up against the Bandit King.

The lottery continued until the last person had picked their card, and then the seeds for the first round were decided. The numbers that were not chosen were nine, twenty-one, and thirty-one. In other words, that meant that Jin, the previous first-place winner, and someone I didn't recognize had been chosen as seeds.

As the names of all the participants were recorded, I realized something. "This is kind of rigged..."

"Yeah—most of the guys who participated in the last tournament drew young opponents."

Out of the fourteen people who had previously participated in the tournament, eleven of them had shown up to the venue early and gotten in line first. Eleven of those participants had made it to last year's finals, while the remaining three had all been to the finals at some point over the years.

Among them were previous winners, runners-up, and third-place finishers. I would be facing the runner-up from last year in the first round, the third-place winner in the third round, and the winner in the semifinals.

On the other hand, most of the participants on the other side of the bracket were first-timers. The only ones who'd attracted attention before the start of the tournament were Jin and the Bandit King, and they'd never met before.

"Doesn't look like many people will put up much of a fight until the semifinals!" Jin said, striking a victory pose. Meanwhile, Galatt looked depressed.

"I can't believe I drew the Bandit King in the first round! He was one of two

people I really didn't want to fight...” Apparently, the other person he didn't want to fight was me. According to Galatt, he would rather have fought the devil he knew *or* the devil he didn't.

Since he'd called me a devil, I decided to put him in a headlock. I went easy on him since it was right before the first round, but it still hurt him so bad that he had tears in his eyes.

We messed around like that for a while, but then a staff member showed up and told me that my match was going to start soon. I'd totally forgotten that I'd drawn number one—in other words, I was first up.

Two matches would be fought simultaneously in the arena. The thirty-two matches were divided into two groups, with numbers one through sixteen forming the first group, and seventeen through thirty-two forming the second. The matches would start with the smallest numbers, with losers eliminated and winners proceeding up through the brackets, and then the two people from each group who were left standing at the end would compete in the finals.

I took my *kogarasumaru* from my bag and entered the ring. My opponent was already standing there waiting for me. His name was Ash Borgman. He was the runner-up of the previous tournament and had been seeded to the main event this year, without needing to qualify.

He was twenty-four years old and had never won the tournament, but he'd advanced to the main event four times so far, and finished third in the tournament two years ago. Since he was last year's runner-up, he was determined to win this year.

His fighting style wasn't flashy, and he didn't have any apparent weaknesses. He held a sword in his right hand and a small shield in his left hand. He was a popular participant, especially with women, and I had a feeling that had something to do with his looks. He had short silver hair, blue eyes, and a handsome face. I'd also heard he had a nice personality.

Supposedly, he was even more popular than the previous winner, although the previous winner's terrible personality might have had something to do with that...

The moment he took a step forward, I could hear women shrieking in the

audience. I was just glad his female fans weren't cursing me, but honestly, it was an uncomfortable situation to be in.

It seemed the referee had no intention of silencing the screams. He simply continued confirming the rules with Ash and me.

"Tenma, isn't it? I'm not going to go easy on you just because you're a kid. I'm gonna give this fight my all!" Ash declared, holding out a hand.

"Same here," I said, grabbing his hand.

The referee waited for us to let go, then told us to keep our distance from each other until he gave the signal.

"The first match of the first round of the individual competition: Tenma versus Ash Borgman. Aaand, begin!"

He waved his hand, signaling the start of the match.

I took the initiative. Before Ash could even step forward, I pulled the *kogarasumaru* out of its sheath and closed the gap between us, then slashed towards him. His reaction was slightly delayed, but at the last moment, he blocked with his shield and tried to counterattack with his sword. However, my blow had more force than he'd anticipated, and his stance wavered. His counterattack was nothing more than a swing of his arm.

I blocked the blow with my scabbard and backed away. That had all happened in less than the span of five seconds. The spectators couldn't believe we'd both made moves in such a short period of time, and the arena was completely silent.

Now that Ash and I were both biding our time, however, the audience finally came back to themselves and their excitement reached a peak. As though their cheers had signaled us, we stepped towards each other. But just when the audience thought we were about to slash at each other again, Ash thrust his left hand forward.

"Light!"

He cast a spell in my direction. The magic itself was a simple Light magic spell—all it did was illuminate. It didn't have any offensive power. It activated

quickly, and consumed little mana. Having used Light in an attempt to blind me, he now put his back into swinging his sword. I could tell just by the sound of the air whooshing towards me that this blow would be much stronger.

However, I dodged by crouching down, then struck out with my right fist at Ash's left side, knocking him back. He rolled for a while and managed to maintain his stance, but looked confused, like he didn't understand what had happened. I kept my eyes on him, not letting my guard down, and leaned forward a little while keeping my center of gravity low so I could jump at him at any time.

He tried to get to his feet, but his side must have been hurting him a lot, because he grimaced and fell back to his knees. And then...

"I surrender..." Ash called out to the referee, raising his right hand. The arena went silent after Ash's surrender, and the referee came over to stand between us and pointed at me.

"The winner is...Tenma!" His voice echoed throughout the arena, followed by cheers and applause. Some people in the audience must've seen how I'd attacked Ash, because they were excitedly imitating it to the people around them.

Ash seemed to have suffered a lot of damage, because after shaking hands with me, the medics had to help him off to the infirmary.

I ran into Jin and Galatt on the way back to the waiting room afterwards.

"Oh. Tenma. Congrats."

"Thanks? That was pretty deadpan," I said.

Jin looked at Galatt and smiled. "Well, we already knew you were going to win."

"Your opponent was strong, but I knew you were stronger!"

"By the way, how did you defeat him?" Jin and the others looked puzzled, as they hadn't witnessed my attack.

"I just slipped under Ash's arm. Not only was it kind of a blind spot for him, but he was also temporarily blinded by his own Light spell. After I went under

his arm, I just punched his side with my fist. He's probably got two or three broken ribs. I timed it well, so he might also have some damage to his lungs or his heart."

Jin and Galatt hadn't expected Ash to be hurt that badly, and looked kind of sorry for him. "Kind of gory, huh?"

"Well, Ash was really serious about the battle, so maybe it was necessary?"

The matches continued while we chatted. Since my match had ended early, Group A's second match was coming up, while Group B was still playing their first.

The finalists were free to stay in the waiting room until their next match, or they could watch the other matches if they were interested. I said goodbye to Jin and Galatt and went back to the waiting room, but for some reason, they followed me.

"Go back to your own waiting room," I said.

"Galatt's match is coming up soon. Let's cheer him on!" Jin said.

"All you want is to watch the Bandit King," Galatt muttered.

In the end, Jin and the others ended up sitting in my waiting room. I let the staff know where they were, so they could come and notify them when their matches would be starting. It seemed it wasn't against the rules to go back and forth between other people's waiting rooms, so the staff didn't have a problem with it.

We talked with each other to kill time, and then the staff member came to notify Galatt that he was up soon. He stood up with a tense look on his face and started getting his weapon ready. Fifteen minutes later, the staff member returned to escort him to the arena. Jin and I decided to go with him at the last minute.

While we watched Galatt go inside, Jin said, "Who do you think is going to win?"

"Eighty-twenty it's the Bandit King," I said.

He chuckled. "That's tough. I'll go sixty-forty for the Bandit King."

“So you think he has an advantage too?” I said, exasperated.

“As long as nothing strange happens, yeah. I think the Bandit King is a young guy. I saw him around town a few times but I felt like he seemed kind of childish. So if Galatt can dictate the pace, his experience will give him an edge. And if we’re just going by experience, Galatt might be the one with the sixty-forty advantage. Young guys like you are unusual, after all,” Jin said, watching Galatt go with a serious look on his face.

As for Galatt, he faced off with the Bandit King without hesitation.

The Bandit King’s face was covered by his tiger armor, so I couldn’t see it, but he never seemed to let his guard down.

“And now for the tenth match: the Bandit King versus Galatt. And...begin!” The referee gave the signal for the match to start, then stepped back.

The Bandit King was using a large axe called a bardiche. Including the blade and the length of the handle, it was probably over two meters long.

On the other hand, Galatt was using two swords. He usually used small ones, but this time they were slightly larger. He stepped lightly in contrast with the Bandit King, who was swiftly closing in on him, so that he could maintain a certain distance between them.

The Bandit King occasionally tried to use feints to get closer, but Galatt calmly dealt with all of them.

As Galatt drew closer to the edge of the arena, he began to move sideways. The Bandit King realized what he was doing and immediately closed the distance between them with tremendous speed. However, Galatt skillfully dodged his blow, then slipped around behind the Bandit King and unleashed a series of attacks. The Bandit King was quick when moving in a straight line, but maybe he wasn’t good at making small turns, because Galatt was able to strike him right on the back. The Bandit King staggered., and Galatt continued to slash at him without slowing down.

The Bandit King somehow managed to turn towards Galatt and tried to block Galatt’s attacks with his axe despite not being in a proper stance. However, he ended up taking several blows in the process.

Galatt kept up the momentum. The Bandit King was pushed back, and before he knew it, he was the one driven to the edge of the arena.

“Hey, hey, hey! Galatt’s doing a great job! He’s completely owning the Bandit King!” Jin said excitedly, once he saw Galatt’s offensive moves.

The audience seemed to be just as excited as Jin because I could now hear people cheering for Galatt.

“Push him out!”

“Finish him!”

Responding to the encouragement, Galatt swung his blade at the Bandit King, but the Bandit King managed to attack first.

“Oof!” Galatt crossed his swords, barely managing to block the blow, but he was still knocked back nearly twenty meters. He managed to land safely, but one of his swords was bent and the other was missing its blade.

“Damn it! How is he this powerful?!”

I knew he’d let his guard down, but not even I had expected that strong of an attack at that moment.

Galatt cursed as the Bandit King rushed towards him. He threw his bent sword at the Bandit King’s face, targeting the exact moment the Bandit King would swing his axe.

I thought this was a pretty good move. If an object flies at your face, you’d either have to dodge it or beat it away, which would create an opportunity for your opponent to strike. That is...if you happened to be dealing with an ordinary human.

But just as I expected, the Bandit King was *not* an ordinary human. He merely let the thrown sword strike him in the face, then swung his axe at Galatt, who’d been expecting a chance to strike, but had instead given his opponent the upper hand.

“Argh!”

Galatt blocked the axe with his remaining sword. This lessened its impact somewhat, but not completely. He was blown away and slammed into the

ground, rolling several times. He bounced and stopped a few meters away from the Bandit King.

Seeing this, the Bandit King turned to the referee and demanded he call an end to the match. About to raise his hand, the referee noticed something and went still. Suspicious, the Bandit King followed his gaze. Galatt had gotten back to his feet and was staggering towards him.

He was nearly unconscious, but he walked unsteadily towards the Bandit King with his broken sword in hand. As the referee called for the match to continue, the Bandit King closed in on Galatt, whacking him with the handle of his axe.

Galatt went rolling across the ground again. The crowd, the referee, and even the Bandit King seemed to think he was a goner this time, but once again, Galatt got back up. He stood up more quickly this time, so the Bandit King didn't bother calling out to the referee.

This sight must have irritated the Bandit King, because he quickly rushed Galatt again, positioning himself to skewer Galatt on his axe. Galatt barely reacted to this, while the spectators screamed and covered their eyes in anticipation of the tragedy they thought would unfold.

Jin flew out of his seat to try to stop the Bandit King, but I didn't think he'd make it in time. I jumped up at the same time, following Jin, but Galatt was too far away—even though I was faster than Jin, I would still be a few seconds short.

"Damn it! We're not gonna make it!"

The Bandit King's axe reached Galatt faster than we could stop him. He lifted our friend's body up, skewered on the tip of his axe. Jin almost collapsed at the sight.

As I stood next to Jin and lent him my shoulder to support him, the Bandit King walked towards us, carrying Galatt, who seemed to have been impaled with the axe.

Jin trembled with anger at the Bandit King's approach, malice pouring out of his entire body. However, as the Bandit King came closer, I felt as though there was something strange about the picture in front of us.

“You son of a bitch! That was going too damn far! You didn’t have to do that!” Jin screamed, with hatred in his voice.

The Bandit King seemed to hesitate, and Jin looked like he was about ready to lunge at him at any second. I held both of Jin’s arms back. Seemingly relieved, the Bandit King slowly began walking again.

“Lemme go! Don’t stop me, Tenma!”

“Just wait, Jin! Something’s weird! Look closely! Galatt isn’t even bleeding!”

Jin squinted at Galatt. If the Bandit King had really just impaled Galatt, there would have been blood gushing everywhere, but there wasn’t.

Once the Bandit King saw that Jin had quieted down, he slowly lowered Galatt outside of the ring. Then he turned towards the referee, who looked surprised by his actions. He rushed over to Galatt and confirmed that he was alive.

“The winner is...the Bandit King!”

Once the referee had declared him the winner, the Bandit King returned to his dressing room.

Much of the audience sat in stunned silence. The referee turned towards the crowd and said, “The Bandit King’s last move was not intended to kill Galatt—it was to carry him outside the ring and end the match without any further injuries.”

The crowd seemed to accept this, because they turned in the direction of the Bandit King and clapped. Then they applauded for Galatt, who had fought bravely, until he was in tatters.

Jin was relieved that Galatt was still alive, but then he remembered Galatt had suffered life-threatening injuries, and wanted to carry him on his back to the infirmary.

“Wait, Jin! Let me do some first aid treatment here.”

Jin set Galatt down on the floor.

“Cure! Aqua Heal!” I cast two spells on Galatt to heal him. That fixed up most of his injuries, but he was still unconscious—he must’ve hit his head when he’d rolled away from the Bandit King.

Once I finished using magic, the staff came over with a stretcher. Jin and I lifted Galatt up and put him on the stretcher, after which the staff carried him to the infirmary.

According to the doctor who was on call there, Galatt's condition was not life-threatening. My magic had worked on his injuries, so those weren't a big deal, but since he'd hit his head the doctor wanted him to rest just in case. Thus, he remained in bed in the infirmary.

"I'm glad Galatt's going to be okay, but that damn Bandit King..."

"Jin, there's no reason to be angry at the Bandit King over what happened. This is a tournament, remember? Nothing he did was against the rules." Mennas patted Jin on the shoulder, comforting him. Leena wasn't there at the moment, as she was filling out paperwork for Galatt's treatment.

"I know, but..."

"You just don't get it. If Tenma hadn't stopped you, you would've attacked the Bandit King! And if you'd done that, you would've gotten disqualified, and embarrassed Galatt too."

Jin looked awkward at Mennas's words.

"Well, putting that aside, thank you, Tenma. Because of you, Galatt's injury is nothing serious, and idiot Jin wasn't disqualified. You should thank him too, Jin!"

"I know... I'm really sorry, Tenma. Thank you." Jin thanked me while Mennas held his head down in a bow.

"It's fine, but...what about the team battle?"

Jin and his team had also advanced to the finals of the team battle, and the Dawnswords were already down a person. Losing another would be a huge disadvantage.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it. We'll be free tomorrow, so let's see how much better Galatt's doing then. Worst-case scenario, Mennas, Leena, and I will just have to give it a go without him."

Normally, a party that had people participating in both the individual and

team battles prepared for such a situation with a team of six, but occasionally, teams did encounter circumstances like these. However, it was too late for additions or changes to the teams at this point. It seemed the Dawnswords would be forced into a tough battle.

“That’s nothing you should worry about, Tenma. You’d never have gotten yourself into this position. We’ll be able to participate, even if we’re down a member. The only way you’d ever have to forfeit was if you yourself were unable to participate for some reason, since the rest of your team is made up of your followers,” Mennas said.

Mennas was referring to one of the rules of the tournament that said it was a tournament for humans and not for followers (that is, monsters). That meant that each team had to have at least one human participant. So, in my case, if I was unable to participate, my entire team would lose the right to compete.

“Good point. I’ll keep that in mind.”

While Mennas, Jin, and I were talking, all of the first-round battles finished up in the arena. A staff member came looking for me.

“Your turn is coming up soon, Tenma. Please return to your dressing room.”

I nodded and stood up from my chair, then took several potions out of my bag and handed them to Mennas before leaving. “If Galatt wakes up, give him these.”

“Thanks, Tenma.” Mennas took the bottles from me and stowed them in his bag. Jin didn’t have anywhere to be until the last match of the second round, so he said he would stay here until then.

I returned to my dressing room and stretched until the staff member came to get me.

My opponent for the second match wielded a large axe. His name was Oggo, and he made it to the finals last year. He was physically large, so I’d thought fighting him might make for a good warm-up for the Bandit King. However, it turned out that Oggo had suffered a stunning defeat at the hands of Ash last year. At any rate, his skills were very different from the Bandit King’s, so I concluded that I probably wouldn’t learn much from the fight after all.

I stepped up into the arena. Oggo still hadn’t shown up yet, so a staff member rushed off in a panic to go get him. Even though the time of the match was swiftly approaching, the staff member didn’t return right away. And when Oggo did finally show up, it still took him some time for him to come over to me.

I wondered what in the world he was doing, but then realized he was trying to annoy me on purpose. He kept smirking at me.

If this had been happening in my previous world, I would’ve tried the strategy I’d call “You’re late, Musashi!” However, if you were too late, you’d be disqualified, so I really didn’t think it would be that effective.

Plus, it seemed like he had annoyed the audience more than he’d annoyed me. The crowd was booing as though Oggo was the visiting team.

The referee seemed to have realized that Oggo was purposely wasting time, and he also looked pretty annoyed.

I took another look at Oggo. He was a bit short of two meters tall and was probably over a hundred kilograms. It seemed like he thought he was making a show of his strength as he swung his axe everywhere threateningly.

“Round two, match one: Tenma versus Oggo. Begin!”

Just as the referee had called the start of the match, I approached Oggo without drawing my sword, sneaking up close to him to gauge his response, then unleashed a body blow on his left side. I slammed right into his solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. He began to foam at the mouth and fell to the ground in agony.

As he was unable to stand up, the referee declared him defeated.

“Huh?” I said.

Even after the referee had called the match, Oggo was unable to get back to his feet. In the end, he had to be dragged out of the arena by staff members.

“Huh? Seriously? That was it?” I stood there stunned, staring at Oggo as they took him away.

By the way, the audience booed so loudly as he was leaving the arena that it felt like the entire venue was shaking. The staff struggled to keep them quiet.

I returned to the waiting room with their boos still echoing in my ears. I couldn’t shake off the feeling of dissatisfaction that that fight had left me with, so I decided to visit Galatt to clear my mind.

Jin and Mennas were surprised when I showed up at the infirmary.

“You’re already done?”

When I explained to them what had happened, both of them burst out laughing. They laughed so uproariously that the doctor and the nurse yelled at them for being too loud. Then, for some reason, they started yelling at me too.

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After the instant kill that was the first match of the day, the next match proved to be even more exciting than last year’s—at least, according to the

crowd. Amidst the commotion, my third opponent was decided, and, as expected, it was the third-place winner from last year.

The Bandit King's match ended in no time as well. His opponent survived several of his attacks but was unable to land any of his own, and thus the match had ended with his defeat.

Last year's winner fought next and won his battle. He tortured his opponent throughout the match, which the audience didn't look kindly upon. But since he'd won last year and had advanced to the finals again this year, I figured he must have some ability.

Before long, it was time for the final match of the second round, and Jin, who was quite fired up, appeared in the arena.

Jin's opponent was new to the tournament, yet had advanced all the way to the finals. He was a young man that people called the hope of a new generation. Unfortunately, however, he was no match for the burning desire Jin had to overthrow the Bandit King, which he now directed at the young man.

Jin took the upper hand immediately after the match started, and it was over in about five minutes. The young man was depressed that he hadn't even gotten one attack in, but from my point of view, I thought he'd done a good job enduring Jin's attacks for five whole minutes. Many of us shared that opinion.

That was the final match of the second round, and now there was a one-hour break.

Spectators used this time to buy lunch or go shopping and so on. However, under normal circumstances, participants couldn't eat much.

"Another serving, Tenma!"

For some reason, Jin had come to my dressing room and begun eating lunch with me. I was eating rice gruel with cabbage and chicken I'd made the night before—basically a soupy porridge that was easy to digest. And since it contained chicken and eggs, it was fairly nutritious.

The winning participants weren't allowed to leave the arena, so we'd been asked to bring food and drink before coming. Otherwise, we could ask a staff member to get us something.

However, there weren't many things on the menu the staff member had given me that I wanted to eat, so with permission, I'd cooked my lunch in the dressing room. As for Jin, he joined me because he'd gotten kicked out of the infirmary.

"Jin, even though this is easy to digest, you shouldn't eat so much."

"Don't worry! My match is last, so I have plenty of time to digest everything!" Ignoring my warnings, Jin kept shoveling the rice gruel into his mouth. I'd made extra once he showed up, but it was reaching a point where there wouldn't be enough for me, so I decided to start eating too.

Once we were done eating, Jin decided to take a rest. He lay down, then, quite suddenly, asked me a question.

"What do you think about the Bandit King, Tenma?"

"I think you're right and that he's much younger than anyone else thinks. And from what I saw of him in the match against Galatt, he seemed unaccustomed to being ambushed or being at a disadvantage."

Jin nodded in agreement. "That's pretty much the same opinion I have. I'd say my fighting style is pretty close to the Bandit King's, and I have a feeling it's gonna be a head-on fight—a battle of the blows."

It seemed he'd decided that that was how things would go. He could have tried ambushing and putting the Bandit King at a disadvantage, but honestly I didn't think Jin could fight like Galatt had. And in light of that, he needed to decide on a strategy. Rather than trying to force himself to fight like Galatt, he'd decided his chances of winning would be higher in a head-on battle of blows.

"Oof... All right, I'm gonna get back to Galatt now, Tenma. Thanks for the food." Jin pushed himself back to his feet and waved before exiting...and leaving me with a huge mess of dishes.

At any rate, I gathered up all the dirty dishes and put them in my bag, then lay down for a nap. I felt like I had plenty of physical stamina, but I was more mentally exhausted than I'd thought, and passed out immediately.

Part Two

After a while, I sensed someone approaching me and woke up from my nap.

“Tenma, your match is coming up. It’s time to get ready!”

It turned out to be a staff member, who’d knocked on my door.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be back in ten minutes to escort you to the arena. Please be ready by that time.”

I didn’t have much in the way of preparations as my weapon and equipment were already good to go, so I just stretched to warm up.

As I said before, my third opponent was the third-place winner from last year. I’d looked into his matches, and though I had some doubts, this wasn’t the time to dwell on them.

He was a thirty-five-year-old tiger demi-human named Blanca. In the first and second rounds, contrary to appearance, he’d overwhelmed his opponents with technique instead of pure force.

He seemed to specialize in fighting with a spear. In the first and second rounds, he’d replaced the tip of his spear with a wooden one. So far, he had won all of his matches without using his true power.

For a moment, I thought about using a spear to fight him, but since it wasn’t the weapon I was best at using, I decided not to.

I swung the *kogarasumaru* a few times, and before long, the staff member came to escort me to the arena. Normally, they would’ve just notified you that it was time for your match, but after the incident with Oggo, they’d decided to directly escort all participants to the ring.

Blanca stepped into the arena at about the same time I did, on the opposite side. As soon as he saw me, his expression suddenly turned ferocious. For a moment I wondered if he was angry, but he didn’t seem mad. I realized that he was actually enjoying the moment and that his expression was probably one of

excitement.

As soon as he stepped into the ring, he paused. He had a little smile on his face as he removed the cloth that was wrapped around the tip of his spear. The tip was some kind of white metal. It was hard to see from this distance, but I thought it might be made of orichalcum.

The fact that he'd decided to use a real spear tip meant that he recognized me as a formidable opponent. In other words, he was going to fight at full strength for the first time in this tournament.

Both Blanca and I made our way to the center of the ring, where the referee looked us over. Then, he was just about to raise his right hand when Blanca interrupted him.

"You're Tenma, right?" he asked. "You sure you wanna fight me with that piddly little weapon? I'll end up skewering you before you even get near me."

He was looking at my weapon as he said that, but it didn't seem like he was trying to make a fool out of me. It was more like he was looking forward to seeing how I'd respond.

"I could ask you the same thing. You sure you wanna fight with that weapon? Won't be of much use to you once I get up close."

Blanca laughed at that, showing his fangs. "You're pretty cocky, huh? Hope you don't end up regretting opening that big mouth of yours!"

The referee raised his right hand.

"Why don't you make me regret it?!"

As these words left my mouth, the referee brought his arm down and yelled out something. But Blanca and I didn't even wait to listen—the moment his arm came down, we both charged at each other.

Blanca held the tip of his spear pointed towards my chest as he ran. Meanwhile, I kept the *kogarasumaru* on my hip, leaving it loose in its scabbard as I focused on dodging Blanca's first attack.

The moment I came within range of the spear, Blanca let a sharp blow loose. He was faster than I'd expected and the tip of the spear slightly nicked my

leather armor, but I successfully dodged the blow and tried to get inside his personal bubble. He didn't let me do that, however—the moment I evaded, he switched his grip and swung his spear in a horizontal sweeping motion. Since it passed under my armpit I couldn't dodge it, and my body was thrown sideways.

Although it probably looked quite dramatic, the spear had barely grazed me, so I didn't take much damage.

When I'd dodged the first blow, I'd thought that was the full extent of Blanca's power. However, he seemed to move even faster with his second strike.

I managed to land on my feet, but the gap between us put me back at square one. This time, I drew my sword in advance and ran towards Blanca again. He waited for me, hips lowered and spear raised, loosing a barrage of jabs at me as I rushed towards him.

His jabs were slower than before, but since there were many of them, it was hard for me to gauge where each would land. I blocked the spear with my sword and tried to approach him again, but he upped the force and kept the advantage.

I thought he would eventually stop, but he showed no signs of slowing down. From the audience, I figured it looked like I was being attacked unilaterally, with me on the defensive. Whenever I tried to put distance between us, he followed suit. Every time I made a move, he'd do so as well, continuing to jab at me with his spear.My attacks couldn't reach him because of the difference in the lengths of our weapons. However, given that he hadn't even hit me once, I felt like we were on equal footing.

"No more holding back!" Blanca said, as he continued jabbing his spear at me.

"Any day now. I'm still waiting. I won't hold back either," I quipped. However, I was inwardly surprised that he still hadn't used his full power on me. Immediately after he'd made that declaration, his attack pattern changed. Up until now, he'd only been making simple thrusts, but now he was adding rotation.

I decided to see what would happen if I tried to beat away the jabs with my sword, but it just bounced off roughly. I didn't let go of it, but I was knocked off-

balance. Then I was nearly hit by Blanca's attack, but managed to dodge in the nick of time.

I thought that I'd completely avoided his attack and that his spear had just grazed my armor, but as it turned out, the leather had been gouged so deeply that I felt it would be difficult to repair.

"Damn, it's useless now. I liked this armor too!" I complained as I removed my favorite armor, my eyes on Blanca the whole time. For some reason, Blanca politely waited until I was finished taking it off.

"Hah! You're lucky it was just the armor! I meant to finish you off!"

Once he saw that I was done taking off my armor, he gripped his spear again. Since I was now sans armor, it would have been too dangerous to take another blow. I decided to fight with my legs now.

Blanca's spinning attack was certainly a threat, but it wasn't without its weaknesses. He'd added a little twisting motion to increase the force, but when he stretched out his arm, his movements came to a halt for a split second. That was what he'd done when he'd ripped through my armor.

Once I started using my legs to fight him, Blanca seemed to become more conscious of not extending his arm all the way when attacking. This shortened his range and took away his advantage of being able to keep his distance. As such, I was able to get twenty to thirty centimeters closer to him than before, which felt like it was just about in the range where I could get an attack in.

I waited for the perfect timing, but just as I was about to counterattack, Blanca's range suddenly extended—he had stopped rotating the spear. Realizing what I was up to, Blanca had timed his jab for that exact moment.

He smiled confidently, having answered my counter with a counterattack of his own—but I had actually been expecting this all along.

I figured a master like Blanca would have realized what my plan was so when I'd moved differently, stepping forward towards him, he'd stopped rotating his spear, instead extending his range again. And the moment he did this, I threw my sword at him.

Looking surprised, he took his focus off me for a moment while he dodged. I'd

been waiting for that moment, and I managed to dodge the spear and grab the base of its tip.

Blanca hadn't been expecting that. He hurriedly tried to pull back the spear, but then, perhaps realizing something, he tried to release it again and jump backwards, but it was a little too late for that.

"Arghh!"

The moment I'd thrown the sword at Blanca, I'd also taken the scabbard from my hip. At the same time I'd grabbed his spear, I'd also kicked the scabbard at him. Thanks to the force of my kick and the momentum of having had the spear yanked from his hands, the scabbard slammed into his chest.

However, he braced his entire body as it hit him. It seemed that one blow wouldn't be enough to sink him.

Though he was struggling to breathe, Blanca swung his spear hard and knocked me away, forcing me to keep my distance from him again. His face was all scrunched up as he swung his spear, so I figured he'd taken a lot of damage from my blow.

I used magic to call my sword back. I put the scabbard back on my belt and held my sword out to face off against Blanca again.

I could hear murmurs of surprise from the audience at the sight of my sword and scabbard reappearing in my hands, but right now I couldn't spare them any attention. I could feel the malice Blanca was emanating—it was very intense.

Of course, I'd faced enemies who'd come at me with the intent to kill before, but this was the first time that enemy was a human.

"Tenma. Don't resent me if I kill you," he said, and then vanished. Of course, it only *seemed* like he'd vanished, but the truth was that I simply lost sight of him for a split second.

Right after I'd lost sight of him, I sensed his malice coming from behind me, on the left. He was about to charge. I leapt in the opposite direction to avoid him, but he attacked my left hand faster than I could react.

"Argh!"

A sharp pain ran through my left elbow, accompanied by the sound of something being crushed. It seemed like either my left elbow or the bone right above it had been shattered. The impact blew me back halfway from where I'd previously been standing. I kept my distance, assessing the situation. Blanca was standing where I'd been moments before, with his right arm pointing downwards.

His spear was missing from his hands—it had been stabbed into the ground, about three meters left of my previous position, with the handle bent and hanging limply.

"I had to sacrifice my beloved spear, and all you got was one measly broken arm?" Blanca muttered, his figure blurring as he spoke. This time, he approached me from the front. Enduring the severe pain in my arm, I managed to dodge him. He passed me, coming to a stop after about five meters.

Taking a closer look at his feet, I noticed two skid marks lightly etched into the arena behind them.

"Speed boost with Boost magic..." I murmured. Looking impressed, Blanca grinned at me.

"Oh, you noticed? You're right, I'm using Boost magic. No one has ever survived a fight with me where I've used this spell!" Having said these words, Blanca used his Boost magic again to close the distance between us. I knew it would be impossible to stop him with how much momentum he had, so I focused on dodging until an opportunity for a counterattack came.

As I focused on him, for some reason, my eyes began to adjust to his speed. Despite how fast he was moving, I gradually became able to track his movements. And once I was able to see him clearly, I realized that his technique was actually quite simple.

Basically, he used Boost magic to temporarily boost his physical abilities while charging at me at super high speed. However, right before he attacked he would feint slightly. Having shifted his opponent's focus, even just momentarily, he would lean back over and continue the charge.

Just that moment of misdirected attention gave him the opportunity to shift himself out of his opponent's range of vision, making it seem like he had

disappeared.

This technique seemed to be effective against opponents like me, who had many cards they could play. Those people changed up their method of attack based on how Blanca was moving, and so they unconsciously followed even the smallest of movements with their eyes. This meant there were plenty of opportunities for Blanca to trick them and make them lose focus. Plus, Blanca seemed to be good at concealing himself and using magic that hindered recognition, which may have been one of the reasons for the accuracy of his technique.

Anyway, once you realized what was happening, it wasn't difficult to deal with. Like anything else, this technique also had its weaknesses. It was extremely fast and powerful, but it seemed Blanca could only move in a straight line. When he'd first gotten hit, he'd used his spear to force a change of direction, which had resulted in it bending, rendering it useless for the rest of this match. He'd probably been betting on defeating me with that one blow. As evidence of that, as I continued dodging the straight blows he was currently unleashing, he seemed to be growing impatient.

However, my injuries were serious, so I didn't have much time to spare. I wanted to put an end to this match as soon as possible.

Perhaps because I was continuing to dodge them, his movements slowed slightly. It was much easier now to match his timing than it had been before. This time, I jumped forward the moment he unleashed his technique. He didn't seem to be expecting me to attempt to counter it, so it clearly wasn't as sharp as before.

Even so, he didn't attempt to stop me—he tried to forcefully change the trajectory of his spear to catch me instead. However, I bent over to slip beneath his spear. Then I filled my left arm with magic before striking the same place where I'd hit him before, punching him with all my might.

The moment I made contact with him, the magical energy I'd wrapped my arm in was released. It became a shock wave that traveled through his entire body, amplifying the damage several times over. On top of that, since he'd been approaching me at such a high speed, that only increased the force even more.

My fist sank into his body. Fortunately, it didn't pierce through his skin like it might have in a manga, but even so, I could feel it crushing most of his right ribs as well as a lung.

A large amount of blood gushed from his mouth, and he went completely limp. As soon as the referee saw the situation, and before he'd even declared me the victor, he called in the medic team to take Blanca off to the infirmary.

"The winner is Tenma!" the referee finally declared, after Blanca had been carried away on a stretcher.

However, I was writhing in excruciating pain myself. This was only natural because I had punched him with my left arm, which had broken bones. No matter how much magic I'd used to brace it, it couldn't completely deaden the impact. On top of that, it had been a counterattack, so the burden of his weight and speed had only made things worse.

Enduring the extreme pain, I treated my arm with magic, then slowly walked back to the dressing room. I couldn't muster a response to the cheering of the audience, but once they saw the state I was in, they realized how fierce the battle had actually been, and their cheers grew louder.

Since I returned in so much pain, the staff members took me to the infirmary before I could go back to my dressing room.

The moment I entered, I noticed it was as busy as a field hospital. This was because of Blanca's condition—which was, of course, my fault. His wounds were worse than I'd thought, but he was somehow still clinging to life. However, as he was hanging by a thread, the doctor looked at me and screamed, "If it's not life-threatening, please be patient!"

I was brought to a chair in the corner of the room and told to sit there and wait, so I just started using more healing magic on myself.

I assessed my injuries with magic, and as expected, I had many broken bones. Under normal circumstances, the injury was so severe that I might not have been able to ever move my arm again. Luckily, however, I had experience in healing such injuries, so I thought I could probably heal myself.

As for the procedure: First, I used magic to numb the area, then used another

spell to roughly set the broken bones. Then, I used Recovery magic on the bones that had been put in place to start healing them. I had to be careful not to deform them, making sure my fingers could move properly, because it would be very problematic if I set the bones incorrectly. Apart from the pain, I encountered no problems, so I decided I'd just continue using Recovery magic as needed.

Now that the pain had subsided considerably, I decided to help with Blanca's medical treatment.

At first, when I offered to help, the doctor told me an amateur would only get in the way. However, once I told him I'd healed my own arm and name-dropped my mother, Celia, he made a special exception since it was an emergency. Apparently, this doctor knew my mother, and once he saw that I had indeed healed my arm, he decided to allow me to help.

However, all I really did was follow the doctor's instructions and continue to cast Recovery magic on Blanca while the doctor treated him.

When I saw the doctor working up close, I thought that he was a lot more skilled than I'd expected. I figured he must have had a certain amount of skill to be working at the royal tournament, but now I felt he might even be a better healer than my mother had been.

After the treatment was finished, I chatted with him. He told me he worked as a doctor who traveled around to various cities, but when word of his reputation and skill reached the castle, he was recruited by the royal family to come work in the capital.

He hadn't decided what to do after the tournament. He was thinking of settling down somewhere in the future, but was also considering staying in the capital.

"We seem to have saved him. Any ordinary person would've died from these injuries, but demi-humans are strong and have very high vitality."

Once I started pitching in, the treatment was completed in less than twenty minutes. The doctor, who was taking a breather, seemed grateful for Blanca's high vitality.

“Looks like it’s your turn next. I see you’ve done the minimum that was needed, but it still hurts, doesn’t it? Let’s heal it properly,” the doctor said, as he began to rub my arm. Personally, I thought I *had* healed it completely and properly, but apparently, he didn’t agree. At first, as he began massaging my arm, a considerable amount of pain raced through it. But it seemed like he was using Recovery magic as he worked, and gradually the pain faded.

“That should be good. The pain should be mostly gone by now. I fitted the larger pieces of bone back to where they belong, and the smaller ones will eventually be absorbed back into your body. If the pain persists, I can do an operation to remove them.”

In just five minutes, he finished treating me. I moved my arm around to make sure it felt all right.

“It doesn’t hurt at all. Thank you!”

As I thanked the doctor, another patient was brought in. I was pretty sure that this guy had been scheduled to fight in the quarterfinals in the same block as me, but as he was up against the previous winner, he wasn’t favored to win. His injuries didn’t look as bad as Blanca’s, but he had cuts all over his body and had lost quite a bit of blood.

“This one’s in terrible shape too! Looks like you really got it bad,” the doctor muttered, then briskly began giving instructions to his nurse. He didn’t say anything to me, so I figured he didn’t need my help this time.

Standing behind him, I looked at the patient. There were shallow cuts all over his body, and it looked like he had been slashed in the same places over and over again. His wounds were very messy.

“With this type of injury, it’ll be impossible to erase the scars completely...” the doctor said as he began treatment. After everything, the patient ended up looking like a mummy, with bandages all over his body, and was given medicine to make up for the blood loss as well as other recovery medicine.

“His opponent certainly seems to live up to his reputation...” the doctor muttered. I silently agreed with him. The previous winner was said to be quite a sadist and a lowlife who loved torturing those who were weaker than him. To be honest, if he hadn’t been talented enough to win the tournament, people

said he'd probably have committed some kind of crime and ended up in jail.

By the way, in the last tournament, Ash had lost in the finals and Blanca had lost in the semifinals.

"Hey! Did the small fry die?"

Just then, someone suddenly kicked open the door to the infirmary and barged in. It was Chaos Mysails, the previous winner, and the one responsible for all the wounds on that guy's body.

"Damn—two of them have one foot in the grave! Might as well call this place a graveyard!" Chaos pointed and laughed at his opponent and Blanca, who was sleeping now that his treatment was over.

The doctor stepped in front of Chaos. "This is a place where injured people are healed. And unfortunately, we don't treat mental deficiencies here, so get out!" He tried to kick Chaos out with such force that it was hard to believe he was just a doctor, but the man didn't budge. I could see something in the man's temple twitching.

"You think you can stand in my way just 'cause you're a doctor? You've got a lotta guts!" Chaos went to grab the doctor by his neck, but in the nick of time, I stepped in, grabbing him by the arm.

"He might be 'just' a doctor, but he's here at the request of the royal family. If you're not a complete idiot, you'll understand what that means."

Chaos glared at me as I held his arm, but as soon as I'd mentioned the royal family, he pulled away from me with disgust.

"Hah! You're just a brat who can't do anything without the royal family's support! You're the kid who almost killed Blanca, huh? Perfect. You'd better hope you survive the next match!" he spat, and then left the infirmary.

"What the hell did he come here for...?" I muttered, but the doctor had an answer for me.

"He loves coming in to see the opponents he's tortured. He came in and did the same thing after the second round."

That made sense—but there was still something I didn't understand. "But he

seems way weaker than both Blanca *and* Ash...”

The biggest doubt I had about the situation was that he didn’t seem nearly anywhere as strong as Blanca. I couldn’t believe he’d beat Blanca in the previous tournament.

“It wasn’t enjoyable fighting a guy like him at all. Wasn’t worth fighting with my full power. I lost interest and just stepped out of the ring on my own,” Blanca answered from bed, having apparently heard my question.

“You’re already awake? Wow, demi-humans really do recover quickly,” the doctor said, as he went to go check on his patient.

“I heard voices, and sensed an unpleasant presence. I can barely speak,” Blanca said, while looking at me. “If only Chaos had been half as fun to fight as you were, I would’ve won the last tournament.”

I decided to ask him about the other thing that was on my mind. “Well, why did Ash lose last time? He seems stronger than Chaos too.”

“It was just because Chaos was stronger at the last tournament, that’s all. There was a clear difference in strength between them back then. This time, however, the tables have been turned, and Ash is slightly stronger. At this rate, the gap will widen even more next year. I wish I could’ve seen Ash give it his all this time, though...”

So basically, Chaos had neglected his training while Ash had kept it up. And Blanca preferred fighting strong opponents rather than for honor, but most of all, he liked to have fun as he fought. What he *didn’t* enjoy was idiots, and since Chaos seemed to fall into that category, he hadn’t felt like fighting him full-out.

“That’s why my match with you was so fun. After all, I hadn’t gotten that serious in years, and when I finally did and went to kill you, I ended up getting beat and nearly dying myself!” he said joyously, before bursting into laughter.When he noticed that both the doctor and myself were freaked out by his reaction, though, his expression returned to normal.

“Well, I was just joking when I said I was going to kill you. But it’s true that I had fun!”

I wasn’t sure if I believed that, but it *had* been a fun fight. Besides, I didn’t

bear any particular grudge against him, especially since he'd only narrowly survived our encounter.

Just then, I heard cheers from the arena. It seemed like the Bandit King's match had begun.

"I'll be back." I really wanted to watch this match, so I headed out the door of the infirmary.

"Yeah! Good luck!" Blanca called after me. I lifted my hand in response and ran out the door, heading all the way to the arena.

I thought it was strange that, although Blanca had said he loved fighting strong opponents, he hadn't mentioned the Bandit King, but that thought slipped from my mind as I ran.

Although I'd run to the arena as fast as I could, the match was almost already over. The Bandit King's opponent was one of the few sorcerers in the tournament—the only one in the finals, actually—and he was a fairly well-known adventurer.

However, the Bandit King had attacked him before he'd even been able to cast one spell, and he was covered in bruises.

Cough!

The Bandit King punched his opponent right in the stomach, sending him flying outside the ring. That was the match. The Bandit King turned his back on his opponent and began walking towards the center of the ring.

However, the match wasn't completely over—although it was clear the Bandit King had won, he was still struck by his opponent's magical attack. It seemed like the sorcerer had been in the middle of casting a spell on the Bandit King when he'd been flung outside the arena, but had still managed to let it loose as he'd flown through the air. It was a boosted Fireball spell, and since the Bandit King had let down his guard as he walked towards the center of the ring, the attack hit him in the back.

It took him by surprise and he fell down in a somewhat dramatic fashion, but fortunately for him, it seemed his tiger armor had some kind of magical resistance, and the flames didn't spread. However, the Bandit King seemed

somewhat embarrassed as he returned to the dressing room. After that, the referees gathered to discuss what had happened. They decided that, since the spell had been cast before the sorcerer had landed outside the ring, he wouldn't be punished.

Jin's match was next, but his opponent was much weaker than he was, and since I was satisfied with his progress so far, I figured Jin would win anyway. Thus, I decided to go back to my dressing room. And as expected, Jin won in overwhelming fashion.

On the way back to my room, I ran into a smirking Chaos. He'd apparently been waiting for me.

"Hey, brat. You should withdraw from your next match. I'm sure your arm's still hurting, anyway." He was being completely ridiculous, so I decided to ignore him and walk past him, but then he circled around in front of me again. "Don't you ignore me! I'm only trying to be nice! After all, even a guy like me would feel bad about killing a kid...for a day, at least!"

He cracked up laughing. *Not again*, I thought. I tried to walk past him for the second time.

"You haven't answered me yet!" he suddenly yelled, trying to grab my arm, but I crouched down to dodge him. While he grabbed nothing but air, I put distance between us, then turned to face him. It appeared he didn't like my attitude. I could see blue veins bulging in his forehead, and it seemed like he was restraining himself from lunging at me.

"You little son of a bitch! You're gonna pay for that once this tournament is over! Once I win this tournament, I'm gonna become a noble! And I'm gonna... Yeah, I know—you got a lot of female fans, right? Well, I'm gonna take your groupies and rape 'em right in front of ya! Just you wait and see!!!"

He guffawed loudly, delighted with himself. Honestly, I was pretty confident that if I killed him right here and now, I could have cleaned up the scene well enough that there wouldn't be a scrap of evidence that I'd done it. In fact, if I hadn't heard the cheers from the audience at that exact moment, I might have actually gone and done it. That was how furious I was.

He didn't seem to notice my anger, because he was still chortling.

Just then, Jin passed by, having just finished his match. He noticed me right away.

“Hey, hey! Calm down, Tenma! I don’t know what happened, but you gotta calm down!” He’d realized Chaos was there and probably figured the guy had said something asinine to me, because he grabbed me by the arm and started to drag me towards the dressing room.

I didn’t resist and followed him. However, Chaos misunderstood and thought that I needed assistance to make my escape, which just made him start laughing again.

“Ooh, looks like your daddy just came to pick up his widdle baby! Too bad he can’t save your ass in the fight later!”

His baby talk cooled my head a bit. Meanwhile, Jin wasted no time hurrying me back to the waiting room.

Part Three

“All right! Tenma, I’m gonna go beat the crap outta Chaos!” Jin announced, once we were back in the dressing room and he’d heard what happened. It was probably my fault, because I’d added, “Chaos is planning on attacking Mennas and Leena too.”

I wasn’t sure when Chaos had noticed my fans—by which I meant Jeanne and the triplets, mainly—but if it had been during a match, then it was quite possible he was including Mennas and Leena in his statement.

“I said, wait! If you attack him, we’ll be tarred as criminals and made into slaves! We need to at least come up with a plan first so we don’t get caught.”

Jin sat back down and began plotting. Luckily, there was a thirty-minute break before the next match, so it was the perfect chance to kill some time. While Jin wore a serious look, plotting against Chaos, I remembered something I’d wanted to mention.

“You really get heated when it comes to your party members, huh?”

He looked at me for a moment, confused, and then the serious expression returned to his face.

“Well, of course I do! Even if Mennas is vulgar and it’s hard for me to see her as a woman, and Leena is a complete and total airhead who never makes any sense while being clumsy and causing trouble for me all the time...they’re still important friends of mine! Though I doubt Chaos would want to mess with Mennas in the first place...”

Jin got so carried away that he didn’t even notice who was standing behind him. I started trying to think of how I could soften the blow of what he’d just said.

“Mennas is plenty beautiful. Plus, I think Leena’s airheaded personality is kind of cute...”

“Tenma, you don’t have to be polite in front of me. You have *actual* beautiful women around you every day, so I’m sure Mennas and Leena are just a change

of pace. Honestly, I'm pretty envious of you, since those two are the only women who ever hang around me."

We'd gone from him saying he was going to beat the crap out of Chaos, and now we were engaging in boys' talk? And standing just behind him were...

"Well, excuse *me* for being vulgar and someone you can't even consider a woman!" Mennas's lips were smiling, but her eyes weren't; the way she was glaring at Jin was the very definition of "if looks could kill."

"And I'm *so* sorry for being a clumsy airhead who just causes trouble for you!" Leena had an elegant smile on her face, but there was a very dark aura emanating from her.



“Wh-What are you doing here? Only participants are allowed in the dressing rooms...”

“Um, Galatt woke up, so the doctor told me to come get you, then Mennas and Leena said they’d come with me, so...”

Once Jin realized who was standing behind him, he turned his head around so slowly it reminded me of a broken toy creaking.

By the way, it was a nurse who answered Jin.

“We’re part of the team battles, so the staff let us in. We told them, ‘Jin’s an idiot, so there’s no telling what he’ll do.’” And then, apparently, the staff had said they could come along to fetch Jin from the dressing room.

“Galatt’s awake? That’s great news! Let’s go see him, Tenma!” Jin jumped to his feet and tried to leave the room, but both Mennas and Leena grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Sorry, but I gotta go warm up! Give Galatt my regards! Nurse, if you don’t hurry back soon, you’ll be in trouble!” I left Jin there to his fate, and tried to push the nurse out of the room for her own safety.

“Tenma! Wait a minute!” All of a sudden, Mennas called out to me.

Even though I hadn’t said a bad word about them, my heart still skipped a beat when she said my name.

“Yes? What is it?!” I blurted out, in an unnaturally polite tone.

“I’m sure you know this already, but make sure you beat that bastard Chaos to within an inch of his life, because he really will attack your friends. Listen up—you’d better scare him so badly it leaves scars, both physically *and* mentally! Ah, but actually—it’s not against the rules if his death is an accident. Good luck!”

“Thank you!” After I thanked Mennas for her advice, I left the waiting room. The moment the door shut behind me, I heard Jin’s screams. I could only hope that even Mennas would be compassionate enough to leave Jin in a state where he could still compete later.

Although I’d told them to give Galatt my regards, I was still worried about him, so I decided to drop by the infirmary. He looked better than I expected. I told him that Jin was currently being disciplined, so he’d probably run a little

late. Galatt looked a little sad to hear that.

I'd told Jin and the others I was going to warm up, but there really wasn't a place around the arena for me to do that. Instead, I went outside and stretched on a nearby road.

After that, when I felt like I'd loosened up enough, a staff member told me it was almost time to begin. I quickly grabbed my things and went up into the arena.

Chaos hadn't arrived yet, so I had to wait. It wasn't for very long, though, because two or three minutes later, he appeared in the other entrance. He wasn't going to try what Oggo had. Although if someone *had* tried something similar, they'd probably have been disqualified as soon as they appeared, anyway.

However, the thing that caught my attention first was the audience's reaction. When I'd appeared in the arena, there were a lot of cheers and applause, with a few boos mixed in. But when Chaos showed up, it was the complete opposite—the entire audience was booing him. Strangely enough, that seemed to excite him, and he started provoking the audience so that they'd jeer even more.

"Aren't you jealous? The audience will never forget me. As time goes by, they might forget *you*, but they'll never forget me when I win in the face of such adversity! My name will go down in history! Unlike you, who only has luck on his side and not much else going for him!"

Now I realized why Blanca hadn't wanted to fight him—Chaos was a complete idiot, there was no doubt about that. At the very least, he *was* strong enough to have his name go down in history if he'd been serious about it. Instead, he was just screwing it up. He had to have some amount of intelligence if he was able to memorize a speech like that, but shouldn't he have at least assessed his opponent's abilities first?

I didn't think it was an exaggeration to say that Blanca, who I'd fought earlier, possessed the most speed and sheer power of any individual fighter in this tournament. If I hadn't assessed his strength first, I could've been caught off guard and ended up losing.

But Chaos seemed to think the only reason I'd won was because I'd gotten lucky. Now, I wasn't going to deny that luck mattered; luck was an important factor in any battle. I do think I was lucky to have quickly identified Blanca's special move, and to have used it to my advantage as fast as I had.

However, the fact that I *had* defeated Blanca should have been cause enough for Chaos to be cautious of me. At the very least, that's how I would have reacted in that situation. The other opponents I'd fought in this tournament (except for Oggo) would probably have done the same.

So the fact that Chaos *wasn't* being cautious meant that he might go down in history after all—for being an utter buffoon. If this was all an act to catch me off guard, that would have been one thing, but I didn't think it was.

I felt that way because, when the referee stepped into the ring to call the match to a start, Chaos was still provoking the audience and completely ignoring me.

"Let the match...begin!"

Chaos's behavior must've pissed off the ref, because he gave the signal in a forceful voice, without even waiting for Chaos to return to the center of the ring. Even still, Chaos's focus remained on the audience.

In that case...there was no reason for me to hold back.

Just as I had earlier, I used Boost magic to leap in close to Chaos, and held my blade to his neck.

Chaos noticed me too late and quickly jumped backwards, but right before he did, I pressed my blade into his neck, leaving him with a small cut.

Once he'd landed, he focused on his neck for a moment; I took the opportunity to circle behind him, and pressed my blade to his neck again.

"Two..."

Another small cut.

Now, Chaos finally seemed to be on his guard, because even after backing away from me, he didn't check on his injuries.

Next, I closed the distance between us. He immediately went to protect his

neck, but this time his left side was undefended, so I slashed him there.

“Three...”

Chaos was equipped with mythril armor, but it wasn’t like his entire body was covered—it was normal even for strong armor like that to have animal leather connecting the joints.

At any rate, the strength of what it was made out of didn’t matter; it was no match for the sharpness of a blade I’d made from the bones of an ancient dragon, and the tip of the sword easily pierced Chaos’s side.

“Four...”

Next, I stabbed his right wrist.

“Five...”

This time, the back of his right knee.

“Six, seven, eight, nine...”

I cut his left ear, grazed his right Achilles tendon, stabbed the blade into the gap in his armor around his abdomen, then slashed his right cheek.

“Ten...”

Finally, I stabbed him between his eyebrows. The blade sank about five millimeters deep.

It had taken me about thirty seconds to count from one to ten. And during that time, Chaos had been unable to follow my movements.

The moment I stabbed him between the eyes, he fell on his butt, stunned. That caused me to pierce his skin deeper than I’d intended, and so much blood began pouring out as a result that even the audience could see it.

At first, when Chaos landed on his butt, he didn’t seem to be feeling anything in particular. However, after a few moments, the pain finally kicked in and all the color drained from his face.

Ignoring him, I turned around, jumped back about five meters, and waited for him to stand up so we could continue. But even after I’d put distance between us, Chaos, still looking pale, hadn’t gotten to his feet. At first, I thought the

battle would end because he'd lost his will to fight. But just as I was about to call out to the ref, Chaos used his sword as a cane to get back to his feet. Well—he'd won the previous tournament, after all, so at the very least, it seemed his fighting spirit and his ego were still intact.

"Damn it! Dammitdammitdammitdammit! You little brat! I'm not gonna let you make a fool outta me!"

The minuscule fighting spirit that remained had transformed into anger. Perhaps it was even forcibly fueling him onwards.

"Stop howling like a goblin and come at me, *former* winner."

After he'd howled, Chaos jumped backwards to put distance between us. I sheathed my sword and put my arm out towards him, beckoning him so dramatically that the audience could see it.

My provocation made him snap. "Die die die dieeeeeee! Dieeee, you snot-nosed brat!" he screamed, as he flung a magic spell at me.

In succession, he cast five Fireballs at me. Whether the title itself was deserved or not, he *had* won the previous tournament, and thus, as you'd expect, the Fireballs had more speed and power than the average sorcerer's might.

However...

"That all ya got?" Without moving a single step, I concentrated magical energy into my hands and diverted the Fireballs' trajectories. The deflected Fireballs landed behind me, scorching the surface of the arena and fizzling out into smoke.

"No! Gaaaaah!"

Using his surprise to my advantage, I fired a magic spell into his shoulder, causing him to stumble backwards a few steps. I'd used Air Bullet, with enough magical energy in it that under normal circumstances it would have pierced armor. However, mythril armor had enough magical resistance that it was only grazed.

The force of my attack was enough to throw him off guard, but not enough to

kill him. He regained his footing, looking stunned. This time, I silently stretched out my left hand and beckoned to him again—another “bring it on” provocation.

His face turned bright red, and he shot off another series of Fireballs. This time there were five of them again, but additionally, he shot off another round of five immediately after the first.

I deflected the first five as I had before, but used Fire Bullet to punch out the next five. Once he saw the Fire Bullets, which were smaller than his Fireballs, deflect his attack, his expression changed again. Before, he’d been concealing his fear behind anger, but now he was half-crazed, no longer able to hide it.

“G-Get away from meeeeeeee!” he screamed, as I slowly approached him. He recklessly began blasting me with Fireballs, but I canceled them all out with Fire Bullets. I continued to approach him until I was so close that he could see his magic spells being canceled right before his eyes.

We were standing about five meters apart now. Because I was perfectly reading his movements, I remained one step ahead of him and was able to cancel his spells right before his eyes.

Most of the audience didn’t seem to understand exactly what was going on, but they *did* know that I was overpowering Chaos. They had been quiet for some time, but now, all of a sudden, they began cheering so loudly for me the arena started to shake.

I lifted my hand in response to the cheers, and at that moment, Chaos threw the knife he was holding. But since he was so agitated, the knife simply fell to the ground about a meter in front of me.

I’d been expecting to have to bat the knife away with my sword, but once I saw the scowl on his face, I quickly retreated. That turned out to be the right move, because although his knife had failed to hit me, this move was followed by a huge explosion. Thankfully, I wasn’t caught in the blast since I’d jumped backwards, but I did have light burns on my face and arms from the aftermath of the explosion.

It was a pretty big explosion—even though the knife was only about thirty centimeters in length, the scar the blow left in the ground was close to four

meters long. If it had hit me, I'd have been seriously injured.

Meanwhile, I heard the audience screaming that items weren't allowed. The referee, too, seemed like he was about to make a move, but then Chaos regained his composure. He pulled out another knife, which was similar to the one from earlier, and showed it to the ref.

"This is a knife! Knives aren't prohibited!" Then, when the referee paused, he threw the knife in my direction.

This time it flew straight at me, but honestly, all I had to do was lean to the side. It was easier to dodge than the fireballs had been. After doing so, I ran straight at Chaos, pulling out my sword.

The technique wasn't pretty, but speed was of the essence here; I drew my sword from its scabbard and cleanly sliced off Chaos's arm. He'd been poised to throw another knife at the very moment I'd drawn my sword, so his now-severed arm, still firmly clenching the knife, landed behind him shortly and exploded.

"Oof. Guess it'll be hard to reattach that thing now that it's exploded. My condolences."

Chaos's severed arm had, of course, been caught in the explosion and blown to bits, which made it impossible to put back together with Recovery magic. He would either have to make a new arm with some kind of magical item, or undergo a regenerative treatment using magic. However, there weren't many people who could create such magic items or who could administer such treatments.

Maybe if you scoured the whole world you'd be able to find someone, but at the very least, I'd never heard of anyone like that in this kingdom.

"Arrrghhhhh! My aaaaaaaaaaarm!" It seemed that, once Chaos realized his arm had been blown to bits, the pain must've hit him at the same time, because he let out a loud scream.

"Sorry it hurts, but this match isn't over yet!"

Clutching the bloody stump where his arm had been, Chaos fell to his knees. He raised his head slightly in response to my words, and that was the exact

moment I kneed him in the face.

My knee made direct contact with Chaos's nose, flinging him backwards. The hit must've knocked him unconscious, but before the ref had noticed that, I rushed over to him and stomped on his right knee, crushing it. I could hear the bones breaking as I stamped on it, and the pain must've woken him up.

Now conscious again, he went back to screaming from the pain. At this rate, one more painful blow and he might have gone mad and died from shock.

"Now... I think I'll castrate you so you never think about doing something evil again!"

The referee, realizing I was about to finish him off, ran over to try to stop me, but I was faster—with my sword in an overhand grip, I swung it down towards Chaos's crotch. There was a crunching sound as the sword stabbed down between Chaos's legs. From the outside, it might've looked like I'd lopped off all of his "parts" below the waist.

I pulled my sword back and sheathed it again. I checked on Chaos and he was passed out cold, foaming at the mouth with a bodily fluid that was not blood pouring forth from between his legs.

I backed away from Chaos, and waited for the referee to declare me the victor. Though he stood between me and Chaos, he didn't immediately make an announcement. Instead, he checked on Chaos's condition, then called some other referees over for a discussion.

While they were talking, the medics came over to treat Chaos then and there, even as they raised him onto a stretcher. The medics treating his lower body seemed so disgusted, I thought I might start laughing.

The referees' discussion continued for quite some time, but once the audience started booing, they finally stopped and announced the winner.

"The winner is...Tenma!"

I was about to leave the arena, but then I realized the refs were explaining their deliberations to the audience. When I came back, I heard there were suspicions that both Chaos and I had committed fouls during the match, hence the discussion. However, they'd eventually judged there had been no fouls

committed on my part after all.

On my way back to my dressing room, I wondered what fouls they thought I'd committed. One of the staff members stopped me and brought me to the referees' room. They wanted to both apologize for delaying the announcement of my victory earlier, and also question me.

The apology was because they'd suspected me of ignoring the referee's instructions. Another referee had thought I was ignoring the referee of my match when I'd kneed Chaos in the face as said referee was trying to come over and stop me. However, they'd concluded that since I was right in the middle of an attack, I would've found it hard to stop right away, so they'd cleared me of that suspicion.

As for the questioning, they wanted to know why I'd gone that far while attacking him. I told them I was angry, both about his cowardly actions (that is, using an exploding knife), and his threat to use violence against my female friends. The referees accepted my explanation, and it seemed to make them dislike Chaos even more.

However, they said, "While we understand how you feel, that last attack crossed the line," and gave me a formal warning. I earnestly apologized, but at the same time, I was convinced once again that they hated Chaos too.

Additionally, I was told I had to make a written statement, because when I told them about the threats Chaos had made against my friends, I said, "I believe he was also referring to Duke Sanga's daughter, Primera; and Leena, who is the daughter of a viscount." The moment I said that, the referees' faces grew very serious. After they'd summoned a guard who could use Inquiry magic, they deemed my statement was true, and then ran off in Chaos's direction.

By the way, just using the Inquiry spell on someone doesn't mean that what they're saying is true. At best, it can only judge whether someone is lying or not. Thus, the spell is said not to be very useful. However, when they went to Chaos and repeated what I'd said, he denied it, and the spell deemed his statement to be a lie. So, he was immediately arrested.

By the way, the foul Chaos had committed was breaking the prohibition

against items other than weapons, armor, and bags. The knives Chaos had used were officially considered disposable magic items, so Chaos was not only disqualified, but stripped of his previous victory.

Then, he was charged with the crimes “insulting a person of noble birth,” “threatening a person of noble birth,” and, as an added bonus, he was accused of threatening me.

However, the guards who’d arrested Chaos—he had to be dragged out on a stretcher—were positive they’d find more dirt on him as they investigated further, so I expected more crimes to be added to the list.

So, although I’d previously been given a warning based on my “excessive attacks on Chaos,” they ended up reversing their decision and instead thanked me for preventing crimes against a noble. They also apologized, because they said the match should’ve been halted the moment Chaos had used the exploding knife.

As I came out of the referees’ room, I ran into Jin, who was on his way to the arena. Apparently, he’d been worried since I hadn’t come back after the match, and was coming to check on me.

“Hey, are you okay, Tenma? Don’t tell me you got disqualified!”

“Nope, I didn’t. Actually, the referees thanked me for defeating Chaos, and also apologized to me.”

“What the heck? For what?”

I told him what had transpired during my meeting with the referees.

“So whoever loses in my match with the Bandit King will be third place, huh?”

“Basically. It’s fine with me if you both get knocked unconscious, though! That’ll make it easier for me!”

“Don’t be a jackass! If that happens, the audience will turn into a mob! You just wait to see what’s comin’ for ya!” And with that, he turned his back on me and headed to the arena.

“However, I had no idea that those would be the last words Jin and I ever exchanged...”

Part Four

“Hey, knock off that ominous narration!” Jin yelled at me, after he heard me muttering to myself. Since there was a pretty rich culture of novels and plays in this world, such quotations were just as common here as they were in my old world.

By the way, there were many famous works here, similar to Shakespeare’s plays and to opera—and not only that, but anime, manga, and novels as well. I’d have bet anything that the people who’d written them had also been reincarnated from another world.

“You’re not nervous anymore, though, right?”

“Don’t answer me with a question! I was never nervous in the first place!” he huffed, before making his way towards the arena. I thought I might as well go with him, and decided to watch the match from a spot near the entrance.

Once Jin appeared in the ring, the crowd cheered loudly. Only then did I remember that he was one of the favorites to win the tournament. After the cheers died down, another set of loud cheers roared from the opposite direction. The Bandit King had appeared. He walked calmly despite the crowd’s fervor at his appearance, looking thoroughly majestic.

The audience was the most excited they’d ever been due to the much anticipated matchup; they’d been amped up since the previous match. But once the competitors both reached the center of the ring, you could have heard a pin drop.

The referee stepped between them and said something to each of them. They both nodded and then backed away from each other.

“The qualifying round between the Bandit King and Jin...begins now!”

Thus, the match started. The moment the referee called it, he backed away, and the two competitors raced towards each other.

Jin was using a greatsword about a meter and a half long; it was the first time he’d used the weapon. At a glance, it was about twenty to thirty centimeters

wide, and seemed to be quite heavy. Judging by the color of the blade, I thought it was probably made of mythril, so it was most likely lighter than it looked.

On the other hand, the Bandit King's weapon was the same one he'd used in the prelims, but since this one was spotless, I figured he must have several axes just like it in reserve, or else he'd repaired it since then.

The moment the two heavy weapons collided, a loud clang resounded throughout the arena.

"Yaaaaaaargh!"

Jin came out on top. The Bandit King stumbled backwards several steps and quickly tried to reassume his stance, but Jin attacked again before he was able to.

"Take that!" Jin swung his weapon down at full power. Since the Bandit King had not yet regained his footing, he was unable to counter, but still managed to dodge it by stumbling backwards in the nick of time.

Jin's blow smashed into the stone pavement of the arena, creating a small crater where the Bandit King had been just a moment before.

"Damn it, I missed!" Jin said bitterly.

The attack had been so powerful, I was sure it would've been the deciding blow if he'd landed it.

The moment the Bandit King dodged Jin's attacks, he readied his weapon, about to take a step forward to attack. However, the glint in Jin's eyes stopped him in his tracks. He'd lost his opportunity to strike, and as for Jin, he'd missed as well.

Having reached an impasse, they returned to the center of the arena to start over, both gripping their weapons. Unlike before, they started off slow this time, and the air between the two was tense. The audience watched them with bated breath. The venue was so quiet you could almost hear the sound of Jin's feet dragging across the ground.

He held his greatsword over his shoulder, slowly shuffling around to the right

of the Bandit King. Meanwhile, the Bandit King held his axe at waist level, and readied himself to be able to respond to Jin at any time.

As Jin shuffled around, he watched the Bandit King for a while, then launched a sudden attack. The Bandit King, who'd been waiting for this, blocked the blow which Jin had put all his momentum into, before turning to counterattack. Jin managed to block this, at which point they began exchanging blows.

Once, twice, three times... The two stood their ground and traded blows with each other at close range, but neither could deliver the finishing blow.

I had a feeling that their nerves and stamina were being drained each time their weapons collided, as the sounds of their weapons clashing grew quieter each time.

Meanwhile, each time they attacked each other, the audience grew louder. After all, from the audience's point of view, the way these two opponents were fighting was very easy to understand, and they clearly weren't holding anything back.

If they had been fighting like this on purpose just to liven things up, the audience would be booing. But the crowd seemed pretty discerning when it came to matches, so they could tell it was real. After all, many of them were die-hard fans who came to watch the tournament every year, from early in the morning to late at night. Of course, there were some who'd just been lucky to get seats or had gotten tickets through connections, but that accounted for a little over ten percent of the total audience. Most of them were part of the royal family or nobles, or the lucky few who had connections to nobles to get seats.

Just being nobility didn't guarantee you a seat at this tournament. But there were always people who didn't understand that every year, so it caused trouble for the higher-ups.

Leaving that aside, there was a sudden development in the match that signaled the end was coming soon. The two had traded dozens of blows since the match started, and...

"Arghhh!"

Jin's next blow shattered the Bandit King's axe. This wasn't surprising to me since his weapon was made from mythril, while the Bandit King's was probably just made from steel, or best-case scenario, magical steel. I was impressed it had managed to hold up against a mythril weapon for so long.

Meanwhile, Jin showed no signs of letting up. The moment the Bandit King's axe broke, Jin brandished his greatsword and swung it down towards his opponent like he was about to chop firewood.

Just as I thought Jin's attack had sliced right through the Bandit King's brain, I heard loud screams from the audience. The referee rushed over.

"I didn't feel anything! What the— Aaargh!"

The Bandit King, who should've been dead, kicked Jin away. Apparently he'd dodged the attack at the last minute, but the fur from just below his chin all the way down to his right thigh had been cut away.

The Bandit King fell forward as if he were about to collapse. And yet, he wasn't bleeding at all.

As he fell, with the audience's and the referee's gazes glued to him...

"What the— Huh?!"

All of a sudden, a small female tiger demi-human appeared from within the Bandit King's fur armor, both hands held up.

The entire arena went silent at this sudden development. The girl didn't seem to really know what to do either. She was frozen to the spot, her hands still held high.

Jin got to his feet and asked the girl the question the whole arena wanted to know the answer for. "Wh-Who are you?!"

"Amur! Also known as...the Bandit King!" the girl declared, puffing her chest out. A bag hung from her hip, and she took a new axe out of it, then aimed it at Jin. "Haaaah!" The Bandit King—Amur—was about to vigorously lunge towards Jin, but before she could, the referee called a halt to the match.

"Stop! This match is temporarily called to a halt! Both competitors, please return to your dressing rooms!"

Jin immediately put on the brakes, while Amur stopped a few meters away from him. She did not look pleased. Jin, however, had already sensed she was going to lunge at him, and had his greatsword ready to counter. So, really, he might have been even more upset than she was.

The referee up on the dais called the other referees over for a meeting once he saw that the match had been halted. They were gathered by the spot where Amur's fur armor had fallen, and were apparently discussing whether she had broken the rules. The discussion dragged on and on, until they'd been talking for almost ten minutes.

Jin and Amur hadn't returned to their dressing rooms; they were standing apart, yet remained facing each other in the ring. They didn't move much, apart from occasionally stretching to keep their bodies warmed up.

After a while, one of the referees slipped out of the group and ran towards the center of the building. He seemed to be looking for instructions from the king, because the area where the king was sitting looked a little hectic. But before the referee could return, a person with a hood over his face jumped down from the audience. Most of the crowd didn't seem to notice, but I realized it was Gramps.

The crowd began to murmur, as none of the guards tried to stop him from walking over to the referees. When he reached them, he examined the fur pelt for a bit, said something to them, then returned to his seat.

After that, the referees continued their discussion. However, they immediately seemed to reach a conclusion, because all except for one went back to their usual positions.

"Thank you for waiting. After discussing the situation with the other referees, we have decided the match will continue. The reason the match was halted was so we could decide whether the fur armor worn by Amur violated the rules. Since we could not make that judgment ourselves, we asked for the cooperation of Master Merlin the sage. He told us that, although this fur is a magical item, it's not the kind which has any effect on the skill level of the user, so we will not disqualify her."

Once the referee completed this explanation, the match was finally on again.

But since Jin had destroyed Amur's armor and it couldn't be repaired, she had to compete not as the Bandit King, but as herself, minus the armor. She wore only thin leather armor that didn't seem to provide much defense and was armed with her new axe, which was easily taller than her.

Once the crowd saw the small girl wielding such a large weapon, they looked so worried it was like they'd completely forgotten how she'd fought when she was the Bandit King. Even Jin seemed to doubt whether she could even swing her weapon.

But all of that was needless.

Amur had the axe slung over her shoulder as she quickly approached Jin, and swung it just as quickly as she had when she'd been the Bandit King. Jin was struck by the shock wave, flew sideways, and dodged it just as she had before. But Amur's blow created a larger crater than the one Jin had made earlier, stunning not only Jin, but the audience too.

"What ridiculous power!"

The moment Jin's attention was captured by the crater, though, the blade of the axe came swinging right towards him.

"Get back here!" Amur yelled.

Jin seemed to have sensed the axe approaching, as his greatsword blocked it just in the nick of time. However, it couldn't completely absorb the blow, so he was knocked back several meters.

"That was a close one!" he cried.

The audience was very excited to see that Jin had landed on his feet. However, Amur, who swung her axe easily as she kept coming after him, seemed to be getting even more attention. It seemed she had captured their hearts in just a short time after having revealed her true identity, and at a glance, there seemed to be more people cheering for her than for Jin.

After all, even though he was one of the favorites to win, there weren't many women in the tournament. The audience found the sight of someone they'd thought was this huge, hulking man turning out to be a little girl very novel.

On one hand, she fought with pure power, but on the other hand, she looked barely able to pick up such a hefty axe. Yet, she was able to swing it with ease. It was practically inconceivable, and as a result, it was no surprise that her fanbase among the audience had suddenly grown.

“Damn, this sucks... Now it’s like I’m on the visiting team...” Jin muttered. However, the fact that he was still able to talk meant he wasn’t in any danger of losing just yet.

Amur seemed to have noticed how confident he was feeling as well, because she was hesitating about whether to attack.

Jin used that to his advantage to counter. He must’ve said those very words in order to create an opening for himself, because the moment he saw her stall, he sprang into action.

“You might be powerful, but you’re still a kid!” Amur panicked at Jin’s sudden approach and moved to intercept, but he was slightly faster. “Take *that*!” Jin stretched his body to the fullest as he swung his sword, attacking a moment before Amur managed to get into a defensive stance.

“Nngh!”

At the last moment, she just barely managed to deflect the tip of his sword with her axe handle to avoid a direct hit. However, the tip of his sword pierced her left shoulder. “Ugh!”

Although her shoulder was wounded, she could still move it. The wound didn’t look very deep, but it was bleeding. There was no way this wouldn’t hinder her and open her up to more attacks.

“Haah, haah, haah, take that!” Not failing to take advantage of the situation, Jin launched a new series of attacks. Amur managed to dodge them at first, but eventually her defense couldn’t keep up. After about the tenth blow, Jin’s attacks started connecting, and she began bleeding more. All the same, as she waited for a chance to strike back, she managed to avoid fatal blows. Then, Jin’s sword stabbed out towards her again.

“Not so fast!”

Amur knocked it away with all her strength, but then...

“That’s what I was waiting for!”

Apparently, Jin had planned on this from the very beginning, because he wasn’t thrown off guard by the deflection. Instead, he punched her right in the face with all the force of his body weight behind the blow. Of course, she was in no position to dodge or counter—she took the blow right on her cheek, which sent her flying backwards. She rolled several meters before finally stopping, then unsteadily got back to her feet. But her eyes were unfocused, and she looked barely conscious.

That didn’t bother Jin, because even as she staggered, he ran towards her to finish her off.

A portion of her fans began to boo him, but he didn’t even seem to hear. He was on the verge of becoming the villain in their eyes, but I sensed no hesitation in his movements. I had a feeling he didn’t want to drag this second fight out any longer.

He made full use of his momentum as he attacked Amur, who rolled forward diagonally to dodge it. Jin hadn’t expected her to evade and almost ended up stepping out of the ring because of his forward momentum. However, he narrowly managed to plant his feet in the ground to prevent that, then went racing back off towards Amur, who was staggering towards her axe.

“Enough already!”

He swung his sword at her several times, but strangely, the blade never made contact. I thought one reason for that might have been because he was swinging too wide with the intent to take her out with one blow, but it was still strange that not even a single hit landed.

Amur reached her axe, and the moment she grabbed its handle...

“Raaaaaaaaar!” She let out a beastly cry so loud it almost felt like the whole arena was shaking. She turned around and swung her axe. It slammed into the arena with tremendous force, making a fissure several meters long in the dais. Luckily, she hadn’t hit Jin, but her beastly scream made him hesitate for a split second and delayed his reaction. He was very lucky he hadn’t taken a direct hit, or he would’ve died.

“Wh-What was that attack?!” Jin backed away from Amur in surprise. She slowly withdrew her axe from the dais and slung it over her shoulder, then turned towards Jin. But it seemed her stamina was reaching its limit, and she nearly toppled over from the weight of the axe.

“Haah, haah, haah...” She was covered in wounds. Anyone else would’ve folded, but Jin had to be cautious because of her previous blow. Of course, Amur could just have been faking. However, since she’d just let off an attack so massive it had cracked the dais, he couldn’t be reckless. After all, if that blow had connected, he might not only have lost the match—he could have died as well.

I had a feeling Jin thought that he still had the advantage, objectively speaking. And if he did, then he had a higher chance of winning if he proceeded with caution, rather than attacking unnecessarily. It seemed he’d come to the same conclusion I had, because he took a deep breath, then slowly started closing in on Amur.

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I’d had a bad feeling for a while now. Amur reminded me of a monster I’d fought when I was still a novice. It was a tiger-type monster.

Back then, it had been a little out of my league, but I was able to hold my own and cornered it, imagining that I was on the verge of defeating it. I was still inexperienced back then, though, and was hit by a counterattack at the very last moment.

“The scariest beast is a wounded one...”

A veteran adventurer had come running to my rescue. If he hadn’t, I would’ve ended up in that tiger’s belly. Afterwards, I got an earful from that adventurer, the guildmaster, and Galatt too, when I returned to the guild.

Remembering that incident, I refocused my attention and tightened my grip on my weapon.

I can’t hesitate forever. Time to end it now! I feinted, then went in for the kill.

She looked as though she'd lost some of her mobility, and wasn't able to react to me.

"Arrghhhh!"

Judging by appearances, my blow seemed to have struck her right in the body, although she'd defended just in time. However, in her condition, she wasn't able to stay on her feet, and was snapped back like a rubber band. Not only that, but since she'd used the handle of her axe to try to defend, it was now bent at an angle.

Still, even though she'd been blown back by my attack, with her weapon bent and her entire body covered in scratches, she was still hanging on. Once again, she got to her feet.

"Damn it! You're stubborn as hell!" I complained, trying to hide my frustration at not being able to finish her off. Readying my sword, I ran towards her, determined to end it once and for all this time.

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It looked as though Jin would reach Amur in about two or three seconds. Most of the audience had decided that he was going to win, and were prepared to applaud Amur for putting up a good fight.

However, it wasn't to be. What happened next overturned everyone's expectations, including Jin's.

"What?!" Jin exclaimed in surprise. I couldn't blame him. Amur had thrown her greatest source of protection right now—the axe—straight at Jin, who had to thrust both hands out to catch it.

He didn't catch it cleanly, and the blade sunk into his shoulder. But that was just a minor detail—the important part was that, since Jin had to act to stop her axe from hitting him, it left him otherwise defenseless, and also mostly stationary. By the time he realized that, Amur had already made her move. Jin quickly tried to evade, but Amur's fist reached him faster, landing an uppercut right into his chin.

“Raaaargh!”

Amur’s scream rang out across the arena as Jin’s head bounced back from the impact. The force of her blow made him release his grip on his greatsword.

Not missing her chance, Amur knocked it away with her hand, sending it flying out of the ring. That meant he couldn’t use his sword for the rest of the match.

Now that she had disarmed him, she proceeded to launch a series of attacks. She punched him in the face and stomach, then grabbed him by the shoulder and headbutted him right in the face. Now the tables were turned, and Jin was the one eating all the attacks... But it would take a lot more than that to defeat a man like him.

The moment Amur headbutted him, even though he’d taken a lot of damage, he grabbed her by the collar and swung her around in a shoulder throw, in an attempt to slam her back against the dais. If Jin had been at full power, that blow would’ve won him the match.

But he’d just received a head injury, and he looked like he was about to lose consciousness at any moment. For that reason, his shoulder throw didn’t have much power behind it. Amur was able to twist her body right before impact to lighten the blow and take less damage. Now the two were on equal footing again. Both of them had suffered a lot of damage and looked like a feather could knock them over, and both had lost their weapons.

They began punching each other, their movements so slow you wouldn’t have believed how powerful they’d both been at the start of the fight. Neither’s fists had any intensity or accuracy, and only about two or three out of ten punches would land.

However, each time they missed, they grew even weaker, until it seemed they were about to collapse entirely. It was frustrating to watch. But it was also clear that, at some point, one of them was going to give out.

Over time, Amur’s attacks gradually increased. But that wasn’t because they were getting stronger—it was moreso that Jin’s movements were growing slower.

The only way I could have explained this battle was to say that Jin had bad

luck.

If they had similar attack, defense, and speed, the difference between the two would just have been their physiques. And the difference in their physiques that was now pertinent was that it took one of them more effort to pull back every time they missed. What I mean to say is, a heavier object requires more force to come to a stop than a lighter object.

So even though Jin was moving in the same way as Amur, he was consuming more energy than she was. Now, if Amur had remained as the Bandit King throughout this entire fight, it might have been Jin still standing at the end of everything. However, with all his strength exhausted and his feet giving way, Amur's final blow to his body made him crumple to the ground.

And then...

"The winner is Amur!"

The referee announced Amur's victory.

Cheers and applause went up from the audience for Amur, the winner of the fierce battle. However, she didn't move even after the referee had declared her the winner. Concerned, the ref went over to her and tapped her on the shoulder, which made her crumple to the ground right on the spot. Panicking, the ref called out to the medics to bring over another stretcher, as they were already in the process of bringing one out for Jin.

As a result, both the winner and the loser of the battle ended up having to be carried away to the infirmary, leaving the crowd unsure of how to react to the loss of the competitors who should have been honored for their fierce fight. Amidst this atmosphere, the referee turned towards the audience to say that the day's matches were over and that everyone should go home.

I thought about going to visit Jin, but realized I might run into Amur too, so I didn't head directly to the infirmary. Instead, I found a staff member and had them send a message to Mennas and Leena, who I assumed would be going to the infirmary themselves. Ten minutes later, Leena showed up at my dressing room where I was relaxing.

“Oh, good, you’re still here!”

I’d asked the staff member to tell Leena that I’d be hanging around for a while until the spectators cleared out, and to come see me in my dressing room.

If I’d gone home right away, I would’ve had to fight my way through the crowd, which might have led to trouble. Plus, I was worried about Jin. Killing time in my dressing room seemed like the best option.

“What happened?” I could tell by the look on Leena’s face that Jin’s condition hadn’t worsened, so I figured he had at least regained consciousness.

“Yes, Jin’s awake again! And I have several requests...”

She said that she wanted me to share some recovery medicine with her. Apparently, the medicine I’d given Galatt worked better than the stuff normally sold around here, so she wanted to use it on Jin as well. Also, she wanted me to help get Jin and Galatt home.

“That’s fine, but are Jin and Galatt really in such bad shape that they can’t even walk?”

If they couldn’t even get home by themselves, how were they going to compete in the team event?

“No, their major injuries have been healed, but the doctor says Jin suffered very bad head injuries, so he was instructed to rest for today and tomorrow. He needs help getting home, and I’m not strong enough...”

I understood why she was asking me, but it was a bit annoying. Why couldn’t they just hire a carriage? Since Leena came from a noble family, I doubt anyone would say no to her—plus the Dawnswords must have had enough money to hire a carriage. I thought there must be some other reason, but it didn’t seem like she was trying to deceive or harm me. At any rate, it’s not like Jin and the others were complete strangers, nor did I have any other reason to say no, so I started getting ready to take them home.

Leena and I headed to the infirmary, where I found Jin sitting up in bed with a spaced-out look on his face. Amur wasn't in the room. Apparently, they didn't think it was a good idea to have the winner and loser in the same room, so she was being treated in another room.

"Hey! I came to visit!" I announced in a purposely cheerful voice. Jin's reaction was slow.

"Oh, Tenma... Thanks for coming..." He looked more down than I'd ever seen him, and it seemed to have rubbed off on Mennas and Galatt too—their faces were equally gloomy.

"You look pretty glum. Hey, I brought the medicine Leena asked me for! Let's see... Yeah, here it is!" I took a bottle of medicine out of my bag and handed it to Jin. "This is the most effective medicine, out of all the stuff I've made! Here, take it!" I urged.

Jin reluctantly pulled off the lid and took a swig of the medicine, but then...

"Pfft! Bleech, it's so bitter!" He spat out a fine mist of the green liquid...right at Galatt and Mennas.

"That's gross! Oof!"

"M-My eyes! Argh!"

Apparently, Mennas got some of the spat-out medicine in her mouth, and Galatt got it in his eyes and nose. Both of them were coughing and gagging like they were about to vomit.

Leena handed Jin and Galatt towels while Mennas went to wash her face, while the doctor scolded me. The lecture went on for quite some time, but then the doctor picked up the bottle of medicine that was on Jin's bed, dipped his finger in, and tasted it.

"Hrm, you used some pretty good herbs in this. If you have any of those left, could you give me enough for another dose? I'll pay you, of course."

Jin responded before I could. "Don't tell me you're gonna use that on the Bandit King!"

"Why, do you have a problem with that?" The doctor readily admitted he was

going to use the medicine on Amur. That made Jin so angry, he looked like he might strangle the doctor at any moment.

“Hell yeah, I do! You know that Tenma has to face the Bandit King in the final round! So why should Tenma help his enemy?!”

“Hey, that’s got nothing to do with me. If I find some good medicine, I want to use it on my patients. He’s giving you the medicine too, right? You’re already done with your team event. So aren’t you technically Tenma’s enemy too?”

“Ugh...” Jin couldn’t argue with that. Galatt and Leena both made awkward faces when they remembered that they might have to go up against me in the team event too.

“That’s different.” Just when I thought the doctor had won that argument, Mennas came back with her opinion. “It’s true that we might go up against Tenma in the team event. But just because we might have to face each other in a match doesn’t mean we’re enemies. You don’t have the first clue about our relationship, so you should stay out of it!”

Mennas’s harsh words relit the fire in Jin, Galatt, and Leena’s bellies, and they all backed her up. Meanwhile, the doctor frowned.

“It’s true. Our relationship is stronger than that,” I agreed with Mennas. She was right. If our relationship was as flimsy as the doctor had suggested, I wouldn’t even have been here, nor would Leena have come to get me in the first place.

As I spoke, I took a bottle of medicine out of my magic bag and handed it to the doctor. “Here’s the medicine. You should test it for safety first.”

“Thanks. And sorry if I offended you.” The doctor took the medicine from me with an apology, then tried to give me some money.

“You don’t have to pay me. I’ll get the prize money from winning the tournament anyway, so just go ahead and treat Amur,” I said casually, refusing payment. The doctor chuckled wryly, then left the room.

“Hey, you sure about that? I wouldn’t be surprised if the Bandit King made a full recovery after taking that medicine!” Jin had already experienced firsthand how effective the medicine was.

“Don’t worry. I’ll beat Amur, even if she makes a full recovery.”

“Not really sure how I feel to see you so confident about that...” Jin said, with an awkward expression.

“I’m not trying to say you’re weak. I’m just saying you and Amur weren’t a good matchup. If she hadn’t been wearing that armor from the start, I think you would’ve won.” That was my honest opinion, but Jin thought I was just saying that to flatter him. Normally, he’d have come back with some cocky response, but he must still have been smarting from his loss to Amur. Honestly, it was annoying.

As I was wondering what Jin was thinking, Mennas suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. She didn’t say anything, but I took the gesture to mean that she was asking to take care of it. She’d known Jin a lot longer than I had, after all, and I was curious to see how she was going to cheer him up, so I let her take the reins. Mennas nodded, then slapped Jin across the face as hard as she could.

“Bwaah!”

“You listen up, Jin!”

Jin was so intimidated by Mennas that he fell speechless, and sat up straight in bed as she continued to speak. “Tenma wouldn’t just lie to you like that. I mean, it’s Tenma we’re talking about! He’s a sadist and loves knocking people down. If the Bandit King really was better than you, then not only would Tenma be honest with you about it, but he wouldn’t let you live it down! Plus, he’s gonna face the Bandit King in the finals. He wouldn’t underestimate his own opponent. Got it?”

Although her intention had been to cheer Jin up, it mostly sounded like she was bad-mouthing me. However, it seemed effective, as Jin cheered up a bit. Mennas seemed relieved at having said her piece. Meanwhile, I grabbed a nearby cup and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she said, and chugged it without checking the contents. In the next moment, she spat it back out...right at Jin.

“Pfft!”

“Gaaaah! My eyes, my eyes!”

The cup had been filled with a mixture of the medicine I’d given Jin, and pickled chili peppers and vinegar. I didn’t want to imagine how it tasted, but I was pretty certain it no longer had any medicinal value.

“That’s right, Jin. I like torturing people like this, so if you really were that weak, I’d be teasing you about it.”

I said that for both of their benefits, but they didn’t seem to appreciate it. Mennas had already run out of the room, and Jin had poured all the water from his water pitcher onto a towel and was wiping his face with it.

Since they had raised such a commotion, the doctor returned to the room and scolded me again. Since he was there, he had Jin and Galatt take off their clothes and gave them an examination as well. He instructed both of them to take it easy for a few days, but said they were free to go home.

I wasn’t sure about the doctor’s judgment, but the arena was going to close soon, so those two couldn’t just stay in bed forever. Leena led the way out of the arena, and I reluctantly carried Jin while Mennas gave Galatt a helping hand.

We didn’t run into anyone else besides staff members until we reached the exit, but then we discovered someone acting suspicious. Leena spotted them first, and she took her staff out of her bag. I thought her behavior was strange, but before she had a chance to indicate the suspicious man standing before us, I called out to him.

“What are you doing here, Ash?”

The mysterious man was the person who was my opponent from the first round, Ash Borgman. He froze in surprise for a moment at the sound of my voice, but then looked relieved when he realized it was me.

“Hey there, Tenma... Don’t scare me like that,” he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“We’re the ones who were startled. You look like you’re about ready to rob the place. What are you up to? You know, if I didn’t already know you, I would’ve reported you to the staff.”

Hearing that, Ash seemed to reflect on his behavior. Realizing I was right, he began to blush.

“You’re right, Tenma. I wouldn’t blame you if you had.”

Leena relaxed when she saw Ash and I talking, and snuck her staff back into her bag.

“So? What were you doing?” I asked, and frowned. He seemed to realize there was no getting out of this one, and reluctantly answered me.

“Can you see the woman standing over there, Tenma?”

I went over by him and looked in the direction he pointed. There was a woman standing outside the arena with an attendant. I didn’t know her, but she was clearly older than Ash, and although she didn’t have the greatest fashion sense, her clothes looked expensive. On top of all that, she had an attendant, and so I figured she must be some kind of noble.

I decided to use Identify on her to see.

Name: Medea Ollio
Age: 36
Class: Human
Title: Third daughter of Viscount Ollio

However, something seemed strange about that. She was in her thirties, and yet her only title was “third daughter”? I wondered what that was all about.

While I pondered this, Leena peered over my shoulder along with Jin, whom I was still carrying on my back. Both of them seemed to recognize Medea.

“Tch, talk about trouble...” Jin muttered.

“You can say that again. Why would you be interested in an old spinster like her?”

So I was right—Medea was unmarried. In my previous world, it wasn’t unheard of for a thirty-six-year-old woman to be unmarried, but here it was incredibly unusual. And actually, this was the first noblewoman I’d ever seen who was unmarried at that age.

However, it made sense when I looked at her. I couldn't have called her beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, and her face, which was already mean-looking, was caked with thick makeup. Not only that, but she was screaming at her attendant and kicking them. No wonder she wasn't married. Perhaps if she had been the daughter of a higher-ranked noble, they would've been able to find someone to take her, but it was a tall order for the daughter of a viscount's family.

"So? Why are you hiding from that hag?" I asked Ash, but Leena responded before he had the chance to answer.

"She probably wants him to be her lover," Leena guessed, and Ash nodded. Apparently, she had been stalking him. If she had been just an ordinary person, Ash could've dealt with it on his own, but since she was a noblewoman, he wasn't sure how to turn her down.

"Just leave through another exit," Mennas suggested. However, Ash shook his head. Apparently, the lady had attendants posted at every exit.

I felt bad for Ash, but this was all too much trouble for me, and I just wanted to get home. But Leena had a serious look on her face as she pondered how to solve his problem. I muttered quietly, "C'mon, let's go," but she didn't seem to hear me.

I wondered if perhaps Leena was being so serious about this because she had a crush on Ash. Suddenly, she turned in my direction.

"Do you have any good ideas, Tenma?"

She just looked so serious about the whole thing. And I felt that as her friend, I should help her if she really was in love with Ash, so I came up with a suggestion.

"First, we need to get out of here. That part's simple—just leave it to me. But the bigger problem is getting that old hag to give up on Ash. The quickest way would be to have Ash start dating another noblewoman. Probably a *viscount's* daughter..."

"Yeah, I think that'd be for the best. Leena, you're a viscount's daughter, right? You know anybody eligible?" Having caught my drift, Mennas asked this

of Leena.

However, Leena said, “No, I can’t think of any. I don’t actually have that many friends, besides you guys...” Our suggestion had gone completely over her head. Not only that, but... “Anyway, we need to get out of here! Hurry up and tell me your plan!”

Poor Mennas’s assist had all been for nothing. We both exchanged confused glances, but Leena didn’t notice because she was too busy glaring in Medea’s direction.

“O-Okay, then. Hang on a second... It’s almost...here...”

Then, with perfect timing, liquid began overflowing from the drain.

“What’s a slime doing here?!” Ash drew his sword with surprise, but Jin and Galatt stopped him.

“Calm down—it’s one of Tenma’s followers!” Jin explained. Then, remembering that Rocket was a part of my team, Ash apologized.

“So what does Rocket have to do with the plan... Wait, don’t tell me!”

Ash looked confused, but the members of the Dawnswords had an idea of what I had up my sleeve, and they looked *very* dismayed.

“It’s the plan to escape from an intruder, Rocket. Go!” I gave the signal. Rocket’s body expanded, and he opened his mouth. It kind of looked like a dark curtain or a door, which only made Jin and the others more anxious.

“Are you serious about this?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. This is the best way for him to go unnoticed,” I answered Jin solemnly. When I’d used this method before, I discovered how convenient it was, and I’d had Rocket practice it several times since then.

“Well, now that you know the plan, get in.” I slung Jin over my back and climbed inside of Rocket.

“Hang on! I’m not emotionally ready for this yet!” Jin flailed and made a fuss, but I decided to ignore him. After Jin and I were inside, everyone else reluctantly followed. Once Rocket had checked to make sure we were all safely inside, he shrank his body, then entered the drain and went back down the way

he’d come.

“Tenma... Don’t you think having decorations inside a slime is too much...?” Jin said, sitting on Solomon’s favorite sofa, which was inside of Rocket. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

“Is it? Even though it’s just temporary, I thought it would be nice to make the place comfortable.”

Jin sighed with exasperation. However, the girls saw the logic in my statement, and nodded.

By the way, Ash had previously just thought Rocket was some kind of powerful slime, and was half-dazed to see how smart he really was.

“Hey, Leena. Are you sure you’re not hiding something from me?” Seeing as she’d relaxed a lot since we’d entered Rocket, I decided to get straight to the point and ask the question that was on my mind.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” she huffed, trying to play dumb with me. However, anyone with half a brain would have realized she was just trying to cover it up.

Mennas side-eyed Leena, who scooted closer to me.

“Leena, what are you hiding? Tenma’s going out of his way to help you, so just spit it out already!” Mennas said harshly.
Leena relented, finally spilling the beans. “I might be wrong, but I could’ve sworn I saw someone from Shadow Crimson.”

Mennas frowned at these words, but I didn’t recognize the name. “What’s that?”

The two of them looked surprised, but then seemed to accept it, and whispered to me. “It’s the name of a party full of outlaws. They’re all terrible people, and use being adventurers as a cover to commit theft, murder, kidnapping, human trafficking, and so on. They’re so bad that Jin and Galatt teamed up with some other adventurers to destroy them,” Mennas explained.

“They killed most of those outlaws on the spot, and the ones who survived were either executed for their crimes or turned into slaves. But three members

escaped, and they're still on the run," Leena said.

For that reason, it was very possible that those surviving members were after Jin and Galatt—and Mennas and Leena too, because of their association with the former.

"You two didn't go with them?" I asked.

Apparently, for that quest, Jin and Galatt had joined up with some male adventurers they were friendly with and made a temporary team. Leena and Mennas hadn't gone with them because Jin figured it was going to be a "kill or be killed" kind of situation, and they hadn't wanted to put the women in danger.

"Although Shadow Crimson engaged in many brutal crimes, apparently they weren't actually all that strong. However, the three who got away are quite clever, and that's why they haven't been traced back to their misdeeds."

"So I used you to keep us safe, Tenma. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Tenma. But Leena—why didn't you tell me that sooner?" Mennas apologized to me as well, then bonked Leena on the head as she bowed to me. Clutching her head in pain, Leena quietly told us the reason.

"Well, Jin and Galatt are already badly hurt, and I thought it would really worry them if they knew someone like that was hanging around. I just forgot to tell you, Mennas... Ouch!"

Leena really shouldn't have mentioned that last bit, because she got bonked a second time.

"It's more dangerous to *not* tell me!"

As I watched their exchange, I felt that I didn't care much whether she'd used me or not. It's not as if she'd hurt me, after all.

"Well, I'll forgive you for using me, since Mennas knocked you on the head for it. As for the surviving members of that party, I'll report this to the authorities, and I'll pay more attention to my surroundings, just in case." I left it at that for the time being, and the three of us went back over to Jin and Galatt.

"Hey, what were you three talking about?" Jin seemed a little mad that he'd

been left out of the conversation. Galatt didn't seem to mind as much, but he was still curious about what we'd discussed.

"W-Well, that's..."

"Umm..."

The two girls trailed off awkwardly, so I explained things.

"Actually, Jin..."

"Y-Yeah?" Jin and Galatt both got tense looks on their faces when they saw how serious I looked.

"Leena came to get me earlier because she said you were too heavy and reeked too bad of sweat for her to help you. Once Mennas heard that was her reason, she got mad at Leena," I told them solemnly. It took the two of them a second to process what I'd just said. But once they did, Galatt burst out laughing, while Jin immediately started sniffing his pits.

"Ha ha ha ha! It's true! You *do* reek, Jin!" Galatt laughed. Jin looked utterly depressed. Leena tried to say something, but Mennas clamped her hand over Leena's mouth from behind to silence her.

"O-Oh. I'm sorry about that... I'll take a bath as soon as I get home," Jin earnestly apologized.

At this point, I decided not to tell him the truth.

"Oh, also—you all can stay at my house tonight if you want," I added. Jin and the others looked at me, and it seemed like they wanted to say something. However, just as Jin opened his mouth, Rocket opened his, and the exit appeared.

I went ahead just in case, and discovered we were in an alleyway quite far from the arena. First, I checked to make sure there was no one around, then I brought Jin and the others out.

"This here okay, Ash?" I asked. Ash quietly looked around, then nodded.

"Yeah, it's fine. My inn is nearby. I booked a room at a pretty nice inn, so I think I should be safe once I get inside, even if the person after me *is* a noblewoman. Thanks, Tenma. You really helped me out."

He shook my hand, then started walking off towards his inn.

“Well, shall we go then?” I asked, and took Valley Wind and the carriage out of my magic bag. Everyone got inside, and we decided to go home.

After Valley Wind had been traveling for a while, Gramps’s familiar mansion came into view. Jin and the others seemed nervous about seeing Gramps, but I had a feeling there would be someone else there who would make them even more nervous.

As usual, there were a lot of people outside the mansion. However, they made a path for the carriage, and there didn’t seem to be any dangerous characters or charlatans out there today.

“Open the gates!” I called, and the two golems standing guard sprang forth from the earth and opened the gates for the carriage. As we rode towards the front door, I saw that my instincts were right on, because another carriage was parked there.

“I’m home,” I called, as I stood in front of the front door, which swung open for me.

“Welcome home, Master Tenma!” The person who greeted me with a polite bow was Aura. Actually, it wasn’t Aura—it was her sister. As Aina bowed to me, Aura rushed over, looking quite flustered.

“W-Welcome home, Master Tenma!”

“Hi, Aura and Aina. I’ve brought over four guests today, so I want you to prepare dinner and beds for them.”

“Yes, Master Tenma. Aura, go show our guests to the parlor. Master Tenma, Master Merlin is waiting for you with a guest.”

Aura’s presence faded in response to Aina’s words. Recently, Aina had been acting like the head maid of the mansion, so I’d gotten in the habit of asking her to do things.

“All right. Where is he—in his room?” I asked. Aina nodded.

I could only think of two people who would be waiting in Gramps’s room at this time of day. I didn’t think it would be the father (because his wife wouldn’t

have allowed it), so I figured it was his son. I went ahead to Gramps's room, and...

"Yo!"

A muscular man greeted me. As I expected, it was the son.



“I had a feeling it would be you,” I said.

Prince Lyle, the Minister of Military Affairs, gave me a puzzled look. Gramps realized what I'd meant, and explained to Lyle with a smile. The three of us had a good laugh about it, and then I remembered there was something I wanted to ask the prince about.

"Prince Lyle, have you heard about Shadow Crimson?" I asked.

Gramps's eyes grew sharp, and he glared at me. "Did something happen, Tenma?"

"I have a feeling it must be serious if you're bringing up that name in front of me. Do you have some kind of important information?" the prince asked.

Their reactions surprised me. I told them that Leena thought she had spotted one of the escaped members.

"I see. I understand the circumstances, but I'll need more information to mobilize the knights. Could you call this Leena person in here?"

I went to the parlor to do just that, and found the members of the Dawnswords there looking quite relaxed. Rocket, Solomon, and Shiromaru were there too, with the latter two begging for snacks.

"Sorry, Leena, but could you come with me?"

"Me? Sure..." She seemed to be wondering why I was only asking for her, but she followed me without asking any questions.

"Here she is," I said, once we'd arrived.

Leena gave me a puzzled glance, but I ignored her as I showed her into the room.

"You wanted to see me...?" Then she saw who was waiting for her. "Prince Lyle! Pardon my rudeness!" Her attention had been focused on Gramps, so it took her a few moments to realize the prince was there too. However, when she did, she immediately curtsied and bowed her head.

"I'm here on personal business, so please relax. Anyway, I heard from Tenma that you think you saw a fugitive from Shadow Crimson. Is that correct?"

"Yes. They were a bit far away, but I saw someone who matched the description I'd heard, and when we made eye contact, I got a bad feeling. Then

they disappeared down a narrow alleyway. I can't say for certain he's a member of Shadow Crimson, but still..." Even after Leena had finished speaking, she remained tense, still bowing and curtsying.

Prince Lyle folded his arms and frowned, deep in thought.

"Is something the matter, Prince?" I asked.

"No... But I'd like you to keep this in strict confidence. Actually, there have been several reports of suspicious people spotted in towns and villages near the capital in the past month. We've been investigating those sightings, but have so far come up empty, so we thought it might just have been a misunderstanding. But since this sighting happened in the capital, I think a full-fledged investigation is necessary."

As Prince Lyle spoke, I looked through the window and saw a fancy carriage pulling up outside. The carriage had passed through the gates without being stopped by the golems before heading towards the entrance. Only a few people had permission to enter the grounds, and the number who would have come by carriage was quite limited. For example, most were members of Lyle's family...

"It seems you have a guest, Prince Lyle," I told him, after having made that deduction.

"Huh? A guest? Don't tell me...!" Lyle quickly ran towards the foyer. We followed him, arriving just as Aina was about to open the front door. Before she did, Lyle quickly straightened his posture with an awkward look on his face. I stood beside him and watched as the carriage parked outside the front door and a familiar woman got out of it.

"I thought you'd be here, Lyle," said the woman who had just arrived with a smile, her voice sharp. It was so intimidating that it made all of us sweat.

"M-Mother. I can explain..."

"Yes? There's something more important than your duties as the prince?" Her voice grew even sharper. Knowing he was in trouble, Prince Lyle shoved me out in front of him.

"Actually, Tenma was just telling me we shouldn't overlook crime prevention, so I was about to formulate a plan to deal with it!"

“Is that right, Tenma? Oh, by the way, congratulations on making it to the final rounds of the tournament,” Queen Maria said, giving me a hug. After this slightly-too-tight embrace, she noticed Leena behind me.

“Aren’t you Viscount Trinit’s daughter...?”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! My name is Leena! However, I’ve parted ways with House Trinit, so I don’t go by that name anymore.”

“I see... And what is your relationship to Tenma?” The queen’s voice was even sharper than before.

“We’re friends!” Leena answered quickly.

Hearing this, the queen smiled, no longer giving off that threatening air in Leena’s direction. “Come to think of it, you’re registered for the team competition, aren’t you? Good luck. Come on, Lyle. You can tell me in front of your father why you used Tenma as an excuse! Aina, I just came to collect Lyle while saying hello to Tenma today, so please continue taking care of him.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

True to her word, the queen collected the prince, who’d realized she’d seen right through his excuse. Although he looked pale, he obediently followed his mother.

“Now, about dinner...” Aina said, closing the door as if nothing had happened and heading to the kitchen. Gramps, Leena, and I headed back to the parlor. The other three were there sitting quietly, while Jeanne and Aura were laughing.

“What are you three doing?”

“Well, we heard the names ‘Prince Lyle’ and ‘Queen Maria’ all of a sudden, along with feeling this insane pressure coming from the other room, so we thought it would be best to stay still and keep quiet for a while,” Jin explained, while Mennas and Galatt nodded in agreement. By the way, the reason Jeanne and Aura were laughing was because they were used to this kind of situation, but they thought Jin and the others’ reactions were amusing.

Nothing major happened after that. We had a noisy dinner. My guests were

nervous at first to be dining with “the great sage Merlin,” but after they got some alcohol in them, both Gramps and Namitaro helped loosen them up. We all had fun sharing stories about the tournament.

That night, Jin and Galatt went to bed early, but it seemed like Mennas, Leena, and the maids stayed up late having some girl talk, because occasionally I could hear muffled laughter even all the way from my room.

Part Five

The next morning, I snuck out to the garden to find Jin and Galatt there.

“Hey!”

“Morning. You two doing early training?” I greeted them, then, as I looked them over, discovered that they seemed to have recovered greatly from the previous day. “Looks like you’ll be back in fighting shape by tomorrow, huh?”

The two of them nodded. They hadn’t completely recovered yet, though. One wrong move could take them out. But they didn’t want to forfeit, and they certainly wanted to avoid the worst-case scenario of making the girls compete alone.

“Honestly, with the shape we’re in, I don’t even know that we’d win the first round, but at the very least, we’ll be able to step into the ring.”

“Jin’s right. After all, we can’t get any prize money if we don’t even compete.” Galatt was talking about the prize money awarded to all contestants who made it to the main battles. It was only a participation prize of 10,000G, but when you took into account the cost of food and lodging in the capital, every little bit helped. Plus, if they ended up winning, they’d get even more.

Even though the Dawnswords would benefit from Jin’s third-place finish in the individual battles, there wouldn’t be much money left once you subtracted the cost of medical treatment and replacing or repairing their equipment.

Plus, there might be some great finds up for sale at the auction that would be held after the tournament, so they wanted to save up as much money as possible.
“Well, if nothing else, we can do some adventuring near the capital for a while.”

Their party would be competing in the main battle, Galatt had competed in the individuals, and Jin had finished third overall, so the Dawnswords’ following had grown in the past few days. They would definitely be able to get some good jobs once they were done with the tournament.

“Well, just don’t push yourselves too hard. I won’t be able to sleep at night if

you two die.”

“Don’t say that! It’s bad luck!” Both of them yelled at me, but this must have tired them out, as they began panting.

“You okay? Take it easy.”

“And whose fault is that? Jeez...”

“Jin, there’s no use. Tenma’s enjoying this.” Galatt was right. I was enjoying it. After I had my fill, the two of them took a seat nearby, and I began my own morning training.

First, I stretched to loosen up my body, then did some light jogging around the garden. I practiced swinging my sword, including drilling with the forms I’d made up, practiced my magic control, and then finished off with some cool-down exercises.

Partway through, Jin and Galatt seemed to recover and joined me, along with Mennas and Leena, who’d finally woken up. My morning training was a lot noisier than it usually was.

Once we were finished, Aina came over with Aura and Jeanne, bearing towels and water. After resting a bit, we went to have breakfast.

“By the way, are any of you going to watch the matches today?” I asked casually. They all shook their heads. Apparently, they weren’t interested in matches where they didn’t know the competitors.

“Those who compete in the pairs division pale in comparison to those in the team and individual events,” Jin said.

“After all, adventurers either work in a party or alone, right? So the only people who go around in pairs are either siblings, lovers, or married couples. Besides, the matches are in the middle of the day, which tends to exclude those who participate as individuals and in teams. So as a result, fewer famous people are competing in the pairs division,” Mennas added.

“There are *some* talented people who only compete in the pairs division, though,” Leena said. But at any rate, it was true that the pairs division didn’t attract nearly as much attention as the individual or team events.

“That’s why, every year, there are some who assume the pairs division will be a piece of cake, but they always get totally destroyed by the regulars when they get to the main battles.”

It seemed like most of the pairs who competed every year advanced to the main competition, and there were no pairs in the finals this year who had never competed before.

“So you’re all going to take it easy today? I don’t mind if you stay here again tonight.”

“Thanks for the offer, but we should at least show up at the inn today.” Jin mentioned the name of their inn, and Gramps perked up.

“Oh, I can talk to the owners for you. They’re from our hometown, after all.” That surprised not only Jin and the others, but me as well. Apparently, the owner of the inn was from Kukuri Village, but it was a different type of inn from the one Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha ran. It was a cheap hotel which you could book nightly, and which didn’t provide meals.

That was why Gramps decided to take Mennas and Leena back to the inn after breakfast. The reason Jin and Galatt didn’t go too was because they hadn’t healed completely. And since I didn’t want the girls to have to go alone with Gramps, I decided to tag along.

“After you two are done eating, I want you to take this medicine and rest,” I told Jin and Galatt, handing them a potion. I gave Jeanne a bottle of her medicine while I was at it, but then she told me she needed to talk to me about something, so I followed her to her room.

“So? What did you want to talk about?”

I entered Jeanne’s room and saw Aura and Aina there. They surrounded me, and I suddenly felt trapped.

“Actually, about the medicine...” She took out a vial of the medicine I’d given her and showed it to me. “What is it? Ever since I started taking it, not only has my health improved, but my magical powers have also increased. It’s no ordinary medicine, is it?”

Just as I was coming up with an excuse, Aina looked at me and said, “Master

Tenma, we know what's in the medicine. So please just be honest with us. What is it?"

I knew that there was no sense in lying about it now, so I decided to be honest. "The potion is made from my blood."

"Why are you using it on them?" Aina didn't seem surprised by my answer. Meanwhile, Jeanne and Aura had strange expressions on their faces.

"To put it simply, Jeanne needed a medicine made from my blood. You know that—don't you, Aina? The blood of creatures with high magical energy can sometimes be used as medicine. And that's why I used my own."

I was able to conceal some of the details from them, but the bit about the effects of the medicine were true. It was really no different from the old-fashioned remedy of turtle's blood.

"I see... In that case, I suppose it makes sense. But what about Aura?"

"Aura's just a package deal with Jeanne."

"That's mean!" I wasn't surprised that Aura would react in that way, but Aina and I ignored her.

"So why did that medicine strengthen Jeanne's and Aura's magical abilities?"

"I think it's because I have high magical power, and because I used fresh blood. It might be rare, but haven't you ever heard of someone ingesting the blood and flesh of a monster with strong magical powers, and thereby increasing their own magical powers?"

That kind of story had been the stuff of legends and folklore in my previous life too. There were stories about someone becoming immortal by bathing in the blood of a dragon, or about someone becoming immortal after eating the flesh of a mermaid.

However, in this world, fantasy creatures called monsters with magical powers and magic actually existed, so instead of being mere folklore, it was a well-confirmed phenomenon that eating monsters either temporarily or semipermanently increased people's power, although it was quite rare.

"I thought ingesting my blood would be good for their constitutions.

However, if you drink too much, it can become like poison, so I was thinking about halting it fairly soon."

"I see... Very well, then. Please don't speak about this to anyone, though. Jeanne and Aura, that goes for you too. If word of this spreads, people with ill intentions will definitely appear."

Jeanne and Aura silently nodded in response. I nodded as well, because I didn't want to get involved in any trouble like that.

Name: Jeanne

Age: 14

Class: Human

Title: Cursed Child (Saint), Ex-Viscount's Daughter, Tenma's Slave

HP: 3000

MP: 12000

Strength: C-

Defense: C-

Agility: C+

Magic: A+

Mind: C+

Growth: A+

Luck: B

Skills

Light Magic: 6

Vitality Boost: 5

Magic Boost: 5

Endurance: 5

Water Magic: 4

Sword: 4

Debuff Resistance: 4

Recovery Boost: 4

Fire Magic: 3

Earth Magic: 3

Rod: 3

Growth Boost: 3

Gifts

Protection of the Goddess of Love

Protection of the Goddess of Nature

Protection of the Goddess of Fertility

Name: Aura

Age: 16

Class: Human

Title: Maid, Tenma's Slave

HP: 5500

MP: 6500

Strength: C+

Defense: C+

Agility: C+

Magic: B

Mind: B

Growth: A

Luck: B

Skills

Cooking: 9

Endurance: 7

Spear: 5

Fire Magic: 4

Water Magic: 4

Bow: 4

Sword: 4

Brawling: 4

Debuff Resistance: 4

Light Magic: 3

Earth Magic: 2

I checked their statuses, and could see quite a bit of growth there. Even if the rise in their magical power was due to the influence of my blood, it seemed that the increase in their physical strength and endurance was thanks to Aina's hard work.

Once I was finished with that conversation, I didn't have anything else to do and was left with some free time on my hands. As I sat there wondering what to do, one of the golems who guarded the gate came over to me; apparently, we had a visitor. I had Aina accompany the golem. I went back to my room to polish some weapons, but then Aina returned looking for me.

She said that a staff member from the tournament was here. I asked her what they wanted, and she said it was confidential and that I had to talk to them directly. She had asked to see their identification, and then let them inside. They were currently waiting for me in the parlor.

Just in case, I didn't sit down right away; instead, I remained standing and asked them why they'd come. Apparently, she had been dispatched by the tournament headquarters because she needed to inform me of something urgent.

I took a seat, and then Jin and the others entered the room. Mennas and Leena were with them; it seemed Aina had caught them right before they left for the inn.

"So what's the news?"

"R-Right! I know this is very sudden, but we've actually decided to change some of the rules!"

“What?!”

The staff member looked very nervous, but even more so after a bunch of competitors, including myself, yelled at her. Now she looked shocked and scared. However, wearing a tense look, she went on to provide the details.

“R-Regarding the rule changes, all competitors will now be required to register the weapons and armor they plan on using, as well as being required to use a rental magic bag for the tournament. These changes stem from Chaos’s violation of the rules. We decided it would be safer if we had prior knowledge of all weapons, armor, and equipment to be used during matches.”

“This is awfully sudden. He definitely violated the rules, but why do we have to change things mid-tournament?” Mennas asked.

The staff member shrank back in response. Mennas had a point, though; this was way too sudden, and would only invite confusion.

“I don’t know the exact reasoning behind the decision because I’m just a lowly employee... There was a lot of discussion about complete bans on certain types of weapons and armor, but they agreed that that would be unreasonable at this time. Due to the delay in the referees’ response at the time, it has been decided that if a participant uses any weapons or equipment which we weren’t notified of, it will be a violation of the rules, and they will be disqualified.”

“Doesn’t that render trump cards meaningless?” Jin asked, and we all agreed with his statement.

“The tournament staff members will not disclose the weapons and equipment you register to any other parties. I suppose you’ll just have to take them at their word.”

“Take them at their word?! What do the other participants have to say about this?” Galatt asked.

The staff member frowned. “The backlash was quite strong at first, but after we conducted some forced inspections, we discovered about half of the participants had in their possession weapons or equipment which would have disqualified them.”

“Like what?” Leena asked.

The staff member took out a notebook and gave several examples. “Let’s see... The most commonly found items were magic recovery potions, both pills and entire bottles. The next were medicines that provide a physical and magical boost, also in small bottles and in pill form. Also, disposable barrier items were found.”

I doubted that all of those items were meant to be used during a match. However, it was certainly possible to take pills without a referee noticing, so I agreed that the rule change might actually be necessary.

“In order to cut down on the number of violations, we had to enact these rules. As much as possible, we will endeavor not to hinder participants. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we do ask for your cooperation,” she said, bowing her head. There was no way around it now, since they *had* found illegal items after conducting inspections.

“Well, I understand your reasoning, and I’d like to cooperate as much as possible. I just want the rules to be fair to everyone,” I said, and Jin and the others agreed.

The staff member looked relieved. “Thank you! Regarding the rules being applied fairly, we’ve asked the knights to cooperate with us. I’m very glad that you’ve agreed to these new rules, Tenma!”

She looked much more cheerful than she had when she’d first showed up. I asked her why she was so happy, and her answer surprised me.

“Hm? Well, it wouldn’t be strange to say that you’re the participant who’s garnered the most attention during the tournament! If someone as high-profile as you are agrees with the new rules, it will be much easier for us to convince the other participants to get onboard.”

After saying this, she practically skipped outside to her carriage.

“Since when did I have so much influence?” I muttered. Everyone stared at me like I was crazy or something. “What?”

Jin placed his hands on my shoulders, shook his head pityingly, then left the room.

“Tenma, no matter how ya look at it, yer just a head above the rest! Yer even

more famous than some nobles, yaargh!" Namitaro suddenly appeared by my side, speaking, as usual, with a strange accent. He was using his fins to make some sort of strange thumbs-up gesture, which really pissed me off for some reason.

After that, I was mildly annoyed for a while, and decided to start preparing for tomorrow's team event.

"Are you ready? We better head over there early because of the inspections. It'll take more time than usual, since it's a team battle," I called out to Jin and the others, who were checking their bags a little ways off.

"We're good here!" Jin raised his hand, and then Galatt, Mennas, and Leena all signaled to me as well.

"I'm ready and rarin' to go!" Namitaro called from atop the roof of the carriage—as if he even had that much to get ready in the first place...

Shiromaru and Solomon howled in response. Solomon, in particular, seemed to be in high spirits, as he hadn't been allowed outside much since we'd come to the capital.

It was hard to gauge Rocket's reaction since he was inside of Valley Wind, but since Valley Wind seemed excited, I assumed he was pretty pumped. With how excited everyone was, I felt I might not even have to do a thing in today's battle.

"Tenma, can you c'mere a sec?" Namitaro called out to me from overhead, once Shiromaru and Solomon had finished howling.

"What is it?"

"Can ya help me get down? My body's all dried up and it hurts to move!"

Well, why did you go up there in the first place? We all rolled our eyes, and then I hit him with a low-level water magic attack.

"I've come back to life!" he said, and then got down by himself. He slipped into my bag and added, "Wake me up when we get there!"

It kind of felt like his enthusiasm had already dissipated, but at any rate, Shiromaru and Solomon both joined him in my bag, and we all got inside the

carriage.

Jin and Galatt sat up front to drive the carriage, so I didn't have anything to do until we reached the arena. But I suppose you could have said I felt a little more relaxed thanks to Namitaro.

"All right, we're gonna get going now!" I called out to Gramps, who had come out to see us off, then I headed towards the carriage.

Even though it was early in the morning, the area around the arena was bubbling with enthusiasm, and as expected, it took a little longer than usual to get through the line because of the number of people. However, we were able to enter without any problems.

"See you at the match."

"Yeah! If we have to face each other, I won't go easy on ya!"

The inspections happened right after we entered the building, so I had to say goodbye to Jin and the others there.

"Over here, please," a staff member called.

The matches weren't due to start for a while, and only one other group had arrived earlier than us, so we were able to get into the inspection room right away.

There were two inspection rooms that were spaced out far away from each other. Jin and the others had to go to the other room, which is why we parted ways there.

"First, allow me to explain how the inspection will be conducted. We'll do a simple check of your weapons, equipment, and party members. Also, we don't mind if you carry magic bags into your dressing rooms, but if you plan on using them during the match, you'll have to transfer their contents into your rental magic bag in the presence of a staff member. You will also have to present your weapons and so on to the staff member for a final check before entering the arena. So, please be prepared to hand over those items to a staff member at that time. If, for some reason, you are unable to do so personally, please have someone you know hand over your items to a staff member."

I went ahead and put the weapons and equipment I planned on using on the table. The staff member recorded what they were, including the number, types, and colors of any recovery medicines I had.

“If you plan on using recovery medicine after the match, please be sure to use them in front of a staff member. There will be exceptions made in the case of an emergency, however. Still, even then, you are not permitted to use slow-acting medicines. Headquarters has prepared medicines available for purchase, so please let a staff member know if you’re interested. Next, we will check your party members. Tenma, you’ve registered as a tamer and his followers. Is that correct? If so, please call them here.”

I’d really wanted to keep this whole thing a secret, but I now had no choice, so I called them all forth.

“Huh? Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

The staff member already knew about Rocket, Shiromaru, and Namitaro, so they weren’t surprised to see them, but once Solomon leapt out of the bag, the staff member screamed and fell to the ground.

“What happened?!” Hearing the screams, a bunch of knights burst into the room. I’d quickly put Solomon back into my bag, but apparently that looked even more suspicious, and the knights surrounded me.

“Show us what you hid just now!” one of them yelled, as they all held their weapons at the ready. However, I couldn’t acquiesce.

“I can’t do that. It’s my team’s special weapon. Plus, it doesn’t violate any rules.”

Not believing me, the knights looked down at the staff member, who was still on the ground.

“I-I’m sorry. Tenma isn’t violating any rules. I was just startled, that’s all,” they told the knights, looking embarrassed. The knights still seemed doubtful, though.

“If he’s not breaking any rules, then he should be able to show us right here!”

“Like I said, this is my team’s special weapon that I’m only going to use inside

the arena. If I show you now, then it won't be a secret anymore—get it? You know, I wasn't planning on showing anyone before the match in the first place, including staff members, but then they suddenly added this new rule. That's the only reason that I'm even showing it now."

Even after all that, though, the knights weren't satisfied. As I was trying to figure out what to do about the situation, a new face suddenly appeared in the room.

"What's going on?"

It was the familiar muscular man who'd become a regular at my house lately—Prince Lyle. Startled by the prince's sudden appearance, everyone except for me knelt down. However, this looked a bit odd as the staff member was still on their butt on the floor.

"At ease. Someone tell me what happened! Oh, Tenma! It's you. What's going on?" The tone of the prince's voice immediately softened when he spotted me, reverting to his usual tone. The knights all went pale when they saw how the prince reacted to me, but their leader briefed Lyle on the situation. After hearing everything, Lyle thought for a moment, then made a suggestion.

"I understand what you're saying. It's true that you need to check what Tenma hid. However, competitors have the right to keep their trump cards hidden, and the staff member says he's not breaking any rules, so we need to take them at their word. Bring me a managing staff member, and I will check Tenma's concealed item along with them. Would both parties agree that that's fair?"

So as a result, the manager, Prince Lyle, and the other staff member all ended up doing my inspection together.

"Is the source of all this commotion Solomon, Tenma?" Prince Lyle asked knowingly. Not understanding what he meant, the manager looked confused.

"That's right. Come on out, Solomon."

Solomon appeared at my signal. Prince Lyle was used to seeing him already, and the other staff member, who was now prepared, didn't scream, but this time it was the manager who let out a shriek of surprise.

The knights outside freaked out to hear another scream, but Prince Lyle immediately told them to calm down, so they didn't come inside.

"Solomon isn't against the rules, right?" I asked the manager. He shook his head, half-dazed.

"Tenma, are you going to use Solomon in the first round?"

"I was planning on it."

"Okay. Go ahead and do that, then. Once they see him, they'll realize why you refused to comply," Prince Lyle said, then opened the door to call out to the other knights. "The manager and I just verified that Tenma isn't violating any rules. He was just hiding a member of Oracion. We can't reveal their identity right now, but you'll see him in the first round. At that time, you'll realize why there was such a commotion about his identity. Are you all satisfied now?"

After that, the prince took all the knights and left. The staff member and manager both vehemently apologized to me, and I felt like everyone was walking on eggshells around me.

"Why did this have to happen...?" I muttered as I walked to my dressing room, remembering how humiliating the experience had been.

Right now, I was planning on using Solomon during the first round and Namitaro in the second round, so what the prince had told the knights was the truth. However, it'd had a greater effect on the staff members, who were crying and apologizing to me as they finished the inspection. In the end, the whole thing made *me* feel guilty.

Since the inspection had taken so long, it took about thirty minutes to get to my dressing room after we'd first reached the arena. By the time I got there, a staff member came and told me all the participating teams had arrived.

They said they were going to draw for the matchups and that each team had to send a representative, so naturally, for my team, that was me. I left everyone else in my dressing room and followed the staff member. Just in case, I left Rocket in charge of the other three. I figured he would probably be able to keep Namitaro under control, at least for the time it took for me to finish getting our matchup.

The process was the same as with the individual matches. We were assigned numbers based on our places in line, and so I was number three. Jin was in front of me, and the person first in line was the winner of last year's team competition.

Agris and Marquis Sammons were behind me.

"Tenma. Heard you already got in trouble. You made two staff members cry," Jin whispered to me. Apparently, the story had already gotten warped. This wasn't the place to explain what had really happened, plus I didn't have enough time. I said I'd tell him about it later.

"We'll start the drawing now. Number one, please come forward," the staff member said to the man in front.

"We're spaced apart nicely. The soonest we'd even go up against each other would be the semifinals."

My friends' teams pulled numbers so that we weren't matched up in the first or second rounds.

Sagan Tamers A pulled three, Demon Soldiers pulled eight, Oracion pulled nine, and the Dawnswords pulled thirteen.

The other high-profile teams included one who'd won the semifinals last year—they drew two—the team who'd won the semifinals year before last—who pulled eleven—and the team going for complete victory two years in a row, who pulled number sixteen.

There weren't any other particularly famous teams besides those. The remaining competitors were split pretty evenly between those who had prior tournament experience, and those who were making their first appearances.

"I can't believe this," I muttered. I was talking about the name of the team I'd be going up against in the first match. "Can you believe the name of our enemy for Solomon's debut match is the Dragon Strikers?!"

Their representative was a few places behind me in line, so I was at least able to check out one of them. He was pretty muscular and I had a feeling he liked to fight with brute strength. I didn't know what type of weapons or equipment he used, but I guessed that he was a warrior.

He was slightly larger than Jin and had a buzzed head. I got the sense he was pretty powerful, although not as strong as Jin.

“I don’t think I’ll have a problem with him.”

At first, I was going to have Solomon do the fighting, and if I thought things looked dangerous, I would send out Rocket and Shiromaru. In the unlikely event that the representative of the Dragon Strikers was their weakest member, I’d participate right away, but I didn’t think that would happen. Otherwise, I surely would’ve heard some kind of rumors before the tournament had even gotten started.

Once the lottery ended, I went back to my dressing room to have a leisurely meal, since I had some time before the start of the team matches.

Since there were no restrictions on food, I ate the same thing as before. However, before the match, the staff would do a magical search of you to make sure you hadn’t drank any kind of potions, and to ensure you weren’t benefiting from any kind of magical effects. Obviously, if they found any violations, you’d be disqualified.

As long as you cooked with normal ingredients, nothing like that would happen, so I didn’t have anything to worry about.

Just as I’d started preparing my food, it seemed the first match had begun, because I heard loud cheers from the audience.

“The winners of last year’s semifinals are competing first,” I muttered, as I continued cooking. The reason I didn’t go watch was because I wasn’t really interested. But most of all, I had the intense pressure of four sets of eyes watching me cook.

By the way, I was making onigiri and miso soup, along with fried eggs and pickles. The onigiri were stuffed with fish flakes and umeboshi, and the pickles were lightly pickled cucumbers and eggplants.

I hadn’t known this until I’d come to the capital, but apparently calling plums “komai” was a regionalism, and they were usually called “ume,” just like in my past world. It was surprising how many words were the same in both worlds, but Namitaro told me the person who’d popularized these words had been

reincarnated from Japan too, which made sense.

What was even more confusing was that the name of the village where I'd learned the word "komai" was Komai Village, and in that village they sometimes called pickled plums "komai-zuke." Namitaro had told me that too.

At any rate, ever since then I'd called "komai-zuke" "umeboshi."

"Tenma."

"What is it, Namitaro?"

Namitaro poked his head out of the bag, which was hanging on the wall.

"Don't worry about it!"

Sometimes the things he said made me wonder if he could read my thoughts. And most of what he said just irritated me.

I quietly stood up and shoved Namitaro back in the bag. Then I closed it up so he couldn't come back out, grabbed the drawstring, and wrapped it around the bag several times. He was going to stay in there until the match.

My other followers were already outside the bag, so they weren't causing any problems.

After that, we started eating. I gave Rocket and the others boiled jerky. Occasionally it looked like the dimension bag, which was hooked to the wall, was moving, but it could have just been my imagination.

Once I sat down to eat my meal, I heard loud cheers from the arena. It seemed like the first battle had already been decided. It had been about twenty minutes from start to finish, which was the average match time for the first and second rounds of the team battles.

Unlike the individual and pair matches, team battles had a time limit. That was because in a team battle, there was a maximum of ten people, and the arena was too small to be divided into two. The first round had a limit of thirty minutes, the second round forty-five, and semifinals were one hour. Only the finals had no time limit.

For that reason, there weren't many teams that focused completely on defense, so the matches developed rather quickly. Flashy offense and defense

were commonly used, which made the team battles the most exciting to watch.

In the past, there had been suggestions to increase the number of teams participating in the finals from six to eight, and to increase the time limit per match. Although the more teams there were, the easier it was to get excited, shorter match times were better. When the matches were shorter, they tended to be more exciting, and it was also more economically effective. That was why nothing had been changed yet. This was something Prince Zane had told me.

Judgments were made by one main referee and four assistant referees who all used flags, so there would be no ties.

In the past, there had only been a few instances of dishonesty in the refereeing, so it seemed like the king now personally appointed all referees himself. Worst-case scenario, a dishonest referee could be charged with treason. However, the honest referees who did their jobs well were given suitable rewards and honorary titles after the tournament was over.

“Hm, seems like the next match has started. Is it Agris’s team?”

For a moment, I hesitated about whether to go watch. However, I thought that surely Agris’s team wouldn’t be defeated, so I kept on eating. By the time my meal was over, the third match was about to begin, and Agris’s team had won an overwhelming victory, just as I expected. I hadn’t been worried, because his team was well-balanced and very highly organized, but I was still relieved to hear that my friend’s team had won.

The problem would be in the second round, with the winners of last year’s semifinals. However, according to the information I’d heard about their opponents, they hadn’t fought in the first round with their full roster, so I was curious about their other members.

The third match would be a battle between teams that were almost evenly matched, so I didn’t think that battle would reach a quick conclusion. But Marquis Sammons’s team was up next, so I felt it was probably time for me to start getting ready for my own match.

It seemed like the team he was going up against consisted mainly of rear guards, so watching Gulliver fight would be entertaining. I did some light exercising after my meal, including stretches, then heard cheers from the

audience. Apparently, the third match had ended, and it was time for the fourth to begin. So, we headed towards the arena.

Near the entrance, a staff member did another inspection. He asked if I'd eaten anything during the break, and put some kind of stone slab in my hands, and that was pretty much it. It didn't take long.

By the time the inspection was done, the fourth match had begun. I saw Gulliver running at full speed in the arena. The Demon Soldiers' opponents had two warriors in the vanguard, two archers, and one sorcerer in the rear.

The two vanguards looked surprised when Gulliver suddenly rushed in, but immediately one of them held up his shield while the other readied his axe. The archers in the rear fired arrows over their heads, but Gulliver knocked them all down with his club. The sorcerer, who was sandwiched in between the archers, started chanting, but Gulliver was faster. He knocked over the warrior in front with the shield before the sorcerer had even finished chanting.

Gulliver's sideways blow sent the warrior rolling backwards towards the sorcerer, who had to stop chanting in order to avoid getting crushed. Another warrior stood in front of Gulliver to try to protect the rear guard, but by that time the battle had already been decided.

Gulliver was so powerful he seemed to make them forget this was a team battle. The moment the warrior with the axe noticed the knights hiding behind Gulliver, the knights jumped out from behind him with their shields held out and headed for the rear guard.

From that point, it was just one-sided. Gulliver held back the warriors. The archers were too close to fire arrows and took out their daggers, but they were overwhelmed by the knights. The sorcerer only had enough time to cast spells with short incantations, and managed to injure one of the knights, but was unable to cast any other spells in succession, and was soon overwhelmed by the other knights physically ramming into him.

The warrior with the axe hadn't been defeated by Gulliver yet, but since he was greatly outnumbered and the rear guard had been completely annihilated, he surrendered.

"Graaaaaaaar!"

It was a more overwhelming victory than even I had imagined, but the one who was most excited was Gulliver himself. He swung his arms around enthusiastically and let out a loud bellow.

His howl was so sudden it startled the crowd, along with his own knights, who should probably have been used to him—they quickly backed away.

I could only spot two people who were clapping happily for Gulliver after he'd howled; one was his master Marquis Sammons, and the other was Luna, for some reason.

She was leaning out of the royal box with excitement, and Tida was frantically holding her back so she wouldn't fall. Her applause was the trigger that brought the shocked crowd back to their senses, and they also began to clap.

The members of the Demon Soldiers waved to the crowd. I was on the opposite side so I couldn't see clearly, but Marquis Sammons seemed very pleased that Gulliver had had such a good showing.

"Will the members of Oracion please make their way to the ring." I heard an announcement from a staff member, just as the previous competitors left the ring. It was the same staff member who'd done my inspection this morning.

"Let's go!"

I took out my followers, who were waiting in my bag, and touched the collars around Shiromaru's and Solomon's necks.

"Huh?"

The staff member made a weird sound when he saw the two of them suddenly grow bigger right before his eyes. Meanwhile, my opponents, the Dragon Strikers, entered the ring on the opposite side. They appealed to the crowd as they came in.

Sorry, but Solomon's going to win this match.

I imagined the audience's reactions when they saw what was about to happen, and then made my way to the center of the ring.

Part Six

The moment we entered the arena, it was like time stopped. My team, Oracion, hadn't come in with any kind of dramatic flair—we just walked in normally. And yet the crowd was flabbergasted, their eyes glued to us.

After I entered the arena, Shiromaru followed, with Rocket riding on his back. Then Namitaro came, wriggling his way along the ground, and finally the star of the show, Solomon, entered the arena.

There was a big cheer for me, since I'd advanced to the finals in the individual competitions, and for Rocket and Shiromaru, who'd shown their strength in the prelims. However, they booed and screamed at Namitaro because of his antics in the prelims.

But then, when the audience saw Solomon, they fell silent. With his collar off, he was three meters in length and had a wingspan of four meters. He'd grown quite a lot. Anyone would recognize him as a dragon now.

"Raa-waawr!" Upon entering the ring, however, he let out a roar that couldn't be categorized as threatening in any shape or form.



Time started flowing again. Part of the crowd began to scream, while some of them just let out noises of confusion because they had no idea what was going

on. But mostly, people were screaming.

I looked around and saw a portion of the audience trying to escape from the arena, but this only lasted a few seconds. Most of the audience had their eyes glued to Solomon. In fact, they seemed to have forgotten anyone else was even around.

The Dragon Strikers were all standing there with their mouths hanging open, staring at Solomon. Even the referee was frozen in place, and no one was calling him on it.

Shocked by the audience's reaction, Solomon snuggled up to Shiromaru. I guess the audience must've liked that, because they began cheering. The cheering wouldn't die down, and the ref was still stunned, so I had no choice but to stand in the center of the ring and use magic to send fireworks up into the sky and get everyone's attention.

The sudden explosion temporarily stunned the audience into silence. The ref finally snapped out of it, and when he realized why I'd done that, he ran over to the center of the ring and called the match to begin.

"The fifth match of the first round is Oracion versus the Dragon Strikers. Begin!" the ref yelled, before running outside the ring to evacuate. Both teams took that to mean we should stay still until he was clear, so neither of us made a move just yet.

The moment the referee left the ring, though, the Dragon Strikers got into formation. They were all warriors—three of them had large shields and stood side by side in a wall in front of the other two, one of whom had a large sword and the other a halberd.

The group of five began running towards us in a straight line. They seemed to be quite wary of Solomon and the others. I knew that, since this was a team battle, if they took me out, the rest of my followers would be disqualified, since I was the only human. A team with only followers in it was not allowed to compete. In the case of Marquis Sammons, his team would be disqualified once all the human members—that is, all the members apart from Gulliver—were KO'd.

Since this was Solomon's first time competing, he was pretty excited and

stopped the Dragon Strikers in their tracks. He flew straight up into the air and glided over to them, then rammed into their formation. I suppose it would have been more accurate to say he trampled two members of the vanguard, and crushed the man in the middle with his body.

Even though he was still small for a dragon, he was much larger and heavier than humans were, and he had also built up momentum before crashing into them. As a result, it looked like he'd done considerable damage.

Seeing that, I instructed the others to prepare to fight. We surrounded the Dragon Strikers to cull their options for movement. Solomon's attack had broken their formation, and it looked for a moment like that had decided the match. However, since our opponents had also made it this far in the tournament, it would take a lot more than that to finish them. In the end, Solomon's attack only took out one of the members of the vanguard. The remaining two pushed their way forward with their shields up, trying to block his advance.

"Raaaaaawr!" Solomon twisted his body to shake off the two men who clung onto him. Meanwhile, the two warriors behind the vanguard began to attack him.

"Grawr!"

Their greatsword and halberd attacks hit Solomon in each shoulder, and he let out a scream, but they were unable to pierce his skin. It seemed the scales covering his body were too tough, and also he was too close to them, so their strikes weren't accurate.

However, even though they hadn't injured him, he had still taken damage. Although the attacks were imperfect, he'd still been hit with heavy weapons. And although his body was covered in scales, it's not as if he had scales on the inside to protect his organs. So he winced with pain when he was hit—but that was about it. He quickly recovered and went on the offensive.

First, he targeted his assailants. He stretched his neck out as far as it could go, and bit the shoulder of the man wielding the greatsword, then whacked the man with the halberd. Though he was unable to completely knock out the two men, who were nearly two meters tall, even so, they lost their balance.

Solomon tried to take advantage of that opening and attack, but the two remaining members of the vanguard who clung onto him shouted loudly and held on, halting his movements.

Meanwhile, the other two regained their balance and readied their weapons. At that exact moment, they were knocked backwards. But the culprit wasn't Solomon—it was Shiromaru and Namitaro.

I'd given them the signal to do so, since it looked like Solomon was in trouble.

The members of the Dragon Strikers were wary and cautious of us, but my two followers had moved faster than they could react. They were going so fast, their bodies practically turned into arrows as they shot past Solomon's side, slamming into our opponents.

As a result, two of the Dragon Strikers were blown backwards and crashed into each other in midair, becoming unable to move. They were twitching slightly, but since the ref didn't call for medics to remove them from the arena, they seemed to still be alive.

After having received backup from his comrades, Solomon targeted the remaining two men who were stuck to him and getting in his way. However, he had never experienced close-range battle before, so he didn't know how else to attack beyond just rampaging on the spot.

He flung his arms around, flapped his wings, swung his tail, and so on, but since the men were physically on top of him and knew how to use their shields well, he couldn't do much damage to them. Still, the little damage he did cause by flailing around wildly eventually accumulated.

They didn't go down without a fight; they counterattacked when they saw an opening, but they didn't stand a chance against Solomon's defensive stats.

This went on for quite some time, and finally one of the men lost his grip and was cast off by a blow from Solomon's tail.

The one who remained desperately clung to Solomon while trying to strike back. However, that didn't last long. He ended up taking a blow to the back of the head, and passed out while still holding on to Solomon.

At that point, there was no one left in the Dragon Strikers who could move.

The ref came out to confirm this, but Solomon still didn't stop thrashing around. If I didn't intervene, he could end up killing someone. I took his collar out of my bag and said, "Solomon! Stop!"

I rushed over to him and hopped on his back, then put the collar on him. Then, finally, he shrunk back down to his regular size.

"Squee?" Only then did he realize our opponents had been knocked unconscious, and he finally calmed down. Apparently, he'd been so nervous about his first fight that he hadn't realized what was going on around him.

I looked Solomon over quickly and saw there was a spot near where the last man had clung to him that was bleeding. It seemed that that man had continued to attack as Solomon had swung him around and gradually managed to do some damage with his bare hands.

Although Solomon's defenses weren't as high at this spot as they were by his shoulders, the fact that this person had managed to damage a dragon with his bare hands meant I'd underestimated my opponents. If I'd known they had this much offensive power, I would have had everyone participate from the very beginning, and just gotten Solomon some experience.

Even though his injury was slight, it was still an injury, and when I treated it with recovery magic, Solomon clung to me.

"The winner is...Oracion!"

The moment the ref called the match, the staff came running with five stretchers, while the crowd went wild.

Although objectively, all Solomon had done was go on a rampage, the audience seemed satisfied just because they'd gotten to see a dragon—something they'd normally never get the chance to do. Some people in the crowd were even shouting Solomon's name.

It looked like Luna was once again the happiest person in the audience. Tida desperately clung to her so that she wouldn't fall over the railing.

"Nngh..." One of the Dragon Strikers who had fallen unconscious at my feet woke up before the medics got to him. He was the one who had hung onto Solomon until the end. I realized that he was the one they'd sent as their

representative to the lottery. “Huh...? What? Did we lose...?”

He was definitely stronger than he looked, because he didn’t have any serious visible injuries. There were only scratches, which was hard to believe since he’d been exposed to Solomon’s attacks for such a long time.

“How embarrassing... I can’t believe the Dragon Strikers got beat by a dragon! Maybe we should change our name...?” He sat cross-legged, scratching his head and muttering to himself. That same hand he was using to scratch his head must’ve struck Solomon, because the skin on it was peeling off, and it was bleeding.

“I don’t need a stretcher, I can walk on my own. Still, dragons are really strong. And you must be pretty strong yourself, if you can get it to obey you!” The man refused a stretcher and stood up, then turned towards me with hand outstretched. I shook it, and for a moment I thought he might crush mine because he was so strong.

“Ha ha ha! Just let me have that, okay?” He laughed cheerfully and turned around before I could come up with anything to say. Then he left the ring with his comrades, who were all on stretchers.

“Oww... You’ll pay for that later, Baldy.” I shook my throbbing hand and complained as I went back over to my followers.

Namitaro, who heard me grumbling, wriggled up beside me.

“You already beat him once, Tenma. Don’t be a sore winner!”

Secretly, I agreed, but I didn’t want to give Namitaro that satisfaction, so I pretended I hadn’t heard him.

On the way back to the dressing room with Solomon in my arms, I passed by the team who won the championship two years ago. They were participating in the next match. I didn’t say anything, but they stopped and glared at me, so naturally I stopped and glared right back at them.

They were three men who seemed to be the vanguard, one sorcerer who kept his face hidden, and one female archer who was quite the slender beauty. Her ears were a little pointy, so I thought she might have elven blood in her.

“Ignore him. Let’s go,” the sorcerer called out. The other members began walking away. From that, I figured the sorcerer was probably the leader.

I thought about using Identify on them, but just then a staff member stood between us, so I decided to just head for the dressing room. Apparently, the staff member thought I was going to start a fight, so when I started walking in the other direction, he breathed a sigh of relief.

I had a feeling I’d be going up against that team later, so I decided to formulate a plan of attack with my followers.

First, the vanguards. The three of them had no shields. The two with axes and spears were probably warriors, so they would attack with brute strength. The last one was a swordsman, with two swords hanging from both hips. I could tell from his equipment that he most likely put an emphasis on speed.

I felt like I’d seen these guys somewhere, but ultimately decided it wasn’t worth worrying about, and pushed it out of my mind.

As for the archer, the short bow she carried on her back seemed to be her main weapon, but she also had two daggers on her hips that could be used in close-quarters combat. I couldn’t judge how skilled the sorcerer was, but his attitude made me think he probably wasn’t a weakling.

I didn’t know if they had backup members, but if they didn’t change their roster in the round where I faced them, then I’d be the one in charge of fighting the sorcerer. I doubted he was stronger than Gramps, so I didn’t think I would lose. However, it’s annoying to have someone firing off magic spells during a battle, so it would be best to defeat him early.

On my side, the three vanguards would be Rocket, Shiromaru, and Namitaro. Shiromaru and Namitaro were the main fighters, with Rocket there for backup. I had a feeling the three of them alone would be evenly matched against the opposing team.

I intended to put Solomon in charge of the last member of their team, the female archer. To be honest, I thought she was the member who was mostly poorly matched against our lineup. She’d probably only be able to fire her bow once or twice before we attacked, and then once we were closer, her bow would become ineffective. It would be hard for her to damage any member of

my team besides myself.

So I'd have Solomon attack her directly. All he had to do was ram into her, so his job was simple. I told him he just had to be careful not to catch an arrow in his eyes or mouth.

Apart from that, he just had to do his best not to get hurt. After I made those decisions, I called the strategy meeting to an end. To be fair, we'd never really had concrete strategies before. Things were just decided on the fly, with a little guidance given to each member as to what their role would be in each battle.

Now that that was over, I decided to take a break. A little while later, a staff member came to tell me that my opponent for the second round had been decided. As expected, it was the team I'd seen earlier.

The competition had been uneventful so far, and the favorites were progressing smoothly. However, those familiar with the tournament thought that the next match was going to be rather exciting.

That was because the Dawnswords were up next. Originally, this team—which included Jin and Galatt, who'd both advanced to the individual finals—were regarded as highly skilled and were favored to win the first round. However, both Jin and Galatt had lost their individual matches. Now, if they had merely been defeated, the crowd wouldn't have been so worried, but after their losses, word quickly spread among those participating that the two had suffered serious injuries.

These rumors were fueled by bettors and those who were trying to manipulate the payout rates. As a result, there was almost no difference between the odds for those betting on the Dawnswords, who had been the team to watch before the tournament began, and the odds for those betting on the opposing team.

By the way, their opponent for the match was an up-and-coming team at the guild in the royal capital. The Dawnswords had them beat in terms of both achievements and experience, but the other team had momentum, and there were a fair amount of people who thought that, in their current state, they could beat the Dawnswords.

"I'm curious, so I guess I'll go check it out." I told Rocket and the others I was

going to go spectate, and they all obediently got into my bag. Namitaro wanted to go on his own, but I thought he'd probably end up getting himself in trouble, so I forced him inside.

Once I left my dressing room, a staff member showed me to a space where competitors could watch the matches. It was two floors below the spectator seats, looking down onto the arena. They were private boxes, and if you opened the window, you could see the arena up close.

For safety reasons, the walls were thick and the windows were small, but it gave you the chance to watch the matches from an angle typically reserved only for competitors or staff.

The room was about four meters wide and three meters high, but it felt a little cramped once I let my followers out of the bag. The window was about fifty centimeters tall and one meter wide, so we all had to huddle together to see. However, Shiromaru and Solomon weren't interested in the match, so that freed up more space.

When we arrived, it looked like the match had just started. Mennas was in the middle of the vanguard, with Jin about five meters to the left, and Galatt to the right. Leena was about four or five meters behind Mennas.

The opposing team had two warriors, one sorcerer, and two archers in that order, forming an X shape. They made the first move. The archers shot arrows, and everyone began to move forward slowly. The Dawnswords tried to counter, with the three in the vanguard solidifying their defenses while returning fire.

As the distance between the two teams eventually narrowed, the sorcerer began throwing stones using Earth magic. The stones were about the size of fists, but they didn't move very fast, so Leena had plenty of time to block them.

Leena was using Air Ball, but I had taught her Air Bullet before. Although she hadn't mastered it to the point where her projectiles were actually bullet-shaped, they had been compressed with more power than normal magic would use.

Up until this point, the two teams had been evenly matched, but the moment the archers' arrows stopped, the soldiers in front of them started running. Then the sorcerer's flying stones became faster and more frequent. The archers

jumped out from behind the warriors to the left and right, aiming at Jin and Galatt respectively.

The two warriors in the lead were heading towards Mennas, fighting together. They were armed with a one-handed axe and a one-handed sword respectively, and both were carrying shields in their other hands.

The opposing team was using archers to keep the wounded Jin and Galatt in check, while their sorcerer focused on Leena. They were trying to defeat the healthy members first before turning their attention to the injured ones. It was an effective strategy, but they had made a slight miscalculation, which was that Galatt was a demi-human and therefore had higher stamina than an average human. Also, although Jin was human, he had the same stamina as a demi-human. On top of that, I'd helped to heal their injuries previously. As a result of all those factors combined, they'd recovered more than normal humans could have in the same amount of time.

And they were certainly in good-enough shape to win a complete victory against ordinary adventurers.

If the opposing team had tried with all their might to defeat Jin and Galatt from the beginning, they might have been able to take down one of them. But the idea of winning had gone to their heads and they were already thinking about their next match, which made them completely careless and vulnerable to unexpected attacks.

"Take that!"

"Oof!"

The two warriors who ran towards Mennas didn't notice that Jin and Galatt had made a move faster than them until it was too late, and were attacked from each side, losing their balance. As expected, since Jin and Galatt hadn't fully recovered yet, they weren't strong enough to take their opponents out with a single blow. However, it gave the Dawnswords a huge opening, and Mennas let off a blistering attack.

Though Mennas was a woman, she was also a first-rate adventurer and a warrior. It was an easy feat for her to unleash two powerful blows in a row on opponents who had left themselves so vulnerable. She knocked the two men to

the ground, leaving them barely conscious. Jin and Galatt didn't hesitate to finish them off. Now, the Dawnswords had the advantage in both numbers and strength.

After that, Jin and Galatt kept the archers in check while Mennas and Leena turned their attention to the sorcerer.

Jin and Galatt couldn't run that fast due to their injuries, so they couldn't reach the archers to finish them off, but their slow approach was enough to keep them in check so Mennas and Leena could go on the attack. At the moment, they weren't having any problems deflecting the arrows that came towards them.

The archers knew that they'd be in trouble if they took their eyes off Jin and Galatt, so they couldn't just switch targets to Mennas and Leena. They'd fallen into a sort of stalemate, trying to distract the two women while keeping their distance from Jin and Galatt. But it didn't seem like this stalemate would last for very long...

Now that the sorcerer had no support from the rest of his team, he began to run backwards, firing off magic spells along the way. However, his magic completely missed Mennas and Leena, and actually obstructed his escape. Leena was able to easily block the spells, so the sorcerer had no other tricks up his sleeve. At that point, he should have just surrendered, but as Mennas approached him he grew frightened, and without the help of his companions began to panic so badly that the thought of surrender didn't even enter his mind.

As a result, Mennas attacked him and sent him flying through the air.

The sorcerer was now defeated, and Jin and the others were closing in on the two archers. They hurriedly threw down their bows and raised their hands in surrender.

"The Dawnswords are the victors!" the referee called. Half the audience cheered, while the other half sighed. The private room I was in was right below the audience seats, so it was quite noisy. It seemed like a lot more people than were expected had lost money on their bets. That meant that more people had bet on the opposing team. And although fewer people had bet on the

Dawnswords, they'd probably bet more money overall.

In any case, the Dawnswords had lived up to their reputation, and there was no major upset. The match had gone smoothly, resulting in their victory.

After the match was over, it was noisier than I'd imagined it would be, so I thought about going back to the dressing room. However, as the previous winners were up next, I decided to just hang in there and watch the next match.

However, I would come to regret that decision. That was because the previous winning team's victory was overwhelming—they won with such ease that I really gained nothing from observing their match.

The previous winning team comprised two warriors, two swordsmen, and two sorcerers. As soon as the ref called the start of the match, they each faced off with a member of the opposing team, and beat them with their very first blow.

I couldn't tell if that was because the team was just that strong, or their opponents were just that weak. The only worthwhile thing I learned was that the two sorcerers on this team were also skilled in close-quarters combat.

The next match would kick off the second round of battles. The first matchup was last year's runners-up versus Sagan Tamers A.

Honestly, I wanted to go get ready for my own match instead of watching this one, but I was curious about one of the runners-up, so I decided to stick around for a bit. The person I was interested in was a man of average height and average build who didn't look particularly strong, but I just got a strange feeling from him.

Agris and the others were already waiting inside the ring. His three grappler apes were checking the conditions of their weapons like humans would. One carried a sword, one a spear, and one a bow.

I wondered to myself, "Can monkeys use spears?" Just as that thought crossed my mind, the ape holding the spear began swinging it around, and I realized it was using the weapon more like a club than a spear. I wasn't sure if the ape could actually wield the spear properly or not, but I could hear the sound of the weapon whooshing through the air, and thought that a spear swung around by an ape would surely pack more of a punch than one wielded

by a human.

Next to the three grappler apes was a warrior wearing armor, who seemed annoyed that the opposing team was taking so long. I couldn't see his face from here, but I knew it to be Agris's grandson Ricky, who had been introduced to me the other day.

The opposing team consisted of a warrior, a sorcerer, and a creepy-looking man. Just when I thought they were going to start the match with just the three of them, the last guy pulled out a bag.

He hesitated, then brought a one-eyed giant—a cyclops—out of the bag. The giant was three-and-a-half meters tall, with a muscular body. Then, he took out a giant troll that was about the same height, but clearly weighed much more. The troll had a dumb look on its face. The two of them had collars on and wore simple clothing. They didn't have any weapons or armor.

According to the guild books, these monsters were both Rank B or above. Their attack power alone was comparable to monsters Rank A or higher. Because there were no suitable habitats for giants near the capital, they were quite rare. Cyclopes were mainly said to live in mountainous regions, while trolls liked to live in forests with low temperatures.

The audience erupted into cheers at the giants' sudden appearance. After all, when the two giants emerged from the bags and stood up, their heads came up to the same height as the audience's seats. Although there was still a good amount of distance between them, it was quite intimidating, and many members of the audience looked frightened.

However, from the perspective of Agris's team, they had a hard battle in front of them. After all, their opponents had won the first round with just three members while facing five opponents, and now, on top of that, they'd added two members with superhuman strength. Their chances of winning looked pretty slim.

However, Ricky was extremely enthusiastic. He had a smirk on his face and, for some reason, started taking off his armor. He took off his helmet and his shoulder pads so he was left only with his breastplate, armguards, and shin guards.

He instructed the three apes to throw the armor out of the way. Some of the armor flew towards the audience seats, but the sorcerers who were waiting in the audience seats put up a barrier to prevent the armor from hitting anyone.

For some reason, one of the apes who had almost hit the audience with the armor began to pose. I guessed it was some kind of appeal to let them know he was confident in his strength.

With a look of exasperation on his face, Agris knocked both Ricky and the ape on the head with his staff. The audience loved it and burst out laughing.

They were evenly matched in the preliminary skirmish, if that was what you could call this. Agris and the others had the disadvantage in terms of strength, however, so this match was going to be an interesting one to watch. At the very least, they didn't seem intimidated, and I thought we could expect to see a full display of their power.

The referee waited for the laughter to die down, then called the match to begin.

The opposing team was the first to make a move—the cyclops and the troll took up positions in the front with the warrior. Just the two giants moving together was quite impressive, and the sound of their footsteps alone was enough to excite the audience.

Their formation was three-one-one from the front. The cyclops and the troll both flanked the warrior, who was a few steps back from them. Then came the sorcerer, with the creepy tamer guy at the back. They were probably positioned this way to prevent the tamer from being defeated, which would have led to the disqualification of his followers.

Agris's team was in a similar formation. The ape with the sword and the ape with the spear were on either side in the front row with Ricky in the middle, but unlike his opponent, they were lined up side by side. Behind the warrior was the archer ape, and then behind that ape was Agris, holding his staff.

As soon as the referee stepped aside, the cyclops and troll stepped forward, the earth rumbling beneath their feet.

The archer ape fired several arrows, but that didn't stop the progress of the

two giants, although they did grimace a bit. The two apes in the front moved around to the sides of the giants and readied their weapons. This distracted the giants, and they came to a stop. Meanwhile, Ricky ran in and slashed at the troll's shin. Because the troll's body was so sturdy, he didn't take much damage, but the pain still made him scream.

The troll swung his arm down and tried to crush Ricky, but Ricky had already swiftly moved away, and this time he slashed the cyclops's shin. The troll's screams had flustered the cyclops, so he moved to dodge just before Ricky attacked. Because of this, Ricky only inflicted minor injuries, but now the cyclops's attention was on Ricky instead of the apes.

The ape armed with the sword jumped up and swung his weapon down at the cyclops's head. If this blow had landed, it could've been fatal, but he'd used the cyclops's torso as a stepping stone, so in the end, his blow was blocked by the giant's arm.

The cyclops then tried to swing his arms at the defenseless ape in the air, but the archer ape kept him in check, and he missed his attack. Because the troll was so slow, he was struggling at the mercy of the ape with the spear, who was very agile.

Up until this point, Agris and the others had the advantage. However, the opposing team seemed to have come to the realization that they were on the back foot, and the warrior and sorcerer left the Tamer behind to start attacking themselves.

However, at this point, something that the opposing team hadn't expected now happened. Agris, who had been waiting behind the apes, suddenly used magic. The power of the magic itself wasn't very high, but the nature of the spell was pretty creepy. He used Fire magic to shoot flames that looked like snakes, which coiled themselves around the cyclops and troll as well as the other approaching team members, almost like they were alive.

The flame-snakes wrapped themselves around the cyclops's and troll's faces. The two giants began to claw at their faces, trying to fight back against the fire serpents. They were able to extinguish the fire right away, but they had burn marks in the shape of the snakes all over their faces. Neither of them could

even open their eyes.

Now the apes struck. The cyclops and troll were flailing around, blindly. Their own warrior and sorcerer, who'd just come within range, were caught up in these attacks, and had to focus on dodging their comrades.

That gave Ricky and the ape with the sword a chance to make their approach without being noticed by anyone. By the time the warrior and sorcerer *did* notice they were heading towards the tamer, it was too late. Both Ricky and the ape were running at full speed towards him, with their swords drawn.

However, the moment the audience was convinced the battle was finally decided, another unexpected event occurred.

A stone pillar sprouted from beneath the tamer's feet to protect him from the swords. Then, another stone pillar struck the chests of his two assailants. Ricky and the ape with the sword were blown backwards, spitting liquid from their mouths. Luckily, they didn't end up near the cyclops, so they had avoided the worst-case scenario, but it now seemed like it would be impossible for them to make a comeback in this match.

The two giants had recovered their eyesight, and they, along with the warrior and sorcerer, began to attack Agris's team. Agris's team quickly recovered and survived this attack, but they couldn't hold out long.

The troll attacked the ape with the spear, knocking him to the ground, at which point Agris immediately surrendered.

The referee declared victory for the opposing team, but then the troll turned, heading for the fallen ape. It lifted its leg to stomp on the ape and finish it off, but the cyclops held it back at the order of their tamer. Still, it was clear the troll was intent on finishing off that ape.

As expected, the referee couldn't ignore such behavior, but since the troll hadn't actually landed its attack and it was possible it hadn't heard the ref's declaration, they got off with just a stern warning.

The ape with the spear got back to his feet after that, but Ricky and the ape with the sword, who had been struck by the tamer's stone pillar, had to be carried away on a stretcher. They were sitting up when the medics transferred

them to the stretchers, though, so their injuries didn't seem life-threatening.

"That tamer seems to have first-class sorcery skills, but he's just a second-class tamer!" Namitaro commented, after having watched the match with me.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What, you didn't notice? Those collars are the same ones you use on slaves. But those are much rarer. No wonder he can't control the troll."

According to Namitaro, the collars the giants wore weren't accessories, but rare magical items which allowed the user to put the target who wears the collar under his control. Certain conditions had to be met, and these conditions differed for each target, and Namitaro didn't know what these might be for the giants.

"That's why he's second-rate?"

"It took a while for them to respond to the tamer's orders, and that's because they're resisting him, since they're not obeying by their own free will. That's why they don't act immediately."

I was inadvertently impressed by Namitaro's knowledge. I asked him how he knew all this.

"A long time ago, I almost had one of those put around my neck! But the collar slipped and I escaped. By the way, I sank that guy to the bottom of the river! I still have the collar. Do you want it?"

"No!"

Regardless, Namitaro produced the collar. He said it was still in its original shape. "It's so old, it probably wouldn't even be effective against a goblin, though!"

"It sounds like you get caught and sold pretty often, huh?"

"There's still more to the story—do you wanna hear it?" It seemed like he really wanted to tell his story, but I shook my head. "What? You're no fun."

While we were talking, it looked like Marquis Sammons's team, the Demon Soldiers, had entered the ring, so I decided to go back to my dressing room and wait for a staff member to come get me. When I arrived back at my room, a

staff member hurriedly rushed in and asked me to go to the entrance of the arena. I went with him. It seemed the match was already over, which I thought was awfully quick, but it made sense once I remembered Gulliver was fighting.

The staff member checked me over, and then I entered the arena at the same time as the opposing team. As expected, the three members of the vanguard glared at me.

“The second match of the second round is Oracion versus Lohengrin!” The moment the ref called the match to order, the opposing team got into formation. I felt like they sprang into action pretty quickly, but this time the ref was fairly nimble, so he immediately retreated out of range after giving the signal. Perhaps the opponents had seen him at work in previous matches.

I felt like we were a bit late to the game now, but since my team wasn’t particular about our formation, we just started immediately rushing towards our targets. Shiromaru jumped out first, followed by Namitaro after a short delay. Solomon jumped up next. Rocket and I kept our eyes on each other as we moved behind the three.

“Graar!” Shiromaru pounced on the warrior to his right, who was clinging to his weapon.

“Take that!” Namitaro charged into the warrior on his left, propelled by a mysterious force.

Shiromaru opened his jaws, but his opponent quickly shifted and pulled his arm away, so Shiromaru ended up biting his sword and taking that away instead. The other warrior swung his sword as Namitaro charged him, but...

“Marseille Roulette!” The fish uttered a cryptic battle cry as he twirled sideways and knocked his opponent in the back. I’d never heard of any kind of spinning attack called the Marseille Roulette that looked like the move Namitaro just did, that was for sure. “Namitaro Sesame” probably would have been better.

“Damn i— Ughh!”

Before Namitaro’s opponent could turn around, Namitaro whacked him in the back again. The warrior fell forward. Seeing his comrade fall, the swordsman

slashed at Namitaro, but the fish spun and dodged just in time.

And then...

“Aaaahhhh!” A woman’s scream echoed throughout the venue. When I turned to look in the direction of the scream, I saw that Solomon was flying around in the sky, holding the archer’s leg in his mouth. Luckily, the archer didn’t have a skirt on, so she wasn’t exposing her panties to the audience. She had dropped her bow, though. I guessed she’d dropped it when Solomon had caught her in his mouth. She hung in midair and kicked at Solomon, but it wasn’t doing much damage. Obviously, it would be impossible for the archer’s dangling kick to surpass the attack power of the representative of the Dragon Strikers.

After the archer had kicked out at Solomon several times, the boot that Solomon was grasping in his mouth slipped off.

“Noooooooo!”

The archer fell headlong towards the ground. Solomon opened his mouth with a guilty look on his face and began to plunge downwards. He managed to catch the archer before she crashed into the ground, but then Solomon took one look at my expression, then lowered the archer to the edge of the arena.

She seemed to be unconscious, and was carried away by the medical staff.

When the archer fell, both sides had temporarily stopped fighting. Shiromaru went to try to catch the archer, and Rocket was even closer. So even if Solomon hadn’t been successful, the archer surely wouldn’t have been injured.

“Tenma! Watch out!” As I was staring at Solomon, I heard Namitaro’s voice, and several Air Balls whooshed towards me.

“That was a close one!”

The sorcerer must have caught me off guard, but it wasn’t important because I had already put up a magical barrier which deflected the Air Balls.

The magician looked surprised that I’d deflected his spell, but he immediately pulled himself together and began chanting another one. But he was too late. Namitaro was behind him, and Rocket and Shiromaru were on either side of

him.

“Damn it! What the hell are they doing?!” The sorcerer looked around for the swordsman and the warriors, but saw that they had all been knocked out by Namitaro—they were lying together in a heap on top of each other.

“Well, you see what happened to your comrades. What will you do? Give up?” I asked the sorcerer, but he ran towards me without answering. As he ran, he cast a Firestorm spell in an arc to protect his back, left, and right, but it didn’t work on the three surrounding him.

“Oof, aargh, ahh!” He thought he’d kept the three of them in check, so he let down his guard—then lost his balance when his legs became tangled in Rocket’s tentacles. As a result, he was knocked unconscious.

My role in this battle was over, but I glared at Solomon, who had gotten carried away because of his excitement.

“The winner is...Oracion!” The referee announced our victory. I could hear cheers from the audience, but I quickly left the ring so I could watch the next match.

The next match was between the Dawnswords and the winners of the previous tournament. Whoever won would face me in the next round. However...

“Jin and the others are gonna lose.” I offered my honest opinion when I went back into the same viewing area from before and took an objective look at their opponents

“Brrr, you’re cold, Tenma! Actually, I feel the same way you do!”

Both Namitaro and I thought that if both teams were in perfect condition, and even if the Dawnswords were outnumbered, they would be evenly matched. Unfortunately, however, Jin and Galatt were not fighting at full strength. Because of that, being outnumbered might now result in a difference in power that would be too much for them to overcome.

And unfortunately, my hunch was right.

In the early stages of the match, Jin’s team seemed to be pushing through, but somewhere in the middle, their opponents gained the upper hand, and by the end of the battle the Dawnswords were thoroughly overpowered, and lost.

By the time it was over, they were completely in the palms of their opponents’ hands. It seemed like the Dawnswords were fully aware of this fact, which they found even more frustrating than merely losing.

“No wonder they won the last tournament. They had control of Jin’s team the whole match,” Namitaro commented.

“Yeah, I think Jin and the others knew that too, but they had no recourse.”

The Dawnswords retreated from the ring looking pretty upset. That marked the end of their matches in this year’s tournament. In the end, they ended up getting eighth place in the team event. Jin got fourth in the individuals, and Galatt did a good job getting past the prelims. Objectively, I thought they were pretty great results, but at the same time I knew it probably frustrated them because they felt they could have done better.

As there were two matches remaining, I decided to take an hour-long break in my dressing room, and waited a bit before leaving so I wouldn’t run into the

Dawnswords. I thought I didn't really have anything to say to them since they were losers and I'd won all of my matches, but...

"Damn it! There was nothing good about that fight!"

"If only I'd been fighting at full strength..."

"It's Jin and Galatt's fault. Leena and I did nothing wrong."

"That's right! You guys need to take responsibility!"

I'd incorrectly assumed the Dawnswords were already in their dressing room, but for some reason they came straight over to mine after the match was done. I was a bit startled to see how cheerful they all were. Apparently they'd been so loud a staff member had yelled at them, which was why they'd come to my dressing room.

"Why are you so unusually upbeat? Aren't you upset that you lost?" I passed out cups of tea to the group.

Jin took a sip of his. "Of course we're upset. Even though they handed our asses to us, we did the best we could at the moment and lost. So we can't have any regrets about that. Anyway, we can't just mope around forever."

"Says the person who was the most depressed out of all of us," Galatt remarked, making Mennas and Leena burst out laughing.

"Oh, please! You know you're gonna be so upset tonight you won't even be able to sleep!"

As I saw them all bantering back and forth, I was relieved that they weren't too upset, but at the same time, I took that to mean I didn't have to walk on eggshells around them.

"I just now realized that I'll have to avenge you all, both in the individual competition and the team competition."

I'd be going up against Amur, who'd bested Jin and Galatt, and then the team who'd just beat the Dawnswords.

"Hey, I guess you're right. Jin and Galatt, you'll have to cheer Tenma on more than anyone!" Leena said. Neither Jin nor Galatt seemed too crazy about that idea.

We spent some time chatting, and then it was time for the first semifinal match to start.

“Well, I guess we should go get some rest. Good luck out there, Tenma.”

Since Jin and the others were going to return to their own waiting room, I decided to head to the viewing space again. I told them goodbye and started walking, then heard a loud noise from the direction they were headed. I figured it was Jin punching the wall. No matter how cheerful he wanted to come across, I knew he was still frustrated, and that it would be hard to get out of that mindset.

I passed a staff member who’d heard the noise and was rushing over to them. I shrugged and continued towards my destination without looking back. I was a bit worried about Jin and the others (they were definitely getting lectured by the staff) as I entered the viewing space. After a while, the Demon Soldiers entered the ring.

Gulliver emerged from his bag and seemed to be in good shape, swinging around a thick wooden stick to warm up. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that the key to the Demon Soldiers’ victory in this battle would be Gulliver’s success. Gulliver also seemed to realize this, and that was probably why he was so excited.

The opposing team was running a little behind, just like in the previous match, but the Demon Soldiers didn’t seem to mind. However, the audience was very noisy. Shortly after a roar came from the crowd, the opposing team entered. However, I only saw a Tamer and a sorcerer. I wondered if they’d had some kind of trouble with their warriors and that’s why they were missing. The rest of the crowd seemed to be wondering the same thing. But just then, the Tamer opened his bag.

A cyclops, a troll, and a wyvern emerged from the bag. Not only that, but while normal wyverns were about three to four meters in length, this one was well over five. In addition, ordinarily a wyvern was green, which could be of a lighter or darker shade depending on the individual, or it might change to a light red color due to mixed breeding, but this wyvern was a dark gray.

That must have meant this particular wyvern was either a subspecies or a

variant, but I couldn’t tell which.

“Have you ever seen something like that, Namitaro?”

“Why didn’t you use Identify before asking me? I’ve never seen one that big, but I spotted one that had the same kind of coloring a long time ago. I think that one is probably a variant.”

I was both surprised and impressed by Namitaro’s knowledge. But perhaps because it was so far away, Identify didn’t work. I told Namitaro that, and he gave me a look of exasperation.

“Come on, Tenma. You’ve been here for over a decade now, and you’re still not used to how to use it? You have to activate Identify while focusing magical energy into your eyes when you look at your target. Kind of like focusing a telescope. Once you get used to it, you’ll be able to focus that ability just as well as your eyes.”

I went ahead and tried it out according to Namitaro’s instructions. It didn’t work at first, but after I tried it several times, I finally got the hang of it.

Name: Wyvern

Class: Wyvern Variant



The result I got from Identify was very simple, but for the time being I considered it a success. I then realized that the Tamer didn’t seem to have

much affection for his follower. The wyvern's name was just Wyvern—that's what the Tamer must have called it.

Just to check, I tried using Identify on the cyclops and troll as well, and their names turned out to be Cyclops and Troll.

"If that guy catches me, he's gonna change my name to 'Koi,' isn't he?!"

Setting aside the fact that I wouldn't really have classified Namitaro as a koi, this Tamer seemed to be the type who regarded his followers as nothing more than tools.

The audience was very excited by the appearance of the new follower. In a big city like the capital, you'd only be able to see a wyvern—either kept as a follower or slain by an adventurer—a few times a year. It was a type of monster most Tamers aspired to tame. The audience knew this, so although they were excited, they weren't as excited as when they'd seen Solomon.

At any rate, having a wyvern in the fight put the Demon Solders at an immediate disadvantage. If it had just been the cyclops and troll, Gulliver and the knights could have worked in tandem to have a good chance of winning, but now that there was a flying enemy, it was an entirely different story.

That was because none of the Demon Soldiers were capable of aerial combat, and in the worst-case scenario, the wyvern could attack all of them from the air at once.

Since the knights served the marquis, they had probably been trained in magic to some extent. However, that wyvern looked too strong to be defeated with normal attack magic, and I didn't think it would descend close enough to come within range of their physical attacks.

From everything I'd seen so far, it seemed like Gulliver was stronger and smarter than the cyclops and troll. But he wouldn't be able to overwhelm them single-handedly. Now, if this wasn't an arena but an open field with obstacles on it, and if there wasn't a time limit, then Gulliver might be able to do something. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Even Marquis Sammons, the leader of the Demon Soldiers, looked worried as he stayed close to the edge of the ring.

Just then, the referee called the match to begin.

At the signal, the wyvern took flight and the cyclops and troll stepped forward to form a wall in front of the team. It didn't seem like they would switch up this formation. The only difference from what we'd seen before was that the mutant wyvern was in the sky over where the warriors had been last time, giving it an irregular 3-1-1 feel.

Meanwhile, the Demon Soldiers' formation had Gulliver at the front, with the knights arranged in two lines slightly behind him. Once the referee left the field, the Demon Soldiers began to move forward while maintaining their formation.

The opposing team intercepted any attacks, and the wyvern variant spewed fireballs as if to test the Demon Soldiers' response. The fireballs were about forty centimeters in diameter, and although they seemed fairly powerful, it did take the wyvern several seconds to continuously spew them out.

The Demon Soldiers dodged the first and second shots by moving to the left and right, but the third looked like it might be a direct hit because it was fired from such a close distance. However, Gulliver knocked away the incoming fireball with his club. At first, I thought the blow had shattered his club, but it looked like it was only surface damage. Half of the club had peeled away to expose the dark metal within.

Apparently, Gulliver's club was not made entirely of wood, but had a metal rod inside. I wondered if it was magic iron. I suppose it made sense that if any metal could withstand Gulliver's power, it would at least have to be as strong as that.

Once the Tamer saw that Gulliver had blocked the spell, he immediately instructed the cyclops and the troll to attack. Perhaps he thought it wouldn't be a great idea to let Gulliver approach him with that thick weapon.

I had a feeling that the Tamer thought Marquis Sammons wouldn't waste money on the weapons used by his followers. After all, that Tamer hadn't even given his own followers weapons. He probably thought it was silly to spend money on weapons for followers he thought of as tools, so I wondered if he might assume the other party had the same mindset.

As Namitaro had said, if he was a second-rate Tamer, that was very possible.

What's more, they didn't seem to be cooperating at all even when they attacked. The Tamer just raised his arms to direct them, without issuing any proper orders.

For that reason, since the troll was already slow, a gap opened up between them, such that the battle at the moment just looked like it was the cyclops versus the Demon Soldiers—basically, one challenger versus five.

The moment the cyclops got close to Gulliver, the knights behind Gulliver leapt out from both sides. The cyclops was temporarily distracted, his attention drawn to the knights.

Gulliver didn't let this opportunity escape, and rammed into the monster. The cyclops was thrown backwards and collided with the troll, bringing it down as well.

The two of them were all tangled up as they tried to get to their feet, and Gulliver attempted to attack them. However, the wyvern flying through the air overhead blocked him. Then Gulliver tried to attack the wyvern by using his club to deflect the fireballs, but the wyvern flew out of range before this counterattack landed.

The knights who had left Gulliver's protection split up into two pairs, one pair casting spells while the other protected them from the opponents' magic. They moved in a group to try to get closer to the other team, but they couldn't get very near due to the Tamer and the sorcerer's offensive magic.

While the knights were struggling, the cyclops and troll recovered and turned to face the knights. However, Gulliver kicked the troll just as it turned around. The slow-moving troll was—obviously—slow to respond to Gulliver's approach, and rolled several times across the ground. Yet this didn't seem to do much damage, and it quickly got back to its feet.

Meanwhile, the moment Gulliver kicked the troll, the cyclops pounced on him. Gulliver defended with his hands, but it just so happened that the blow landed while he was still standing on just one leg, so Gulliver was also knocked to the ground.

As Gulliver rolled, the cyclops tried to stomp on him. Gulliver dodged while he kept rolling, using the momentum in his favor to leap to his feet.

Meanwhile, the wyvern variant used that opportunity to face off against the knights, putting them in serious trouble. Thankfully, Gulliver had kept his grip on his club even while rolling, and he now hurled it at the wyvern.

The wyvern was spewing fireballs at the knights, and since it had its back to Gulliver, it didn't see the club hurtling towards it. The club flew through the air and smacked right into the base of the wyvern's tail, letting out a dull *thunk.*

The sudden impact made the wyvern scream, and although it lost its balance, it somehow managed to recover and didn't crash-land. However, unlike before, it was no longer flying steadily—it seemed it had taken quite a bit of damage.

The knights had been flanked by the opposing team for a little while, but Gulliver had quickly dispatched his enemies, and the wyvern was no longer spewing out fireballs with as much speed. Therefore, the Demon Soldiers had neither taken a direct hit nor incurred that much damage.

As the followers kept up their barrage of attacks, they all headed towards Gulliver, which meant he had to fight three at once. However, this development was actually to the Demon Soldiers' advantage; the knights didn't have to support him.

This made the Tamer panic, and he tried to call out to just the cyclops. However, since they were so far away from each other, the cyclops didn't hear him. The Tamer clicked his tongue in frustration, then teamed up with the sorcerer to use attack magic on the knights who were closing in on them from either side. But unlike before, the knights had split into two groups, making it harder for them to land hits. Not only that, but the knights were also moving faster than before.

The knights seemed to know it was now or never, so they paid no mind to the small amounts of damage they were taking as they forced their way forward. Their swords approached the Tamer and the sorcerer.

Meanwhile, Gulliver, who was taking on the three followers, put on a ferocious show. Instead of attacking all three at the same time, he concentrated his attacks on the cyclops, while being careful not to let the troll hit him. He approached them, then drew back, dancing in and out of range over and over again, being very careful to maintain a certain amount of distance between

himself and his enemies.

The wyvern had only Gulliver in its sights—so far, it didn't seem to be heading for the knights, and didn't seem to care much about the distance between them either.

However, the earlier attack against the wyvern had weakened it, and it was slower than before. Its head appeared to be bleeding, and its attacks were sloppy. It hadn't reached the point where he was accidentally shooting fireballs at his own comrades, but that might only have been a matter of time.

Gulliver focused his attacks on the cyclops, and they got into a fistfight. But of course, Gulliver had the advantage when it came to brawling, and the cyclops wasn't able to land any hits on him. He just took the brunt of Gulliver's assault, and ended up accumulating a lot of damage.

The cyclops began to wobble on his feet, and just as the three followers were roughly lined up, Gulliver made his move. He punched the staggering cyclops with all his might and sent him rolling, then ran towards the troll, kicked off the ground, and landed on the troll with all his might, stomping it to the ground. Then he leapt off the troll and struck the wyvern variant in the sky. Gulliver's fist caught the wyvern right in the face, and it crashed to the ground with a scream.

Then, Gulliver managed to land cleanly on his feet and began running towards the knights to give them backup, ignoring the three flailing followers behind him.

After seeing his followers defeated in an instant, the Tamer began to panic. He left the knights to the sorcerer while focusing his attention on Gulliver. He began to throw rocks at Gulliver, who dodged the ones that could be dodged, and knocked down the ones he couldn't avoid with his fist. The Tamer created several twenty-centimeter-thick stone walls in front of Gulliver with Stone Wall to buy time, but Gulliver smashed those with his fists as well.

Gulliver's maddening attacks thrilled the audience with a sense of fear, which only made them more excited. However, he wasn't unscathed. He'd already been through a fistfight with a cyclops, fended off attacks from a wyvern variant, and had knocked back a troll. His body was wounded, and his mind was

exhausted. After he busted through the stone wall, his fists began to bleed as he continued knocking back the stones. It looked very painful.

If he were in a better position, he might have been able to avoid the Tamer's magic, even if it meant taking a detour in his approach. But he was punching through them because he was nearing the limit of his strength. He was growing impatient. And that impatience created a big opportunity for the enemy. The moment he knocked down the last wall the Tamer had created, his body pitched forward. His back was on fire. It all happened so fast that the knights were thrown into shock and began scrambling.

Gulliver collapsed, and the fireballs continued barreling towards him. He rolled across the ground to try to dodge, but there were so many of them that it was clear his stamina was running dry.

After the wyvern made sure Gulliver was down, it slowly stood up and began to flap its wings. I wasn't sure if its earlier weakness was just an act or if maybe it had just recovered, but now it was once again a dangerous foe.

The wyvern soared up into the sky, gliding towards Gulliver so it could ram into him. Gulliver quickly got up, but his knees were trembling so bad he wasn't able to dodge this attack.

Two of the knights had raced to assist Gulliver, but the sorcerer attacked now, blocking them. The Tamer also started to attack the other knights, stopping them in their tracks. Moreover, the troll now got back to its feet and approached Gulliver, making the ground tremble. The cyclops was still defeated, but it was becoming clear that the end of the Demon Soldiers was drawing near.

For a moment, the knights hesitated about whether they should go to Gulliver's side or defeat the Tamer, so they lost momentum. As for Gulliver, he was badly wounded and exposed to the wyvern's fierce attacks, so he was in a precarious state.

Just then, the wyvern flew a distance away. Timing its movements with the troll's, it dive-bombed Gulliver.

Realizing what the wyvern meant to do, Gulliver twisted himself to avoid it, but he was a little too late. The wyvern barreled into Gulliver at full speed and

bit into his left arm, ripping it from his shoulder and filling the air with fresh blood. As Gulliver screamed, the troll attacked him without hesitation.

You could hear shrieks from the audience as the bloodied and battered Gulliver collapsed. The pain from his shoulder seemed too intense for him to even faint, and he was writhing in agony. He was bleeding so profusely I was afraid he might bleed to death. The wyvern variant circled around him and was about to attack again, but then the referee put a stop to it.

“The match is over! The winner is Dendrobates!” the referee declared louder than I’d ever heard him speak before. It seemed like Marquis Sammons had told the referee they wanted to surrender.

The Tamer appeared to order the attacks to stop, and the wyvern flew up and began circling in the sky. However, the troll didn’t seem to register the command, and continued to approach Gulliver.

The knights started running, but they were too far away to make it in time. The moment the troll got within a few meters of Gulliver, however, suddenly it began to writhe in pain. Clutching its neck, it looked over at the Tamer.

“He used it,” Namitaro muttered, looking at the troll.

“Used what?”

“That’s the same as a slave’s collar, and there must be a mechanism that responds to the master’s magical energy that he can use to strangle his follower. Unlike slave collars, however, you can’t do anything complicated with it, and you have to infuse it with quite a bit of magical energy, but it basically uses pain to get the follower to listen to its master.”

To some extent, a slave collar could be imbued with various settings (such as “do not harm to your master,” “obey your master’s commands,” and so on), and if the slave wearing the collar broke any of those rules, then the collar would tighten and strangle them. However, the collar the troll was wearing didn’t seem to work exactly like that. Instead, the master infused it with magical energy, and the creature wearing it was not strangled by physical strength, but by magical power. Depending on how much magical energy the collar had been infused with, it was even possible to instantly kill the wearer.

With regard to the suffering troll, the Tamer continued infusing the collar with magical energy to once again give it orders. Now that the troll registered those orders, it crawled away from Gulliver.

At that moment, Marquis Sammons ran over to Gulliver. He clung to his ogre in a panic.

Several staff members pulling something like a wagon followed the marquis and tried to get Gulliver onto it, but he was just too big for them to manage.

“I’ll be right back.” I let Namitaro take care of things for the time being and headed towards the arena, pulling medicine out of my bag.

On the way there, a staff member tried to stop me, but when I told him Marquis Sammons had asked for my help, he let me pass. I had a feeling they were aware of the relationship between me and the marquis. They might’ve even heard about it days before the tournament had begun.

I ran over to Gulliver. The marquis looked surprised to see me. I gave a short explanation, then started treating him.

“Can you save Gulliver?!” The marquis was very agitated. I knew it was disrespectful, but I half-ignored him, instead barking out orders to the knights while I continued with the treatment.

First, I cast magic on Gulliver to numb his pain so I could take a look at his wound. It was worse than I thought. Since the wyvern had bitten his arm off, the wound was jagged, and since he’d rolled across the ground so much, it was filthy. Not only that, but I was certain the wyvern’s mouth was teeming with bacteria, so I was really worried about an infection.

First, I washed the wound with clean water (using Water magic) to remove any visible dirt. Just in case, I disinfected it with antidote magic and high-purity alcohol. The purpose of the alcohol was to sterilize the wound, but it seemed like it stung quite a bit, as Gulliver began to flail wildly in pain. Because of that, the knights had to restrain him. But once Gulliver realized what I was doing, he calmed down and didn’t injure himself further.

Next, I put the torn-off arm back onto his shoulder, carefully adjusted its position, then reconnected it with magic. I tried to connect it from the inside as

much as possible, but since the wound was so tattered and hard to see, in the worst case he might not have been able to move his arm. But after I finished, I saw him move his fingers, so it seemed that I'd safely connected the nerves.

After that, I tied a clean cloth around his shoulder and made a sling that went around his neck, just like you'd use for a broken bone. As a finishing touch, I gave Gulliver a blood booster, some medicine that would prevent infection, and some pain medication.

The drugs were of natural origin, and I'd taken those same combinations myself several times, so I didn't expect there to be any problem with him taking them all at once.

"I don't think his life is in danger for the time being. But be prepared that he could get an infection," I said to the marquis, once I was finished with treatment.

I was surprised to see that he had tears running down his face. "Thank you! Thank you so much! I swear I'm going to repay you for this!" He firmly grasped my hand and violently shook it up and down as he expressed his gratitude. After he'd shaken my hand about a dozen times, he hurried back over to Gulliver.

Gulliver's pain seemed to have eased considerably thanks to my treatment, and he was able to move on his own to a certain extent.

The marquis tried to haul Gulliver out on the wagon by himself, but the knights stopped him, and then together with the staff members they were able to wheel him out of the arena. I followed them to the entrance, and once we got there, a referee gave me an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, but could you wait here, Tenma? Your match is just about to start."

It had been my decision to treat Gulliver, and the match couldn't be postponed due to my own personal reasons, so he asked if I would wait here for Namitaro and the others to arrive.

I wasn't that tired myself, so I didn't have any complaints about this decision; however, the referees seemed concerned. I told them it was only natural and that I didn't mind, and handed over my magic bag.

As I waited for Namitaro and the others to arrive, the other team entered the arena and stepped into the ring. Namitaro and the others brought up the rear.

“Thanks for your hard work, Tenma! I’m glad you saved Gulliver!” Namitaro was very enthusiastic as he led the way for us to face off against the other team. Then, the referee called the match to begin.

“Second match of the preliminary rounds: Oracion versus the Blue Hornets! Begin!”

After the referee gave the signal for the match to begin, we all moved at once.

The opposing team was the winners of the last tournament, and had been strong enough to beat the Dawnswords, even though they weren't fighting at full power. I had a feeling they probably had the best teamwork in the tournament. The composition of the team was the same as before: two warriors, one swordsman, and two sorcerers, with the swordsman behind the sorcerers.

Having the swordsman in the back made their formation unusual, but this was probably some sort of countermeasure against our speed, if we managed to circle around behind the sorcerers.

They weren't exactly young—instead, they had the air of being experienced, veteran fighters. Without a doubt, they were the strongest team I'd fought in this tournament. If I wasn't careful, Shiromaru and Solomon could suffer some serious injuries. As for Rocket, I thought he would probably be fine as long as he transformed into his emperor form.

"Tenma, our opponents seem to be stronger than I thought they'd be. What should we do? If we just charge at them, we'll certainly win, but we might take a lot of damage in the process."

It seemed like Namitaro agreed that we were up against some formidable opponents.

"Hm, let's see. Let's try a little trick. Shiromaru! Solomon!" I called my two followers, who were ready to spring into action, and let them do the tricks I'd come up with.

"Firewall!"

Since the sorcerers on the other team had taken the initiative and used magic, I decided to deploy a firewall to protect ourselves and conceal our whereabouts. The sorcerers used Fireball and Air Cutter, both of which emphasized speed over power, so they couldn't penetrate through my magic.

"Waterball!"

Next, I created ten huge balls of water around me.

The audience cheered when they saw that our match had begun with a magical shoot-out.

My opponents seemed unable to see the water balls due to the wall of fire, so the sudden cheering put them on guard. I could sense that they'd both increased their magical energy output, ready to fire off magic at any time.

"Go!" I threw the water balls towards the firewall I'd made. They struck the rising flames, extinguishing them and creating a field of water vapor around the ring.

"Shiromaru and Solomon! Go on and play!" I gave instructions to Shiromaru and Solomon at the same time. The moment they heard my orders, they split up left and right and circled around our opponents.

The warriors weren't flustered when they saw Shiromaru and Solomon suddenly jump out, and prepared to protect the sorcerers. The sorcerers didn't shoot magic at my two followers either; they kept their focus on me.

Shiromaru zigzagged, occasionally glancing at the opponents, while Solomon flew about one to two meters overhead, circling in the sky while he kept his eye on the other team. The moment they came up beside the warriors, they suddenly increased their speed and passed right by. The opponents hadn't expected that and paused for a moment, but once they noticed, they quickly moved into a defensive stance.

The instant they did so, a bullet was already heading towards them, cutting right through the steam.

"It's coming! Intercept it! Once we defeat the Tamer, it's all over!" the swordsman in the back called to his comrades, before turning towards Shiromaru and Solomon, who they thought would attack them.

But instead, what appeared before the cautious warriors was...

"Did ya think I was gonna be Tenma? Too bad! It's-a-me! Namitaro!"

...Namitaro, skating across the ground at high speed.

"What?!"

“Look sharp! He’s coming at us from somewhere!” The swordsman who had ordered his comrades to intercept stopped moving for a moment when Namitaro appeared. Namitaro slipped past the warriors, heading straight for the swordsman.

The swordsman dodged Namitaro, who was charging at high speed, but this caused him to take his eyes off Shiromaru and the others.

“Whoops! Watch out for the wolf and the dragon!”

At these words, our other four opponents reflexively looked at Shiromaru and the others, but Shiromaru and Solomon were running all over the place, chasing each other.

“Argh!”

“Oof!”

By the time the swordsman heard the groans of his comrades and turned around, the warrior and the two sorcerers were already down. The culprit...was me.

“Where did you come from?!” the swordsman roared at me, furious that I’d defeated his comrades. I thought it would have been wiser for him to look out for himself rather than asking me questions, but he might just have been in shock since it had all been so sudden.

So, I decided to answer his question.

“From above.” I pointed towards the sky.

The trick I’d mentioned before was using Shiromaru and Solomon’s playful actions to put them on guard and distract them. I’d then had Namitaro feint by pretending to be the main event, using that opportunity to fly up into the sky while concealing myself in the steam. The goal of my attack was to reduce their strength.

But there was more to this trick.

“Fireba— *COUGH!*”

“What’s wro— *COUGH!*”

The two who had been about to attack me were drawn into the huge mass of water that appeared behind them, and began choking and coughing.

“Hey! What’s going on?! Damn it—a slime!”

Only now, the swordsman seemed to remember I had a slime on my team.

Rocket had turned into his emperor form and was dragging along two of them. Originally he’d intended to hang back and just give the other followers backup, but then he saw an opportunity and went for it. And as a result, it seemed the match was decided.

By the way, Rocket had sneakily ridden in on Namitaro’s back to move into position.

“It’s not over yet!”

Brandishing his weapon, the swordsman ran towards me. He completely ignored Shiromaru and Solomon, whom he’d been focused on this whole time—his goal appeared to be a one-on-one match with me.

Shiromaru and Namitaro were about to attack him from behind, but I took out my sword and held it at the ready.

“Shiromaru and Namitaro! Let me handle it!”

At my words, they both froze.

“That confidence is gonna kill you!” The swordsman slashed with both his swords. He seemed slightly less skilled than Chaos was.

If the other members were similarly capable, then it made sense that they’d won last year’s championship. Especially since they hadn’t entered the individual tournament, instead competing in the team event in perfect condition.

However, this swordsman seemed to be used to fighting in coordination with his comrades rather than fighting on his own. What’s more, he seemed to be thinking about defeating me before his comrades had been knocked down. His attacks were sloppy because he was so flustered. Perhaps because of that and the fact that I’d fought really strong opponents in the individual matches, it felt somewhat unsatisfactory.

“What’s wrong? Thought you were gonna kill me,” I said casually, deliberately trying to provoke him while I dodged all his attacks.

“Arrghh... Hah!” The provocation seemed to make him regain his composure. His movements were sharper now than they had been before.

Halfway through, the swordsman stopped dual-wielding and switched from large swings to small, sharp jabs, fighting a lot tougher that way. Still, I didn’t feel like I was going to lose. Since my opponent had calmed down, I couldn’t let down my guard. Eventually, it felt like he was on par with Chaos.

I gradually increased the speed of my attacks, and once he was unable to keep up with me, I knocked his swords out of his hands.

“You got me. I surrender.” Disarmed, the swordsman raised both hands while I pointed the tip of my blade at his throat.

“That’s enough! The winner is...Oracion!”

The small tricks I’d come up with had been more effective than I’d thought, and we’d been able to win without taking any injuries. This had also probably been because the other party had read too much into my tricks. But if they had come out like the Dragon Strikers, who had charged ahead while ignoring the threat of small injuries, or a team like Jin’s who was familiar with me, my tricks might not have been as effective.

In other words, these gimmicks were more effective against teams who thought about strategy, and less effective against those who were all brawn with no brains.

At any rate, today’s match was over, and all that was left was the finals in three days. I waved to the audience and thought about what I’d do on my days off.

I decided I’d spend two days recovering. There were also things I wanted to do and had to do, like procuring new weapons, browsing the shops and food vendors, and so on. I was sad I only had two days to do all that.

Products were often replaced or sold out in a day, especially at the food stalls and shops, so all the great bargains sold out quickly.

Also, this is a digression, but it seemed like I had set several new records in this tournament.

First, I was the youngest player to ever advance to the individual finals (the second youngest of the team competition), the youngest to advance to the finals in both the individual and team competitions, and had won an individual match in the shortest time ever (against Oggo).

But the ultimate record I set was that I was the first third-generation person to advance to the finals (as my parents and then a grand-uncle had previously made it to the finals).

I'd heard that Mom, Dad, and the king's team had won before, but apparently Gramps had also won the individual competition. My parents only won once, but apparently Gramps won twice in a row. After that, he got tired of competing, so his streak had come to an end.

I wondered if these records would be valid since I was adopted, but apparently, since I'd been raised by them as a baby, and since adoption was common in this world, particularly for aristocrats, it wasn't out of the ordinary.

Part Seven

“Gramps... It seems we have a lot of relatives all of a sudden.”

“Oh? Want me to get rid of them?” Although Gramps had just said something rather disturbing, to be honest, I almost agreed with him.

On the first day of my break, dozens of people gathered outside our mansion. If they were just gawkers, it would have been one thing. But that wasn’t the case—and this was all *their* fault.

There were all kinds of people out there. There was a man who looked like a dirty beggar, and a woman who looked like a prostitute with gaudy makeup smeared on her face. There was a very plump merchant dressed in expensive clothes, and a mercenary who didn’t look like he could kill a fly. There were also nobles who looked like they were down in the dumps, and some who looked like idiots.

They were all scammers who claimed to either be my parents, or else somehow related to me.

The commotion had started when I’d left the venue to go home after finishing the semifinals yesterday. After the match was done, I received a letter from the staff explaining the procedures for the finals, and then, even though I left the venue much later than the audience, I was approached by a man and woman claiming to be my “real parents.”

They must’ve received my information from somewhere and approached me, trying to get money out of me. At the time, I thought it would be taken care of because I told the security guards near the venue about it, but this morning I felt a suspicious presence near the mansion gates, and woke up to find an enormous group of scammers (self-proclaimed relatives) there.

After I’d returned to the mansion yesterday, I told Gramps about the scammers, but I hadn’t expected them to all suddenly camp out outside our house. Not only that, but they were all claiming to be my parents or other relatives and shouting about how they wanted to take me in. I was approaching my limit.

Currently, the gatekeeper and security golems were standing side by side inside the gate, so none of them had been stupid enough to break in, and as far as I was concerned, anyone who tried should be arrested as a criminal. But I *did* think there was one person stupid enough to show up right now.

Anyway, I had a feeling either myself or Gramps would end up destroying the scammers if we went near them, so I asked Rocket and Shiromaru to deliver a letter to the castle. The nearby guard station would've worked too, but I thought the quickest and surest way to get help was to ask the most powerful person in the kingdom.

Besides, Rocket and Shiromaru were well known in the castle, so I figured someone in the royal family would notice their being around. Worst-case scenario, Rocket would be able to sneak in without the guards noticing and hand over the letter to the king.

It had been about an hour and a half since they'd left, so if all went well, I could probably expect them to come home in an hour or so. However, Rocket and Shiromaru did a better job than I expected, and the king seemed to have acted swiftly as well. Rocket was back thirty minutes sooner than I'd expected.

"Good job. You delivered the letter?" I asked. Just then, I sensed movement outside the gates.

"Don't let anyone escape! I don't care if you hurt them, as long as you don't kill them!"

I was surprised to see that Dean was the person shouting. Edgar and Kriss were also there. Furthermore, it seemed that not only the royal guard, but other knights were present as well. Even though they were in the middle of the city on horseback, it almost looked like they were here to destroy something rather than help. There were around two hundred knights, who were the most elite warriors in the kingdom, and they quickly rounded up and arrested all the scammers outside the gates. They tied them up and gagged them, and then Dean stood in front of the gatekeeper golem.

Since Dean was a member of the royal family, he had been given free access to our mansion, so the golem opened the gate and let him pass. (We had instructed the golems to only let Dean pass, just in case the king wanted to shirk

his responsibilities to come hang out at our house again.)

Once Gramps and I saw Dean walking towards us, we rushed out to greet him.

“I apologize for disturbing you, Master Merlin. I know it may be uncomfortable, but please accompany me over there so that we may confirm something.” Dean spoke in a formal tone as he led us before the gate so that we could look at the arrested scammers. “Do you recognize any of these people?” he asked, to which both Gramps and I shook our heads. “Very well then. Hey! Take them away and throw them in jail!”

“Yes, sir!”

Dean called out orders to the knights who were nearby, and a few dozen of them rounded up the scammers and took them away. The remaining knights were instructed to patrol the perimeter of the mansion. But then, more onlookers who had been watching from afar began to crowd around, listening in with great interest.

“Actually, we received information recently that a group of criminals had been loitering about, so we were on special alert. Early this morning, we heard from nearby residents that a strange group was crowding around the mansion and causing a commotion. We received instructions from the king to arrest them, but we didn’t know it was Master Merlin’s mansion.”

Dean explained all of this loudly, in a voice that could be heard by those around him, to make sure they knew the information had come from a third party and that the orders came directly from the king.

Of course, this was just a front—clearly, he had been dispatched by my request because of the letter I’d sent, but there were quite a few people who would have found the idea of a participant in the tournament directly contacting the king problematic, hence the lying.

“Thank you so much for your help. With the finals coming up, it was a huge distraction having them make such a commotion in front of the gates.” I thanked Dean in an exaggerated manner.

“I have a message from the queen,” Dean went on, in a voice so low only Gramps and I could hear it. “She says the next time idiots like this appear, you

can arrest them yourselves. She'll take responsibility and take care of them herself. She was pretty angry, and said to please come visit her once the tournament is over." He looked very serious, so I could imagine how mad she must've been. I promised I would definitely go see her after the tournament.

"Yeah, go ahead and do that. Well, we'll be off, but I'll send some guards over here to periodically patrol until the tournament is over. Unfortunately, I can't have any stationed here permanently, so please use caution when entering or leaving the premises. And if you are attacked, please try not to kill the culprit. I will report the incident to His Majesty and the Minister of Military Affairs and other related parties, so I think it's highly likely that it would be ruled a crime committed in self-defense, but there would still be a lot of paperwork and investigation involved, which would be pretty difficult..." Dean said this loudly for the benefit of the onlookers, then went back with the remaining knights.

"I'm pretty old, so I'm not sure if I can hold back when I'm threatened...!" Gramps announced, clearly expressing to the crowd that he had no intention of holding back. He took a large staff from the bag beneath his robe and began jabbing the stone pavement with it. The stones made a loud noise and shattered, and several people who'd heard the sound left in a panic, looking terrified.

"Looks like you've still got it, Gramps."

"Those scammers are like cockroaches. If you see one, you should expect to find thirty more."

I hoped that the high-quality insect repellent the royal family had just dispatched would work, but you know what they say—there's no remedy for true idiocy.

At any rate, I'd been given permission to use force next time, and we had every intention of doing so.

"You guys are both looking really sinister..." The expressions Gramps and I were wearing seemed to freak Namitaro out. We managed to wipe those looks off our faces just in time to greet Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha, who'd rushed over to see how we were once they'd heard about the commotion.

When Grandpa explained the situation, the two of them seemed to get

annoyed and quite angry. Not only did they feel protective over me because I was Ricardo and Celia's child, but also I was a child from Kukuri Village. Plus, they were actually my relatives, so they were very offended that these scammers were claiming to be related to me. They said they would let the other former Kukuri Villagers know about the scammers and tell them to keep an eye out, then ran off to go do that.

I had a feeling word of today's commotion would spread quickly through the capital, so I hoped no more scammers would appear. It wasn't until then that I'd truly considered the idea that there might be someone in this world who was biologically related to me. Ultimately, the odds were pretty slim, but I was still curious.

Plus, I was also curious about why the gods had left me in that particular place as a baby. I decided I should ask them about it someday.

"Well, now that the scammers have disappeared, I'm going to the weapons shop. I told everyone else to stay here, but just in case, give Jeanne and the others these golem cores. I taught them how to activate them before, so they should be fine."

I took several golem cores from my bag and handed them to Gramps. These cores were for combat golems. Just one of them would be enough to take on several first-rate knights at once, giving Jeanne and the others enough time to run away.

"You're not going to take them with you?"

"If more scammers show up and cause trouble, I don't think I'll be able to run away with both of them in tow. I don't want to get them involved, and it's better for them to not have to worry about this stuff, if I can help it."

Gramps seemed convinced by my reasoning, and went back inside the mansion. Shiromaru and Solomon wanted to go with me, but that would have caused a different type of commotion, so I told them that if they were good, I'd bring them back a souvenir. They both sat down and began to drool.

Rocket and Namitaro hadn't wanted to come along from the start, but they seemed to be expecting souvenirs nonetheless. Just then, I noticed Jeanne and Aura were peeping at us from behind the front door.

“I’ll buy souvenirs for everyone, so just don’t leave the house!” I called out to Jeanne and Aura. They seemed slightly disappointed I wasn’t taking them, but they both waved back at me.

I walked through the gate and left. Once the remaining onlookers saw me coming out, they scurried away. I ignored them and started walking towards my destination, but not even five minutes had passed before I saw someone running towards me.

I crossed the street so they wouldn’t bump into me, but apparently they weren’t just in a hurry to get somewhere—they were in a hurry to get to me. They also crossed the street and continued to approach.

I braced myself, thinking that it must be another scammer. The onlookers who were still near the mansion must’ve thought the same thing because they began to make a commotion again.

But luckily, I was just being overly paranoid. The person running towards me turned out to be a woman...a woman I recognized, actually.

“Hello. You seem to be in a hurry. Can I help you with something?” I asked. The woman was actually one of the dwarves who worked at Kelly’s weapon shop.

“I’m so glad I caught you! Actually, we received an order intended for you at the shop, and I was told to come tell you it was done.”

“An order meant for me? What does that mean?” I certainly hadn’t made any such order, and that doubt must’ve been apparent in my voice.

“Well, I’m not supposed to say who it’s from, but...I’ll tell you anyway. The person who ordered the weapon for you was the archduke.”

I had no idea why the archduke would have done such a thing for me. Sure, we had gotten to know each other fairly well, but it was so sudden that I was quite bewildered. She said that if I came to the shop, Kelly would tell me more details. Since I was headed there anyway, I went along with her.

“Oh! There you are. Here’s what you ordered. Go ahead and try it out.”

The moment I opened the door, Kelly was there holding a sword for me. The

sword was completely black, with a blade about eighty centimeters long and a hilt about forty centimeters long. It was a little smaller than the adamantine sword I had returned to the archduke before, but it seemed to be its equal in terms of quality. However, what really stood out was that the sides of the blade were engraved with dragons from the base to the middle, and the grooves were filled with white metal, making it look like a work of art.

After checking it over, I swung it several times, switching between my right and left hands, then tried it with both hands. “It has a good balance, and it’s fairly easy to swing for its size,” I told her.

Because it was made of adamantine, it was heavier than iron swords of the same size. However, it was lighter than the other adamantine sword, so it didn’t pose me any particular problem.

“I’m glad to hear it! Well, let me make some minor adjustments and then you can have it!” Kelly took the sword from me and removed the cloth wound around it. She lined up several materials she had prepared in advance before me.

“I’m going to wrap the hilt with something, so pick what you like.”

I looked at all the colorful materials. They were animal skins—reptile skin, shark skin, bird skin—and then black cloth and white cloth, all of varying thicknesses.

I took more than an hour examining all the materials. “None of them really fit me well. If I had to choose from all of these, I’d say the shark, but the shark’s skin is rough, and it feels like I’m holding a nail file. I think the next best is the thick cloth.”

“Well, that shark skin is from a monster, so I can’t help the fact that it’s rough. If it was normal shark skin, it would become tattered when magical energy passed through it. If you don’t like the material, maybe cloth is the safest.” Kelly looked a bit bored by my decision as she put away the other materials. The other animal skins didn’t feel bad in my hand, but their surfaces had been so smooth I was afraid the sword might slip out of my hand if I swung it with all my might.

Maybe I was overthinking things, but I figured it would be better to use a

material that wouldn't become slippery when it was bloody or wet, so I'd decided to exclude those.

"The cloth is the most commonly used material for adventurers' weapons, so in a way, it's probably the material that's most compatible, but...since it's an adamantine sword, I didn't want to use any ordinary material. Sorry—I guess that's just a blacksmith's selfishness," Kelly said. I understood how she felt. The sword was beautiful and very well made, so it made sense to be particular about the material wrapped around the hilt. However, since there was nothing that particularly caught my eye, I didn't want to compromise either.

Just then, an idea popped into my head.

"Hey Kelly. How about we wrap a rope around it?" I took a length of rope from my bag and tied it around the hilt to test it out before handing it to Kelly.

"That's definitely out of the ordinary, but I think it's a bit too weird... Hmm, but it does have a nice grip. No, there's just no way I can agree to that." She was surprised by the feel of it, but repudiated it for being too ugly.

"No, we won't wind a rope around it no matter what. But how about we make a rope out of *this* material, then use that?" I handed several materials to her, and asked for her opinion. She held the materials and then, having thought about it for a bit, grinned at me.

"That's an interesting idea. The problem is whether or not we can collect a large amount of this material."

"That's not a problem. I know this material well—I have some in my bag."

Kelly began to roughly calculate the amount we would need for the rope. "All right! I've figured out about how much we'll need. But we should make sure to have a bit more just in case. Tenma, collect as much as you can and bring it to me right away! I'll have everyone in the workshop work on it, and it should be finished by tomorrow morning!"

At these words, all the female dwarves in the workshop stopped working and flopped down on the ground at once to get some sleep while they still could.

"Tenma, I'm sure it'll take some time for you to gather the materials, so we're going to get some rest before our all-nighter. Once you have the goods, come

wake us. Here's the key!" Kelly pulled a key from between her cleavage and tossed it to me. "Don't lose it! And remember, before engaging in any kind of sexual activity, you should ask for consent first!"

Hearing that, the female dwarves all said "We're ready when you are!" and laughed. I wasn't really sure how to respond to all that, but I guessed Kelly giving me a key to enter when all the female dwarves were asleep was a sign she trusted me.

I awkwardly laughed it off, then ran to collect the materials. For the moment, I was headed back to Gramps's mansion. I ran so fast that people nearby gave me weird looks, but I didn't care. I saw some familiar faces in the crowd, but since I was in a hurry, I pretended I hadn't spotted them.

When I arrived at the mansion, I immediately began collecting the materials.

"Come on, Shiromaru!" I was in such high spirits that I called Shiromaru to my side in a way I wouldn't normally have done. He came running at full speed, tail wagging violently and drool dripping from his mouth. After removing his collar, which turned him back to his original size, I retrieved the materials from Shiromaru.

"Awoooo!"

In my hands were huge clumps of Shiromaru's fur—that was what I'd come back to get. His hair was about thirty centimeters long—not long enough to weave a rope. "Hold still a bit longer..."

Looking frightened, Shiromaru tried to run away.

"I'll give you twice as many snacks today and tomorrow."

His ears twitched as he hesitated.

"The day after tomorrow too! No—how about twice as many snacks for a week?!"

Having heard this, Shiromaru turned and obediently lay down for me. He was drooling very hard. Thus, I was able to gather my coveted materials for the low, low price of double snacks for a week. Behind Shiromaru, the flying glutton was also drooling and lying down.

At any rate, I threw some meat in Shiromaru's mouth in lieu of money, and collected the material from him. I made sure not to leave any bald spots, but honestly it was difficult to collect the amount I needed.

"Hey, Tenma. Don't you think it'd be faster to cut Shiromaru's fur rather than shave it?"

"Oh...?"

Namitaro slithered up to me and offered this opinion. I realized he was right and took out a pair of mythril scissors from my bag. Shiromaru gave me a look that said, *Took you long enough.*

That made the task much easier. After Shiromaru's haircut, the fur all over his body was considerably shorter. The process had taken about thirty minutes. I put all the fur in a basket and shoved it into my bag, then went to the kitchen to start cooking.

I had enough time, so I decided to make dinner for Kelly and the other dwarves. I wanted something that would be easy for them to eat while they worked, so I made several different types of sandwiches.

First, I boiled a large pot of water to make hard-boiled eggs. In the meantime, I thinly sliced a hunk of ham and fried up thin slices of beef in a sweet and spicy sauce.

I peeled the shells off the boiled eggs, added mayonnaise and some seasonings, mashed it all up and mixed it together.

I put the different ingredients on homemade buttered bread, and then I was done. I wasn't sure what to bring for them to drink, so I just decided to brew a large pitcher of tea. The scent and taste would probably not be as good as usual since I wasn't used to making so much at a time, but it was better than nothing.

After I put all the food and drinks in a bag, I headed to Kelly's workshop. On the way there, I stopped at a few shops to get more items for Kelly and also the souvenirs I'd promised Shiromaru and the others.

Finally, I arrived at the workshop and opened it with the key. "Kelly, I've gathered the materials," I called out.

Kelly was sleeping in the middle of the workshop with a blanket over her head. She began to move, crawling out of bed. For some reason, she was topless, and her pants were down around her knees.

“Take that!”

She seemed to be half asleep since she was wandering around half-naked, so I threw a blanket over her head.

“Waaah!” Surprised by the sudden blanket attack, Kelly turned around in circles with the blanket still over her head, then grabbed her clothes, which were nearby, to get dressed.

“Here are the materials for the rope. Rocket cleaned them for me, so you can use them as is. Also, I brought you all dinner and drinks so that if you are hungry and thirsty, you won’t have to go anywhere.”

I handed over the basket filled with Shiromaru’s hair to Kelly, who was now fully dressed.

“Tenma, you saw a naked woman, so I thought you might be a little flustered or embarrassed, but not having any reaction at all kind of hurts my feelings...” Kelly seemed hurt that I hadn’t reacted, and pushed her breasts up and down while she complained.

“Eeeeeeek. I saw Kelly naked. Ohmigod what should I do. My heart’s pounding so fast I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight.” I said this in the most deadpan tone I could muster. I heard the other dwarves in the workshop snickering in response. As I continued teasing Kelly, the dwarves couldn’t suppress their laughter any longer, and they began doubling over, howling.

Kelly finally realized what she had done and turned bright red with embarrassment. “Tenma, I’m sorry, but knock it off already! And you girls! How long do you plan to laugh, anyway?!” She was so humiliated she started yelling at the dwarves who were laughing in the shop. But seeing Kelly blushing and yelling just made the dwarves laugh even louder.

For some reason, Kelly became quiet. Then, after the laughter had finally faded, she said, “You got anything to say to me?” Her voice was quiet yet terrifying, and seemed to come from her entire body. The female dwarves

began trembling with fright, and groveled before the head blacksmith.

“Anyway, Tenma, it’ll be finished in the morning, so please be here before noon.” She didn’t sound as angry towards me, but I was still scared enough to break out into a cold sweat. I nodded, careful not to say anything else, and slowly left the workshop.

After I closed the door and got a few meters away from the workshop, I thought I heard Kelly yelling and the other dwarves screaming, but I decided to ignore it and kept walking without looking back.

I’d played it off with a joke, but to be honest, my heart was pounding. She was the last woman I’d expected to see naked, and her body had been much more beautiful than I’d expected too. It had all happened so suddenly that I *had* gotten excited, although not in a sexual way.

From the time I’d been reincarnated into this world until now, even though I’d never been with a woman, I’d seen them naked several times. However, none had made my heart pound more than Kelly.

It wasn’t that I had sexual feelings for Kelly—it felt more like how I’d eventually grown more conscious of women like I had in my previous life. Up until now I’d never really given women much thought, and I was starting to think maybe I was all dried up or something, but apparently this was just a normal part of my development. I wasn’t sure if it was something to be happy about, and I had no idea why Kelly of all people had triggered this reaction in me...

I couldn’t let anyone find out about this—most particularly, any of the women in my life—so instead of going straight home, I decided to walk around the shops for a while until I was sufficiently calm. However, I was pretty famous now, so if I walked around looking like this, I just knew I’d get into trouble. I decided it was best if I wore a disguise. However, that was a bad decision, because...

“Hey, you. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

A patrol soldier thought I looked suspicious and took me to the guard’s station to be questioned.

Looking back on it, I guess wearing a dirty hood over my eyes and a strange mask I'd bought at a street stall had been my first mistake. I'd thought it would be best if I wasn't sneaking around, so I had dressed in my disguise then walked proudly down the middle of the road, but apparently that had made me look even more suspicious.



The soldiers took me to a room for questioning. Several of them surrounded me and pulled off my hood. They were so shocked they nearly fell to the

ground, and then, once they'd recovered, they started bowing their heads to me over and over again to the point where they looked like those retro drinking birds.

Apparently, they thought that if word got out that they had taken in a tournament competitor who had made it to the finals, the king might find out, and if *that* happened not only would they never get promoted, but they might even get their heads cut off.

Personally, I didn't think the king would do that. He would probably praise the soldiers for a job well done and then tease me about it later. After all, they'd done the right thing taking me in, since I was dressed so suspiciously. They didn't know the king's true personality anyway, so they wouldn't have come to the same conclusion as me.

At this rate, I felt this matter might make them hesitate to take in similarly suspicious people in the future. I didn't want to cause confusion, so it was necessary to clear things up.

Just as those thoughts were running through my mind, several other knights who'd heard the commotion came into the room.

"Is anyone here? I heard you arrested someone suspic— Huh? Tenma?"

Luckily, one of the knights who entered the room was Edgar, with whom I was acquainted and who knew the king's personality well enough because he was in the king's guard. I couldn't help but laugh at this convenient development. But for some reason, the soldiers began to look even more panicked.

Before anyone could speak, I decided to explain the entire matter to Edgar.

"Pfft... Ah, excuse me. That sounds like it was very rough, Commander."

"Yes..."

Edgar suppressed his laughter as he spoke to the soldier in charge, who honestly looked like he'd just given up on everything in life.

"Well, that was a job well done. Keep it up next time."

"Huh...?"

The commanding soldier must have thought he was going to get lectured, and

he was completely dumbfounded when Edgar praised him instead.

"There's some kind of misunderstanding here, but you did the right thing. The only person in the wrong here was Tenma, for dressing up in this confusing disguise. And he feels bad about it, so let's just consider this matter settled."

I immediately apologized to the soldiers. "I'm terribly sorry for the commotion." "Tenma, you can go now. I understand why you felt the need to dress in a disguise, but next time, please just keep it to a hood. That mask was way too suspicious," Edgar said, suppressing laughter as he returned the Phantom-of-the-Opera-esque mask to me.

I took the mask, then whispered a request to Edgar. He nodded while trying to suppress his laughter again.

After that, I received some advice regarding disguises. I got advice not only from Edgar, but from the soldiers who'd arrested me. As a result, I discovered the reason the soldiers were suspicious of me was not so much the hood, but the mask. They said that next time, if I just wore the hood down low over my eyes, they'd at least be able to see my face when they stopped me, and we could sort things out at that point.

I thanked Edgar and the knights and left. I started going around to the shops again, but then realized there were three people following me. At first, I thought it was Leena and the others, but after I turned a corner, I casually turned around to check, and that wasn't the case. It was three men I didn't recognize. Plus, I figured if it had been Leena and the others, they would've called out to me.

If I thought this would be trouble, I would've gone back to the knights and have them deal with it, but when I used Identify on them, I didn't know them, and they were people who had nothing to do with me, so I thought it unlikely that they'd try to harm me. I decided that as long as they didn't call out to me, I'd just ignore them and continue shopping.

I walked around for two or three hours, and the trio never said a word to me. When I was done shopping, I decided to go back to the mansion. They followed me all the way to the mansion, but still never said a word, so I just went inside. I peeked out the window and saw they lingered outside the gates for a while, but

then eventually gave up and disappeared.

I had a feeling I'd run into them again sometime in the near future. And then, at that point, I'd just ask them what they'd been up to today.

At any rate, I decided to take out the food I'd bought from the street carts. Shiromaru and Solomon raced over to the grilled meat and skewers, while Jeanne and Aura locked on to the fruit and other sweets. That seemed to make up for me not having allowed them to come with me earlier.

Rocket and Gramps calmly sipped tea while they watched the spectacle unfold. The souvenirs I'd brought back to the mansion were delicious and varied, and they were all quite unusual items, so I could see why they would be served at the royal capital's festival.

It was the second day of my break. The final rounds of the tournament would take place tomorrow, so even though I had a mountain of preparations to attend to, I found myself standing in the kitchen first thing in the morning instead.

“I don’t think I screwed it up... There! It’s set!”

I took the amber platelike object out of the refrigerator-type magical tool I’d installed in the kitchen—made by me, under Gramps’s and Aina’s supervision—and touched it to check.

“The true test is how it tastes, though...”

I placed the object on a cutting board and sliced grid-like grooves with a kitchen knife into it. Then I picked up one of the pieces and put it in my mouth for a taste test.

“Yeah—it worked!”

I was making candy. I’d found someone selling sugar syrup yesterday, so I bought a bunch and improved it to create a type of portable food that could easily replenish energy.

By the way, candy in this world was just made from sugar syrup, but I’d never seen it in the form of hardened balls, like I was currently making. Gramps and the others said they’d never heard of such a thing either.

I’d tried to envision the kind of candies I’d eaten back in my previous world. Luckily, the ingredients were simple, so I remembered how to make them, but I wasn’t sure if I’d be successful or not.

The ingredients were the sugar syrup, honey, and a little lemon juice. I poured all the ingredients into a vat and let the mixture harden in the refrigerator. That was what gave the candy its basic flavor, but I also tried making several different variations, such as one with chopped raisins and lemon peel, mixing rock salt in it, and so on.

“This’ll be perfect to bring along when we go hunting. Next time I’ll make a bigger batch!”

I kept cutting up the pieces of candy, then separated them into jars by variety

before stashing them all in my bag. As I was putting them into my bag, I felt a presence behind me. I turned around to find Rocket standing there looking at me. It was unusual for him to show interest in food, but he seemed very curious about the candy.

He came up by my feet, at which point I noticed some pieces of candy had spilled from the cutting board onto the floor. He reached out with his feelers to pick up the pieces, then absorbed them into his body.

“Is it good, Rocket?”

He bounced up and down in reply. Apparently, Rocket liked the candy I made.

It was pretty unusual for Rocket to want something, so I gave him half of each kind of candy. He didn’t eat it right away, however, instead storing it inside the magic bag in his body.

I thought it was strange that Shiromaru and Solomon had no reaction to the food, but they were still sound asleep. They probably hadn’t noticed the candy because it didn’t have a strong smell.

Then, having decided to head to Kelly’s workshop, I asked Rocket to hold down the fort while he enjoyed his candy, and headed out.

There were still onlookers near the mansion, but none of them tried to talk to me, so I pretended they were just potatoes and ignored them. By the way, the three stalkers from yesterday were also there this morning, but since they didn’t say anything to me, I ignored them too.

Eventually, I arrived at Kelly’s workshop. The door was still locked, so I used the key she’d given me to go inside. Kelly and the other workers were all passed out on the floor, though, and didn’t hear me come in.

I checked on Kelly first, and as it seemed safe to call out to her, I did just that.

“Ugh... Morning, Tenma... It’s over there...” she replied groggily, pointing to the adamantium sword. The hilt was wrapped with a pure white rope woven from Shiromaru’s fur. Everything looked good.

“I’m going to go test it in the back,” I said, picking up my sword. She yawned and nodded off again, her hands waving like a ghost’s. I didn’t think she’d really

heard me.

I went out into the backyard and tested the sword. It was really well made. Since Shiromaru's fur was so silky, I was afraid the rope would be slippery, but Kelly and the other workers had made the knot on it really large, which stopped my hand from slipping.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" Kelly said with a yawn, suddenly appearing behind me.

"Yeah, it is!"

Originally, the entire sword had been black and looked rather rough around the edges, but thanks to the dragon now carved into the side of the blade and the pure white rope, it looked like a work of art or some kind of ceremonial sword.

"Thank you, Kelly. How much will it be?" I took my wallet out of my bag, but Kelly shook her head.

"No, no. The archduke paid a lot for the adjustments and engraving, and you're the one who provided the material for the rope. The labor fee for the knitting is covered by the archduke's generous payment!"

Apparently the archduke had overpaid in case I would try to refuse the sword, so Kelly had decided to count that as part of the payment for labor.

"Besides, you gave us a lot of gifts. The new technology worked well, you sent over delicious food, and we were paid a huge sum in advance. If you gave us any more than this, it would be too much."

She had such a big smile on her face that I would've felt bad trying to push a payment on her, so I put the wallet back in my bag.

"Anyway, Shiromaru's fur is a pretty good quality material! It's smooth, beautiful, and sturdy. On top of that, it has lots of resistances. That rope won't burn easily, even if you try to set it on fire!" she said.

She was right; Shiromaru's fur possessed fire, water, wind, earth, lightning, and ice magic resistance, and also poison and paralysis resistance. To find all those properties in a single material was quite rare. Usually, materials made from body hair were more vulnerable to fire, but not Shiromaru's fur.

“He’s really amazing. I knew that Shiromaru had high magical defense, but I didn’t know that his fur carried so many resistant properties,” I replied.

I’d already known that Shiromaru didn’t ever seem to be affected much by magical attacks, but I’d had no idea that it was because of his fur. I’d just thought it had something to do with his physical abilities or his high vitality.

Putting the matter of Shiromaru’s fur aside, we started working on the final adjustments for the sword. Really, though, this was just a matter of adjusting the hilt, so it didn’t take much time at all.

“That should do it!” Kelly said. I had her retie the rope on the hilt so that the whole thing would fit my hand better. “Now the archduke’s request is half complete!”

“Only half?” I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, and gave her a puzzled look.

“That’s right. I’m still not done with his request. These adjustments were made for the tournament, but I’ll need to sharpen the sword and do some maintenance on it afterwards so you can continue to use it. So make sure to bring it back once the tournament is over!” Kelly said, patting me on the back.

Although she was a woman, she *was* a dwarven blacksmith, so her strength was comparable to that of a first-class adventurer. Just that one whack on my back was enough to send me stumbling forward a bit.

“Well, see you later! Don’t forget to bring the sword back! I’m going back to sleep now!”

Kelly yawned and returned to her workshop, then dove back under the covers of her bed, which was still on the floor.

At this point, I thought about returning the key Kelly had given me, but since she was already snoring away, I just went ahead and locked up the shop for her before leaving.

I went for a walk and browsed through various vendors’ goods for a while, but then I noticed my three stalkers were tailing me again. I was sick of ignoring them, so I lured them down a narrow alleyway. I walked a bit further down the alley, then turned around to talk to them.

“Hello.”

Looking incredibly shocked, they tried to flee.

“Oh, don’t run away. I have a pretty good idea of who you are. I don’t think it’s a good idea for nobles to engage in stalking, but I won’t tell His Majesty or your fathers about it, so please stop doing things like this. I think we’ll have an opportunity to meet formally soon anyway, so until then, have a nice day.”

I said my piece before they could get a word in edgewise, then kicked off the wall and leapt up to the rooftop. If these had been nobles I didn’t know, I’d just have reported it to the king, but luckily for them, they weren’t trying to harm me, and they were also relatives of an acquaintance of mine.

In a few days, there would be a party at the palace. And the first, second, and third place winners from each division, including myself, would all receive invitations. That was when I would see these people again.

I took one last look at them as they stared at me with their jaws hanging open, then ran away. I jumped from rooftop to rooftop so no one would notice me, then landed in another empty alleyway to catch my breath.

“Maybe I was a little too hard on them...?”

Confronting them suddenly was out of character for me, and I regretted it a little bit. I hoped I hadn’t given them any kind of lasting psychological trauma. Just in case, I decided to use Detection to see where they were, and noticed that they hadn’t moved from the alleyway. I chose to return to the mansion by a path in the opposite direction of them.

“Hey. You missed out on talking to him again!”

“Loser.”

Two of the men were heckling the largest of them. That man scratched his head and groaned as he crouched down on the ground. “I can’t help it... If I screw up, my family’s territory could be in jeopardy again...” he muttered, in a pathetic voice quite unbefitting of his stature. The other two looked exasperated.

“Oh, don’t give us that. My dad told me he doesn’t hold that much of a grudge against anyone.”

“I heard that about him too. But he might’ve changed his mind now that he knows Leon—er, we were following him.”

When the shortest among the three of them (although in truth he was average height) said this, the man called Leon straightened up vigorously.

“Isn’t that your fault too?!” he shouted loudly, but the other two didn’t seem fazed. Apparently, this must have been how Leon always acted.

“That’s not true. We warned you. You were the one who didn’t listen and were acting like a scared puppy dog, like the weakling you are.”

“Albert’s right. We cooperated the best we could. The rest is on you, Leon. We’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“Arghhh!” Leon groaned as he glared at the other two. However, this had no effect on them, and they just stared back at him coolly.

If someone unfamiliar with the three of them happened to be observing them right now, they’d probably have called the guards. That was how intimidating Leon’s face looked right now. He certainly didn’t look like he was of noble blood.

“H-Hey, Albert. Are you...”

“No way! I’m telling you, I’m not getting involved!” Albert bluntly refused.

“Then Cain! Would you—”

“Absolutely not! I’m not gonna pick a fight with him! One wrong move, and my family could disown me!” The man called Cain interrupted Leon before he could even finish speaking. However, unlike Albert, he refused with cold sweat dripping down his back.

“Well, he said we’d be meeting formally soon,” Albert piped up again. “So he might actually be willing to hear Leon out? Maybe?”

“C’mon, Albert!” Leon cried. “Don’t phrase it like a question!”

“Hearing him out and cooperating are two different things, though,” Cain

pointed out.

Leon started trembling, and then...

“This is all my stupid dad’s faaaaaaault!” he howled, turning his face to the sky.

“But if you piss him off, it’ll all be your fault, Leon.”

At Albert’s words, Leon crumpled to his knees onto the ground.

A few minutes later, several guards heard the commotion in the alleyway and came to question them.

Part Eight

The individual competition's finals would begin in less than an hour. According to the tournament officials, the number of spectators attending today had set an all-time record, which meant more customers at the vendors' stalls and betting facilities, and more smiles from the higher-ups.

"Are you nervous, Tenma?" Gramps, who was here as my second, seemed to have interpreted my silence as anxiety.

Seconds weren't allowed in the individual team events except for in the finals, where competitors were permitted to designate a single person as their second. This was to prevent finalists from bringing along an entourage, and also to curtail forced solicitation from nobles. It was also to encourage finalists to have someone else in charge of their personal belongings so they could focus on the competition.

"No, I'm not nervous. It's just I've never faced someone smaller than me in a duel, so I'm trying to think through how I should approach the fight."

This was true. All the opponents I'd fought so far had either been bigger than me, or about the same size as me. A lot of people tried to take advantage of me because of my age.

"Well, that's certainly true. I've also never fought someone smaller than myself. Objectively speaking, I can say that she's your superior in terms of brute strength and maneuverability, but other than that, you've got the upper hand."

I knew that Gramps was including magical ability in that assessment, and I agreed with him. Still, it took the fun out of it a bit to fall back on magic like that. Of course, this was a serious competition, but it was also a kind of festival. So I wanted to have some fun with it, if that were possible.

"I have a feeling you're not going to use magic then, huh? That's very like you." Having guessed my thoughts, Gramps sounded a bit exasperated with me. "Well, whatever," he went on. "I believe you will win, Tenma. Please do your best so I can get some extra pocket money!"

With that, he took a slip of paper out of his pocket to prove that he had bet on me. I did a quick calculation. He'd bet 1,000,000G, and if I remembered correctly, my multiplier was about 1.2x, so if I won, he would make around 200,00G.

"Oh, you bet on me? So did I. Gramps, will you come with me for a warm-up exercise?"

Gramps took off his hood. By the way, Gramps's body was pretty good for his age. He was muscular and toned, and didn't have much fat on him. He was pretty strong too. We weren't going to warm up with magic, but with our fists.

As expected for someone of his age, he wasn't as strong as he had been when he was young, but he was a technical fighter by nature. The way he fought didn't seem to use much power—he used techniques such as counter-jabs and throws, and of course, didn't use magic. There were many times when I thought he could hold his own against both me and Jin.

Recently, Jeanne, Aura, Aina, and I had been learning self-defense techniques from Gramps. Not only was he a good fighter, but also a top-notch teacher. It seemed the protection of the god of war wasn't just for show.

I sparred with Gramps and warmed up until I had a light sweat going. By the way, a staff member who came to check on me was surprised when he saw that Gramps and I were having such an active sparring session.

"Tenma, it's about time." An attendant who was waiting nearby called out to me, so Gramps and I headed to the arena. On the way there, we listened to the staff member's explanation of the procedures, and I gave them my bag so they could check it.

They led me to a different entrance than the one I had used before. It was in front of the royal family's seats, and more than twice as wide as the passageway I was used to.

"Please wait here for a while. Amur will be here soon, but you should enter the arena at the same time."

Since the tournament was sponsored by the royal family, it seemed like this process was designed to allow them to get the first look at the competitors.

“This way, please, Amur.”

“All right.”

Amur arrived shortly after that. I heard her footsteps approaching, and when I turned around, I saw a little girl. It was Amur, of course, but since she wasn’t in her Bandit King form, it was her real appearance. It made me feel a little uncomfortable. Her Bandit King armor (fur?) had been destroyed during the battle with Jin, which was why she wasn’t wearing it. Instead, she had donned leather armor, gauntlets, and shin guards.

Behind Amur stood her second—a man I recognized.

“Hey, kid!” he said in an oddly friendly manner, before waving at me with a ferocious smile. It was Blanca, the man I beat before. He was the one I’d had the most difficulty with so far too.

“How are your injuries, Blanca? And why are you Amur’s second? Is it because you’re both tiger beastfolk?” I replied, at which he began laughing...ferociously.

“Ha ha ha! My injury has already healed! The reason I’m here is that I’m her friend! I had nothing better to do, so I decided to be the lady’s second.”

I didn’t fully believe that he’d recovered, but he wasn’t having any problems walking normally as far as I could see. As we spoke, Amur suddenly cut in between me and Blanca. She was staring at me, and then I realized something.

“Hey. You’re drooling.”

She turned around once I pointed it out and wiped her mouth with her sleeve, before turning back towards me again.

“I’m the one you’re fighting. Not Blanca.”

Apparently, Amur didn’t appreciate how I’d ignored her and talked to Blanca instead.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Tenma. It’s nice to meet you.” I held out my hand with a sincere apology.

“I-I’m Amur. Nice to meet you.” She nodded, shaking my hand. Then it was time to begin, and they opened the doors.

Once the doors were fully open, I could see the royal seats in front of us. All the members of the royal family, including the king, stood up and looked at us. The staff members guided us forward, and the crowd began to cheer and applaud. At first, they were just looking at me and Amur, but when they noticed Gramps and Blanca following us, the crowd went even wilder. Once the four of us reached the center of the arena, Gramps and Blanca bowed their heads and left. It seemed like this was a remnant of the old days, where the second was basically like a follower. From here on out, there was nothing left but for the two of us to fight.

After confirming that the seconds had left, the king walked down the stairs to a position close to the arena and raised his hand to urge the audience to be quiet.

“These two competitors have made it through to the finals, yet neither one of them has reached adulthood yet. As the king, I’m happy that our young citizens have made such a good showing. This match will go down in history. Both sides should keep that in mind and fight with no regrets. Let the finals begin!”

Once the king finished speaking, the audience, who had been silent, exploded with cheers again. Then Amur and I faced each other at a distance. We both reached into our bags and pulled out our weapons.

Amur was still using a bardiche like before, but this one was a different color. It was darker than the one she’d used in her battle against Jin, so I thought it might be made of magic iron. As for me, I was using the adamantium sword that the archduke had gifted me.

The moment we drew our weapons, cheers erupted from all over the arena. It seemed like the audience was really expecting a power battle after seeing our weapons. However, in contrast to their excitement, some of the nobles looked disappointed. I had a feeling that they had misunderstood after seeing the dragons carved on my sword, and thought I had been recruited by the archduke.

“The individual finals: Tenma versus Amur! Begin!”

The finals had started at last. As soon as I lifted my sword, I saw Amur’s body shaking. She was using the same move as Blanca when he had destroyed my

arm, but due to the weight of her weapon, she was slightly slower than Blanca. On top of that, since this was the second time I'd seen this technique, I was able to deal with it with ease.

I swung my sword down from the top to intercept Amur's horizontal blow. Although she was slower than Blanca, her attack power was greater. So even though I'd prepared myself for an attack on the level of Blanca's, my body was blown away by Amur's attack.

I was in a fairly defenseless position after this, but fortunately Amur was thrown off guard, and I'd been blown back so far that there was too much distance between us for her to pursue me right away.

It seemed at first like the blow had weakened me, but this was actually just due to the difference in the inertia of our weapons, so I didn't really care. Besides, since I'd managed to parry after all, it hadn't damaged me much.

"I doubt she can fire off that move again so quickly either..." Amur's body was too petite compared to Blanca's to pull off such a thing. Plus, the farther one's opponent was, the easier it became for them to spot the technique, so I didn't think it would be possible for her to use it with the distance currently between us.

However, if I didn't do something soon, I would lose the upper hand. I decided to just go for it and engage her in close combat. This was a spur-of-the-moment decision, but I'd tried to imitate Blanca's technique several times during my training, and could use it to some extent. If both of us tried to battle with it my prospects would be poor, but it turned out to be rather effective as a surprise attack, so this time I was able to beat her to the punch.

"Can't use that technique at this distance, can you?"

I came within two meters of her and swung my sword. She belatedly swung her axe too, but I got there first. However, my attack was far from a decisive blow. And because I wasn't able to finish her off, we began hashing it out with our heavy weapons. For a few minutes after that, the fight continued without either of us moving from that spot. I was winning in terms of how often I attacked, but there was a difference between the two of us in terms of weapon proficiency. Amur was used to handling axes, so she would let off one intense

strike for every two or three of mine.

Since neither of us were able to land a decisive blow, at some point, Amur suddenly tried to back away. I thought this wasn't a good move on her part, and took a step forward, swinging my sword, but...

"Not so fast!"

Amur quickly hopped out of range, and my sword whooshed pointlessly through the air.

"Gotcha," she said in a quiet voice, before unleashing a sharp attack right at my torso.

Crap! No matter how I looked at it, she was too strong and had me at a disadvantage.

"Hope I make it...!" I let go of my sword, boosted my hands with magical energy, and caught the blade of her axe between them. Then, without pushing back against the axe's momentum, I leapt sideways. It was a pretty high-stakes gamble, but it paid off, and I succeeded in minimizing the damage I took.

Now that the momentum of the axe had been slowed, I planted my feet on the ground and tried to steal it away from Amur while she was still surprised. But the moment I tried to do that, Amur tightened her grip on it and yanked it back. At once, I let go, and because of that, her momentum made her fall backwards.

"Hah!" I didn't let that opportunity slip past me, and swung my fist. I was just about to hit her face when she held up her arm to block me. However, this wasn't enough to stop me—my fist crashed into her arm, which flew back into her own face and ended up damaging her. She fell backwards and kept rolling without softening the blow, then stood up.

The moment she stood up, she assumed a defensive pose, but I had prioritized picking up my sword rather than attacking her. The flow of the fight had been interrupted, and we ended up starting from square one.

I gripped my sword, glaring at Amur. Where did all that power come from in such a little body? After all, the axe was taller than she was.

All of a sudden, she charged, making the first move. It was just a regular charge, not a move of Blanca's, but she was still very fast. If this hit me, I knew I'd just be blown away like I had last time, so I had to concentrate on avoiding it. But Amur kept on coming at me, swinging her axe for show.

"Nngh!" She let out a grunt, and this time she didn't swing her axe, but her fist. I tried to block her with my sword, but it all happened so fast, I hesitated for a split second. Her fist struck my face and I almost staggered backwards. She looked triumphant and continued charging towards me, but I managed to dodge to the side to avoid the second blow.

After I dodged this, she tried to swing her axe again, but I was faster with my sword. She reflexively tried to block my attack with her axe handle, but didn't make it in time—the blade of my sword got her right in her side.

However, since we were so close, there wasn't much force behind my blow, and it only left a scratch. Not only that, but she then grabbed my sword, leaving me exposed. Then she swung down her axe. Holding tightly onto the handle, she adjusted its trajectory to try to ensure her attack would connect.

"Take that!"

The axe was swinging down towards me. But the moment before it fell, I grabbed her shoulder and pulled her towards me to keep our bodies in close contact. I headbutted her, then followed it up with a punch aimed at her body, an uppercut, and then a shoulder throw. She slammed into the ground with considerable momentum, but rolled away before I could finish her off.

Just as I expected, she dropped her axe, and I threw it away from us without hesitation. It was heavier than I thought it would be, though, and didn't even travel five meters.

"Doesn't look like you're gonna surrender, huh?"

Amur was staggering, but the look in her eyes was sharper than it had been when the match had started. She hadn't given up yet, and she had been in this state when she'd finished off Jin, so I couldn't let my guard down.

The proof of that was the changes I could see in her. Up until now, she'd felt human to me, but now she was like a ferocious beast. It was just like when

Blanca had gotten serious.

“Raaaahh!”

Though she was without her axe, she charged directly towards me. Apparently, she wasn’t even thinking about defense. I braced myself to counter her haphazard charge, but she still kept coming.

I slashed at her diagonally, but she used her left arm as a shield to block it.

“It hurts... *Not!*”

It seemed like she magically boosted her left arm, but from the sensation that was transmitted to me through the sword, I thought her bone should at least have cracked. Plus, I could tell from the distorted look of pain on her face that she was trying to endure it.

She grabbed at my sword with her left arm—the one which should have been injured—and attacked me with her right hand.

I turned my face away and tried to avoid the outstretched hand coming towards my face, but she stuck out her fingers and tried to claw my eyes out just before that. Her fingers were so long I wasn’t able to completely avoid them, and although her fingernails didn’t reach my eyes, she scratched my left temple and drew blood.

The audience roared at the sight of my blood. She continued attacking me with momentum, but I refused to give her any ground.

I let go of the sword she was grasping, and acted like I was aiming for her eyes in return with the fingers of my right hand. Once she saw my fingers outstretched, she was distracted by the movement. I quickly drew my hand back and instead gave her an uppercut to the chin with my left hand.

My left fist made clean contact with her face and I thought she was going to collapse, but she threw her arms around my body before she fell.

“Gotcha!”

She tightened her arms around my torso and tried to lift me up. I dropped my hips and resisted, but since she was smaller than me, she had a lower center of gravity and succeeded in lifting me off the ground.

And then she threw me. Her throw was forceful, so I wasn't able to land in a defensive position. And right after I hit the ground, Amur grabbed my leg and swung me around.

Even though she was only hanging onto me with one hand as she did this, she didn't seem to be exerting a ton of strength. She was just that much stronger than me. Maybe as strong as Jin, or even stronger.

I almost hit the ground several times, but each time I tried to use the hand that I'd boosted with magic to make contact with the ground to avoid injury. But I wasn't able to do that every time.

After I'd hit the ground several times, I stretched out my hand and grabbed my sword that was lying nearby and swung it at her leg. But this was a haphazard swing, so it didn't reach her. She kicked it away, and I lost my sword again. Thanks to this, however, her center of gravity shifted away from me, so I was able to kick myself out of her grasp.

Since that kick had been desperate, there wasn't much power behind it. But it did connect with her face, which surprised her, so she let go of my leg.

She quickly put distance between us, and I was very thankful for that. After all, my body had been stretched into an odd position, so I could barely stand up. We both had to collect ourselves and get back to our feet.

At first glance, it seemed like we were starting over again.

My body was slightly dirty and there were scratches all over my equipment, including my leather armor. I had taken some damage from being slammed on the ground, but it wasn't fatal, and the wound on my temple had quit bleeding.

On the other hand, Amur looked like she was in similar shape to me, except for her face. She was panting heavily and looked like she was in pain. Her nose was bleeding as well. Judging by the amount of blood gushing out of it, I guessed that I had broken her nose. It was slightly crooked.

I was about to ask if she would surrender, but she pinched her nose and forced it back into place. After that, her nosebleed all but stopped, and her breathing seemed clearer than before.

"I'm fine. Let's continue." She bowed her head and thanked me. Perhaps

she'd misunderstood and thought I was purposely waiting so she could treat herself. However, I was just surprised that she had set the bone herself and that it had stopped the bleeding.

But she was right—I *had* been about to ask her to surrender, and even if Amur hadn't treated herself, I hadn't thought she would attack me. But I had still missed an opportunity to strike.

However, it seemed the audience had also misunderstood, and they applauded my not having attacked her as a gentlemanly act. I was a little embarrassed, but this was no time for that. Amur and I were both studying each other, trying to find an opportunity to strike.

Our weapons were both out of reach, and it didn't seem like either of us could afford to pick them up. I didn't think I'd have time to take out a new weapon from my magic bag either.

In that case, it would have to come down to a battle of bare fists, which seemed to be what Amur wanted anyway. She was in a position that made it look like she would jump at me at any moment.

Her nosebleed had stopped, and her breathing had steadied. I didn't see any evidence that she'd used magic, so I wondered if it was just her natural high vitality at work. This bothered me since I had a little bit of medical knowledge, but I didn't have time to think about such things right now. Amur closed the gap between us a bit, and just then...

"Raaarh!"

She let out a ferocious growl and lunged towards me. She swung her right hand down from above, about to punch me, and came at me with considerable speed. If it had been a surprise attack, it would've been a direct hit, but luckily I expected this.

After all, since her vibe was like Blanca's and I knew the two of them were friends, they probably had similar attack patterns. So I prepared to counter. It unfolded just as I planned—I hunched over, stepping to the side to avoid her while trying to hit her with my left fist. However, two unexpected events now happened in quick succession.

First, Amur's attack was so quick, it created a phenomenon like a wind cutter that slashed my arm. Well—it was more like a scratch on my arm, and the wound itself wasn't really the problem.

The problem was the second thing that occurred. When Amur swung her arm down, the force of it made her flip over. Obviously, that shocked me, and I withdrew without actually swinging my fist.

"Ngaah!" Then Amur attacked me with her *heel* instead. It was like some kind of flying karate kick, or a move you'd see a pro wrestler perform.

I guarded with my withdrawn left arm, but she kicked in my whole arm too.

She was small and light, so she wasn't able to knock me over, but she did break my shoulder and I ended up collapsing to my knees. Now I was unable to raise my left arm.

"Ahh!"

Once I'd fallen to my knees, Amur continued with another kick using her right leg. I rolled and just barely dodged it. However, her attacks didn't stop. She chased after me while I rolled, trying to stomp on me.

After I'd rolled several meters, I was able to put distance between us and managed to get to my feet. Even still, she didn't stop trying to attack me, and lunged at me in an attempted tackle.

Using her body as a springboard, I placed one hand on her, launching myself up into the air before landing.

When I hit the ground again, my shoulder began to hurt more, but I endured it. After putting more distance between Amur and myself, I cast Recovery magic on it to heal myself. However, I didn't have much time, so I focused on connecting the bones—reducing the amount of pain I was feeling was a secondary concern. That turned out to be the right decision, because I had the bones connected again, Amur came charging back at me. I stopped healing myself and got ready to counter.

After that, it was an all-out war. We planted our feet and started punching each other... But our fistfight didn't last for long.

At first, since Amur was stronger than me, she had the upper hand. However, her technique wasn't that polished, so she wasn't inflicting much damage. The more time passed, the sloppier her swings became, until she was barely making contact with me at all.

Meanwhile, I focused on making sure her hits didn't land, and tried to counter after I dodged.

I ducked and swayed and parried to avoid her fists, countering whenever I could. Since my shoulder hurt so much, I was off-balance, and I tried to focus on small but sure hits.

I tried to remember the boxing techniques I'd practiced in my previous life—I used to watch matches and imitate them as a kid, just for fun.

In this world, that kind of fistfighting boxing technique had not yet been developed, so even with my haphazard proficiency, the effect was outstanding. Besides, boxing techniques were made just for fistfights like these. Just because I was in another world didn't make them any less effective. It was only a matter of time before my fist would catch Amur in the face, and she'd begin to slow down.

And finally, that time came. My right hook smashed into her jaw. She collapsed to her knees, and I almost did too. At the same time, her left fist struck my side. But since I was slightly faster, I was able to dull the impact a bit. It still hurt, though.

She tried to throw her arms around me as she fell to the ground, but I dodged her by jumping back while enduring the pain. Her gaze fell to the ground, but judging by the look in her eyes, she hadn't lost her fighting spirit. I knew that if I gave her time, she would rise to her feet again.

So I went behind her, and...

"Huh?"

I strangled her. To be more specific, I wasn't compressing her trachea, but I was using the technique of choking her cervical artery—the so-called "naked choke."

For a few seconds, she struggled desperately, but with an injured jaw and a

concussion she couldn't do much, and finally her limbs went limp.

"Referee! She lost! Kid, hurry up and let her go!" Blanca rushed over once he saw that Amur couldn't move. But I raised a hand to stop him, and instead placed my knee on Amur's back.

"Oof..." I put more force into this move, and she regained consciousness, then looked around. When she realized I was on her back, she quickly stood up and tried to back away from me, but the moment she got to her feet, she almost collapsed.

"You lost, little lady. It was only for a few moments, but you were unconscious." Blanca seemed relieved that Amur was safe, and calmed down a bit. He helped her stand and told her the results of the match. She looked surprised for a moment, then got a hold of herself and nodded.

"The winner of the individual finals is...Tenma!"

Once the referee confirmed that she had regained consciousness, he declared my victory. That moment, the entire arena exploded with cheers and applause. All of my friends looked so happy, you'd think they were the ones who'd won. Queen Maria was dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her handkerchief. I waved to the spectators and then walked over to Amur. She was still unsteady on her feet and was only able to stand with the help of Blanca.

"Good job. Stay still for a second." I held my hand over her face and cast Recovery magic on her. This was an emergency treatment, so the bruises didn't disappear, but at least her nosebleed stopped again.

I held out my hand to her. She looked back and forth between my face and my hand, then reached out and shook hands with me.

"Congrats, kid. I never thought you'd be that merciless!" Blanca congratulated me. I guessed he was talking about the naked choke.

"She wouldn't have stopped unless I did that, right?" I said.

"Without a doubt," he replied with a laugh.

I turned towards Blanca, but suddenly felt Amur tug on my hand again. Wondering what was up, I turned to look at her. She grabbed me and pulled me

towards her, and then...

“*SMOOCH!*”

.....Huh?!

Completely without warning, she kissed me.

Why had she kissed me?!



I was so surprised that I pushed her away and quickly backed up.

“Bwa ha!” she laughed triumphantly. She looked like a predator staring at her prey.

Blanca caught her and put his hand on her forehead while looking up.

“Did you see that, Blanca? I made a fool out of him! Ha ha!” Amur flashed me a victory sign while Blanca began wrapping her head in a bandage. Then, she lost consciousness again. Blanca lifted her up in his arms.

“Ah, sorry about that, kid. Just think of it as a tiger bite and forget about it!” He slung her over his shoulder and left the ring.

But...aren’t tiger bites usually fatal? I thought absently, but then Gramps came to get me and escorted me out of the ring.

“Tenma, what’s your relationship with that girl Amur?”

“I dunno! I’d like to ask her why she did that!”

Back in my dressing room, Gramps was treating me while we talked about the duel.

“Thanks, Gramps. I can take care of the rest myself.”

I was better at Recovery magic than Gramps, so I decided to take care of everything except my back myself.

After the duel, I was so stunned that I went directly to my dressing room, so I didn’t remember much, but I later heard the crowd went wild when Amur attacked me.

“But why did she kiss you? And in front of all those people... Maybe she fell in love with you at first sight?”

I didn’t know, but the person who could tell me happened to be standing right there.

“Can you explain, Blanca?”

Blanca gave me a surprised look from the doorway. For his part, Gramps seemed to have sensed someone was in front of the door, but not who it was specifically. Blanca seemed taken aback that I had guessed his identity.

“You’re right, it’s me. I’m coming in.” Blanca slipped into the room and bowed his head to Gramps and me, immediately apologizing. “I’m sorry that the little lady did something so stupid!”

Gramps spoke before I could. “Well, it’s not like she put him in danger or anything, but why’d she do it?” he asked.

Blanca had an awkward look on his face.

“She must’ve had a reason, right? She didn’t hurt me, but I’m still a victim here. I deserve to know what she was thinking,” I said.

That must’ve convinced Blanca, because he took a deep breath and started to explain.

“The reason she kissed you is because... Well, the whole reason she’s

participating in the tournament is so she can find a *companion*."

Both Gramps and I froze at this explosive revelation. Ignoring our reactions, Blanca continued. "Her clan—well, it's mine too—but it's a famous clan from the southern region. And she's the only daughter of the clan's chieftain."

The place they came from was called the Southern Autonomous Region, and it was in the southern part of this kingdom. It was known for the Beastfolk Autonomous Region, where a large population of beastfolk lived. Technically, they were ruled by the kingdom, but because of their combat abilities, their autonomy had been recognized since the days of the third king.

Presently, although there weren't many of them, there were even beastfolk nobles. Thanks to their influence, the relationship between the royal family and the beastfolk was good. However, there was still discrimination against beastfolk in the kingdom, and that had caused a great many beastfolk to move to the Southern Autonomous Region. Among those who moved were many who hated humans.

So every few years or so, some kind of problem would crop up in the Southern Autonomous Region that troubled the king. These problems were ongoing.

"In other words, she was declaring that she wanted to make Tenma her husband because he's stronger than her?" Gramps asked, and Blanca nodded.

"My clan and the other clans who live nearby have members who are stronger than Amur...but they're few and far between. Most of them are much older and already married. But just because someone's close to her age doesn't mean they would make a suitable companion. So she vowed that if she was going to marry, she would marry someone stronger than her. And her father told her, 'I don't care what race he is, just go find him and bring him back here!' and sent her off on her journey. I was basically tasked with overseeing her mission during this tournament."

By the way, Amur's father had received the title of honorary viscount from the king, but had the military prowess of a count or higher. Not only that, but there were many historical instances of someone not blood-related to the chief taking over the clan, so apparently they weren't concerned with her doing the

same when her father passed away.

“But you’ve got the right to refuse, kid! Worst-case scenario, we can force her to change her mind! The problem is whether she’s gonna give up... So I’m sorry! Even though you got unlucky here, please just go with her!”

In order to get Amur to give up on me, it seemed we only had two options:

1. Find someone my age stronger than me.

2. Find someone Amur is so crazy about that she won’t care about how strong they are.

Regarding the first option, I’d received my strength from the gods, so the chances of it happening were slim. As for the second, we could only hope someone like that would appear.

I let out a sigh, while Gramps said, “Yet another one...”

It was almost time for the final round of the pair matches to start, but I was too afraid to go watch after what had happened, so I just kept resting.

I asked Blanca how Amur was, and he grinned at me.

“Don’t worry, she’s not gonna kiss you again. I punished her by putting her to bed wrapped up in her sheets. So don’t worry! You won’t see her again until the end of the tournament. At least...you shouldn’t.”

And with that, Blanca left the room.

The pair finals ended while I was eating lunch in my room, and then a staff member showed up. Apparently, since the match had ended at a strange time, they’d decided to shift the team finals to two hours later than originally planned. The staff member said they’d done this out of consideration for me, since I would have successive matches.

“All right. I just have to go to the same place as before once it’s time, right?”

“That’s right. A staff member will come get you, so please be ready before then.”

Once the staff member left, I got my bag back from Gramps and opened it.

“Grooowl...”

I heard the symphony of stomachs growling in unison. Even though I’d already given Shiromaru and Solomon food, apparently it hadn’t been enough.

I gave them more while cautioning them not to eat too much. Meanwhile, Namitaro smirked and came over to me.

“Tenma... Looks like you’ve taken your first step towards becoming a man!” He began waving his fins at me as if trying to give me a thumbs-up, but honestly it was hard to tell.

“Shut up!” I snapped. Namitaro’s expression pissed me off, so I gave him a kick, but his scales were tougher than I expected, so it ended up just hurting my foot.

“Are you okay, Tenma?” Namitaro pretended to be concerned, but still had a smirk on his face as he made fun of me.

“I’m gonna make you eat lightning.”

“I apologize! Have mercy on me!” Namitaro’s biggest fear was lightning. He got on his hands(?) and knees(?) in front of me and apologized, at which point I decided to let it go.

“By the way, just changing the subject, but how are you going to fight in the finals?” Namitaro asked. I thought he was probably wondering who I wanted to field in the match.

I thought about it for a while before answering. “First of all, facing the wyvern variant means an aerial battle, so Solomon will be the best choice for that. The variant is bigger and faster, but their range is limited, so Solomon should have a chance of winning. You can participate too if there’s an opportunity. You have a few ways to attack airborne enemies, right?”

Namitaro’s potential seemed limitless, so I thought he surely had some kind of antiair technique. When I asked him about it, he gave me a cocky grin in response.

“Just who do you think you’re talking to? I’ll show you my trump card!” He was so excited, he started panting through his nose(?).

“I’ll take care of the troll and cyclops,” I went on. “They’re powerful but slow, so striking attacks should be effective against them. I’m the best choice for that.”

I’d defeated ogres many times before, and trolls and cyclopes were both giant monsters, so I doubted it would be very different.

“So Shiromaru and Rocket will take care of the other two, huh?” Namitaro asked.

I looked at Shiromaru and Rocket, then shook my head. “No—I’m going to have those two go after everyone except the Tamer.”

They both looked puzzled by my words.

“Oh? What are you going to do about the Tamer, then?” Namitaro asked curiously.

As it turns out, I had an idea for that. “I’m going to ignore him. Obviously, if he comes to attack me, that’s different, but I don’t want anyone to attack him until he makes a move. I’m hoping to take care of everyone else first!”

The Tamer was the strongest on their team. If he didn’t participate in the battle from the start and we were able to ignore him as much as possible, it might reduce the likelihood of sustaining injuries.

Hopefully, once we defeated everyone else, he would surrender because that would be best for me, but...

“If we fight normally, I don’t think he’ll be that strong. We still need to keep our guards up, though!”

Everyone answered with enthusiasm.

“We still have plenty of time. You’re so impatient,” Gramps muttered.

He was right. I guess I’d gotten a little too excited, because we had to sit around for ten more minutes before a staff member came for us.

Part Nine

We pumped ourselves up for the match again as we waited by the entrance to the arena. Meanwhile, Gramps was accompanying me again as my escort.

Since the opposing team only had three members even though the Tamer had more than three followers, I figured one of those followers would be his escort.

This time, the opposing team had arrived before us. However, they barely made eye contact with me.

The reason was simple: the opposing team's Tamer was glaring at me. I wasn't aware of anything I'd done to warrant that, and it didn't feel very nice. However, I figured he wasn't the kind of idiot who'd cause trouble before a match, and decided to just ignore him.

Amidst that awkward atmosphere, the doors opened and both our teams entered the arena together.

Under normal circumstances, we would have taken our followers out before stepping into the ring, but this time there were more followers than humans on both teams, so the referees wanted to make sure the followers didn't get overexcited and start attacking each other before the match formally started. They'd instead requested that the human members enter the ring first and stand at a distance from each other before taking out their followers.

I stood at the center of the ring, and after bowing to the opposing team, Gramps and I backed away.

Gramps went ahead and returned to the spectator seats, but the opposing team's warrior was a registered member of the team, so he was allowed to watch from close up under the condition that he didn't participate. He stepped out of the arena and onto the sidelines.

Now it was time for both Tamers to take our followers out of our bags.

Shiromaru and Solomon leapt out, while Rocket and Namitaro came out slowly.

The opposing team's cyclops and troll also came out slowly, then swung their

arms around in circles to warm up. At first, the wyvern variant walked out of the bag, but then it flapped its wings and took off into the sky.

Once the audience saw that all the followers were out, they started cheering louder than they had all day. The cheers continued for a while, delaying the king's speech before the match.

My team, Oracion, were lined up starting from the left as Namitaro, Solomon, me, Shiromaru, and Rocket.

Meanwhile, the opposing team, the Dendrobates, had a vanguard formation from the left starring the cyclops, wyvern variant, and troll. A few meters behind them was the sorcerer, and then behind him was the Tamer.

"Team finals! Oracion versus Dendrobates! Begin!" the referee called, before quickly stepping back.

However, before he had completely retreated, the cyclops, wyvern variant, troll, and I all leapt forward.

The crowd began buzzing when they saw this. But the opposing team was even more surprised. It was unheard of for the Tamer to begin the battle by launching a special attack. Not only that, but my other team members were all followers, so if I were to be defeated, my team was done for.

Of course the cyclops and the other followers didn't know those rules, and the roaring of the crowd confused them, which slowed their movements.

Not letting that opportunity escape, I approached the troll.

"Take that!" I fired off two low kicks. The troll reached down and grabbed his leg because he was in so much pain. The moment he bent over, I ran up onto his back and started punching him in the head. Just one blow wasn't enough to take him out, but I figured if I just gave it a few moments, I'd have him incapacitated.

I was just about to finish him off when the wyvern variant tried to bite me, but Solomon slammed into it from the side, blocking the attack.

However, the wyvern variant's attempt to attack me had driven me back from the troll, and during that time, the cyclops arrived to back it up.

By attacking the wyvern variant, Solomon had managed to divert its attention from Tenma. Not only that, but the wyvern was now focused on Solomon, so it had all gone according to plan.

“Graaah!”

However, the wyvern variant was very angry that something much smaller than it had managed to interrupt its battle. Under normal circumstances, a wyvern would never run into a dragon stronger than itself. But this wyvern variant didn’t know what was normal. And of course, that also had something to do with the orders it had received from its Tamer. But more than that, the wyvern variant was confident in its own strength.

I’m no ordinary wyvern! was probably what it was thinking.

Ever since this wyvern variant was born, it had been strong. Wyverns were strong in general, but this one was special.

Wyverns were said to be close relatives of dragons. However, when it came to rearing their young, they differed greatly. Dragons were highly intelligent, and took care of their young until adulthood, apart from rare exceptions.

However, once wyvern babies began to grow bigger, they were no longer seen as children—instead, they were seen as equals. So it wasn’t unusual for wyverns to eat their own children. And even if they didn’t, after a certain point, wyvern parents no longer showed interest in their children and abandoned them.

This wyvern variant’s parents had almost eaten them too. However, even though it was a newborn, instead of being eaten, it ate its parents. And then, once it’d gotten a taste for its own kind, it killed and ate all the wyverns in the surrounding territory. In other words, it had grown up eating wyverns.

Not only that, but wyverns were the apex predators in that region, so it had been the king of the land.

Having grown up in that kind of environment, this wyvern variant was confident that its power was absolute.

But there was something this wyvern variant hadn’t considered—the dirty collar around its neck. The wyvern believed it was king, but actually, it was nothing but another creature’s slave.

If it didn’t obey its master’s orders, the collar would tighten and restrict its movements, and it would be inflicted with a searing pain.

Because of that, the wyvern variant was under a lot of stress. It had become more violent than it was when the human had first caught it.

And now, it was being attacked by a creature which looked a lot like it. The wyvern variant was angry that Solomon was flying around in “its” domain. It didn’t understand that its instincts as a wyvern made it terrified of dragons, which were superior to wyverns as a species, and this unfamiliar emotion pierced its heart like a needle. However, the wyvern variant believed this feeling stemmed from the fact that a creature smaller than itself was arrogantly invading its territory.

Solomon rammed the wyvern variant, then flew away from Tenma. The wyvern’s head began bleeding, and in the meantime, it saw Solomon flying in front of it. It flew after Solomon, chasing him. The wyvern variant was slightly faster and tried to bite Solomon every time it was in range, but Solomon skillfully dodged its attacks.

One might have thought it should just have breathed fire, but if it did so while pursuing Solomon at such a high speed, it could end up getting caught in its own blast as well. As such, it seemed it had decided that it was better to show its strength by trying to bite Solomon and dealing direct damage.

On the other hand, as Solomon continued to evade the wyvern variant, he seemed to grow gradually more impatient with simply fleeing, and his movements began to slow. So far, he had dodged all the wyvern’s attacks, but since it was behind him, he couldn’t figure out a way to attack it in return.

Having grown so impatient, he was unable to fully concentrate on his escape, and finally one of the wyvern’s attacks grazed Solomon’s tail. Solomon panicked, and tried to focus on evasion again. Unfortunately, he lost his balance, which put him within range of the wyvern’s jaws.

The wyvern’s mouth opened wide, targeting Solomon, but just then...

“Gaaar! Grmph!”

The cyclops’s panicked cries were heard from below. In the next moment...

“Fish style! Wave Cannon!” An incantation rang out and something glinted through the air, hurtling towards the wyvern variant.

Doesn’t seem too tough, Namitaro thought, as he watched Tenma take on the troll bare-handed.

In terms of strength, there was a great disparity between Tenma (and Namitaro) and the troll, so it was no wonder he felt that way. In fact, everyone in the arena thought that the only person who could beat Namitaro was Tenma.

Uh-oh—can’t waste time thinking about that. Solomon’s got someone on his tail. Shiromaru and Rocket are playing with the sorcerer, may he rest in peace.

Namitaro considered Tenma a friend and a compatriot, and in some ways, they were family. Because he truly thought of Tenma as family, Rocket and the other followers were like siblings to him. So when Tenma had asked him to back Solomon up, he’d accepted the request without question.

“That’s why...Namitaro’s coming to the rescue!”

Thus, Namitaro charged forward to save Solomon.

It went without saying that Namitaro was a fish. Not an ordinary fish, but a rare type of koi. Still, he couldn’t fly, of course. But he did have cheat abilities he’d received from the gods.

And he also had a secret that only he and the gods knew; he hadn’t even told Tenma about this.

Namitaro was a wild fish that was said in his previous life to live for more than a thousand years. And once they had, it was then said they turned into a kind of fairy.

But Namitaro was different. He wasn’t sure what the problem was, but for some reason, he’d gotten godlike properties instead. As such, he’d become what was called a divine beast.

He’d had to travel often so that no one would discover he was using his

powers as a divine beast. He swam all around the lakes, ponds, rivers, and oceans of the world.

He'd enjoyed himself greatly, but as science and technology progressed, he'd no longer been able to swim freely.

Still, he'd thought he could be free if he escaped deeper into the ocean. But the deep sea turned out to be no place for him either. The deep sea fish were always frantically trying to stay alive, and only saw Namitaro as food. There were a lot of grumpy fish down there, and most everyone ignored the cheerful Namitaro.

Most of all, the food in the deep sea didn't agree with him.

Namitaro had grown up in the mountains, but none of the food from the mountains reached the ocean, which was very hard on him. That was why he'd finally decided to move to a lake in the mountains.

His days had been quite boring, and at long last, he reached the end of his natural life span, and his time was up.

However, after he died, the gods came for him.

The gods decided to give him a new body, just as they had done with Tenma. He wasn't given the choice to reincarnate as a human, so he chose to be reincarnated in the familiar form of a fish.

For that reason, the gods decided to use his body from his previous life as a blueprint, so that it would be most compatible with his soul. They made this new body and gave it to Namitaro.

Because of that, he was the most godlike fish in this world. After being reincarnated here, he'd lost most of his divine beast abilities, but just like Tenma, he had great physical abilities.

And one of those hidden abilities was now exploding within him.

He swam across the arena to get into a favorable position, then focused magical energy into his mouth and summoned his attack.

"Fish style, Wave Cannon!"



The inspiration for this was obviously a pro wrestling move, but Namitaro had decided to give it a more appropriately fishy name. (Don’t waste your time

asking how a fish knew a pro wrestling move. Just chalk it up to him being Namitaro, and that's that. Friends of his that were also divine beasts familiar with the human world had asked him the same question, inferring he'd somehow gotten the idea from reading magazines or newspapers left behind by fishermen.)

By the way, you might think the name was humorous, but a few blasts of this attack could have destroyed the entire royal capital. It was similar to Tenma's Tempest attack in terms of strength, but surpassed it in penetrative power. And it was Namitaro's strongest secret attack.

Of course, if he used it at full power there'd be trouble, so he used only a few tenths of its true power.

He focused the Wave Cannon on the wyvern variant, and although he didn't fell it in one shot, he did cause considerable damage.

"Dagnabbit—I went too easy on him!"

Namitaro had meant to take the wyvern out with one attack, and was about to loose another Wave Cannon to finish the job. However, Solomon circled around in the air, gaining momentum before ramming into the wyvern's back.

With that, the wyvern variant dropped to the ground and the aerial battle was over. It was unconscious and could not possibly recover during this match.

"Great job, Solomon!" Namitaro called. Solomon flew in a circle as he cried out in victory.

After Tenma jumped forward, Rocket hopped up onto Shiromaru's back as he ran. They were all headed for the sorcerer.

On the way there, they passed by the cyclops, who tried to attack them. However, unable to keep up with Shiromaru's speed, he missed.

Shiromaru opened his mouth to bite the sorcerer. However, the sorcerer had just finished chanting a spell to counterattack, and unleashed Firestorm. He had probably chosen a large-scale attack, hoping it would hit Shiromaru.

The Firestorm consumed Shiromaru. Even though Shiromaru had high magical

resistance, there shouldn't have been a way for him to avoid taking damage.

However, the moment the flames consumed Shiromaru's body, they bounced off of it! The flames had been reflected by a semitransparent sphere... It was an emperor slime.

Since half of Rocket's body was made up of water, when his body expanded, it shielded Shiromaru and at the same time both extinguished and reflected the flames. However, the heat made some of the water in his body evaporate, causing Rocket to shrink slightly.

At this, the sorcerer began to shoot Fire-type magic in rapid succession, but Shiromaru skillfully dodged all of his spells. For his part, Rocket made himself still smaller and clung to Shiromaru's body so he wouldn't be shaken off.

Once the Tamer saw that the sorcerer's attacks were fruitless, he jumped into the fray. It had taken him a while, but he gradually began to push towards Shiromaru and the others.

The magic itself wasn't likely to have any effect on Shiromaru, but it was very tough for Rocket to bear. Thus, Shiromaru prioritized shielding Rocket from the attacks over defeating the sorcerer.

In the process, the Tamer's and sorcerer's spellcasting slowed. As a result, although the tide of battle had momentarily shifted in favor of the Tamer and sorcerer, now they were back to square one in a sort of stalemate.

However...

"Gaaar! Grmph!"

Suddenly, they heard the cyclops scream as the wyvern variant was consumed by a flash of light before being batted out of the air by Solomon. This broke the stalemate, as the Tamer and sorcerer both momentarily turned their attention to the wyvern variant instead of Shiromaru.

"Grrr!"

"Damn it!"

The moment they took their attention off of Shiromaru, the sorcerer was knocked over by Rocket's Fireball spell. Rocket shot one at the Tamer too, but

the Tamer dodged in the nick of time.

Shiromaru raced over to the collapsed sorcerer and attacked with his front legs. The sorcerer was knocked unconscious by this blow, and that was the end of his participation in this year's tournament.

"Troll! Cyclops! Come help me!" Now that the Tamer was alone, he began to panic and called to his followers, but suddenly the earth rumbled, and the cyclops fell to the ground too.

Solomon attacked the wyvern in the sky, Rocket and Shiromaru were taking on the sorcerer, and I was dodging attacks from the cyclops and troll.

This cyclops is a pretty good fighter.

The cyclops had prevented me from finishing off the troll, who quickly stood up and joined the cyclops in its offensive.

However, since the troll had nearly been knocked out, it posed little threat, and was weak enough that I knew I could finish it off at any time. The cyclops was supporting it well, though, which made things difficult.

I was impressed by the cyclops's combat skills, which were surprisingly good, but I didn't feel like I was in much danger. I continued to counter the two giants' attacks.

For example, I concentrated my attacks on the base of their thumbs, their little fingers, their wrist joints, and so on, such that the pain they felt gradually increased, even if I wasn't using much force. Before long, the two of them became afraid to hit me.

After all, every time they swung their fists, it hurt more. Even a dumb troll can learn quickly when pain is involved. Obviously, the cyclops caught on fast as well.

Suddenly, the cyclops shouted up at the sky. It sounded like some kind of warning. Just then, there was a flash of light and the wyvern variant hit the ground. The moment that happened, the troll launched a half-hearted attack, almost as a reflex.

Using its fist as a stepping stone, I jumped up to launch a spinning kick. This technique was difficult to use against humans, but perfect against large, slow-moving trolls. And just as I'd expected, my kick hit the troll's temple. Not even a troll could withstand a blow like this, and its huge body collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Without checking the troll's condition, I then approached the cyclops and launched another attack. The cyclops tried to fight back, but at close range its own large, unwieldy body obstructed its movements, so I quickly gained the upper hand.

As I began to jump up to finish the match, the cyclops guarded his head by crossing his arms over it, apparently thinking I was going to do another spinning kick.

However, instead of leaping up, I decided to jump forward, straight at the cyclops's chest. Then I squatted down and raised my arms as I gained momentum, before unleashing "Frog Punch (Isekai Version)" over and over again.

The cyclops had only been prepared for a kick that would come from above, not below, so its chin was completely unprotected. My fist connected directly with it.

The cyclops's head swung to the side, and it fell to the ground. Apparently, that single punch had knocked him unconscious.

The moment the cyclops collapsed, the Tamer began to scream something, but it was covered up by the sound of the ground rumbling.

And that was how the Dendrobates' forces were reduced to just the Tamer.

My team and I surrounded him on all sides. Meanwhile, he tried to cover himself using the body of the wyvern which had fallen to the ground.

Seeing this, Shiromaru went to attack the Tamer. He was but one step away when suddenly, for some reason, he put on the brakes. In the next moment, tragedy struck.

"Graaaaaaaah!"

“Huh?”

Suddenly, the wyvern’s eyes flew open. He bit into the torso of the Tamer, the person supposed to be his master...and ate him.

The entire arena fell silent as the wyvern chewed up the Tamer and swallowed him.

“Graaaaaar!”

Once the wyvern was finished with its “dinner,” it stood back up, flapped its wings, and roared. The audience screamed and made a huge commotion as they began rushing towards the exit.

Reacting to the sound of the crowd, the wyvern turned suddenly towards the stands, unleashing three fireballs.

The moment I saw the wyvern’s mouth open I ran towards it, but since I was the farthest person from it, I couldn’t reach it in time.

One of the fireballs landed on Solomon’s body and was extinguished, and one didn’t hit the stands. However, the last headed straight for the audience. Luckily, the sorcerers the king had stationed there just in case put up a magic barrier, so there were no victims.

Now that the wyvern’s fireballs had all been mitigated, the wyvern roared again and flew up in the sky. Solomon had used his body to block the second fireball and crashed somewhere, so he wasn’t able to intercept the wyvern.

The wyvern must’ve noticed that, because it looked satisfied. It let out a cheerful purr from its throat, and seemed to be in control now, but fortunately for us, it didn’t even last three minutes.

“Wave Cannon...!”

Namitaro unleashed his special blow into the sky, and hit the wyvern variant. However, it didn’t seem to be the kind of technique you could use repeatedly, so it wasn’t as powerful as the first time he’d used it.

At first the wyvern was surprised, but quickly realized the attack wasn’t that powerful, and snorted with laughter. Even though it hadn’t worked, it seemed to have pissed him off.

“Idiot! I was just bait!” Namitaro then declared.

“It seems to have forgotten about me, so it can’t be that smart!” I cried. I snuck up behind the wyvern and punched it in the head before it noticed a thing.

While it had been distracted by Namitaro’s Wave Cannon, I’d used magic to jump up and circle behind it. If it hadn’t been distracted, this gambit wouldn’t have worked.

“Graar!” The wyvern started falling, thrashing around as if I had caused a concussion. However, since he was falling right towards the spectators’ seats, the audience members who remained screamed in terror.

“Shiromaru! Rocket!”

At my call, Rocket hopped up on Shiromaru’s back, and Shiromaru charged at full speed towards the wyvern. Suddenly, Rocket’s body grew huge, and he extended his tentacles, grabbing and pulling at the wyvern to alter its trajectory. Not only that, but Solomon bit the wyvern from behind as it crash-landed near the center of the arena.

I was certain Solomon must’ve taken a lot of damage from that fall, but he clung to the wyvern’s neck and didn’t let go, as if showing off his usual greediness.

Meanwhile, I went over to Namitaro’s side.

“Things went great, Tenma. Let’s take care of him.”

“All right.”

The wyvern variant’s scales were tougher than I’d thought, and my fists were bloodied, but I hadn’t broken any bones. They would heal with a low-level Recovery magic spell, so in the meantime, I pulled my adamantium sword from my bag and ran towards the wyvern.

The wyvern spewed forth several fireballs to try to keep me away, but I dodged them all. One of the fireballs hit the troll, who was passed out, and he began to groan in agony.

The wyvern managed to stand again, and tried to take flight even though

Shiromaru and Solomon were holding on to him, but I got there faster and swung my sword, aiming at its neck.

Krrnnch! With a loud noise, the wyvern's neck shattered, then hung loosely, followed by a sound that was like the air being let out of a tire.

"Gramps! Bring me my magic bag!" I called out to Gramps, who had put up a barrier in front of the royal family. He released the barrier and flew away to fetch the bag I had entrusted to the referee.

"This okay?"

"Thanks, Gramps."

I seized the wyvern and put it inside the bag, making it disappear. With that, its death was finally confirmed.

I went to check on the troll, but unfortunately, it had expired too. As for the cyclops, its collar had fallen off since its master, the Tamer, had died. It sat there quietly, not showing any signs of violence.

However, when I looked around, I didn't spot the sorcerer.

Wondering what was going on, I went over to Rocket, who was now his original size again. Suddenly, Rocket spat the sorcerer out. Apparently, he'd sucked the sorcerer into the dimension bag inside his body.

The referee came running over. "The winner is Oracion!" he declared.

Several knights followed the referee, but since I'd already slain the rogue wyvern, they ended up being too late to assist. We handed the sorcerer over to the knights, and they also detained the warrior and took care of the Tamer's corpse.

Meanwhile, two knights approached me. It was Jean and Sigurd.

"Hey, Tenma. Congrats on your win. We want to make sure it's okay with you first, but we'd like to analyze that wyvern variant."

"There's a possibility a crime was committed here, and since it's the royal tournament, we have to do a thorough investigation. Hopefully you'll understand our point of view, but in the worst-case scenario, we'd have to insist. Right now, ownership of all the loot in this battle falls to you, but we'll

have to confiscate it as evidence.”

That was pretty bold of them to declare, but as this wyvern had endangered the royal family, an investigation by the knights was probably necessary. I knew they’d likely end up paying me a reward for the spoils anyway, so asking me first was just a pleasantry.

“I don’t mind. But please allow me to be present for the autopsy. Wyvern blood is valuable as a raw material.”

Jean nodded. However, since the knights hadn’t brought a magic bag in which to store the wyvern, I hung on to it until then.

After that, the knights continued cleaning up the bodies of the troll and the Tamer, but they couldn’t decide what to do with the cyclops, so they entrusted it to the adventurers’ guild.

Due to the post-match processing by the knights, the award ceremony was delayed, so I returned to my dressing room to rest before being called back into the arena.

Part 10

Once the arena was ready, the first, second, and third-place finishers from each division gathered there. However, only the winners of the pair competition were actually all present and lined up.

First, for the individual competition, I'd come in first, followed by Amur, and then Jin and Chaos were tied for third place. But of course, Chaos wasn't there because he had been disqualified. All that was in the past now, though.

The team competition was the real problem.

Oracion was first. We were supposed to be followed by the Dendrobates, who should have had the Demon Soldiers and Blue Hornets behind them.

However, none of the runner-ups, the Dendrobates, were actually present, because everyone apart from the cyclops had been taken away in the aftermath of the finals.

It seemed like there had been some talk of letting the cyclops line up alone. However, due to the death of the Tamer as well as the wyvern variant's rampage, there was also a chance the Dendrobates might be disqualified. As such, there were questions about who would be held responsible if anything should happen.

By the way, the reason why the cyclops hadn't been disposed of was because he was a follower and teammate, not a mere monster. He was also calm, and wasn't acting violently.

However, the most bizarre part of the lineup was my team—Oracion.

I was lined up with the individual competitors, so Namitaro and the others were standing by themselves. Since the individual awards were to be presented first, followed by the pair and then the team awards, I'd planned to join my team afterwards. But apparently, there had never been any previous occasion where followers were lined up by themselves, without their Tamer.

An exception had been made since Namitaro could speak human language, but at worst, it was also suggested that Namitaro and the others could wait in

my dimension bag. If we'd done that, though, the spot for my team would have stood empty, which would have left quite a gap in the lineup for the winners of the team competition.

On top of all this, I couldn't help but be aware of the person standing behind me. How could I not? It was the man-eater, Amur. Her gaze had been piercing into my back for a while now, and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.



I wanted the ceremony to be over as soon as possible so I could go back over to Rocket, but events like this always seemed to take much longer than

necessary.

Off in his corner, the king was saying something, but I really didn't care to listen to him right now. I just wanted to be done with it.

Next, it was Prince Caesar's turn to make a speech, but my feelings about all of this didn't change. After his speech was finally over, it was time for each of us to receive the commemorative shield, dagger, and prize money from the chairman of the tournament.

Even though I had moved away from Amur, I could still feel her glaring at me, although it wasn't as bad as before. But even though they were now doling out the pair awards, she hadn't stopped staring at me. Personally, I felt like it was incredibly disrespectful, but no one seemed to notice or care. I wondered if the king had mentioned it to everyone beforehand, because every time I made eye contact with someone, they just smirked at me.

"Oracion, please step forward."

With the pair awards taken care of, it was time for the teams to receive their dues, and my team was called forth. The rewards were the same as in the individual competitions, except each competitor on the team would receive their own dagger. However, there was a slight problem with that.

"Um, it seems that apart from Tenma, none of this team's members can wield daggers, so let's just give them all to Tenma."

The staff member in charge of the daggers realized Shiromaru and the others couldn't wield such weapons, so he just handed them all over to me.

After that, everything went smoothly, ending with a speech by the chairman. He said the winners were invited to a party hosted by the royal family as a special prize, in addition to the prize money. It seemed the party would be held at the palace a week from now, on the last day of the festival. But honestly, I already met with the royal family often and would probably continue to do so in the future, so I felt like I didn't have to go. On the other hand, I knew it would look bad if I didn't, plus I *had* made that promise to my three stalkers... In the end, I decided to attend anyway

The moment the awards ceremony ended, I packed Rocket and the others

into my bag and got out of there as fast as I could, trying my best to avoid Amur. I hurried back to the dressing room and met up with Gramps. There, I got Rocket out of the bag and had him swallow us and take us to the royal family.

Up until that point, we were able to shake Amur off.

The royal family hadn't been expecting me, so they were surprised. However, they quickly grasped the situation.

"Oh, Tenma! Congratulations on your win! It looks like someone's pursuing you quite passionately!" the king remarked.

"I knew Tenma would win, but I hadn't expected *that* to happen!" Prince Lyle teased.

"Lyle, that's enough."

The moment Queen Maria showed up, both the king's and prince's smiles froze on their faces, and they stepped aside, allowing the queen to pass.

"Tenma," she said, addressing me directly, "what's your relationship with that girl?"

I reflexively stood up straighter. "That was the first time I ever met her!" Just then, Gramps emerged from Rocket and began to discuss something with Prince Caesar.

"Is that right...? Well, she does have the right lineage, and she's capable. So if that's what you desire, I can make arrangements for you. On the other hand, if you're against the idea, simply speak up, and I can have her removed from your sight." The queen had a knack for saying the most frightening things with a smile. It seemed she'd somehow discovered Amur's true identity.

"Y-You don't have to go that far..." I turned the queen down because I was frightened, but I knew all I needed was to say the word, and Her Majesty really would "remove" Amur from my sight. I didn't want to imagine what that entailed.

"U-Um, where's Jean? I want to talk to him about the wyvern variant."

"Hm? Oh, Jean's attending the interrogation. I'm aware of the wyvern issue. I'll remind them to treat it with care, since the spoils belong to you." With these

words, the king managed to help me change the subject, while officially recognizing my rights to the wyvern.

Then, when I tried to leave, Queen Maria leaned in close to me with a smile. “We’ll continue our conversation later.”

Why did everyone have to remind me of that terrible moment...?

Anyway, Gramps was done talking, so it seemed like the right moment to go home. On the way back, the knights said they would escort us so that we wouldn’t have to ride inside of Rocket again. Just as we were about to leave, Tida and Luna rushed over.

“Congratulations, Tenma! Your battle with the wyvern was amazing!” Tida exclaimed.

“Congratulations on winning, Tenma! Congratulations, Rocket! Please let me play with Solomon again sometime, okay?” Along with giving me her congratulations, Luna’s adorable request made me feel a little better. I told her of course she could before making my way outside.

I was relieved not to sense Amur nearby, but I was also a bit worried because now I had even more stalkers than before.

I had changed my clothes, so I tried to blend in with the audience as I made my escape. It would be harder for people to spot me that way, and even if Amur was waiting for me, she’d have a hard time finding me. The people around me would never have guessed who I really was.

Unfortunately, near the entrance of the venue, I sensed her presence. I glanced in the direction of the sign and saw Amur standing on Blanca’s shoulders, looking in all directions. She was definitely keeping an eye out for me.

Ironically, some people around her had noticed her and stopped to gawk, so there was a crowd forming around her. After all, she’d won second place this year, and came in third the year before. Add to that her eccentric nature, and, well...if she hadn’t been after me, I might’ve stopped to take a look out of curiosity too.

But of course, I couldn’t do that. I proceeded carefully to the exit, trying not

to be distracted by Amur while I fled.

Once Gramps and I got back to the mansion, there was a crowd in front of the gate. I'd figured this would happen, but this time it was a different kind of crowd.

There were three separate masses of people—one right in front of the gate, one keeping a safe distance from the first group, and then a third group who were clearly knights.

After I slipped through the crowd and approached the gate, I recognized the people standing right in front. They were former Kukuri Village residents, including Uncle Mark, Aunt Martha, along with some of Duke Sanga's knights.

I didn't recognize any of the knights, and Duke Sanga himself wasn't there, so I was a bit suspicious. However, once I saw one of them wearing the duke's crest, I figured no one would be so bold as to commit fraud in the royal capital. Either way, I decided to approach one of them and ask about it.

"Yes, sir! We received orders from Duke Sanga to guard the people of Kukuri Village here. Since it's quite dangerous, we will protect these gates to the utmost of our ability! The duke shall be coming later!"

To me, this just sounded like an excuse to come to my house, so that I'd owe him one later.

If this had been some noble I didn't know, I'd just have said thank you and asked them to leave. But since I was acquainted with Duke Sanga, not to mention that I wasn't particularly upset about the knights being here, I decided to allow them to enter. However, they told me they weren't allowed to leave their posts until the duke showed up, otherwise they'd be defying orders. After all, they were only here courtesy of the duke.

Given how much I'd stood out in the tournament, it was easy to guess that from now on I'd be meeting nobles more often than before. I felt that it would be best to improve my relationship with Duke Sanga while I could, before I got swarmed by other strange nobles. I had to be very careful about who I decided to make ties with.

I already had a relationship with the royal family, but it seemed like a good

idea to befriend a lot of high-ranking aristocrats. At the same time, I knew it would make my troubles increase...

Once I finished interacting with the knights and turned to face my family, Aunt Martha gathered me up in a big hug. Then the Kukuri villagers chivied me to the center of the group before tossing me up on their shoulders in celebration.

There was nothing wrong with that, of course, but I wish I could've had some say about where this was going to happen. I didn't want everyone here watching. But I couldn't say that out loud, of course, because these were all people who loved me dearly. Even Gramps participated.

Then someone shouted, "We're having a party todaaaaay!"

Not today, I groaned inwardly. Once again, though, since this was all being done in my honor, I couldn't exactly complain.

And with that, the people of Kukuri Village immediately disbanded and began to scatter in all directions. They seemed to have already divvied up the tasks beforehand, because they all knew what to do and where to go. Duke Sanga's knights were stunned by their teamwork.

Leaving the knights behind, I entered the mansion. It was quiet, so I assumed that no one else had returned yet.

"Well, I hate to go ahead without Aina and the others, but let's get things ready!" Aunt Martha headed straight for the kitchen, as if she owned the place, and a few more aunties followed her. Meanwhile, Uncle Mark began to prepare for the party out in the garden. Since Aunt Martha had mentioned Aina's name, I figured they must know each other.

"Must be nice to sit there and do nothing, Gramps..."

"Well, they all insisted. What choice did I have?"

While Gramps and I were talking, Rocket and the others climbed out of my bag. Rocket moved to the sofa in the living room, Namitaro went out to the garden, and Shiromaru and Solomon gravitated towards the kitchen. Since I knew the latter two would just get in the way of cooking, though, I grabbed their collars and dragged them back into the living room. While I was doing that,

Jeanne and the others arrived. Naturally, Aina and Aura were present—but so were the triplets, as well as Jin and the others from the Dawnswords.

“You really worked hard today, Tenma. Congratulations on winning.” Aina was the first to speak to me. The triplets had been about to throw themselves at me, but stopped at the sound of Aina’s voice.

Perhaps she’d told them to keep them in check. The triplets didn’t look happy about this, but they didn’t complain either—they clearly understood who was in charge.

As for Jin and the Dawnswords, they seemed to expect that a banquet would be held here tonight—they’d come for the food. They did at least bring a souvenir with them, though.

When I asked the triplets about Primera’s absence, they said she would be coming with the duke. I guessed that this was supposed to be insurance. In the unlikely event that I hadn’t approved of the presence of the knights and refused to meet the duke, they’d thought they might still have a chance of winning me over if Primera was there.

Basically, since Primera’s teammates were attending the banquet, I couldn’t single her out like that. If I refused to let the duke in when Primera was with him, it would look bad.

I sort of got the feeling that the duke didn’t trust me, but I supposed since he was a noble, he could do as he pleased. I knew he wasn’t a bad guy or someone who meant me any harm, so I figured it was fine. But I wouldn’t have allowed any of this if we hadn’t known each other.

Next to arrive were the Sagan City Tamers. Their visit was also sudden, but since I knew them and they were also guild members, I let them in.

With that, most of my acquaintances had arrived, apart from a few nobles. Now all that was left was for the banquet to start...but just then, an incident occurred.

The golems guarding the gate activated all at once, moving into a defensive stance and putting everyone on high alert. Most of those with fighting experience were immediately on guard, and those who couldn’t fight quickly

went inside.

Then, shortly after the golems activated, someone jumped over the gate—actually, there were two intruders.

The golems attacked the intruders, who tried to get past the golems. However, once they realized just how strong the golems were, the intruders changed their tactics, simply evading them. Eventually, one of the intruders spotted me and charged over, closing the distance in an instant. At that point, I realized who it was.

It was Amur—Stalker No. 4, let's call her. The one who'd suddenly stolen a kiss from me in public, and had been chasing me around all day. She spread her arms wide, flying towards me...before being intercepted midair by Namitaro.

Namitaro, who was moving at a speed that was sure to break the world record—he'd even set such a record in his previous life—flew towards Amur, carried by momentum, before smacking right into her. She, in turn, was flung through the air before falling.

"Take that!" Namitaro pinned Amur to the ground. He was holding a lantern with one fin and something like a jitte—an old-fashioned police baton—in the other. Meanwhile, dozens of golems surrounded them.

The fact that Amur was here meant that the other intruder had to be Blanca. And speaking of Blanca, he was still duking it out with the golems. Sure, my golems were stronger than you'd expect, but I wouldn't have thought they were enough to surpass Blanca. Because of that, I guessed he was going easy on them. At any rate, I couldn't have Blanca destroying them, so I knew I had to intervene.

"Stop fighting! Don't attack that man! Just restrain the woman over there!"

At my orders, the golems immediately stopped attacking Blanca. Two of them went over to Amur and gagged her with their hands.

"Phew! I'm sorry! I just couldn't stop her!" Blanca apologized. For some reason, it felt like lately all he'd done was apologize to me.

"I know you're having a rough time with her." I gave him a sympathetic look and received one in return.

“Well, I guess this is better for me, because now you can shoulder half my burden.”

“Pfft!” This made Gramps and Namitaro both burst out laughing. Namitaro put away the strange tools he was holding, and the golems restraining Amur carried her over to me. Being head of our household, Gramps came over to receive them.

“At any rate,” Blanca went on, “I’m sorry for the disturbance. C’mon, little lady! Let’s go home! Stop struggling! They had to tie you up—you’re lucky they didn’t call the constable on you!”

Blanca picked Amur up by the scruff of her neck and tried to pull her away forcibly, but she refused, kicking and shaking her head while clinging to the golems. At the same time, the golems were trying to get her to let go while Blanca was also wrestling with her, creating quite the commotion.

“Well—it’s fine, isn’t it? Today’s a banquet to celebrate Tenma’s victory. And interestingly enough, a lot of people who played an active part in that tournament have gathered here! Shouldn’t they be allowed to stay, Tenma?” Gramps suggested.

I glanced over at Amur, who turned pleading eyes on me.

I let out a sigh. “I suppose it’s fine. But don’t cause trouble for me and everyone else. Got it, Amur?”

Amur’s eyes shone, and she nodded frantically.

“Sorry about this,” Blanca said again, removing Amur’s gag before lowering her to the ground. Once freed, Amur moved like lightning and threw her arms around me, hugging me from behind.

“I love you, Tenma!”

I was very embarrassed by this straightforward confession, but I wasn’t given time to fret about that.

“Get away from Tenma, you cat burglar!” the triplets chorused, closing in on Amur.

“*You’re* the cats,” said Amur. “*I’m* a tiger.”

“That’s true, but that’s not exactly what they meant...” I said.

In the meantime, Duke Sanga and Primera had arrived, wry smiles on their faces. Amur’s words had triggered an argument between her and the triplets, and they were going at it.

“Ah, so this is what all the commotion is about.”

“Great job in the tournament, Tenma.” After that, Marquis Sammons showed up too. He said he’d just dropped by to congratulate me and also to express his gratitude for my having treated Gulliver, but when I told him Duke Sanga was here and invited the marquis to stay too, he gladly agreed. I had the feeling he’d been hoping for an invitation, anyway.

I had Gulliver come out to show me the state of his injuries. Thankfully, he wasn’t frightened of me. Instead, he got down on his knees, looking thankful.

“Oh, it seems like Gulliver feels a great debt of gratitude towards you, Tenma! He certainly seems to respect you.” Marquis Sammons seemed surprised, but then laughed. “Even my own sons have never treated me with this much respect!”

“I wanted to be friends with him, though...” I said. I would’ve preferred to befriend Gulliver, instead of having this distance between us, but I supposed this was still an improvement.

Shortly, with Aina’s intervention, the quarrel between Amur and the triplets was settled. As for Aura, she crouched behind Aina, looking beside herself. Then, Duke Sanga and Primera came over to me, so I explained the situation to them.

And so the party went on...

Once someone from Kukuri Village got drunk and started dancing, the party naturally turned into a rave. Then, when someone started singing, it turned into a concert. All of this just egged on my followers, who also started making noise and kicking up a fuss.

To start with, it was all just noise, but gradually it came together and turned into an actual performance.

Once the followers were done with their concert, Jin and Galatt came over to me.

“Hey, Tenma. Can I have a minute?” Jin asked. “You’re free until the auction starts, right? How about we go hunting in the meantime?”

According to Jin, meat grew scarce at this time of year, so the demand for it was high. He was inviting me to go hunting with him to earn some pocket money. “This time of year, you can sell any kind of meat—except for goblins, I suppose. So, why don’t we go together? There’s a nice forest about half a day from the capital.”

“Yeah, Tenma. We can make it a boys’ trip!” Galatt said.

Considering my recent problems, the offer was rather attractive. I did want to get away from it all for a while.

Behind me, Amur and the triplets were still glaring at each other. Well, to be more precise, the triplets were glaring at Amur while she calmly nibbled on some meat.

“That’d be fun. But would it just be us three?” I had a feeling Mennas and Leena wouldn’t take the news very well.

“Well, we asked Blanca to come too, but he turned us down, saying he had to get a souvenir to bring back to his wife,” Jin said.

At that moment, another man approached us. “In that case, mind if I tag along?”

It was the warrior from Agris’s team.

“You were with Agris, right? What’s your name again?”

So much had happened lately that I just couldn’t remember, and neither could Jin nor Galatt. The guy looked pretty disappointed, but quickly introduced himself.

“Oh, sorry! I’m Ricky Monacato! I’m Agris’s grandson.”

Jin and Galatt consulted with each other privately for a moment. Then Jin spoke. “We don’t mind, but you’ll have to get permission from our leader first.”

Ricky looked confused, but I had an idea what he meant.

Galatt pointed at me with a smirk. “He’s our leader.”

I knew it, I thought.

“Why him?” Ricky asked, puzzled.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Think about it, Ricky. He’s the strongest among us, and you’re the weakest,” Agris said.

“You didn’t have to point that out, Grandpa!” Ricky fumed as he turned around.

“Am I wrong?”

Ricky’s grandpa and my grandpa had both walked over together.

“Not if you’re just judging by the tournament’s results, sure. But Jin and I are better adventurers than him, aren’t we?”

“He’s a Rank B adventurer! I heard from Master Merlin that when Tenma was five or six years old, he used to go freely in and out of the Elder Forest, hunting and playing by himself! If you start counting from back then, Tenma has nearly ten years of experience! Plus, do you have any idea how many adventurers have underestimated him and haven’t lived to tell the tale?!”

“Pfft!” Jin and Galatt burst out laughing. That was probably because they knew about my behind-the-scenes activities in Sagan.

“I hadn’t meant that as a compliment, but...Ricky, was it? Tenma’s younger than you, but you should think of him as different from others, on the inside. After all, his hunting skills have surpassed his father’s, and his father was the best hunter in our village!” Gramps said.

“Hm, that’s news to me! Ricardo was Tenma’s father, and he was the leader of His Majesty’s party when they won the team match,” Duke Sanga commented.

Marquis Sammons, who was standing next to him, added, “I heard that Ricardo was a very skilled hunter. So if he’s even better than Ricardo while he’s this young, who knows how good he’ll be in the future!” He smiled with a glass in his hands.

By the way, these two were highly influential people in the royal faction, so they'd supported the king since they were young. It seemed like they knew a lot about my mom and dad because of that relationship, but they hadn't been personally acquainted with them.

Despite the fact that two great nobles were chiming in like this, Agris's lecture continued. I had a feeling he was drunk. And now that I took a closer look, I noticed Gramps's face was red too.

At this rate, it seemed like they were going to try to drag me into their ridiculousness, so I decided to just take charge. "Ricky, you can come. Gramps, I haven't eaten much yet so I'm going to go get some food!" I said, then got the heck out of there. The Dawnswords casually followed me, leaving Ricky, Agris, and Gramps behind, and the two drunks didn't even realize we'd left.

"By the way, you're going to the party at the castle, right, Tenma?" Duke Sanga asked.

"Yes—apparently, attendance is mandatory. But most importantly, we were invited by Queen Maria, so..." Honestly, it was much more difficult for me to say no to Queen Maria than to the king. I wondered if I had some kind of Oedipus complex...

"And who will you be bringing with you?" Marquis Sammons asked. Duke Sanga seemed rather interested in how I would respond, watching silently for my reaction.

Apparently, we were expected to bring partners to accompany us to the party. I guess they wanted to know who I was going to choose.

"I'm going alone. Well—to be exact, I'm going to bring Rocket and the others, but they'll probably stay in my bag."

At my words, Duke Sanga glanced over at Primera. I guessed he wanted me to take Primera, and Sammons had probably asked this question to set that whole thing up for his friend.

"Well, when one attends a party hosted by the royal family, it's expected that you bring a date," the marquis urged.

"Maybe that's expected of a noble, but I'm just a commoner who doesn't

have a peerage. Besides, I can handle things on my own without pretending I have a *fiancée*." When I put emphasis on that word, Duke Sanga and the marquis seemed to give up.

"I apologize for my persistence."

"No—I appreciate the thought. Besides, there's someone even more enthusiastic about this than either of you..."

I was very sure that the queen would be keeping a close eye on my behavior at the party—or, to be more precise, who would be approaching me. After all, she'd said that anyone who wanted to marry me had to get her permission. To be honest, the whole ordeal was kind of annoying, but at the same time, I was grateful so many people cared about me.

The two of them seemed to take this in their stride.

"Yes, that's true. I doubt Her Majesty would overlook the matter."

"Yes, quite. Oh! A new dish has been brought in. Shall we go and taste it, Your Grace?"

The duke nodded, and off the two went.

"What a pity, Your Grace. I thought Lady Primera might have a chance to take the lead, but that was more or less how I'd expected Tenma to react," Marquis Sammons said to Duke Sanga, once they were out of Tenma's earshot.

"There's nothing to be done about it. It would only backfire if we tried to force Primera on Tenma. Perhaps it was pointless from the start. Let's just say what's done is done."

Since the two of them were gentlemen, they'd pulled back rather than risk upsetting Tenma. Anyway, if it hadn't been for these two, Tenma's bad mood would have started a lot earlier, and then neither of them would have been invited in the first place.

"It's a pity that Tenma won't call me Dad." It wasn't solely for his own benefit that the duke was trying to matchmake them, of course. He liked Tenma very much, but Primera was his first priority.

“At least you have that chance. I only have sons, and Tenma hates the younger one. Why didn’t I try for one more so I might have had a daughter?” Apparently, the duke wasn’t the only one who wanted Tenma as a son-in-law.

By the way, Tenma didn’t hate his son as much as he thought...but of course, there was no way for the marquis to know that.

“So when are we going hunting?”

“I think it’d be good to leave the capital at noon tomorrow, at the earliest, then return around noon the following day.”

This felt a bit rushed to me, but Jin said, “If we don’t act quickly, many others might be having this exact same idea, and then there won’t be anything left to hunt.”

Galatt agreed with his opinion. “It’s only one night, so we don’t need that much luggage. All the equipment you used at the tournament should be fine. Plus, if we can use your magic bag, we could even go right now!”

“I don’t mind putting what we hunt in there, but I don’t want to go right now. How will we split the spoils?”

That was the biggest problem. After all, it wasn’t uncommon to hear stories of people going on a hunt together like this—sometimes even with the party you always traveled with—then arguing over who would get the spoils. Sometimes, things even got violent. This apparently happened a lot for adventurers.

“Oh, we should try the method the guild recommends. First, we’ll block out time to hunt together. Whatever we get then is divided equally between everyone. After that, we can hunt on our own, and whatever you bag during that period of time belongs to you. We cycle between those two activities until it’s time to go home.”

“It’s a bit of a pain, but that way, everyone gets time to hunt both with the rest of the group and alone, so we won’t have to argue about how things get divided up. You can use your personal time to take a break, or you can team up with someone. If you decide to team up, then you’ll divide the spoils equally between everyone who participates.”

I didn’t have any better ideas, and I rarely hunted with anyone but my followers, so I decided this would work for me.

“I guess it’s fine. It’s not like I’m going hunting with strangers or anything.”

Anyway, if something came up, we could just discuss it and come to a resolution. I didn’t know much about Ricky, but I knew Jin and Galatt pretty well.

“It’s decided, then. Since we’re having this party, we’ll probably sleep until noon anyway, so we can just meet up after that. We’ll probably end up passing out here,” said Jin, as he looked around. Most people were still drunk, and many of them were Kukuri villagers.

The party had started in the evening and only two or three hours had passed since then, yet some people were already passed out drunk.

“Okay, well, since that’s settled, let’s go have fun!”

“Might as well!”

Jin and Galatt both enthusiastically made their way over to the banquet to get more food.

I went to find Ricky to tell him about the plans, but saw Agris was still talking to him. Ricky’s eyes had started to glaze over, and it took about an hour for Agris to let him go.

The party continued late into the night, ending naturally when most of the guests had passed out drunk and fallen asleep on the spot.

As expected, Sanga and the marquis left without having imbibed too much...but Primera was on thin ice.

Previously, at the castle...

“Well, shall we go?”

A man checked to make sure no one was watching, then snuck out of his room, heading for the carriage. Once he turned a corner, though, he noticed someone following him.

“Who’s there?!”

“Uncle, it’s Luna!”

A small silhouette appeared behind him. It was the youngest member of the royal family, Princess Luna. She suddenly popped up from behind a pillar and smiled.

“What are you doing here, Luna?”

The man she had called “Uncle” was none other than the minister of military affairs, Prince Lyle.

“I was going out for a while,” said Luna.

“Hm, I see. Well, I was about to go out too. I know a place where they’re going to have great food, so I’ll take you with me.”

“Okay!”

And so the two proceeded down the corridor, eyeing their surroundings carefully. Then, suddenly...

“Luna, stop,” said the prince. “There’s someone there.”

Both of them froze with tension. Lyle quietly peeked around the corner and saw two men there.

“Oh, don’t worry, Luna. They’re friends.” He turned to address the two men. “What are you two doing?”

The two of them tried to hide at first, but once they realized who he was, they seemed relieved.

“Oh, it’s you. Don’t scare us like that. I was just thinking of inspecting the city.”

“You, the king? Together with the archduke?”

The duo Lyle had discovered was his father, the king, and Ernest the archduke. The archduke was the oldest man in the royal family—he was the younger brother of the former king.

“Hrm, His Majesty and I mean to personally inspect the festival, so we can ascertain the successes and failures of such an event. Of course, we can’t show

up with a grand entourage, so we were planning on having a look around, just the two of us.”

“Yes, it’s exactly as the archduke says. By the way, where were you going with Luna?”

The pair produced the excuses they’d agreed upon in advance, then tried to figure out what Lyle and Luna were doing here.

“We had the same idea as Your Majesty. I thought this would be a fine opportunity to get to young people’s perspectives on various issues, so that’s why Luna is with us. After our observations are through, we planned on eating a delicious meal.”

Lyle and the archduke smiled.

“I see. What a coincidence. We also were thinking a good meal would be in order.”

“I know just the place to get such a thing at this time of day, and I was thinking of going there. How about we all go together?”

They all nodded at the king’s suggestion, and got into the carriage together. The archduke gave instructions to the driver, who wore a hat down low over his face. “Drive around the city at random. I’ll give you proper directions later.”

He also asked the driver to hold on to some money for him. After they’d confirmed everyone was on board, the driver slowly urged the horses forward.

“I’m looking forward to what kinds of delicious things we’ll eat!”

“Hopefully something sweet.”

“I’d like some good alcohol too.”

“Calm down, everyone. First, I have to observe the city, even if it’s just a formality.”

The four of them chatted away happily in the carriage, which trundled on—sometimes slowing, coming to a stop, or turning corners. But eventually...

“Shouldn’t we be at the city by now?” the archduke asked. “Hey, this is still the garden! What’s going on?”

“Have we been tricked?” Lyle put his hand on the sword hanging ready at his waist.

“No—this is the destination,” the coachman answered, before pulling the doors open.

Lyle tried to draw his sword, but...

“Just where did you think you were going, skipping out on your duties?!”

Standing there was the future king of the kingdom, the crown prince Caesar. Although he also held a ministerial position like his brother Lyle, being the crown prince meant he outranked his brother.

Not only that, but...

“Luna! We’re supposed to be studying right now!” Prince Tida, third in line for the throne, was also present.

And then...

“You! You know what would happen if you went to Tenma’s house right now, don’t you?” This chilling voice came from the coachman’s seat.

“M-Maria! What are you doing here?!”

The queen had pretended to be a driver. Although she was the king’s wife, she had the most authority in the royal family.

Normally, the archduke, who had spoken with her directly, would have noticed her identity, but he was so excited at the prospect of getting to drink and relax that he hadn’t even noticed. And of course, it would never have crossed his mind that the queen could be masquerading as a coachman.

“You know the answer to that, don’t you? Now, let’s go, *darling.* And you too, Archduke.”

Maria dragged both the king and the archduke out of the carriage by their ears and went back inside the castle.

“Now, I suppose it’s time that we have a nice little talk, Brother.”

“Yes, Crown Prince...”

Lyle was restrained by his brother and taken away.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t finished studying yet! Time to get that done!” Luna tried to escape too, but the moment she started running, her brother grabbed her by the collar.

“I’m glad you remembered, Luna. Well—if you’re that enthusiastic, then we should get back to our studies right away!” Tida smiled, trying to drag Luna back into the castle. But just then...

“Tida, wait!”

A woman’s voice rang out before Tida. It was Princess Isabella, their mother.

“Mother...” Luna reached out her hand, pleading for help.

However, all Isabella did was take Luna’s hand and hold it firmly by her side to prevent Luna from escaping.

“Mother?”

“Tida, you can’t possibly tutor her until morning all by yourself. I’ll help, so you run on in and explain the situation to the maids. Oh—if only Aina were here at a time like this! Honestly!”

Now Luna understood why her mother had shown up. It hadn’t been to save her, but to become her enemy...

Not many would sleep tonight at the royal castle...

Extra Story: When Leena Was Gone

“Here’s to us! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Galatt and Mennas clinked their glasses together with mine, and we gulped down our beer.

“Ahh! That first cold drink after a long day’s work always hits so good!” Mennas was the first to drain her drink. Although she was a woman, it seemed she’d lost sight of her feminine charms. But if I brought that up, I knew she’d punch me, so I refrained. By the way, I saw Galatt glancing at her and had a feeling he was having the same thought.

“Still, I wonder where Leena’s at? We don’t have many chances to drink like this together at the capital.”

“Well, she attended school here in the capital, so she probably doesn’t think it’s that special of an opportunity. Or maybe she has some important business to attend to.”

“Come to think of it, Leena’s friend was in the tournament. Maybe she went to go see them.”

“Yeah—she can drink with us anytime, but it’s not easy for her to see that friend. I heard she’s captain of the knights in Gunjo City.”

If I remembered correctly, Leena’s friend’s name was Primera. When I first heard about this, I figured she was captain of the knights because she had some connection to the duke, but she seemed to have done pretty well in the tournament, so she must have some kind of skill.

“Well, enough about Leena. The two of you haven’t completely healed yet. Are you sure it’s okay for you to drink?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re fine!”

“I went to great lengths to find a place in the capital where the food and drink are good! I can’t believe what’s on the table in front of me right now!”

“Wait, I thought I could have it all to myself.”

“Hey, Galatt! Don’t hog all that meat! Share some with me too!”

“Yeah, and me!”

It felt like it had been a long time since the three of us raised a commotion like this. Before Leena joined, we ate and drank like this every night. It had really been a while.

“We certainly go back to our crude ways without Leena around. Especially you, Mennas.”

“Excuse me?” Mennas glared at Galatt, but I agreed with him. “And Jin too? Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“No, I’m not. It’s the truth. Plus, it’s not just you. It’s all of us.”

We were originally commoners. No ancestors to be proud of, and little education to speak of. Although we were careful not to be rude in front of members of the higher class, we didn’t have any proper etiquette training. Sometimes there were those who tried to skimp out on paying us for quests, saying we wouldn’t understand because we weren’t educated anyway. We reported guys like that to the guild, and they’d be banned right away.

But once Leena, who was of noble birth, joined us, the number of people who made fun of us sharply decreased. Most of all, I was grateful to Leena for teaching us etiquette.

“Despite it all, Leena really made up for what the Dawnswords were missing, huh?”

If our opponent was an ordinary person or an adventurer, we could use physical strength to shut them up. However, physical strength was meaningless when dealing with aristocrats—rather, aristocrats used authority to put pressure on you.

“Yeah, I agree. I learned how to deal with nobles thanks to Leena.”

“We might have had to disband because of those sorts of troubles, if not for her.”

Leena filled the need for long-ranged attacks on our team. In addition, I was a

little embarrassed to admit it, but she was like a little sister I needed to protect. Thanks to that, our teamwork had improved, and we only had the occasional disagreement.

I thought Mennas and Galatt agreed. In particular, Mennas might have been the happiest of us all, since there was now another woman around.

“Well, shall we wrap up Leena’s food and get out of here?” Back in the day, we never would’ve even considered doing such a thing.

“Sure. We probably shouldn’t drink much here today, anyway. We can bring Leena back some other time and all drink together again,” Galatt said.

And with that, we decided to end our drinking party early—another thing that had been unthinkable for us in the past.

“Sounds good.”

We slowly cleared the table and wrapped up the food we’d ordered for Leena.

“It’s unusual for the three of us to go home so early after drinking together.”

“True.”

“It really is.”

I still hadn’t had enough, but going home early once in a while wasn’t a terrible idea.

“Leena probably won’t be back until it’s late, but when she is, how about we invite her to have a drink with us before bed?”

Mennas and Galatt nodded. Once we returned to the inn, we decided to wait up for Leena’s return. However...

“She didn’t come back.”

“Yep, without even letting us know.”

“What in the world is she thinking?”

Even after sunrise, Leena still wasn’t back. We fell asleep waiting for her, and after we checked her room, discovered she had never returned.

“I hope she wasn’t in some kind of accident.”

“Let’s try to find out what happened. Mennas, you go where Leena’s friend is staying, and Galatt, you go visit Tenma. I’ll go to Leena’s family’s manor.”

“Got it!”

“Okay!”

But just as we were about to leave, there was a knock at the door. For a moment, I thought it would be Leena, but then realized that if it had been her, she wouldn’t have knocked. I called out, and discovered it was the owner of the inn, who said Tenma was here to visit.

“Tenma, you’ve come at the perfect timing! Actually, Leena never came home last night, and we haven’t heard from her, so we were about to go look for her. Would you please help us?” I bowed my head to Tenma, thinking it would be great to have some help.

For some reason, though, he seemed uncomfortable. “Actually, I’m here about Leena. She was sleeping in our backyard. I thought about bringing her with me, but she’s fast asleep, and I figured carrying a passed-out, drunken noblewoman through town might cause some trouble...so I’m here to tell you about it instead.”

“I’m sorry about that, on behalf of our party...”

All three of us bowed in apology to Tenma. Then we went to fetch her from Tenma’s house, and were greeted by quite a shocking sight.

“How much did she drink?!”

Leena’s hair was a mess of tangles, her clothes were disheveled, and she was asleep in a barrel of wine.

“I know we were just talking about how rough *we* were, but I’ve never seen anything this bad.”

Honestly, I hated seeing someone I thought of as my little sister in this state. I was feeling foolish for having gotten so sentimental over her yesterday.

“Leena, get up!” I said loudly in her ear.

“Nyaaaah!” Leena let out a strange scream and jumped up, but then immediately seized her head and crumpled back down to the ground.

Mennas grabbed Leena’s arm and tried to stand her up, but even the slightest movement seemed to leave Leena in pain. She was so hungover she couldn’t even speak.

I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed, but asked Tenma for some hangover medicine.

“Tenma, I hate to ask you this, but do you have any medicine for this?”

“Yes...but the flavors I offer are Bitter, Very Bitter, and Extremely Bitter. What kind would you like? By the way, they all have the same effect.”

“We’ll take the Very Bitter one, please.”

After that, Leena’s taste buds didn’t work right for several days. And once again, I was reminded of just how devious Tenma could be.

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Afterword

Hello, I'm Kenichi, the author! This time, we were able to publish the fifth volume without much delay after the fourth volume. This all started with some (nuanced) suggestions from my editor: "Since the manga is about to start, why don't we publish volumes four and five close together?" At first, I thought it would be no big deal, but I actually had a very hard time. And that's because I had no idea what to write in the profile, afterword, or the bonus stories! (T_T)

As I said in my profile, I was at a loss for what to do, and ended up writing a strange report on recent events. That was how bad things got. By the way, I wrote this afterword just before the deadline. And just to make sure I finished it on time, I didn't skip work to go fishing. I was actually working on my cell phone *while* I was fishing, but then a puffer fish interrupted my concentration. I only went fishing for a change of pace so I could concentrate! It's all the puffer fish's fault!

But, all excuses aside, I decided to write this bonus story because I'd never written one for the Dawnswords. Well—I wrote, deleted it, wrote again, deleted it again, and repeated that process over and over. At first, I was going to write a story about the restoration of Jin and Galatt's honor, but then decided to write a nice story involving Mennas too. I'd like to write more short stories about them if I have the opportunity and enough ideas.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone who made it possible to publish these two volumes in such a short amount of time. And thank you very much to all the readers and everyone who was involved in this publication.

- Kenichi